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Water Protectors & Land Defenders: Recentering Indigenous Reciprocity with the Living World

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Mni Wiconi. Water is life. These are the words that fueled protests of the Dakota Access Pipeline at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation beginning in 2016. The construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) underneath Mni Sose, or the Missouri River, poses a direct threat to Standing Rock's primary drinking source (Weston, para. 2). Recognizing that the federal and Tribal court systems would likely ignore their pleas, the people of Standing Rock joined together with members of their sister Tribes among the Oceti Sakowin (Seven Council Fires), or Great Sioux Nation, to protect the drinking water from potential destruction. The movement encouraged indigenous people from around the world to join the Water Protectors—as they called themselves—in their efforts. Months of protest by the Oceti Sakowin people and indigenous and environmental activists brought world-wide attention to the movement and sparked a stream of social media posts with hashtags *#NODAPL, #mniwiconi, #waterislife,* and *#rezpectourwater* (Weston, para. 9). Thousands of people joined this Indigenous-led movement, participating in marches, encampments, relay runs, letter campaigns, elaborate banner drops, blockades, and more.

Though protests of the DAPL started with the Water Protectors, many Indigenous writers assert that the *#NODAPL* movement quickly became about more than the potential pollution of the Sioux reservations' drinking water. In the introduction of *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NODAPL Movement*, Nick Estes writes that the movement "was not a

departure from so much as it was a continuation of long traditions of Indigenous resistance deeply grounded in place and history" (2). The *#NODAPL* movement follows centuries of Indigenous resistance to colonial efforts intended to remove, vilify, and silence Native American people. Since the trespass of Lewis and Clark in 1804, Native Americans have fought to defend their communities, their traditions, their language, and their relationship with the land and water. However, Estes asserts that *#NODAPL* differs from previous Indigenous-led movements in that it "made critical links between protecting Indigenous people and their treaty rights to the protection of the earth and nonhuman relations, such as water" (3). The movement draws from histories of defensive battles in which Indigenous people have fought to protect and inhabit sacred ancestral lands. Moreover, *#NODAPL* foregrounds Native Americans' refusal to be silenced.

When Meriwether Lewis and William Clark first encountered Mni Sose, the river flowed freely from the Rocky Mountains to the mouth of the Mississippi. Mni Sose "nurtured the adjacent fertile bottomlands by intermittently inundating them with upriver nutrients, and served as a transportation corridor for people and their nonhuman relatives" (Howe and Young 56). Mni Sose provided sustenance not only to the people but also to the plants and animals. For the Oceti Sakowin, water is both a living being and a relative. To be a good relative, the Oceti Sakowin people must protect Mni Sose; in the case of the DAPL, honoring this relation requires protecting the river from contamination (Estes 8). Because the pipeline trespasses through unceded treaty lands and scared sites, such as burial grounds, the Oceti Sakowin must also fight to protect the land which embodies the rich history and anticolonial struggles of their ancestors (Estes and Dhillon 3). Though the *#NODAPL* movement brought world-wide attention to Native American concerns, construction of the DAPL began in 2017 and is now fully operational underneath the

Missouri River. A quote from North Dakota Senator Kevin Kramer on the DAPL website encapsulates the economic interests that eventually overruled Native ones: “Because of the Dakota Access Pipeline, we are able to move another half a million barrels per day to market efficiently and effectively” (“About”). Just as European settlers dismissed Native culture, tradition, and relations in the name of westward expansion, representatives of the DAPL disregarded the pleas of the Oceti Sakowin in the name of profit.

A bill authorizing the construction of the Missouri Valley dams in 1944 also failed to consider Native interests in plans for development. The *#NODAPL* movement follows the damming of the river from 1946 to 1966, which halted the flow of Mni Sose and flooded reservation lands in the Missouri Valley. Damage caused by flooding of the Crow Creek, Lower Brule, Cheyenne River Sioux, Standing Rock, and Fort Berthold reservations forced 3,538 Native Americans to relocate (Schneiders 238). In an examination of the Pick-Sloan plan that spearheaded the construction of the dams, Robert Kelley Schneiders points to the politics that led to the site selection of the dams. In December of 1941, representatives from the Bureau of Reclamation, Army Corps of Engineers, business interests in the upper basin, and government representatives from South Dakota, North Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, and Nebraska formed the Missouri River States Committee (MRSC) to discuss and plan the development of the Missouri River (Schneiders 239). Later adding the states of Kansas, Missouri, and Iowa, the MRSC debated over river development: the upper basin wanted dams for irrigation and hydroelectric power, and the lower basin wanted a navigation channel and cheap power (241). Acknowledging the fact that Congress would not authorize construction of two programs in direct conflict with one another, the upper and lower basin representatives decided to revise the

Pick-Sloan Plan and satisfy both parties (243). Once they determined a compromise, the MRSC moved forward with dam site selection and design.

