

# #StandWith(out)StandingRock

Tracing how White activists move in decolonizing spaces

An Honors Thesis for the Department of Peace and Justice Studies

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## **Acknowledgements**

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# Preface

There's a book of Edward Curtis' photography on my coffee table at home. If you haven't heard of him before, he's the photographer who took pictures of Native people all across what is now called the United States, sepia portraits that present Indigenous folks in a very particular light: mythologized, essentialized, disappearing. The distance between the photographer and the photographed is stark in these pictures. I remember how eager my mom was to give it to my dad because of his long interest in Native rights and because of Curtis' fame. I hadn't heard of Curtis before, but I was excited too, and so was my dad when he opened the present on his birthday—right around Thanksgiving.

My family and majority White community walks a delicate and often-crossed line between wanting to respect and advocate for Native rights and capitalizing on indigeneity. I grew up participating in sweat lodges, getting smudged with sage, hearing about peyote, going to anti-war and anti-nuclear protests, and making dreamcatchers while eating a lot of homegrown kale on my off-the-grid intentional community and thinking that all of these facets of my life were *mine*. Until very recently (and if I'm being fully honest, sometimes still

now) I claimed what I called my “alternative” upbringing as something that made me unique, quirky, interesting—as part of my identity—even as I learned about the contexts and origins of various practices. Slowly, as I’ve had the opportunity to exist in more educational and community spaces that challenge harmful exoticizing and appropriative behavior, I’ve been asked think more fully about where I come from.

Last semester, in a class called “Issues in Native American and Indigenous Studies,” I wrote in my notebook, “how many blind spots do I *have*?” This question prompted others: why wasn’t I talking about these blind spots with anyone? Why I was trying to act like I had it all figured out even though I definitely do not? Why, even though I often said that I was “still learning,” did I not want to *appear* as though I was still learning? Why it was so hard for me to admit when a concept or manifestation of racism or settler colonialism was totally new for me? Meanwhile, I heard stories from my parents about bringing up these topics with other White people back home and being met with intense defensiveness and anger. Meanwhile, White folks on my campus doing justice work splintered apart and burned out.

I hear White folks in my life say that justice and love guide them, and I want those to be my guides as well. We think we are acting out of love, but is that what it feels like to others? As we look around us, does it seem that these guiding principles are working? Where are we just refusing to look at the impact of our actions because we are afraid of what we will see and learn about ourselves?

The incredible scholarship, activism, friendship, mentorship, and critique of many folks inform these questions and this project.

How can we love more wholly?

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# **Introduction: Situating Standing Rock, Self, and Framework**

The panelists sit in a semi-circle facing the audience situated in a beautiful hall in Harvard's Graduate School of Design, the promise of delicious snacks peeking from under cloth covers in the back of the room. I lean forward in my seat as the event begins. Having missed a meeting to be here because the panel was "critical for my thesis," I wonder how many more times I can use that excuse to be in the presence of my academic inspirations given the impending thesis defense. The panel, hosted in late March of 2018, was called "Centering Indigenous Women's Voices," and featured Dr. Kim TallBear, Erica Violet Lee, Dr. Adrienne Keene, and Emily Riddle. Dr. TallBear goes last, and at the very end of her presentation, she speaks the question that has been guiding this project, but that I hadn't been able to articulate: "How do we call non-Indigenous people to be in good relation with us and this place while telling them usurping our Indigeneity is not okay?"<sup>1</sup> The notes I scribbled furiously throughout I would later transcribe to a google doc titled "The Raddest of Rad Events," infinitely grateful to have used my thesis excuse one last time.

I have been writing towards TallBear's question, but couldn't find the words for it; it seems they weren't mine to find. This project spends time with White activists who participated in the resistance against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock as a starting point to thinking through how White activists seek to engage in good relation, and where we might be (re)colonizing along the way.

The introduction acts as a situating of my research, myself, my interlocutors, and this project—an articulation of the foundation upon which this project is grounded. The following chapters lift up six moments during my interlocutors' involvement in Standing Rock that stand as critical places of reflection and action, moments where our Whiteness potently interacts with our ability to engage in good relation, where moving without consideration of our Whiteness would (re)colonize. While I have to write these moments in a particular order for this project, and chose to do so by following the moments as they arose throughout the course of these folks' involvement, I do not see them as “stages” or linear. Rather, I think of each of these moments as connected to—and often actually involving—the others; trying to separate out each moment for the writing process was challenging because they entangle together and often happen simultaneously.

In addition, while this project engages in conversation with the term “good relation,” my knowledge of relationality is necessarily incomplete. I am non-Indigenous and White and thus my understanding of the full implications of “good relationality” will only ever be partial. I seek to look at White people's

engagement with this term through the works and words of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars. This project—like all academic work—is in progress and incomplete; it does not offer answers so much as reflections on TallBear’s question.

### *Situating Standing Rock*

I look to Standing Rock as a point of entry to spend time with how White people seek to engage in good relation and Indigenous-led resistance movements. I understand White activist participation in Native resistance movements as an attempt to respond to TallBear’s question and I am curious to think critically about these responses. Because Standing Rock is a recent example of a widespread Indigenous-led decolonizing resistance that mobilized people across identities, including White folks, I spoke with folks engaged in Standing Rock to consider this question in the present (or very near past). The resistance at Standing Rock, however, is one potent moment within a long history of Indigenous resistance against the settler state of the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The resistance at Standing Rock began in 2014 when Energy Transfer Partners (ETP) submitted an application for the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) that would cross through the contested treaty land outside of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation and Mni Sose, the Missouri River.<sup>3</sup> The United States Army Corps of Engineers moved ahead with this project in 2015.<sup>4</sup> The structure of settler colonialism that allowed for this has—at least within the context of the land now known as the United States—been in place since colonizers first came

here; let us not forget that the US government has *always* had land dispossession and erasure of Indigenous people as a goal. The Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) route had previously been north (and upstream) of Bismarck. This new route ran through sacred land and burial grounds of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and put Mni Sose, the Missouri River at risk of being poisoned when the pipeline leaks, which it already has.<sup>5</sup>

The peaceful resistance in Cannonball, North Dakota began with public opposition from the directly affected Native nations including the Standing Rock Sioux, Osage, and Iowa Nations. A group of young Native folks, including Alice Brownotter, Winona Gayton, Bobbi Jean Three Legs, Anna Lee Yellowhammer, and Ezra Miller, also organized a prayer run from North Dakota to the office of the Army Corps of Engineers in response to the proposal.<sup>6</sup> When the Army Corps of Engineers did not budge, the Standing Rock Sioux brought them to court.<sup>7</sup> The case rested on the Army Corps' failure to do an adequate Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) of the route.<sup>8</sup> The current model for pipeline proposals does not require an EIS reflective of the cumulative environmental impact, only individual statements for each of the pipeline's water crossings.<sup>9</sup> In addition, although the Army Corps must do an EIS, they do not have to change anything based on their findings.<sup>10</sup> So, as of June 2017, while the court agreed that the Army Corps had not sufficiently measured the potential environmental impacts of the pipeline, oil still flows through it.<sup>11</sup>

In April 2016, in the midst of the legal battles, Ladonna Brave Bull Allard, who owns property near the contested land, set up a resistance camp called Sacred

Stone in honor of the spherical rocks sacred to the Standing Rock Sioux that used to be at the meeting of the Missouri and Cannonball River before the Army Corps flooded the area in the 1950s.<sup>12</sup> Folks began to arrive in droves, mobilizing around the phrase at the forefront of the movement: Mni Wiconi, or Water is Life/Alive. Participants in the resistance rejected the identity of protestor and claimed that of water protector, which lifted up the purpose of the resistance and subverted the notion that there were equal power dynamics between the state, ETP, and those fighting the pipeline. By August there were two other prayer camps, Oceti Sakowin and Red Warrior.<sup>13</sup> Hundreds of Native nations were represented along with folks of all different identities. At the peak—around Thanksgiving—thousands of people were physically at the prayer camps.

The backlash against the entirely nonviolent actions of the water protectors was intense and violent. Militarized private security and police forces attempted to block access to the camps. According to the *Guardian*,

Police have acknowledged using sponge rounds, bean bag rounds, stinger rounds, teargas grenades, pepper spray, Mace, Tasers and a sound weapon. The explosive teargas grenades in use at Standing Rock have been banned by some US law enforcement agencies because they indiscriminately spray people, Lederman said.<sup>14</sup>

Police sprayed water protectors with water cannons in sub-freezing temperatures and used attack dogs to wound them.<sup>15</sup> Also, after clearing out one of the camps temporarily, they returned the belongings heaped in a pile smelling of urine, desecrating the sacred objects and personal belongings of many people.<sup>16</sup>

The response from the media was tepid at best; while some independent media outlets were on the ground, most major news sources didn't get to Standing Rock until the security forces began to escalate their tactics.<sup>17</sup> The camps were

surrounded by barbed wire, often lit at all times of day by huge floodlights, and constantly under the surveillance of helicopters and low flying planes that would interfere with cell signal such that it was often difficult to communicate outside of the camps.

### *Standing Rock as an entry point*

Standing Rock is situated in a long history of resistance in the face of violence and land theft. The Red Power movement in the 1970s that included the Alcatraz resistance, Wounded Knee, and the Trail of Broken Treaties are notable examples of this thread. This history of refusal also includes the specific resistances that came out of the forcible displacement of seven nations of the Oceti Sakowin when the US Army Corps of Engineers non-consensually flooded their lands by constructing the Pick Sloan dams in the 1940s.<sup>18</sup> Native children refusing to speak English in boarding schools, the battles against the US military since the formation of the nation (and before), the continued survival of Native folks and celebration, mourning, love in the face of continued brutality—all of these continuous and daily resistances are also part of this legacy.

Standing Rock continues and builds upon this thread of subversion and refusal, mobilizing thousands of people across identity, led primarily by youth and women. Framed around water, folks flocked to give support to the struggle through their physical presence, funding, local solidarity movements, and social media posts. Even though I often refer to Standing Rock as the location of the direct encounter between water protectors and security forces, the Standing Rock

resistance expanded past a specific physical location and time, galvanizing people globally.

Many non-Native people came to the camps or organized themselves in local movements and groups. Because of this, and because of the history of White appropriation of indigeneity to perpetuate goals of settler colonialism (that is, to erase indigeneity), I use Standing Rock as a place to interrogate the ways that White people attempt to engage in good relation. This project marks places where our Whiteness is particularly salient in this process, where we may need to reflect a bit more, to recommit to the practice so that we are not (re)colonizing,

### *(re)grounding*

To think about White people moving to be in good relation, I offer the framework of (re)grounding. Our norm—the White settler norm—relies on individualism, extractivism, violence, exploitation, capitalism. To (re)ground then is the continuous acting to decolonize, the choice to engage in the space of decolonizing, the opening and willingness to learn, grow, decenter oneself, to be in reciprocal relationship. The active choosing to destabilize our norm, to refuse to (re)settle. The parentheses around (re) are my attempt to call upon Mishuana Goeman’s and Cutcha Risling Baldy’s use of parentheses to “build a future with the past,” recognizing the Indigenous roots of these concepts in the present.<sup>19</sup>

At first I thought of my project as an exploration of how we cross the *borders* into decolonizing space. But as I read more about decolonizing borders and spaces, I recognized that the idea of borders and barriers is incompatible with

decolonization. Borders and barriers are tools of colonization. Decolonizing space, rather, is porous and flexible. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, a Nishnaabeg scholar, offers these thoughts about decolonizing/liberation for Indigenous folks:

Biiskabiyang—the process of returning to ourselves, a reengagement with the things we have left behind, a reemergence, an unfolding from the inside out—is a concept, an individual and collective process of decolonization and resurgence. To me, it is the embodied processes as freedom. It is a flight out of the structure of settler colonialism and into the processes and relationships of freedom and self-determination encoded and practiced within Nishnaabewin or grounded normativity.<sup>20</sup>

Rather than framing decolonization as bounded and static, Simpson describes it as an act, as movement. While I would reframe this slightly for White folks—we cannot flee the structure of settler colonialism as we are part of the structure—her description of decolonizing as process and relationship ground my thinking throughout this project.

Speaking to those “relationships of freedom,” nēhiyaw scholar Erica Violet Lee notes “how revolutionary our gatherings are.”<sup>21</sup> I understand this to mean that the very act of Indigenous folks gathering together and being in relationship is subversive to settler goals. Indeed, a tool of the settler colonial project is redefining relationality. As Nick Estes says, “to eliminate a people to gain access to desired lands and resources requires annihilating their relationship to that land and therefore their social relations.”<sup>22</sup> Building upon Cheryl Harris’ and Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s discussion of Whiteness as property—that is, that Whiteness is a form of capital folks can exchange for other goods— TallBear also defines settler relationality as property.<sup>23</sup> Settler relationality, she explains,

imposes a framework of ownership, rather than kinship, on all of our relationships. Within this framework we own our body, our DNA, the land, even other humans.<sup>24</sup>

Radical relationality disrupts this framework and is integral to (re)grounding. Rather than describing a specific bounded place, (re)grounding is decolonizing action. I move with my interviewees, who are self-described White activists, as they seek to (re)ground. How is our Whiteness implicated in this act? How do White people (re)ground and not (re)colonize or perpetuate harmful systems of power in the process? Where could we be recommitting to this resistance in fuller ways?

### *Lens and Methodologies*

I write this project as a study of my own community—to, as Nado Aveling says “invert the gaze from ‘the racial object to the racial subject.’”<sup>25</sup> I come from a very White small town in Northern California that believes itself to be well intentioned but also generally believes that if everyone were to “follow their bliss” and be kind to one another the world would be okay. Folks get outraged at events in the news—or often refuse to read the news because it’s “too much” for them. My community wants to live gently in the world yet consistently ignores the realities of systems of power in pursuit of personal comfort. While my group of study extends past my specific home community, growing up in this context sparked my desire to write this thesis.

I am guided by the words of TallBear who says that decolonizing research must be a “relationship-building process...[a] sharing of knowledge, not simply data gathering.”<sup>26</sup> I believe that we White folks can (and must) grow, contribute to decolonizing, learn how to (re)ground. I also believe we need to actively make this happen. I ask readers to read with resilience, with radical self-love and critical compassion for self and others.

As part of including relationality in my research I write myself into this project. I do so to subvert hierarchy between myself and my interlocutors, to remind myself and readers that I am very much a part of this group and that I still have so much to learn, and to assert that research is not subjective, that I necessarily influence my research.<sup>27</sup> Regarding tone, I have also chosen to keep certain aspects of my voice in this project—such as conjunctions and colloquial language—in an attempt to both disrupt academic standards for language and make my writing more accessible.

My group of study for this project included folks who self-define as White activists and who either went to the prayer camps at Standing Rock or were involved in local solidarity efforts in their hometowns. I interviewed 15 White folks for this project, spending thirty minutes to two hours with them depending on time constraints and their availability. To gather interlocutors, I put out a request on social media and emailed folks I knew, asking them to send any potential participants my way; after speaking, interviewees would also at times connect me with folks to interview. The response to my outreach was fairly immediate and illuminated community networks I hadn’t been aware of prior. The

type and duration of folks' participation varied with some having gone to Standing Rock for a few days or a few weeks and others participating in the resistance from home. Although many participants in this research did not request anonymity, I've chosen to use pseudonyms to offer them a bit more privacy.

My interviewees were of a variety of ages and lived in various places around the US, with one interlocutor currently living in Nicaragua. All of them had responded affirmatively to my request for interviewees that identified as "White activists who had participated in some way in the Standing Rock resistance." Our interviews happened in a spectrum of places—my room via phone or Skype, coffee shops, homes—and while I had a set of questions that I came with, I also went where the discussion went, following the threads of folks' thoughts during the course of our time talking.<sup>28</sup>

I chose to interview White folks in particular so as to put the labor of reflecting back on ourselves, rather than Indigenous folks. We are often able to escape study; our participation in systems of power and oppression goes unexamined. Too often the gaze is upon those who have been marginalized, which perpetuates the exoticification, othering, and essentialization of these folks. My decision to interview solely White folks was in reaction to this trend, the desire to ask White folks to reflect, the scope of my research, and because there is a lot of scholarship and writing out there by Indigenous people offering critique of and guidelines for White people participating in Indigenous-led spaces. Rather than asking folks to repeat these thoughts just for the purpose of my interviews, I seek to center them and their work through citation within this project. This is

imperfect; my project does focus on the voices of my White interlocutors, which raises a potent tension between this focus and the project's intention to consider how White people try to decenter their Whiteness.

Our Whiteness requires that we (re)ground in specific ways given that we are coming from a privileged location that often is a source of violence.<sup>29</sup> This being said, I write this project specifically *about* my interviewees, not about White people in general or White activists in general. The folks I interviewed have whole complex histories and identities that inform how they (re)ground and I ask that readers consider this project within that context of specificity. My analysis is grounded in these narratives and I recognize that it may not hold if extended past them. To honor this specificity, and to create a bit more breathing room in this work, I have inserted a few intentional breaks throughout the project when I switch from an interlocutor's personal story to analysis, or between different interlocutor's stories. These white spaces are moments for personal reflection, for sitting with a person's narrative, for breath.

In this project I specifically trace how Whiteness is implicated in (re)grounding, but I also want to acknowledge that there are many other layers of identity implicated in how we exist in the world that I cannot do justice to in this piece. Yet, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes, "race matters in the lives of all peoples" and interacts with how we move through the world.<sup>30</sup> With these words in mind, this project spends time with Whiteness.

This project thinks through my interlocutors' (re)grounding, noting specific moments where they/we actively wrestled with this process, reflecting on how our Whiteness interacts with those moments and (re)grounding in general. While their specific (re)grounding processes may not look like another White person's, I hope that each moment offers a chance to consider and reflect: how does this thought about (re)grounding resonate with you? I strive to hold both Keith Basso's articulation that our worldviews are shaped by our communities and what TallBear calls a radical "Feminist-Indigenous" practice of care that values fluidity and blurriness, seeks to engage in compassionate relationality, and offers critical analysis.<sup>31</sup>

I hope to create a bit of space so that folks can explore the(ir) White activist identity and how it can interact with other aspects of their existence in the world. Perhaps this will be in similar ways to the folks in this project, or perhaps not. In any case, we can learn from one another's processes, and in reading this work you enter into critically compassionate community with yourself, with the interviewees, with me. How can we push each other to (re)ground more fully? How can we more deeply understand the particularities of (re)grounding as a White person?

### *Definitions*

Language holds an incredible amount of weight, and terminology can work to either reinscribe or rupture harmful stereotypes, so I want to be very clear

about the language I am using and how I am using it. The end of the introduction includes a list of terminology that surfaced throughout this learning process as decolonizing terminology as well as a list of abbreviations that may be useful while reading. No words are without traces of colonialism. As Dionne Brand notes, “The language we use already contains our demise;”<sup>32</sup> this is the language that has justified colonization, genocide. Or, as TallBear says, “English is bad.”<sup>33</sup>

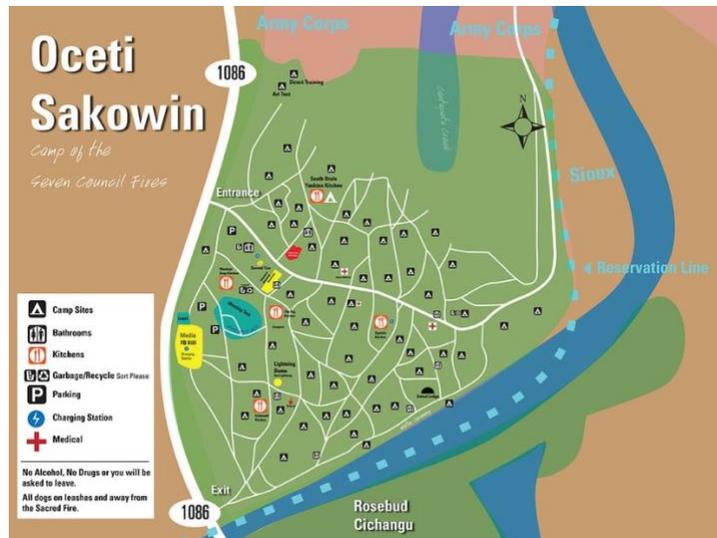
That said, I have, as articulated by Jean Dennison, “attempted to choose the words with the baggage I most prefer to carry,” those that seems least harmful based on learnings and scholarship of Indigenous scholars that I have read.<sup>34</sup> The definitions below describe the context and weight that the word holds each time I use it. Clearly defining the language I use is an attempt to both contextualize the words and increase accessibility to the work given that these words are important to expressing my intent. As TallBear notes, “we need precise languages to talk about precise ideas that have derived from specific histories of work, from the development of theories and methods.”<sup>35</sup>

In this project I call Standing Rock a decolonizing space, not only because Standing Rock was specifically about land and Indigenous sovereignty over land, but also the communities at Standing Rock offered another way of coexisting outside of the realm of individualistic, capitalistic, violence based methods of organization. The prayer camps at Standing Rock held the rules of no alcohol, drugs, or weapons.<sup>36</sup>



[Image of the Direct Action Principles posted at Oceti Sakowin prayer camp.<sup>37]</sup>

Standing Rock had no jails and there was not a traditional police force but rather a community security system with folks on duty 24 hours a day to hold people to these community rules and to offer safety should that be needed.<sup>38</sup> Ceremony was built into camp life, art was everywhere, and food and medical attention—including midwives, mental health services, and other Indigenous healing practices—were available to all.<sup>39</sup>



[Map of Oceti Sakowin highlighting food, medicine, camp rules.<sup>40</sup>]

The prayer camps had a school that incorporated the Lakota language and knowledge was shared freely and intergenerationally.<sup>41</sup> People were expected to go to an orientation upon arrival to be educated on the expectations for their participation and how the prayer camp they were staying at functioned. The prayer camps at Standing Rock became thriving towns and communities with comprehensive infrastructure that functioned outside of Western expectations of civic structures. I do not say this to imply that Standing Rock was a utopia, but rather to echo what Nick Estes has said: that Standing Rock demonstrated that another way of living is indeed possible, that decolonizing land allows for such living.<sup>42</sup>



[Painting of the prayer camps at Standing Rock. Mni Wiconi, Oceti Sakowin Camp Yatika Starr Fields.<sup>43</sup>]

I use the word “decolonizing” to mark moments of acting in furtherance of (re)grounding, of dismantling the settler colonial project that strives to eliminate indigeneity and glorifies ownership, land theft, and individualism. When I mention decolonizing work, I am specifically talking about resistance that furthers “repatriating land to sovereign Native tribes and nations, abolition of slavery in its contemporary forms, and the dismantling of the imperial metropole.”<sup>44</sup> Decolonizing will completely change the current dominant structuring of our world and how we exist in it.<sup>45</sup>

To identify people or places that act in furtherance of decolonizing, people or places trying to (re)ground, I use the term activist. This is not always how my interviewees used this word, and I try to be clear about where those differences in definition may arise.

Community is a complicated term, and I recognize that I have already referenced it in several different ways. When I mention critically compassionate

communities, however, I speak to a very particular sort of community. Critically compassionate communities are places of learning, care, growth, challenge, love. They are my attempt to understand what it looks like to be in “good relation.”<sup>46</sup> I understand critical compassion through the words of a classmate who, after I said that I often stayed silent for fear of hurting others, told me: “Maya, trust that we will let you know if you say something harmful. And we will do so because we love you and we want you to grow.” Critically compassionate community members practice, as George Yancy says “an openness to having one's world transformed and cracked.”<sup>47</sup> They embody a practice of care that includes what TallBear describes as a willingness “to be altered, to revise her stakes in the knowledge to be produced.”<sup>48</sup> Critically compassionate communities ask folks to participate in them actively, to open themselves to being changed by their participation, to hold each other accountable.

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***List of terms:***

*Indigenous, White, Black, Native American, American Indian:* I capitalize these terms to connote the weight these markers carry regarding one’s positionality and experience of the world unless directly quoting someone who did not capitalize.

*American Indian nation:* I use the term nation because American Indian nations are sovereign states. Unless I am referencing specific language that did not use this terminology, I will use nation.

*Citizen:* Given that American Indian Nations are sovereign states, I use the term citizen to refer to folks who are part of a given nation.

*American Indian, Native American:* I use these terms interchangeably to refer to those folks who are indigenous to the land now defined as the United States.

*Indigenous peoples:* I use the plural (peoples) when referencing the general identity of indigeneity to include the multiplicity of folks, traditions, and groups that this term holds.

*Water Protector:* I shall use this term in reference to those who participated in the Standing Rock resistance against the Dakota Access Pipeline.

*Moment/Event/Resistance vs. Movement vs. Protest:* To recognize the events at Standing Rock as part of a long movement of resistance against land theft, exploitation, infringement upon sovereignty, and oppression, I'll refer to the resistance as the Standing Rock resistance, events at Standing Rock, or the moment at Standing Rock rather than a movement unto itself. In addition, I will not use the word protest to describe this moment so as not to reduce the weight of or invalidate the resistance. Protest also implies an equal power balance between two similarly positioned entities, which is an incorrect reflection of the reality of the resistance.

### ***Abbreviations:***

*DAPL:* Dakota Access Pipeline. The Standing Rock resistance was sparked by this pipeline's construction.

*ETP:* Energy Transfer Partners. The company behind the Dakota Access Pipeline.

*EIS:* Environmental Impact Statement. A federal report that details the environmental impact of a given project, in this case DAPL.

*#NoDAPL, #StandWithStandingRock:* The hashtags used in reference to the Standing Rock resistance on social media.

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<sup>1</sup> Kim TallBear, Erica Violet Lee, Emily Riddle, "Centering Indigenous Women's Voices: Self Determination and Decolonization Through Literature, Scholarship, and Activism" (lecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Cambridge, MA, March 30, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> I will not be diving into the full historical context of the resistance at Standing Rock here, however Nick Estes' forthcoming book *Our History is the Future: Mni Wiconi and the Struggle for Native Liberation* and the forthcoming volume *#NoDAPL and Mni Wiconi: Reflections on Standing Rock* edited by Jaskiran Dhillon and Nick Estes offers a more complete contextual analysis of the resistance.