The only group excluded from these conversations, of course, was the Native American people. The MRSC received no opposition for the plan because the committee contained not one Native American representative. Schneiders asserts that the Native American population "had little or no idea that plans and policies were being formulated that would dramatically affect their lives" (240). Forums intended to promote public support took place solely in off-reservation towns and cities, never in the Native American communities along the river. Part of the reason for this is that MRSC members believed Native Americans could not afford the hydroelectricity and irrigation water proposed by the project and would not provide tax revenue needed for project construction. However, Schneiders points out that the MRSC believed Indian reservation lands were "underutilized" and would be more beneficial to society under their control. As for the location of the dams, Schneiders writes that cost-effectiveness played a major role:

> Purchasing prime agricultural land, or expensive urban real estate, would have increased the overall cost of a dam's construction; therefore, "underutilized" or cheap, "low quality" [Native American] land was preferable. Furthermore, moving a large off-reservation urban population—and railroad bridges, sewer facilities, buildings, and other property—would cost far more than moving residents off [Native American] reservations whose worldly possessions and homes had less market value. (244)

When selecting the dam sites, the MRSC and other supporters of the plan placed little value on Native American lands and communities. Not only that, but they actively chose the location of the dams with the intention of minimizing damage to off-reservation urban centers and expensive real estate in the Dakotas would flooding occur (Schneiders 245). Therefore, the economic and

political interests involved in Missouri River development and the damming of Mni Sose failed to take the impact on Indigenous lands and communities into account.

Both the construction of the DAPL and the Missouri River dams demonstrate the sacrifice of Native American lands for the sake of economic development. Throughout history, European American society has often portrayed and treated the Missouri River as a commodity. This continuous cycle of commodifying the land and water reflects a pattern of "strengthening" the American economy at the expense of Native American lands and communities. The Lewis and Clark Expedition opened Mni Sose to more trade, travel, and economic opportunity for the emerging American nation, which in turn introduced liquor, smallpox, and cholera to Native American people (Hernandez 77). The MRSC aimed to commercialize the river and boost the economy, focusing more on the cost to benefit ratio than the devastating impact on Native American communities. In the interest of economic growth, the construction of the DAPL completely ignored Indigenous concerns and now threatens to pollute one of the most sacred and powerful living entities in Native American tradition. The current dominating perspective of human-nature relationships in the United States emphasizes exploitation and a detachment from nature. For this reason, corporate America continues to commodify and capitalize on natural resources. Even in the wake of the world-wide sustainability crisis, companies search for new ways to sustain economic development rather than address the harmful practices that led us to this point.

Continued focus on commodification and exploitation of natural resources has broader implications that affect everyone, not just the Indigenous communities who have fought to protect the land and water for centuries. The dominant view of sustainability in 21st century society reflects a utilitarian attitude toward nature that emphasizes human separation from nature

and focuses on the logistics of "regulated" exploitation (Mazzocchi 88). This perspective values the well-being of human societies and communities and views nature in terms of the benefits it provides to the human population, which in turn has resulted in unsustainable commercial practices. Increased greenhouse gas emissions causing a rise in global temperatures over the last 150 years directly result from human activities that burn fossil fuels for electricity, heat, and transportation ("Sources" para. 1). According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), direct and indirect industrial greenhouse gas emissions accounted for 30% of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions in 2020, making industry the largest contributor of greenhouse gases (para. 16). Waste management and production has led to numerous environmental issues as disposed plastic products accumulate in our oceans and growing landfills contaminate our soil and groundwater. Water pollution critically affects the availability of clean drinking water, posing a direct threat to all living beings.

Over the last few decades, society has started to recognize how resource consumption and pollution of land and water bodies negatively affect our planet. How will we continue to sustain life on earth? How do we protect the land and water for generations to come? Environmentalists and governmental agencies have proposed several methods for approaching these issues, ranging from laws and regulations to a radical shift in worldview. The U.S. EPA develops and enforces many laws and regulations that aim to control and minimize environmental issues. For example, the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, or "Superfund," provides federal funding to "clean up uncontrolled or abandoned hazardous-waste sites as well as accidents, spills, and other emergency releases of pollutants and contaminants into the environment" ("Laws"). The Clean Water Act, on the other hand, regulates the discharge of pollutants into U.S. water by making it unlawful without a permit. The problem with

governmental laws and regulations such as these, however, is that they fail to address the root of the problem: continued prioritization of economic growth over the preservation of the environment.