<sup>3</sup> "DAPL Timeline," Sacred Stone Camp- *Iyyaŋ Wakháŋagapi Othí*, accessed March 31, 2018, <http://sacredstonecamp.org/dapl-timeline/>

<sup>4</sup> "#StandingRockSyllabus," NYC Stands with Standing Rock, accessed March 30, 2018, <https://nycstandswithstandingrock.wordpress.com/standingrocksyllabus/>

<sup>5</sup> DAPL has already leaked since oil started running through it. Alleen Brown, "Five Spills, Six Months in Operation: Dakota Access Track Record Highlights Unavoidable Reality—Pipelines

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- <sup>11</sup> Meyer, “Victory.”
- <sup>12</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions,” Sacred Stone Camp- *Inyan Wakhánagapi Othí*, accessed March 31, 2018, <http://sacredstonecamp.org/dapl-timeline/>
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- <sup>16</sup> Nick Estes, “Going Off the Reservation: Traditions of Indigenous Resistance, Border Towns, and Oil Pipelines” (lecture at Harvard University Native American Program, Cambridge, MA, November 17 2017).
- <sup>17</sup> Tristan Ahtone, “How the media did and did not report on Standing Rock,” *Al Jazeera*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/12/media-report-standing-rock-161214101627199.html>
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- <sup>21</sup> Lee, lecture.
- <sup>22</sup> Nick Estes, “Lakota Giving and Justice,” *Owasicu Owe Waste Sni*, November 26, 2015, [oldwars.wordpress.com/2015/11/26/lakota-giving-and-justice/](http://oldwars.wordpress.com/2015/11/26/lakota-giving-and-justice/).
- <sup>23</sup> Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June, 1993): 1707-1791; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015); TallBear, lecture.
- <sup>24</sup> TallBear, lecture.
- <sup>25</sup> Nado Aveling, “Don't Talk about What You Don't Know': On (Not) Conducting Research with/in Indigenous Contexts,” *Critical Studies in Education* 54, no. 2 (2013): 205.
- <sup>26</sup> Kim TallBear, “Standing with and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist Indigenous Approach to Inquiry,” in *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies*, ed. Chris Andersen and Jean M. O'Brien (Routledge, 2017), 80.
- <sup>27</sup> Sarah Wall, “An autoethnography on learning about autoethnography.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 2 (June 2006): 1-12.

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- <sup>28</sup> See appendix for sample interview questions.
- <sup>29</sup> When discussing this sort of systemic privilege, I'm speaking about the benefits granted to White folks based on race given their positionality in a White supremacist and settler colonial system. For a foundational reading on the concept of White privilege, read Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Peace and Freedom Magazine* (Anny/August, 1989), 10-12.
- <sup>30</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "Introduction: White Possession and Indigenous Sovereignty Matters," in *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xiii.
- <sup>31</sup> Keith Hamilton Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 72. Here, Basso notes that, "local understandings of external realities are fashioned from local cultural materials."; TallBear, "Standing."
- <sup>32</sup> Dionne Brand, "An Ars Poetica from the Blue Clerk," *The Black Scholar* 47, no. 1 (2017): 60.
- <sup>33</sup> TallBear, lecture.
- <sup>34</sup> Jean Dennison, "Introduction," in *Colonial Entanglement: Constituting a Twenty-First Century Osage Nation*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 13.
- <sup>35</sup> TallBear, "Standing," 79.
- <sup>36</sup> Sacred Stone Camp- *Iyyaŋ Wakháŋagapi Othí*, "Frequently Asked Questions."
- <sup>37</sup> Adrienne Keene, "#NoDAPL: Updates, resources, and reflections," *Native Appropriations*, November 1, 2016. <http://nativeappropriations.com/2016/11/nodapl-updates-resources-and-reflections.html>
- <sup>38</sup> Nick Estes and Yatika Fields, "Aesthetics, Academics, & Activism at Standing Rock: A Conversation with Yatika Fields and Nick Estes," (lecture at Tufts University, Medford, MA., February 26, 2018); Sacred Stone Camp- *Iyyaŋ Wakháŋagapi Othí*, "Frequently Asked Questions."
- <sup>39</sup> Carolina Reyes, Melissa Rose, Yuwita Win, "Midwives at Dakota Access Resistance Camps: We Can Decolonize, Respect Women & Mother Earth," interview with Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now!*, Democracy Now!, October 18, 2016. [https://www.democracynow.org/2016/10/18/midwives\\_at\\_dakota\\_access\\_resistance\\_camps](https://www.democracynow.org/2016/10/18/midwives_at_dakota_access_resistance_camps); Noah, interview with the author, November 2017; Sienna, interview with the author, December 2017.
- <sup>40</sup> "Map of Oceti Sakowin," Oceti Sakowin Camp, accessed May 8, 2018. [ocetisakowincamp.org](http://ocetisakowincamp.org). (This website is no longer in operation.)
- <sup>41</sup> Reyes, Rose, Win, interview; Estes and Fields, lecture.
- <sup>42</sup> Estes and Fields, lecture.
- <sup>43</sup> Yatika Starr Fields, *Mni Wiconi, Oceti Sakowin Camp*, Painting, 2016.
- <sup>44</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 31.
- <sup>45</sup> I use the active verb "decolonizing" here to note that this process is ongoing and continuous without a clearly defined end.
- <sup>46</sup> TallBear, lecture.
- <sup>47</sup> George Yancy, "Black Bodies, White Gazes: the Continuing Significance of Race," (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2008), 240.
- <sup>48</sup> TallBear, "Standing," 80.

## **one: positioning ourselves**

**[figuring out where we are to see where we are going]**

I'm standing in line at Coffee Catz, not the most obvious café in Sebastopol, California, waiting to order a tea, scanning the room for a person who fits my dad's description: "She looks like someone from Sebastopol. Shortish, kind of gray hair, flowy clothes." Not that helpful, if I'm being honest—most people here look like this. A woman walks in, sees me, comes over. It's her. Cynthia insists on buying my tea for me despite my protests and we get to chatting. I can tell that she doesn't love the recorder, but agrees to be recorded anyway; she says she knows it can be useful. I wonder, throughout the course of my interviews, about the recorder. People are edgy around it, treating it like it's going to catch them in the act of doing something they shouldn't be doing.

As she speaks she sort of dances around her idea of herself in relation to justice work. To her, being involved in resistance is an identity you move in and out of. She says that she had

sort of hung up my activist shoes a number of years ago, but when Standing Rock emerged I saw that as, like, worth dusting them off and getting involved. Because it felt, like, to support the voice of Native peoples at this time felt really important. I could see it was an important thing to step into.<sup>1</sup>

She'd wanted to go to Standing Rock saying "it was fun to think about" but ultimately decided she couldn't go and focused on organizing from her hometown.<sup>2</sup> The word "fun" stands out to me now as I revisit the interview back in Medford, greeting these words once again on different, but still colonized, land.

I wonder if "fun" marks Cynthia's distance from the struggle to decolonize, an ability to "play Indian" as Philip Deloria says, or in Cynthia's case, to play ally while not wholeheartedly committing to the struggle.<sup>3</sup> I don't believe Cynthia—a dedicated organizer—only thinks about her participation as an adventure. While celebration and joy are part of resistance, Cynthia's centering of fun reads to me as an underlying distance from what is at stake in decolonizing struggles.

This distance is also reflected in her rationale for not going to the prayer camps, which was based around personal reasons rather than requests from the leaders at Standing Rock. She decided not to go because of age, winter, her daughter being sick. All of these reasons are "good reasons" within the construct of Whiteness. I don't think that Cynthia's choice to take care of her body and her daughter rather than go to Standing Rock is malicious or even apathetic, but she was *able* to distance herself from the struggle and could refuse to involve her whole life in the struggle without repercussion. Her age, family, and her Whiteness offered her an out.

Cynthia's reasoning also indicates a pragmatism, an ability to identify where she, given her identity, defined capacity, and other life circumstances could be most useful. So she helped spread the news of Standing Rock to her own

community. Cynthia identifies her role as “being on the ground”—responding to requests from Indigenous leadership, mobilizing folks in her hometown. “I also was reflecting on that before coming [here], to realize, I am in a position of White privilege and I can choose to go into that or not. And I was in part acting on that as well” she says of her decision to take a step back from the work.<sup>4</sup> She reflects that, throughout her involvement in Standing Rock solidarity efforts, “I think I became humbler and humbler.” She wonders, sometimes, if she’s a “fairweather activist,” the kind that is only engaged when it’s easy. She doesn’t think so—she’s been involved in justice organizing throughout her whole life—but she does admit that “I’m in a position of privilege that allowed me to step back and take care of myself whereas there are people that aren’t in that position. So I’m grateful for the opportunity to participate to the extent that I was.”<sup>5</sup>

I thought about Cynthia as I left California to return to Medford, Massachusetts, to my coffee and the warmth of my scarf, that perhaps our Whiteness allows allyship to be a shoe that we can take on and off, rather than part of us, rather than our foot.

Sienna and I are in her house. We came here, rather than a spot on the Tufts University campus, because she tells me that she still has some trauma associated with her time at Standing Rock. While she’s up for talking about it, she’d prefer to do so in private. We sit across from each other on chairs that look as though they were designed in the late 1800s. I’m into it. It’s pretty far off campus; she took a year off (during which she went to Standing Rock) and

wanted some space from Tufts when she came back. Holding a cup of tea in her hand, she plays with the tag of the tea bag consistently while we talk. She says to me that Standing Rock wasn't her "first time" engaging in radical spaces.

Returning to her words now, I hear this as a recognition that she is located far enough from this sort of subversive radical work to be able to *choose* to engage with it, rather than living the engagement.

When I ask if she'd consider herself an activist she responds quickly: "Oh. Yeah. The words I use are more, like radical...I'm an anarchist, so yeah."<sup>6</sup> She claims this identity of anarchist—an identity that perhaps necessitates a choice *to* engage. Her use of the term radical leads me to ask: How do we take on this term? Are allyship and activism ours to claim? Must we claim our identity and commitment to this resisting through words? Words give power to something, legitimacy to something, and perhaps claiming that we are activists or allies holds us accountable to doing that work.<sup>7</sup>

For Ann, another interviewee, activism "means that I'm willing to take action on my beliefs about what's needed to build a better world."<sup>8</sup> Many White folks, she notes "came in" to Standing Rock with an "agenda" about what should happen. She says that many White folks, including herself, were humbled as a result. Ann's noting of White folks' ability to "come in" reflects this distance, this ability to choose, this ability to step away, to *go out*, to return to the comfortable norm our Whiteness offers us. Is claiming oneself to be an activist simply marking when one enters the decolonizing space? Does claiming to be an activist

obscure whether one is actually (re)grounding behind a façade of proclaimed action? Does placing the label of activist on some people actually create a divide between activists and the rest of society?

Ben has a qualm with the term activist and what it implies. I'm greeted by his dog, Freya, (yes, like the Norse fertility goddess), who comes bounding up and on to me. She's present throughout the interview, scuffling around on the recording, barking in the background. At times Ben talks to her rather than to me.

Activism, states Ben, makes him uncomfortable. He says

I don't like that word for various reasons, I don't identify with that anymore. I would not say I ever really identify as an activist. Mainly because, um, it feels like a lot of pressure. And there is in *certain* activist circles, not all and not everyone, but there is that whole thing about if you're down. I just really hate that and I don't think it's conducive to organizing a community.<sup>9</sup>

Down has come to mean something akin to being aware and thinking about systems of power and oppression. Ben's words make me wonder, what happens when White people become the arbiters of how people get to position themselves. If White people in activist spaces are the ones deciding who gets to enter activist spaces, they become the "guardians" of the border of decolonizing work; indeed, they *create* the/a border.

"And the other thing I don't like about the *idea* of activism," Ben continues,

is that it's sort of this sense that there's a certain group of people in our community who will address these issues and I feel like we all have a responsibility...and that doesn't mean we all have to be activists in the traditional sense, but we can't just relegate these responsibilities to one

small group of people who really are not going to be able to do it by themselves anyways.<sup>10</sup>

I read this also to mean that those who don't claim activism as part of their identity leave themselves more room to choose not to participate; that activists are the ones who *must* choose to (re)ground.

Ben spoke specifically to his experience with a local solidarity group in Sonoma County. He expressed his discomfort that folks were so quick to mobilize around a highly public issue like Standing Rock while that same energy has not been present when it comes to local Native justice issues. This makes me wonder about the continuity of allyship, about White activists participating in some movements but not others, about the lack of continuous reflection and engagement this indicates.

Re-parsing over the interviews, the amorphous nature of decolonizing space stands out. These conversations between my interviewees and I span time and space, existing in the place and moment where they happened, yet also expanding to encompass the land now called the United States, the colonized land upon which we reside. As I listen again to the words we spoke months ago, I am struck by decolonizing work's continuous rooting in land, even as it dislocates from time.

Many of those I interviewed hedged a bit before deciding how they identified with regards to the word activist. When I asked Meg whether she considers herself an activist she said "I guess."<sup>11</sup> For Samantha, the response was "I guess of sorts."<sup>12</sup> Diane said that activist wasn't her "primary identity."<sup>13</sup> Claire

said that she would say yes to that question, but that she sees activism as having “different levels,” and she’d place herself on a “low tier” of these levels.<sup>14</sup> I hear this as a belief that activists who participate most frequently in decolonizing work are somehow “more activist” than others, and that Claire does not see herself as one of them. When White folks refuse to claim fullhearted activism, are we protecting our ability to distance ourselves from decolonizing?

The interlocutors’ reticence to claim full and continuous participation in activism, this recognition of the choice to (and the common choice to *not*) engage indicates to me that folks are willing to unsettle, to begin to think through relinquishing power.<sup>15</sup> Says Yancy, “The white ally engages in a form of relationality that requires a suspension of self-certainty, arrogance, fear, and other-blaming” and I read these nuanced answers to “do you identify as an activist” as such a suspension of self-certainty, as a willingness to self-reflect.<sup>16</sup> Yet an indirect engagement with privilege isn’t enough.

I circle back now to the beginning of this chapter and Cynthia’s direct engagement with her ability to choose. This feels hopeful because she acknowledged the distance and that she acted on this distance. Perhaps a first step for White folks to (re)ground is recognizing that (re)grounding is an active choice. Indigenous survival is resistance; Tuck and Yang remind us that “the presence of Indigenous peoples - who make *a priori* claims to land and ways of being - is a constant reminder that the settler colonial project is incomplete.”<sup>17</sup> For White

people, our survival on Indigenous land marks the settler project as continuing. So, to unsettle our inherently colonizing presence is a continuous choice.

In (re)grounding, we don't lose our Whiteness; to (re)ground we recognize it so that we can work to disrupt it. As Yancy notes, being an antiracist ally “involves an active commitment to relinquishing white power.”<sup>18</sup> To (re)ground is active and self-aware. To (re)ground as a White person is to first reckon with our Whiteness, is to recognize that our passivity (re)inscribes colonization.

In the interviewees' careful locating of themselves in relation to decolonizing work I read a recognition that the edges of participation are fluid. A recognition that White people can always (re)settle, slip out of decolonizing resistance if we wanted; perhaps recognizing this choice makes space for continued choosing *to* (re)ground. If we do not acknowledge the privilege we hold, how can we continue to dismantle the systems that privilege us? Getting really clear about who we are and our Whiteness—that is, locating ourselves—may allow us to more fully understand what it means to enter decolonizing spaces, to (re)ground.

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia, interview with the author, December 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Cynthia, interview with the author, December 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Philip J Deloria, “Thinking about Self in a Family Way.” *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 1 (2002): 25.

<sup>4</sup> Cynthia, interview with author, December 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Cynthia, interview with the author, December 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Sienna, interview with the author, December 2017.

<sup>7</sup> TallBear, “Standing,” 79.

<sup>8</sup> Ann, interview with the author, January 2018

<sup>9</sup> Ben, interview with the author, January 2018

<sup>10</sup> Ben, interview with the author, January 2018

<sup>11</sup> Meg, interview with the author, November 2017

<sup>12</sup> Samantha, interview with the author, December 2017

<sup>13</sup> Diane, interview with the author, January 2018

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<sup>14</sup> This interviewee requested anonymity so this is not her real name. Claire, interview with the author, December 2017

<sup>15</sup> Yancy, "Black Bodies," 238.

<sup>16</sup> Yancy, "Black Bodies," 241.

<sup>17</sup> Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization," 9.

<sup>18</sup> Yancy, "Black Bodies," 238.

## **two: the call**

### **[finding our stake while listening for consent]**

I meet Noah in Brookline, a suburb of Boston. After driving around the block, ungracefully navigating a few one-way streets with no parking and checking that where I parked is indeed legal, I find him at the small diner on the corner. I spot him right as I walk in—he’s in the back, legs crossed, leaning away from the metal table. When we chatted over email he said this was a good time for him—he had a few hours before heading to work nearby in a hospital psych ward where he’s a nurse. Noah wastes no time; he dives in immediately and after an hour I write in my notes “I have asked no questions and it has been almost an hour!!!!”<sup>1</sup> I take this as a sign that he has a lot to process. But it also makes me think about how gender plays into (re)grounding, how White cis men may (re)ground differently than other folks, how cis people in general may, how straight people may—the layers go on and are questions for another time. Noah is raw and vulnerable with me. His thoughts come freely, openly, scooting down tangents as they arrive.

When he speaks about why he decided to go to Standing Rock he mentions his ancestry, his Whiteness, his desire to learn from the resistance and

the skills he felt he could contribute. He went back and forth about whether it would be more helpful for him to donate the money he would use on airfare and supplies, but finally decided that given his nursing and carpentry skills, his presence at one of the resistance camps could be really useful. He also says that he did research and reflecting before going to work on ensuring “that when I got there it wouldn’t all be about my ego, my own need to validate myself or whatever” and that “I did actually feel like I wasn’t completely ignorant either.”<sup>2</sup> A few more personal motivations also called to Noah, one being his own desire to grow. “It did seem like to be a better human being I did need to develop myself as an activist and contribute what I could,” he said.<sup>3</sup> He speaks gently about his daughter, who died when she was very young.

She was a good part of my inspiration, feeling like she’s gone [so] I’m going to try to make this world livable for my sons who are still alive and for the rest of humanity and wanting to preserve what is excellent about this world and the people here.<sup>4</sup>

I think about how intimate Noah’s call was, how specific his decision to (re)ground in decolonizing work. How carefully he parsed through the pros and cons of going, the research he did to try to identify whether he should actually go. And, ultimately, his decision to go as reinforced by his own desire to “be a better human being” and by wanting to create a better world for his children. That is, as motivated by his ideas about who he is and the need to fulfill that self-perception, that self-identification. The need to locate himself and who he wants to be in the resistance.

This chapter explores why folks moved to (re)ground, what pushed folks to actively participate in decolonizing resistance given their distance from it. Almost everyone I interviewed said that their identity was somehow wrapped up in their decision to join the resistance. Each person saw participating in Standing Rock as a way they could live up to their idea of themselves or who they wanted to be and so they wanted to get involved. The requests from the leadership at Standing Rock were not the only reason, and indeed most often not the primary reason, for people's involvement.

In discussing decolonization, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson notes that "true engagement requires consent."<sup>5</sup> That is, true engagement in decolonizing resistance asks for a negotiation, asks that folks wait for permission to participate and then participate in a way that feels good for everyone involved. Given this, a central question about White (re)grounding is whether the process is consensual. *How* we (re)ground, how we enter a decolonizing space (which in this case is rooted in the actual land of Standing Rock) is indicative of whether we have actually entered into good relation.

I spoke with Jon over the phone, sitting on my bed in Medford. He lives in Boonville, California and is familiar with the intentional off-the-grid community that I grew up in. We shared some laughs about how tiny Boonville is, but also I understood when he said that there's a powerful sense of community there. He grew up in North Dakota and was going to visit his mom just as the resistance was gathering steam. So, he said he decided to go help out at Standing Rock for a few

short periods because it was convenient. He says with regards to the resistance, “I definitely felt it emotionally” and that he “tried to double up on personally what was going on for me” so that he could support both his mom and Standing Rock.<sup>6</sup> He ended up working primarily with the Mendo Stands with Standing Rock group—the solidarity group based in Boonville—to support their camp at Oceti Sakowin, helping them prepare for the North Dakota winters with which he is familiar. Jon spoke about his personal connection to North Dakota as a primary motive for his participation. He also notes that the attitude of showing up and offering help—indeed the assumption that one has anything to offer by way of “help”—can be a dangerous assumption as it implies that the water protectors are deficient and in need of saving. So, as part of his decision-making process, Jon also thought about what brought him to Standing Rock and what his presence could contribute.

I call Joanne, another person from Boonville, from my mom’s office in Sebastopol while I’m home for winter break. I continue to think about place during all of these interviews—about how the project of decolonizing stretches not only over physical land but also airwaves, and time, and bodies. That these conversations and resistances happen in so many physically different areas points to the porousness of decolonizing space and ability to (re)ground wherever we are. Joanne speaks gently, kindly. She talks about how she’s been involved in environmental activism for quite some time, about how she’d lived on the banks of Lake Oahe in a tipi for a bit and thus felt a personal connection to protecting

the land. She said that she felt she “learned what it was like to live as an Indigenous person” during that time and that her involvement with the Mendo Stands with Standing Rock group “felt like she was protecting her home.”<sup>7</sup> Standing Rock, she says, “is for everyone” because it is primarily about protecting water.<sup>8</sup>

When I asked her about how she sees her role in the resistance she said that it is “to share my feeling of being, even though I’m not Native American, I don’t have DNA of Sioux or Navajo, being Indigenous is being in relation to Mother Earth. You can feel Indigenous and feel Native American through that protection.”<sup>9</sup> In these words, Joanne not only locates herself in the resistance, she actually claims that this movement is *for* her, that Standing Rock is *about* her own “indigeneity.” That in deciding to participate she isn’t just entering a decolonizing space, but she’s actually taking on a different identity, claiming that space as *hers*.

In this speech act, Joanne undoes the self-positioning from the previous chapter, pointing to the interwoven nature of the moments separated out in this project. She actually erases her identity as a White woman and the specific positioning that comes with this in relation to decolonizing spaces. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang put forth the idea of settler colonial “moves to innocence”— tactics that White people use to claim that they participate in decolonizing efforts without fully engaging with what true decolonization looks like. One such move is the “adoption fantasy” or the desire to “become, without becoming, Indian.”<sup>10</sup> I think, as I read this paper, about Joanne’s claim that “we are all Indigenous” and that after living in a tipi she “felt Indigenous.” I want to mark this claim as one

that reproduces harmful notions of indigeneity and decolonizing, as a claim that is indicative of the logic of settler colonialism that presents indigeneity as a static, historicized identity that White settlers long for. Joanne's response is not an anomaly; it is aligned with this dominant narrative around indigeneity that she operates within. In many ways her response is to be expected, yet it also demonstrates the work that still needs to be done to disrupt this narrative.

Many in the decolonization and liberation realms state that none are truly free until all are free. The Combahee River Collective, a self-identified group of Black feminists, explains "that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy."<sup>11</sup> Yet finding our stake in dismantling systems of power as White people does not mean we can claim indigeneity as our own. Rather we have to find our particular stake, *as* White people. Identifying our stake in decolonizing work I understand to be part of engaging in reciprocal relationality.

Sarah, who is currently in Nicaragua working at an NGO and originally from Nebraska, said that she decided to participate in Standing Rock because she sees herself as someone who cares about Indigenous justice struggles and so felt that she needed to follow through on this self-identification.<sup>12</sup> Meg, a young woman at George Washington University said that her involvement was spurred by a mix of "outrage and wanting to be helpful."<sup>13</sup>

Sarah and Meg's reasonings indicate an entangling of identity in their motivations for going. This entanglement is confusing. In many ways, I think it

necessary: in a very theoretical sense in order to exist in a place, to ground in a place, you have to be able to envision yourself in that space already. As Toni Morrison's Baby Suggs says in the book *Beloved*, "She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it."<sup>14</sup> Keith Basso picks up this thought when he speaks about place-worlds, or our cultural constructions of space and place, and what goes on within them. "We *are*, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine," he says.<sup>15</sup>

So yes, we have to see and imagine ourselves participating in decolonizing in order to actively (re)ground. We have to find our stake in the work to fully commit to it. And if the stakes are as high as our identity, wouldn't that mean deeper commitment? Yet if we tie our identities to our decision to (re)ground, are we listening for consent? Are we truly (re)grounding? Eric Ritskes poses this question:

If the imagining and building of decolonial futures and worlds must happen...and it happens on Indigenous land, which itself contains knowledges, stories and history, including knowledge of borders, what are the decolonizing relationships that we can engage with by understanding Indigenous sovereignties and ways of engaging borders as relational?<sup>16</sup>

Is "the call," as these interlocutors discussed it, a relational and consensual engagement? When we frame our decision to seek (re) grounding as a "call," are we assuming an affirmation of consent that we have not actually listened for? Are we allowing ourselves to be taught about how to enter and act in that space? Have we already decided that it is our destiny to enter before we really take in whether or not we *should*? A radical activist Manifest Destiny? To me it seems that these

decisions to (re)ground are happening on our own. Yes, perhaps we must do some solo self-reckoning to identify our stake in decolonization. Yet is determining in isolation *whether* and *how* we enter radical spaces a colonizing act?

Many of my interlocutors were wrestling with these questions as well, like Noah and Jon when they took the time to get clear on their reasons for going to Standing Rock. They took a breath before deciding whether it was “their place” to participate, thought about what their presence could offer, and considered whether there was room for them in the place-world of resistance. I read this as an attempt to negotiate the entrance into (re)grounding and listen for consent—even though it still happened internally and often alone. And they also seemed open, even eager, to have their thoughts about “decolonizing work” be unsettled. They were ready to learn and take in feedback, then adjust their presence accordingly.