Many scholars assert that current environmental approaches and governmental policies fail to evoke economic change because they continue to support the mainstream narratives that focus on the possibility to capitalize on natural resources and remain embedded in a sense of separation from nature. This narrative dominates present-day environmental discourse and presents a barrier for transforming sustainability in the future. For this reason, Indigenous scholars and others propose a shift in worldview—one that foregrounds human relationships with the both the living and nonliving world. One rooted in Indigenous wisdom of reciprocity with nature. To preserve and protect the land and water for years to come, we must acknowledge and embrace the Indigenous worldview that has been neglected and suppressed during their destruction. Nick Estes writes that resistance to the DAPL does not represent the unification of the fight for Indigenous rights and the defense of the environment. They are not two separate struggles; they are one in the same (Estes and Dhillon 16). The Water Protectors did not simply stand in defense of their relative, Mni Sose, to protect their primary drinking source as humans; rather, they gathered there to "stand with their other-than-human relations…who reside within Oceti Sakowin historic lands" (17). In other words, the Oceti Sakowin provide (protection) for the water who provides for them in return; their care and concern for land and water reflects the same they have for their family. *This* is the foundation of reciprocity.

The question remains: How do we foreground a reciprocal relationship with nature in a human-centered, capitalist society? How do we revise the very foundation of Western culture? Adapting Indigenous knowledge of reciprocity to "fit into the existing framework designed to

fulfill the needs of Western ideals" would be another form of colonialism, attempting to "assimilate" Indigenous knowledge into the dominant system aka the Western point of view (qt. in Mazzocchi). Both Western scientific principles and Indigenous ways of thinking offer different forms of cultural expertise that can contribute to sustainability. However, the current imbalance between the two—which centers Western culture—marginalizes Indigenous knowledge and prevents effective change. For this reason, Fulvio Mazzocchi proposes the creation of a polycentric space in which multiple centers of cultural knowledge "are regarded as having equal possibility to know and be reliable, the also equal rights to speak" (85). In this space, Western science and Indigenous wisdom work together as co-producers of knowledge and have the chance "to enrich and complement each other" (Mazzocchi 86). Mazzocchi suggests a new framework for achieving sustainability—one that merges Western science and Indigenous knowledge. However, the creation of this space requires decentering the predominating Western ideologies of human-nature relationships, educating those who engage with this way of thinking, and reorienting their perspective. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer provides an accessible and highly persuasive argument, rooted in both Western science and Indigenous wisdom, for entering into reciprocity with the natural world.

Through her collection of essays, Kimmerer demonstrates how we might bring these two lenses of knowledge together to achieve a greater understanding of sustainability and our reciprocal relationship with the natural world. A licensed botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Kimmerer approaches Western science with an Indigenous lens. She narrates her experience navigating worldviews and highlights the many tensions between them. However, she learns to combine her academic background in Western science with the Indigenous wisdom passed down through her Potawatomi heritage. Kimmerer frames Western

scientific knowledge with an Indigenous worldview to explain the communal relationships between people and nature. According to Kimmerer, science is the process of questioning and trying to understand the world using rational inquiry (346). Scientific *worldview*, on the other hand, uses science to reinforce "reductionist, materialist economic and political agendas" and separates knowledge from responsibility. A scientific worldview contributes to the illusions of dominance and control of nature that spearhead capitalism and economic development, which have led to the sacrifice and destruction of Native lands. Kimmerer's essay "The Sacred and the Superfund" illustrates how Western scientific worldview often overshadows Indigenous wisdom and tradition.

"The Sacred and the Superfund" tells the story of Onondaga Lake, the birthplace of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and one of the most sacred sites in North America. Onondaga Lake now stands as one of the most polluted lakes in the United States with beds of industrial waste sixty feet deep and nine Superfund sites lining its shores (Kimmerer 312-313). Industrial manufacturing companies and growing city of Syracuse, New York, treated Onondaga Lake as a dumping ground for over a century, pouring tons of waste into the water. Onondaga Lake once held glittering blue water and served as the home to fish, birds, vegetation, and other wildlife; now, the water holds so many chemicals that it turned to leachate. According to Kimmerer, "leachate seeps from the waste beds with a pH of 11. Like drain cleaner, it will burn your skin. Normal drinking water has a pH value of 7" (314). Due to the destructive actions of profit-driven corporations, Onondaga Lake has turned into a toxic waste bed devoid of life. Throughout the chapter, Kimmerer explains the vast difference between Indigenous and Western scientific worldviews, highlighting how one honors and protects the water while the other exploits and destroys it. She writes that traditional Onondaga "understand a world in which all beings were

given a gift, a gift that simultaneously engenders a responsibility to the world" (310). Onondaga Lake sustained life by quenching their thirst and providing a home to the plants, fish, and more. For this reason, the people give thanks to the water and in return fulfill their responsibility of protecting it.