I see a tension between decentering oneself to wait for consent and identifying one’s stake in decolonizing. My difficulty in reconciling the two arises from my own situating within a construct where, as TallBear states, “settler relationality is property.”<sup>17</sup> Folks within a settler framework see relationships as transactional, as entrenched in loss and gain. I’ve been thinking about “the call” to (re)ground as being unable to hold both White folks’ stake and our need to wait for consent. But why can’t it? Perhaps our entrance requires a practice of “radical reciprocity” where White folks identify our stake and still must be granted entrance in order to truly (re)ground.<sup>18</sup> If we don’t listen for consent, we are simply (re)colonizing.

Many interviewees did pause to reflect on how they were being asked to participate, and questioned their motivations for participating, attempting to keep their Whiteness “off-center” through critical self-reflection.<sup>19</sup> Is this enough? And if the decision to (re)ground is so deeply based in how people perceive themselves, what happens when that ideal self falters, when that perception is challenged? What happens when our expectations for how to act are cracked open? This is what the next chapter attempts to dive into.

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s notes, November 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Noah, interview with the author, November 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Noah, interview with the author, November 2017

<sup>4</sup> Noah, interview with the author, November 2017

<sup>5</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 3 (2014): 10.

<sup>6</sup> Jon, interview with the author, November 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Joanne, interview with the author, December 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Joanne, interview with the author, December 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Joanne, interview with the author, December 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization,” 14.

<sup>11</sup> Combahee River Collective. *The Combahee River Collective Statement*. (Zillah Eisenstein, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Sarah, interview with the author, November 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Meg, interview with the author, November 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 88.

<sup>15</sup> Basso, “Wisdom,” 7.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Ritskes, “Against the death maps of Empire: Contesting colonial borders through Indigenous sovereignty,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society*, (2015).

<sup>17</sup> TallBear, lecture.

<sup>18</sup> Estes, “Lakota Giving and Justice.”

<sup>19</sup> Aveling, “Don’t Talk,” 209.

## **three: cracking open**

### **[blind spots, expectations, and utter transformation]**

My morning is packed with interviews. The one I've scheduled with Ann is over the phone, so I dash out of my previous café meeting to my car and sit there with the laptop crunched between the steering wheel and my waist, phone on the console. Ann and I had some trouble finding time to meet in person while I was home, so even though we live in the same county, a phone call it is. Even now, deep into my interviews, I still get nervous before each one. Ann answers the phone and I find that I can make a mental picture of her from her voice even though I've never met her; it holds a lot of her in it. She speaks with force and cohesion, thoughtfully but with certainty, and doesn't want to tell me how old she is. I guess from her voice she's somewhere in the middle of her life—whatever that means.

Ann went to Standing Rock for two one-month periods during the winter time when the resistance was escalating. When she begins to talk about the challenges of being at Standing Rock she mentions that there were a lot of

tensions between White activists and Native folks there. And, she notes, a lot of this had to do with the trauma that folks bring into the space. “The biggest thing that is going to take down anyone’s efforts towards a better world is our own unhealed wounds and trauma. I saw so much trauma that people held.”<sup>1</sup> This trauma that folks carried had a direct impact on their ability to manage their personal triggers so that they could be present and show up for the work they were there to do.

According to Ann, trauma

Makes you vulnerable to conflict in interpersonal situations and group situations. And so it makes it really hard to go forward as an organized entity to make change if everyone involved is still dealing with their own personal traumas or not looking at them or not healing them in some way.<sup>2</sup>

Ann is putting her energies to creating a mobile medic van that can go to the frontlines of these resistances. “I see that as being absolutely essential if we wanna effect change, is that people have to have ways of getting support around their personal and interpersonal traumas so that they can work together,” says Ann.<sup>3</sup>

She continues to say that she’s done a lot of her own personal work to heal her traumas and become really intimate with them so that when they come up she knows what’s happening, what’s triggering her, and how to manage them. She feels that this ability to self-reflect and the desire to process trauma is critical to folks being able to show up fully in decolonizing spaces.

Trauma is a huge and complicated word with many different manifestations and implications. I do not want to make blanket claims about trauma or to analyze anyone’s trauma here. I seek, rather to explore the idea that

what we carry with us in general (perhaps traumatic experiences, but also our whole histories, presents, and identities) can affect the way we exist in a space, particularly if we ignore these aspects of ourselves. And even though it's who we want to be, our idealized self, that calls us to (re)ground, it's our whole self that comes. This chapter considers the space between how we *think* we should act as White activists in Indigenous-led spaces, how we *do* act, and how we are being *asked* to act.

This disconnect between who we as White activists expect ourselves to be in decolonizing spaces and the reality of how we show up can be painful and startling. Sienna notes that:

People bring shit from other places into those more radical places. I don't think that people necessarily knew how to address all of that in that camp because there were other people, and this should be obvious, there were lots of people there who had a lot of trauma from the past, but also we were getting traumatized in the present you know?<sup>4</sup>

Sienna tried to mitigate the impact that her mental illnesses and traumas would have on her ability to work hard and show up and said that she

heard the argument that people couldn't bring that, like their mental illnesses into those spaces. I really tried not to let my past traumas and mental illnesses get in the way...that being said, mental illnesses are also just a reality, so, and not something that should be pushed.<sup>5</sup>

I hear both Sienna and Ann's description of how mental health and trauma have to be "dealt with" so that they don't "get in the way" as indicating an underlying assumption that to engage in good relation as a White person means dealing with personal processes and emotions on our own, not bringing them into the resistance, not taking up space with our emotions. That is, that White activists are

there to support as much as possible, which means taking up as little space as possible, which means leaving parts of ourselves behind. Yet, as Sienna points out, this sometimes isn't possible.

Like Sienna, Noah also struggled to live up to his understanding of self-sufficiency in decolonizing space. His first night at Oceti Sakowin he says he broke down. He was feeling really overwhelmed by the magnitude of the events happening at Standing Rock and also potently feeling the presence of his daughter. Realizing he had to take care of himself to be useful to the resistance, he immediately went to the medic tent and got the support he needed to engage in (re)grounding. His thoughts about how to be present as a White person in that space swirling in his head, he sought the help he felt he needed in order to act on those learnings. After that, he says he could fully participate. Some days he worked 20 hours in the medic tent, other days he built latrines, really throwing his whole self into what needed to be done. So even though it felt jarring to him at first, Noah did convey that he brought his full self—trauma and all—to Standing Rock. And according to him at least, he was still able to support the prayer camp's functioning in critical ways.

Sienna got really sick a bit into her stay at Sacred Stone camp—to the point where she was incapacitated in bed for two days—and had to be taken care of by the folks around her in camp. She ended up leaving camp and staying in the nearby casino hotel for a few days to get out of the cold and smoke of Sacred

Stone. She struggled to reconcile her physical and emotional needs with her desire to fully support the resistance:

There were definitely a lot of things that, you know, affected work and how I felt about work day to day. I mean I did always feel this obligation, you know, about why am I not always doing work, which is capitalistic too. But I do think I did achieve some sort of balance more towards the end.<sup>6</sup>

My interpretation of her reflections is that being at Standing Rock forced her to reckon with her wholeness, her entirety, her humanness. She had to take care of herself and at times let others take care of her in order to be as useful as possible, in order to truly (re)ground.

Sienna's mention of capitalism adds a critical component to this conversation about White activists' expectations for their own behavior in decolonizing space. She notes that the capitalistic framework informs these expectations for how she thinks she should behave as a White activist. That she has constructed her ideas about "good activism" and whether emotion and care have a place within the work while situated within this framework.

Sarah, when faced with small instances where she became super aware of her Whiteness went to her car by herself, cried, and then collected herself and returned to the group. From what I could gather, it didn't sound like she asked for any input. There's an individualism present in how each of these interviewees expected themselves to act in decolonizing spaces. An expectation that they would be able to completely manage their emotional responses by themselves, in isolation from communities. That they *should* be entirely self-sufficient in every

way. My interlocutors and I think this is what it looks like to “not take up space” and to engage in good relation. We assume that we know how we must act in the space, we assume we know what (re)grounding looks like, we assume that our interpretation of taking up less space is the truth, then we attempt to act on these “truths.”

To be clear, these ideas that my interlocutors hold about “ideal” White activism are grounded in very real requests about how White activists should work to dismantle their assumed privilege in radical spaces. Holding these requests at the center is critical to (re)grounding. Indigenous leaders and other leaders of liberation and decolonizing movements, including leadership from Standing Rock, remind White activists to be mindful of the space they take up. At Standing Rock, the leadership specifically told people to come prepared with enough material resources to sustain themselves for their stay, to only come if they would be able to take care of themselves, and to be prepared to help out around camp.<sup>7</sup> For many people, then, who did not meet these criteria, the way to most fully support the resistance and honor these stipulations was actually *not* to come to Standing Rock, but to offer support in other ways.

Yet during the height of the resistance, and continuing into the present, stories emerged about folks coming to the prayer camps unprepared to give their full participation. I understand these stories to be indicative of White people prioritizing *their* desire to act in solidarity while ignoring how Indigenous leadership asked them to support the resistance—a blatant violation of the sort of

consensual engagement (re)grounding requires. Recently *High Country News* published an investigative piece about the Veterans Stand movement led by two White men that mobilized 2,000 veterans to Cannonball and raised over \$1.4 million on a GoFundMe page.<sup>8</sup> The article highlights that the two coordinators were wholly unprepared to provide resources for the veterans staying at Standing Rock, and while the coordinators could have called off the mobilization once they realized their unpreparedness, they didn't. So thousands of people showed up to the camps without the things they needed to support their stay. The majority of the money raised to support the effort is still unaccounted for.

This story reemphasizes that honoring the requests of Indigenous leadership is central to meaningful participation in decolonizing resistance; White activists can burden radical spaces when *we* decide what our White solidarity should look like without truly listening to how we are being asked to participate. Yet in the case of many of my interlocutors, they did think through these requests and did feel that they met the criteria of self-sufficiency; they came to the prayer camps with the intention to fully participate in the resistance. How does our White settler lens distort our understandings of the requests of Indigenous leadership even when we think we are listening? Ann, Sienna, and Noah were each challenged to reconsider how they were interpreting these requests, how they could more fully participate in decolonizing spaces. Their stories ask us to reconsider what (re)grounding looks like.

Given the context of White domination, consumption, and exploitation, these guidelines for White activists about taking up less space and self-sufficiency

are really necessary. We as White folks have a really hard time taking a back seat, deferring to other leadership, not sucking out resources and labor. Yet as Tuck and Yang note, decolonization “is not converting Indigenous politics to a Western doctrine of liberation; it is not a philanthropic process of ‘helping’ the at-risk and alleviating suffering; it is not a generic term for struggle against oppressive conditions and outcomes.”<sup>9</sup> When we interpret what it means to take up less space we do so through a lens of Whiteness. We convert these requests to our White framework. My interviewees and I seem to think that we know how to be White activists acting intentionally in Indigenous-led spaces. But we read the requests of Indigenous leadership through lenses of capitalism and settler colonialism. Our “‘certainty’ regarding how to tackle whiteness,” as Yancy describes, is influenced by our Whiteness.<sup>10</sup> To not take up space might not always mean silence, isolation, total self-dependence, and disengagement from communities.

Imposing our settler colonial frame on requests to take up less space is wholly counter to (re)grounding. To automatically assume that our White interpretation is correct perpetuates a version of settler colonialism’s “logic of elimination.” As J. Kēhaulani Kauanui articulates,

to exclusively focus on the settler colonial without any meaningful engagement with the indigenous—as has been the case in how Wolfe’s work has been cited—can (re)produce another form of ‘elimination of the native.’<sup>11</sup>

We foreground “the settler colonial” and (re)inscribe this elimination by assuming we know what it means to “take up less space” without pausing to consider that our settler framework underlies our very understanding of space and relationship.

In my sophomore year of college, I took a class called “Race in America.” It was almost exclusively discussion based; students were pushed to think and talk critically and compassionately about their lived experiences. Two-thirds of the way through the class, our professor dedicated an entire class period to unpacking why no one was talking beyond theory. Each person had to speak. When it was my turn I said that I had been quiet partly because I didn’t want to take up too much space. My professor looked at me and said “you take up space just by being here, in this room. Make sure you use it well.”

This moment really challenged my notions about space and my presence in it. Taking up less space in this example was not actually about minimizing my physical and emotional presence by attempting to render my body, voice, and emotions invisible. Given that I was already in the space (“the call” is implicated here), the crux of the matter was about how I existed in that space. Carol Lynne D’arcangelis notes that White people trying not to take up space can actually become a weight on the process. “To take as a starting point the privileging of Indigenous women’s perspectives should not lead to an excessive limitation of non-Indigenous ally participation in the group,” she notes, as this can actually lead to Indigenous folks and people of color having to do more labor.<sup>12</sup>

This encounter pushed me to think about how my silence and my obsession with being a “good White person,” could actually take up more space than if I actively participated in the community, acknowledging my imperfections and my need to continue learning, working to subvert my own assumed privilege

in the space, and trying to build connections and support others in an intentional way. (Disclaimer: I'm definitely still working on this.)

Sienna says she grappled with similar thoughts during her time at Sacred Stone:

I had sort of come in with these different expectations of, like, I'm going to work and not get any help from other people. And people sort of taught me that was not the way Sacred Stone was going to work, that there was going to be love that people shared with each other and that often took the form of feeding each other or giving each other herbs or medicine or taking care of me because I ended up getting sick when I was there, or making sure I took care of myself.<sup>13</sup>

She continues, “That was really interesting, this lack of a concept of individualism. Which is honestly one of the beautiful things about Sacred Stone, was that it was not about being an individual.” So, to be fully (re)grounded at Sacred Stone was to actively challenge this idea of individualism, was to engage relationally.

TallBear says that “Settler relationality is property.”<sup>14</sup> I think my interviewees and I have been thinking about our (re)grounding through this framework. We think about relationships as transactional. When we are asked to take up less space in relationships, we literally remove our voices, bodies, emotions from that space—we give up our “property” in the space.

Radical relationality inherently subverts White domination in space because it teaches reciprocity and care rather than competition. That is, if White people truly participate in radical relationality, their engagement would both be fullhearted and also mindful of the space they take up. Radical relationality writes

a narrative of care and critical compassion rather than loss and gain. How do we move towards such a practice?

So, to fully (re)ground, we completely deconstruct our expectations of ourselves as White activists (indeed our expectations of how we move through the world entirely) and how we interpret the requests of Indigenous leadership. This is *not* to say that we can just sit back and expect those around us to explain everything they want from us, to educate us. We can actively seek out available resources that challenge our White lens, we can ask follow up questions, we can listen deeply. Remaining cognizant of and working to unsettle the lens of Whiteness that shapes our understanding of (re)grounding is part of the process.

In holding these conversations with Noah, Sienna, Ann, and Sarah together with TallBear's words, I (re)consider what positive and loving White activism looks like. I think now that full (re)grounding asks us to reckon with our whole selves, constantly centering Indigenous voices, thinking through where we might be imposing our White settler interpretations on the requests of Indigenous folks, where we might still need to disrupt the way we exist in a space, living with complexity.

My professor reminded me that I cannot simply become invisible in order to take up less space. I think now about how I also cannot simply render *parts* of myself invisible. To (re)ground is to engage with *all* of myself, to work on dismantling the harmful parts, to engage in critical compassion with myself as

well. Where can I learn to love myself more fully by engaging in conversation with the aspects of myself I wish were different?

Our whole messy beings are there with us when we attempt to (re)ground. As Ann notes, doing our own work to support ourselves and not expecting others to heal us is really important to a practice of care, to (re)grounding. Yet sometimes healing must happen in community. Ann is actively responding to this dynamic by creating a mobile medic van. How can we as White people show up for each other and push each other to continue this learning process? Decolonizing spaces are confusing and new for White people and require constant change, adaptation, and learning.

This type of decolonizing learning, as Sandy Grande notes,

asks...that we take seriously the notion that knowing ourselves as revolutionary agents is more than an act of understanding who we are. It is an act of reinventing ourselves, of validating our overlapping cultural identifications and relating them to the materiality of social life and power relations.<sup>15</sup>

Full entrance and existence in decolonizing spaces ask that we remain open to literally (re)building ourselves, not ignoring our pasts and our traumas but staying open to engaging with our whole selves in ways that we did not expect and could not have expected, deconstructing our White frameworks for existence. Part of (re)grounding is being open, as George Yancy says, “to having one’s world transformed and cracked.”<sup>16</sup> This process can be challenging, is draining. It is also, says Yancy, “life-affirming” and utterly necessary.<sup>17</sup> So, how do we stay in it?

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- <sup>1</sup> Ann, interview with the author, January 2018
- <sup>2</sup> Ann, interview with the author, January 2018
- <sup>3</sup> Ann, interview with the author, January 2018
- <sup>4</sup> Sienna, interview with the author, December 2017.
- <sup>5</sup> Sienna, interview with the author, December 2017
- <sup>6</sup> Sienna, interview with the author, December 2017
- <sup>7</sup> “Camp Etiquette,” Stand With Standing Rock, accessed May 8, 2018.  
<http://standwithstandingrock.net/camp-etiquette/>; Sacred Stone Camp- *Iyyan Wakhánagapi Othí*, “Frequently Asked Questions.”
- <sup>8</sup> Page Blankenbuehler, “Cashing in on Standing Rock,” *High Country News*, April 13, 2018.  
<https://www.hcn.org/issues/50.6/tribal-affairs-cashing-in-on-standing-rock>
- <sup>9</sup> Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization,” 21.
- <sup>10</sup> Yancy, 240
- <sup>11</sup> J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, ““A structure, not an event”: Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity,” *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (2016): 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Carol Lynne D’Arcangelis, “No More Silence: Towards a Pedagogy of Feminist De- or Non-colonizing Solidarity,” CASAE 2010 Conference Proceedings, (2010), 87.
- <sup>13</sup> Sienna, interview with the author, December 2017.
- <sup>14</sup> TallBear, lecture.
- <sup>15</sup> Sandy Grande, “Red Pedagogy: The Un-Methodology,” in *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, ed. by Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (SAGE Publications, 2014), 234.
- <sup>16</sup> Yancy, “Black Bodies,” 240.
- <sup>17</sup> Yancy, “Black Bodies,” 240.

## **four: staying cracked** **[sustenance and accountability]**

I'm walking on the coast with my family in Northern California when I get a phone call from an unknown number. I wouldn't normally pick up, but this time I do. It's Krishna--someone I'd emailed a few days before at the recommendation of another interlocutor. Krishna wastes no time diving in, and diving in deep. As I walk slowly behind my family, reading placards designed by local Pomo folks about the histories of the land we are walking on and the displacement of people that allows us to walk on them, Krishna talks about calendars, conceptions of stationary sun, and how they intersect with oppression. A bit lost as to how we got on this topic (a theme throughout our interviews together), but riveted nonetheless, I finally interject to ask if we could interview fully at a later time because I want to be able to document all the thoughts Krishna is sharing with me.

We schedule another call—after 11 am because Krishna's phone is solar powered and the sun has to clear the trees before it has enough power to function. Krishna went to Standing Rock at the request of Indigenous Environmental

Network—the two work closely together—to set up a radio station. Radical radio stations are Krishna’s jam, having set them up in various moments of resistance. When I ask Krishna about maintaining resilience and energy, Krishna’s answer is drenched in spirituality.

I think you have to go back to understand the personal cosmology and your dharma and your sadhana, your personal practice...the clarity from following your dharma, the work that you feel sort of comes from within you because you're connecting with the work itself.<sup>1</sup>

Reflective of Krishna’s long practice of Buddhism, this answer—that resilience comes from a certainty within oneself of a greater calling—demonstrates a deep reliance on spirituality for energy amidst decolonizing resistances. I’m curious to think about the need for a structure greater than oneself in (re)grounding, about the role these foundations play in keeping folks *in* the space of (re)grounding both through providing energy and resilience, and also by holding folks accountable to actually doing the work of (re)grounding.

When I asked Ann about this, she said that White people’s ability to thrive at Standing Rock was entangled with their ability to be humble, to take a step back. When I asked what allowed her to practice humility she credits,

my own spiritual background, because I had already spent most of my life working on myself and reflecting on myself so it helped me not go into just, you know, reaction. It was very easy to get triggered here and there for all kinds of things...you just find your own way and just keep using it all for an opportunity for learning. But people that didn’t have that background, I watched many people kind of crash and burn.<sup>2</sup>

She turned to this spiritual structure, this way of radically relating with the universe, for resilience in times of difficulty; it kept her from backing away.

Rachel and Pam expressed interest in interviewing, but it was a long back and forth before they felt comfortable sitting down with me. We emailed for a bit; Rachel sent me a bunch of concerns with my project, primarily centered around my research question and the use of the term White activist. We eventually agreed to meet—the same day that I talked to Ann on the phone—under the condition that we would talk more before any formal interview would take place. After making sure we were all on the same page, we transitioned to an interview.

They spoke to a different structure that offered stamina during their involvement in the resistance: community. Rachel gained strength from “having a sense of working with other people locally and getting to know those people as sort of friends and allies and coworkers.”<sup>3</sup> Having Native American leadership within the group “helped a lot as well,” says Rachel. Pam later says the Native leadership gave the group “authenticity” within the struggle, connected them to the larger resistance at Standing Rock.<sup>4</sup> Despite this problematic terminology (measures of authenticity are often used to erase the Indigenous identity of folks deemed not “authentically Indian” enough by settler colonial standards as a way of continuing to eliminate indigeneity), this sentiment of being connected to a broader movement reinforces the idea that participation in community lends momentum and stamina. “There was a real sense of doing something meaningful that has sustained me over the past year,” says Pam.

Many of my interviewees relied on critically compassionate communities for sustenance to continue resisting—both physically and emotionally—and to hold them accountable. Community building is a decolonizing practice. And reliance on community strengthens community. As Taiaiake Alfred notes, “‘traditional’ indigenous nationhood is commonly defined relationally, in contrast to the dominant formulation of the state: there is no absolute authority, no coercive enforcement of decisions, no hierarchy, and no separate ruling entity.”<sup>5</sup> To recognize the many diverse Indigenous nations, I think about Indigenous nationhoods (plural) when considering Alfred’s idea. Alfred says that community and relationality become the foundation to decolonizing spaces; *connection* becomes a way to subvert settler demands for hierarchical structures and relationality. This is not to say that decolonizing spaces are perfect or without their own injustices and problems, but rather that they are grounded in a different relational structure.

Ben speaks to another critical connection between communities and (re)grounding: accountability. In the solidarity group he was a part of, he often felt that the White people who were in it idealized the American Indian folks who were at times involved in the group, relying on them as “consultants” who would “show us the way.”<sup>6</sup> Ben felt uncomfortable with this, pushed the group to consider who they were accountable to, and asked if the Native members had offered or agreed to do the labor of leading the group. The group acknowledged that they weren’t clear as to what role the Native members wanted and Ben

requested that the group follow up on that. As part of existing in a community supposedly committed to (re)grounding, I read Ben's actions as seeking to hold the group accountable to radical relationality and subverting systems of power.

The group, it seems, was acting somewhat of its own accord while still claiming to exist within decolonizing space, leading them to act in ways that undermined their (re)grounding. The critical compassion that Ben brought challenged their actions. Our norm as White people is colonizing (Would I need this chapter if it were not? Why is it so hard for us to stay in good relation?). To unsettle this norm is a choice; we can easily slip into actions that we think are radical but actually (re)inscribe problematic systems and structures. Critically compassionate communities hold us accountable to look again at our actions, recommit to (re)grounding, center the requests of Indigenous leadership. This sort of community *expects* that we engage with each other, that we critically reflect on our and each other's' actions, that we challenge our lens of Whiteness, and work to (re)ground continuously. Critically compassionate communities ask White folks to step up so that people of color don't always have to take on the labor of educating others.

Ben also mentions he didn't feel very supported by the group, but to be fair, he adds, he also hasn't taken the time to develop those relationships. Yet the lack of support ties into his main critique of the activist world: "I want to have relationships that are long lasting with people. I don't think [activism] works any other way."<sup>7</sup> In activist circles, he says, he has seen the structure crumble time

and again. He thinks that it “all falls apart mainly because we don’t spend time really focusing on the relationships so that when conflict does come we can work with it in a way that’s not harmful to the larger goals.” Critically compassionate community, then, is central to actively holding people together and to keeping people in the space of decolonizing work. It subverts settler and capitalist constructions of power where individualism and individual power are paramount. It is no wonder then, that fracturing communities also splinters decolonizing efforts: decolonizing spaces are relational spaces, and building critically compassionate community is a subversive act.

Critically compassionate communities exist as a way to hold people in the decolonizing space, and to bring folks back when they drift away. When that community structure wasn’t there for the interviewees, the effects were painful. “It was really really hard at first,” Sienna said of her first few months after returning from Standing Rock. “I didn’t have that sense of community because I didn’t know anyone in my immediate area that had been to Standing Rock...it was lonely.”<sup>8</sup> Claire echoes this statement, saying that at times it felt like no one around her really cared, that she was alone in thinking about how bad it was.<sup>9</sup> There was a weight to both of their voices, a sense of exhaustion.

Decolonizing and radical relationality are integral to each other. Decolonizing shatters the systems that keep us comfortable as White people, so (re)grounding is not always comfortable or easy for us. White people need critically compassionate community to move through and stay with this

discomfort, to effectively continue to suspend “self-certainty, arrogance, fear, and other blaming,” as Yancy says.<sup>10</sup> Critically compassionate community is a practice of care, of building radical relationships, of creating a network to fall back on and catch each other when the going is rough, of keeping us open to transformation and continued learning. Decolonizing is a shift towards a different way of moving through the world. It is a shift away from relationality as property and towards a practice of care that recognizes, as Simpson says, that our “existence is ultimately dependent upon intimate relationships of reciprocity, humility, honesty and respect with all elements of creation, including plants and animals.”<sup>11</sup> Critically compassionate community and radical relationality keep us in the work because they are a part of the work of decolonizing.