The contamination and destruction of Onondaga Lake—as well as that of countless other land masses and water bodies in the United States—serves as a direct result of failure to engage in a reciprocal relationship with nature. The corporations responsible for Onondaga's ruination reflect a science controlled by the need for profit and economic progress. This scientific worldview lacks the desire to understand the world and learn how to preserve it. Instead, it accepts ruined land "as the collateral damage of progress" (Kimmerer 326). Kimmerer argues that continuing to endorse a Western scientific worldview, which values nature in terms of what humans can gain from it—will eventually leave all of earth as wounded and uninhabitable as Onondaga Lake. She asserts that to continue receiving the gifts of the earth and sustain life for generations to come, we must first learn how to give back in return. Living in reciprocity with the nature means showing respect and gratitude for the gifts it provides; this relationship also presents a responsibility to protect and restore it. The United States failed to uphold the treaties that guaranteed Onondaga rights to the lake, which limited their power to protect it. However, Kimmerer illustrates how nature can teach us how to restore it.

Examining the soil along the wounded shores of Onondaga Lake, Kimmerer recognizes dark rich soil emerging amidst layers of pure white waste. She notices tiny ants carrying bits of white waste away from the soil and replacing it with seeds and bits of leaves. Kimmerer asserts that the plants and insects understand their interconnectedness with the land and that "the life of one is dependent on the life of all" (332). The ants demonstrate reciprocity with the earth by

slowly removing grains of toxic waste and replacing them with those that will spark new life. Kimmerer frames this observation with Indigenous wisdom, highlighting how the reciprocal relationship between the land and its inhabitants contributes to its restoration. She writes that we can learn from the natural processes used to build and restore ecosystems in our search for sustainability. As humans, we have control over how we receive the earth's gifts and how we give in return; therefore, preserving and protecting the land and water for future generations requires entering a reciprocal relationship with nature. Restoration offers us the opportunity to carry out our responsibility to the land and water; however, Kimmerer notes that restoration "is imperative for healing the earth, but reciprocity is imperative for long-lasting, successful restoration" (333). In other words, restoration efforts are not enough to sustain our environment long-term; achieving that requires recentering Indigenous reciprocity to repair our relationship with the land.

Kimmerer provides a bridge between Western science and Indigenous wisdom that offers a more practical pathway toward achieving sustainability. Though restoration provides a significant piece of the equation, reciprocity holds it all together. Kimmerer writes, "Restoring land without restoring relationship is an empty exercise. It is relationship that will endure and relationship that will sustain the restored land" (338). Therefore, restoration will fail to hold up in the future unless we embrace the notion of reciprocity at its foundation. Sustaining the natural world and life within it will require everyone, and both Western science and Indigenous wisdom can contribute to environmental discourse. Kimmerer's combination of these two lenses of knowledge presents an accessible and highly persuasive argument for both spheres. They can enrich and complement each other rather than stand in opposition of each other. Industry can move forward with economic development using sustainable practices informed by Indigenous

principles and attitudes. This means respecting sacred ancestral lands and protecting them from destruction. It also means entering into a reciprocal relationship with nature, one based on giving, receiving, caretaking, protecting, and restoring.

Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* presents just one work of contemporary Native American literature that offers an opportunity to educate and reorient current predominating perspectives. Writers like Robin Wall Kimmerer, Nick Estes, Craig Howe, and countless others work against the mainstream narratives that disregard Native interests and commodify the natural world. They challenge readers to re-evaluate the literature that centralizes Western ideologies and marginalizes Indigenous culture and tradition. Through essays, interviews, oral stories, poetry, even social media, they confront colonized narratives, call out injustices, and refuse to be silenced any longer. For centuries, Indigenous communities have fostered a reciprocal relationship with the land and water, and for centuries they have fought to defend it from exploitation and destruction. These writers recognize that saving our land and water requires a radical change in perspective, which will not be easy. However, Indigenous voices continue to get louder and louder, demanding to be heard. Literature has the power to change perspective, and contemporary Native American literature provides the pathway to do so.

Mni Wiconi

Source of eternal energy
spiritual law, ancient Lakota teachings
tell us the water is wiconi
life everlasting

Lydia Whirlwind Soldier

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