This practice of care, of building community to build resilience, is something that I reflect on now within my own research process. The interview process was challenging at times, particularly in cases with folks like Rachel and Pam who pushed against me, who asked me to articulate my project in a clear way that also made them feel safe enough to participate. These sorts of interactions asked me to think about the community I was creating, about how I wanted to create connection. I reflect on my laughter or shock post-interview when someone had said something that I deemed “problematic,” and of how much ego I held in that act. I think to the times when I cut an interview off short because I had something else to run to, when I wrote sassy comments in my notes during an interview.

I think about how these actions are failures to practice care with my interviewees. I wonder now, too, about the ways my work seeks to hold us accountable. I think, actually, that holding community members accountable *is* a practice of care. How can we hold each other accountable with love? How can we hold criticism and compassion together, and trust that others are coming from a similar place? How can we reestablish an understanding that accountability is part of community? How can we remain open both to compassion and criticism? How can we, as George Yancy offers, view this type of learning as “valuable to growth, not a sign of defeat?”<sup>12</sup>

I recommit to this practice of care—a constant recommitting. I think about what it means to bring my interviewees and myself into conversation on this page, how sometimes we hold each other accountable in painful ways, how perhaps this is care too, this desire to help another see areas where we can grow more fully into who we hope to be. As TallBear puts it, “I work for Indigenous flourishing. I also critique toward that end.”<sup>13</sup> From this, I understand critique as a practice of care and love, as a way of building community and encouraging accountability to oneself, to one’s communities, and to the goals of those communities. Practicing care as practicing decolonizing methodologies. Practicing care as unsettling settler notions of relationality as property. Practicing care as recommitting to existence in decolonizing space, as subversive to power structures that promote the “hyper-individualism that negates relationality,” Simpson articulates.<sup>14</sup> Practicing care as fortitude and resilience and energy. Practicing care as utter transformation. Practicing care—for White people—as not enough, but as a step.

So—in this discussion of how folks stay in the work, where is the limit? Is there a time when the energy runs out? When community isn't enough? Where do the borders of decolonizing spaces blur, and where do White folks quietly slip out of those borders?

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<sup>1</sup> Krishna, interview with the author, January 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Ann, interview with the author, January 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel, interview with the author, January 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Pam, interview with the author, January 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Taiaiake Alfred, "Sovereignty," *A companion to American Indian history*, (2002): 467.

<sup>6</sup> Ben, interview with the author, January 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Ben, interview with the author, January 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Sienna, interview with the author, December 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Claire, interview with the author, December 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Yancy, "Black Bodies," 241.

<sup>11</sup> TallBear, lecture; Simpson, "Land," 9-10.

<sup>12</sup> Yancy, "Black Bodies," 240.

<sup>13</sup> TallBear, "Standing," 81

<sup>14</sup> Simpson, "Land," 9.

## **five: slipping away**

### **[what we tell ourselves to justify leaving]**

Ann tells me she decided she would die for this fight. She had to consider this when she was at Standing Rock, in the months where death was a real possibility, and decided that yes--she would put her life on the line.

Standing Rock was, like, not only a wake up call but it was also a call to, like, walk your talk...Okay you want to have peace and harmony and all of these nice sounding things. What are you willing to do for it? Are you, are you willing to die for it? And you know that was also huge for me going there to meet so many people that were actually willing to put their lives on the line for it. And to go through that process myself, there was a shift that happened--it was life changing. Like, I really had to go deep in myself and go: 'am I willing to die for what I believe here?' And I had to answer that question, you know, honestly, not just like pretend or have it be like some kind of selfie on social media...no it had to be like for real.<sup>1</sup>

Later on, she says, "Coming to the willingness and the commitment to put up my life on the line. When you come to that it changes you in a very fundamental way." Ann pushed herself to live fully in the reality of decolonizing work, to confront what that really means, to face head on that, as Tuck and Yang say, "solidarity is an uneasy, reserved, and unsettled matter that neither reconciles present grievances nor forecloses future conflict."<sup>2</sup> She sank into this knowledge, let herself be unsettled, then moved to act through fundraising for and planning a

mobile medic van as a resource for those on the front lines of resistances like Standing Rock.

Part of decolonization is the reimagining of boundaries and borders, reclaiming space and disrupting settler notions of what constitutes a space to be based on relationality rather than delineation of land into parcels.<sup>3</sup> The settler imaginary renders space as static and containable, borders as definite. Decolonizing space challenges that; borders become more flexible, relational, temporal.<sup>4</sup> Caring relationality defines the space. We see this at Standing Rock, in the security force's attempt to restrict and contain decolonizing work within the barbed wire and police blockades, and in the resistance's refusal to accept this militarized border as its own.<sup>5</sup> Standing Rock expanded globally, bringing those outside of the defined boundary around Standing Rock into the space.

Decolonizing is bigger than the defined settler borders around the place of the prayer camps at Standing Rock. Even how we reference the resistance indicates this: what we call Standing Rock did not occur in Standing Rock but on contested treaty land close by.<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that specific land isn't important, but rather that the edges of decolonizing spaces are different than the borders settler logic recognizes. As Mishuana Goeman explains, decolonizing is a "move toward geographies that do not limit, contain, or fix the various scales of space from the body to nation in ways that limit definitions of self and community staked out as property."<sup>7</sup> That is, space that is distinct yet unfixed, grounded but unbounded.

Given the fluidity and porousness of decolonizing space, pinpointing the precise moment when White people slip out of decolonizing resistance is difficult, yet many do (re)settle back into the comfort of the settler status quo. How do we justify our departure from that space? How can we push farther, choose again and again to unsettle our presence and support the project of decolonizing? How can we as White people sustain and deepen our commitment to (re)grounding?

For several interviewees, their lives back home were their reasons for physically leaving Standing Rock, and other pulls led them away from decolonizing work. Meg, Samantha, and Claire were in university, had other projects to turn to, and so things kind of dissipated after their initial peak involvement. When Meg returned home after five days at Oceti Sakowin, she mentioned that she felt torn between her involvement in the different things she cares about, naming Black Lives Matter and Indigenous justice struggles as examples. She notes that because there are “so many things happening,” in D.C. where she goes to school, figuring out where to dedicate energy can be confusing.<sup>8</sup> Since Standing Rock, she’s continued to stay involved in activist and justice struggles, but not specifically Standing Rock related ones. She mentioned, however, that upon return she would try to share learnings from Standing Rock with family and friends, help to educate them about the resistance. “Sometimes I went into it with a good amount of patience and other times I wouldn’t because it was frustrating,” she said. In White communities “the bar is so fucking low” for engagement in activism that she often received praise she doesn’t believe she

deserves rather than engagement with the actual topic of Standing Rock. Yet, says Meg, the “number one value I wanted to maintain was humility throughout all of it.”<sup>9</sup>

When I asked her if she was still involved in Standing Rock, Samantha said “Honestly not really, which is really sad.”<sup>10</sup> She went to Oceti Sakowin for a weekend, bringing supplies and donations with her with a collection of people from a solidarity group at her university. “I definitely think about it a lot still...kind of try to tune in, or I have plans, when I have more time, to look up and read more stuff about it,” she said. Right after she got back she was keeping up with the news about Standing Rock, attending more events and such; then that engagement slowly dissipated. She says,

It was kind of interesting, I felt like there was a time when I felt really connected to it, and then I just felt like it faded and it was odd. I don’t know. I think it was when, after the camp kind of got dispersed and everyone had to leave. After that I felt like it wasn’t something I knew about anymore.<sup>11</sup>

When I ask why she thinks this was the case, she reflects that,

because it was such a like, hotbed of people, and people caring about the environment and each other and trying to form this movement that it was very, it had a lot of power, and then when it kind of got shut down I think I maybe just lost some of that potency in me and maybe other people that were involved. I’m not really sure.<sup>12</sup>

Claire didn’t go to Standing Rock, but contributed in other ways while in school. She donated a bit and sought to educate herself and others about what was going on. Sometimes, she said, she would feel pretty alone in thinking about how bad things were at Standing Rock, and though she has friends who are active in

social justice engagement, she often felt as though she was the only one who was bringing Standing Rock up in conversation. She says that the information was generally well received but because studies at her university are really demanding, people didn't act in response to Standing Rock that much. "It's very easy to get in a hole of work," she said.<sup>13</sup> In response to me wondering whether she was currently involved, she pauses, says,

Um...honestly not really. I mean I, I just like remember the moment where I got the, like, New York Times notification that was like, I don't know, remember what it said, but it was basically like 'oh they decided that the pipeline is on' and I was just kind of like 'that's it.' And I was, like, really sad about that. But then I was like, I mean I don't know what else I can do. I mean it just seemed like a lost cause.<sup>14</sup>

In many ways, (perhaps White settler ways?), these acts of disengagement are understandable--life is busy and challenging at times. Yet I would add them to the list of ways that White people evade reckoning with their colonizing presence, what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang call, "moves to innocence."<sup>15</sup> Choosing to exist in decolonizing space when the opportunity is direct and clear and available, then returning to our settler norms when "life happens," when decolonizing work reveals itself as long term and less glamorous, is such a move. I do not mean that it is malicious, but rather it is a return to the stable, known, norm of Whiteness—that is, to colonization—while maintaining the external appearance (and gaining the social capital in certain spaces) of being a person seeking to (re)ground. As White folks we are able to slip out of active resistance because our lives are not on the line. This is not true for others; citizens of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe,

for example, are forced every day to reckon with DAPL and the violence of its presence on their land.

Audrey Thompson notes that White people often frame their participation “in terms of what whites, from their privileged position, [are] *willing* to do, rather than in terms of what [needs] to be done” (emphasis mine).<sup>16</sup> We are eager to note when we’ve chosen to participate in resistance work, what we gave up to do so, and the limits to our participation. We mark all of these like gains and losses, like a transaction, and use them to excuse our (re)settling into our known routines. White people claim presence in decolonizing spaces while slipping out the back door.

While everyone’s (re)grounding is a process, we as White folks need to be honest with ourselves about what decolonization truly is and take ownership when we choose to evade that reality. Many of us aren’t willing to put our lives on the line, or even our jobs, our land, our money. Yet as Tuck and Yang assert, “decolonization is not a metaphor.” Decolonization, they say, and “breaking the settler colonial triad, in direct terms, means repatriating land to sovereign Native tribes and nations, abolition of slavery in its contemporary forms, and the dismantling of the imperial metropole.”<sup>17</sup> Decolonization is, therefore, inherently about White people relinquishing our resources, time, land, money, power. (And were these ever ours to begin with?) To not fully reckon with this reality, to not be honest with oneself about what is at stake materially, to not be willing to put this on the line while claiming presence in decolonizing spaces, is to not be fully in the space, is to slip back into settler norms, is to (re)settle. When we say that

“life” pulls us out of the work, we keep our distance from being in good relation, we refuse to acknowledge that to be in good relation is to be utterly transformed, is to continuously disrupt the patterns that pull us away from resistance.

Meg, Samantha and Claire’s responses indicate that community—or the lack of it—was central to their disengagement from the Standing Rock resistance. Samantha noted specifically that the dissolution of a sense of community led her to feel that the potency of the entire movement had dissipated. Even though this isn’t true—the movement continues, there are still camps at various pipelines around the country, and Indigenous-led resistances against settler colonialism carry on—that she *felt* disengaged when not plugged into specific revolutionary community feels noteworthy. The same is true for Meg and Claire. In their home communities, they were acting somewhat alone in trying to educate folks, mobilize folks. Without a source of energy, accountability, care, and support, their involvement faded.

Ben speaks to this as well. Disillusioned by the way activists were supporting Standing Rock from home, he has distanced himself a bit from the solidarity group he was once involved with. He didn’t feel that the group had a strong enough relational foundation to be able to withstand his requests for accountability.

When I’m with really activist oriented people, I feel like I want to bring more spirit and joy and relational kind of stuff to it, and that’s not always welcome. But when I’m with really, like, spiritually minded or kind of White liberal people who I think do sort of have that sense of spirit or, um, I don’t know how to put it and it’s not just White people, but um, sometimes the activism stuff, sometimes the stuff around accountability...there isn’t that activist culture there. And I find myself just not at home in either place. Like I want there to be more accountability in

the spiritual communities and I also sometimes feel like there's a lot of intense judgmental, um, shaming in activist oriented communities. So I'm trying to find places that can kind of hold both things and create places that can hold both things, and I don't really know what that's going to look like.<sup>18</sup>

He wants to create a new community of activists that includes caretaking relationships because he doesn't feel at home in activist communities that lack relationality, care, and critical compassion. That is part of why he disengaged from Standing Rock solidarity movements: the community wasn't grounding him there.

These forms of disengagement beg the question: What more can White activists do to stay in the work? When White people claim competing interests and lack of community effort or support as our reasons for disengaging, we excuse ourselves from agency. This rationale allows us to obscure for ourselves that we are also making an active choice to disengage. We slip back into the status quo, resettling our previously unsettled selves that glimpsed what it might look like to give up power. We can choose to leave decolonizing efforts; our existence does not depend on its existence. Rather, our existence as we know it is a colonizing one, and our decision to *stay* in decolonizing spaces is an active choice that we must make over and over again. So, how do we continue to (re)ground? How can we actively deepen radical relationships wherever we are?

I do not mean to suggest that these folks' presence in decolonizing space was all for naught. Such a claim would promote linear thinking that (re)inscribes capitalist goals of progress and productivity. Yet the ability to slip out of good

relation may indicate that these folks were not fully in it, that they maintained their distance from the work, used their “opt out” privilege as White people.

Nor do I mean to say that White activists will (or should) only engage if we will easily and comfortably slip into loving communities. Rather I mean that the practice of creating communities, interdependence, is actually a decolonizing practice. And I most definitely do not mean that such communities should be easy or comfortable. Critically compassionate communities cannot be equated with safety and comfort; actually, such community can be incredibly *uncomfortable*, can crack us open, can support our (re)grounding. This does not make it any less crucial. As Bayo Akomolafe articulates, (re)grounding requires being split apart: “We are coming down to earth. We will not arrive intact.”<sup>19</sup>

Then there were folks like Noah who says he “never really felt like I was in harm’s way.”<sup>20</sup> He says he never thought of himself as arrestable, so didn’t go to the front lines. Yet while at Oceti Sakowin, Noah stayed in the medic tent, working 20 hour days at times to support those at the front lines. He set a limit for himself in one area while throwing himself more fully into another. Now, Noah is back at home working in the psych ward of a local hospital. He still attends Native rights gatherings—he mentioned that he went to the Plymouth Rock day of mourning while we were planning our interview for instance—but generally has returned to his “usual” routines.

Cynthia was heavily involved in spreading information and mobilizing local members of her community to engage with Standing Rock. She too stepped back from the work,

because my daughter's going through really big health issues. That was part of it. And I think also a part of it was starting to wind down for me...Like there were other things tugging at me in terms of my life. And I also was reflecting upon that before coming to realize I mean I'm in a position of White privilege you know and I can choose to go into it or not and I was in part acting on that as well.<sup>21</sup>

In this she both recognizes that she needed to tend to her daughter--which is a practice of care, or relationality on an immediate level--and also the privilege of being able to step out of broader decolonizing resistance efforts.

I write a chapter a week these days. Most weeks I find myself a bit resistant to dive back into writing. Each chapter is an attempt to sort out an entangled mess of interviews, theory, reading; each chapter tries to make sense of how these things are intertwined. The result is not neat. Each week feels like a deep dive into this blurry world, a quick gasp after I submit a chapter, before diving back in. Most weeks I resist slightly. Even though I honestly love this project, I balk at the initial intensity of it. I think about this as I feel my urge to distance myself, to resettle, reticent to return to the stories, wanting to stay superficial. Returning to the depths, parsing through the things people say is disorienting. I surface often, looking around me, trying to reground. I wonder about my desire to pull back, I wonder about my own mental health and how to balance that in the midst of such a thesis project. When is that selfish and when is

that necessary? Am I making excuses for not unsettling myself? Am I practicing in my daily life what I write about in these pages?

How do we understand and interrogate these edges of our commitment to decolonizing? How do we understand the intersecting stories of Ann, Cynthia, Noah, Meg, Samantha, Claire, and Ben, who each approached their participation differently and whose lives were such that they chose to engage or disengage differently? Did Cynthia truly leave the space of subverting settler colonialism when she went to take care of her daughter? Did Noah not fully commit to being in the decolonizing space when he decided not to get arrested? He is, after all, a father, a nurse, a husband. Is Ann's decision to put her life on the line the *only* way to fully be in this work? Does full participation in decolonization demand one's life? If radical relationality is what holds us to a place, how do we actively *create* critically compassionate community that will hold us accountable to remaining (re)grounded?<sup>22</sup> How do I think about my own distance from Standing Rock? My own choice not to go? My re-engagement with the resistance to some extent now?

Standing Rock does not stand as the only space of decolonizing practice. This resistance happens everywhere, all the time, by different people. Folks all over continuously mobilize and fight for Indigenous sovereignty and against extractive policies and the desecration of sacred land. And joy, survival, celebration, mourning, language revitalization, community-building in the face of oppression are all decolonizing resistance too.<sup>23</sup> Resistance is a practice; the edges

of decolonization are fluid, relational, able to hold and release. And White people *can* come and go (although I believe that our liberation also lies in decolonizing—so our going maybe isn't strategic). So to (re)ground is an active choice. “Stories keep us together,” says Goeman, not fences.<sup>24</sup> And this act of communal sharing sustains resistance. Simpson notes that collective and reciprocal learning and relationships create “generations of loving, creative, innovative, self-determining, inter-dependent and self-regulating community minded individuals.”<sup>25</sup> Shared histories and communities are what keep us grounded in the space of decolonizing.

Decolonizing space is flexible; it can hold sick loved ones, trauma, families; Goeman quotes an aboriginal scholar who says that ““ Aboriginal sovereignty is different from state sovereignty because it embraces diversity, and focuses on inclusivity rather than exclusivity.”<sup>26</sup> Relationality defines the space. White allyship, asserts Yancy, “involves an active commitment to relinquishing white power,” that is, an active willingness to reckon with and participate in utter transformation.<sup>27</sup> There can be no passivity in the space of decolonizing, just as there can be no passivity in maintaining healthy and loving relationships.

When we as White folks slip out of decolonizing spaces, we aren't considering that decolonizing is not just about going to protests sometimes. We *always* have the choice to unsteady our White colonizing presence, not only when there is a physical struggle over land like Standing Rock to go to. We *always* exist on colonized land, so we can *always* act to decolonize. We can always seek to

(re)ground, to radically relate. (re)grounding is about wholly transforming the way that we move through the world and relate to other people and it is a messy, imperfect, nonlinear process. To slip out of the work is to resist fully reckoning with what it is and yet I do not mean to suggest that constantly staying in the work is easy or simple. How can we both commit to (re)grounding, hold each other accountable to this commitment, and practice empathy along the way?<sup>28</sup>

The decolonizing “map is an open one and... the ideological and material relationships it produces are still in process,” Goeman states.<sup>29</sup> Even though this chapter explores how White people justify their return to their settler norm, attempts to identify the precise moment of leaving decolonizing space imply that these spaces have a defined border. This conceptualization (re)inscribes notions of settler mapping that seek to bound and confine space, rather than learn from and with it.<sup>30</sup> Decolonizing resistances, though often grounded in struggles over land and Indigenous sovereignty, exist uncontainable, unbordered. Perhaps rather than trying to define this space, to border this space, and so mark our White presence within it, we must instead continuously *act* to exist within it. Perhaps to (re)ground in decolonizing space is to *act* and *connect* rather than to cross or mark or define. To abstract what (re)grounding looks like to make ourselves feel better and excuse our absence is to (re)settle. How can we push ourselves to fully reckon with what decolonizing means for us? How far are we willing to go for what we supposedly believe to be true? Are we willing to be utterly changed?

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- <sup>1</sup> Ann, interview with the author, January 2018.
- <sup>2</sup> Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization,” 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Mishuana Goeman, “Introduction: Gendered Geographies and Narrative Markings,” in *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1-40.
- <sup>4</sup> Estes, lecture, 2018.
- <sup>5</sup> Estes, lecture, 2018.
- <sup>6</sup> Estes, lecture, 2018.
- <sup>7</sup> Goeman, “Introduction,” 11.
- <sup>8</sup> Meg, interview with the author, November 2017.
- <sup>9</sup> Meg, interview with the author, November 2017.
- <sup>10</sup> Samantha, interview with the author, December 2017.
- <sup>11</sup> Samantha, interview with the author, December 2017.
- <sup>12</sup> Samantha, interview with the author, December 2017.
- <sup>13</sup> Claire, interview with the author, December 2017.
- <sup>14</sup> Claire, interview with the author, December 2017.
- <sup>15</sup> Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization,” 1.
- <sup>16</sup> Audrey Thompson, “Tiffany, friend of people of color: White investments in antiracism,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (2003):16.
- <sup>17</sup> Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization,” 31.
- <sup>18</sup> Ben, interview with the author, January 2018.
- <sup>19</sup> “Home page,” Bayo Akomolafe, accessed April 3, 2018. <http://bayoakomolafe.net/>.
- <sup>20</sup> Noah, interview with the author, November 2017.
- <sup>21</sup> Cynthia, interview with the author, December 2017.
- <sup>22</sup> Estes, lecture, 2017.
- <sup>23</sup> Lee, lecture.
- <sup>24</sup> Goeman, “Introduction,” 36.
- <sup>25</sup> Simpson, “Land,” 7.
- <sup>26</sup> Goeman, “Introduction,” 35.
- <sup>27</sup> Yancy, “Black Bodies,” 238.
- <sup>28</sup> Thank you to Dr. Jami Powell for this reminder!
- <sup>29</sup> Goeman, “Introduction,” 38.
- <sup>30</sup> Simpson describes the concept of “learning with” in “Land as Pedagogy.” Simpson, “Land,” 7.

## **six: (re)ground** **[building a practice]**

How to stop writing for a project that by definition has no end? In order to ground fully in decolonizing space, we must be willing to be utterly and continuously challenged, changed, split open, ready to cultivate and trust critically compassionate communities. To exist in reciprocal relationships, to connect, to fully exist in radical relationality is to be changed. My interviews reflect what folks have been saying for so long: we need community. We need it if we are going to decolonize; we need it if we are going to keep decolonizing; we need it to unsettle our White selves; we need it to gain energy; we need it to hold us accountable.

Each of my interlocutors spoke to the importance of their communities in some capacity—whether it was about the people who challenged them, the people who gave them nourishment, the people who taught them about themselves and the world. They spoke to specific kinds of communities; these communities functioned so differently depending on the person, how they thought about their Whiteness, how they thought about the resistance at Standing Rock. I think about

critically compassionate community's ability to morph and hold whoever it needs, push whoever it needs, ask for more, meet people where they're at, be generous yet firm. How do we cultivate communities that are flexible, sustainable, challenging—communities that aren't just comfortable or uncomfortable? How can we White folks open ourselves to be able to exist in such communities, to be *willing* to change. How can we foster this openness?

Rather than focusing on one story in this chapter, I offer these quotes that reflect radical relationality's centrality to (re)grounding, with my interpretation of how the interlocutors' words relate to radical relationality, to deep critically compassionate connection, in brackets after:

**Meg**, a student engaged in a variety of social justice activities: "I would say just going [to Standing Rock] and hearing people talk and talking to people had a more emotional impact on me whether I wanted it to or not."<sup>1</sup> [*In critically compassionate communities we are changed.*]

**Pam**, an older woman who participated in solidarity organizing at home: "We have had some really intense collaborative efforts...[my main learning is] just how to work with other people and be clear about my own limits, my own ability, how I interact with people, being compassionate with myself and with other people, and being understanding of people's different ways of working, of communicating."<sup>2</sup> [*In critically compassionate communities we learn.*]

**Sienna**, who went to Sacred Stone camp by herself in the middle of winter: “I needed someone to be like ‘wow I’m sorry those things happened but this was also really beautiful.’ And I did need someone to say ‘I appreciate the fact that you, you know, tried and took risks and like yeah. So. Yeah, just one person makes a huge difference. And then trying to find that and you know trying not to take up too much space. Only what’s needed.”<sup>3</sup> *[In critically compassionate communities we heal, we are challenged.]*

**Sienna** once again, “I believe in, like, collectivity. I didn’t expect people, especially honestly, like, American Indians to have to accept me. Like, I knew that I was welcome officially, but that doesn’t mean that, like, everybody’s going to be like ‘oh yes we’re so happy you’re here.’ I didn’t want that and I didn’t expect that. So, like, to receive genuine love and appreciation from people, was, yeah I just hadn’t expected it. So that was wonderful. Yeah, and I think it was also because I did really try to do work. And there was a comment someone made...she made this comment like, ‘the people in this community, they’ll watch you and like see what you’re doing and what you’re about and determine like, I guess basically like determine who you are in that way.’ And I do think that’s what happened a lot.”<sup>4</sup> *[In critically compassionate communities we are held accountable, we are asked to act and participate, we are seen not just as a set of isolated identities, but for how we embody those identities, how we move in a space.]*

**Samantha**, who decided to go to Standing Rock from California for a weekend:

“I felt unsure of going because of my Whiteness, but when I arrived I felt incredibly welcomed and like majority of people were happy I was there as long as I contributed.”<sup>5</sup> *[In critically compassionate communities we are challenged to deconstruct White settler norms of activism, we are asked for more, we are asked to contribute in ways we didn't expect, we are asked to show up fully.]*

**Jon**, a man originally from North Dakota who has found home in Northern California: “Healthy people have various layers of family through friendships or what have you and they're all kind of feeding off of each other and supporting healthy behaviors.”<sup>6</sup> *[In critically compassionate communities we are supported, we are sustained.]*

These quotes are from different people, each of whom has a different understanding of Whiteness, different ideas about what brought them to seek (re)grounding, different thoughts about what decolonizing even is. Something becomes clear: radical relationality is part of the project. Perhaps it *is* the project. Radical relationality meets folks where they're at, pushing them in the way that they need to decenter themselves, to unsettle themselves. For those who have thought a lot about their Whiteness in Indigenous spaces, critically compassionate communities can challenge their ideas about what White activism looks like, pushing folks further to dismantle their isolationist tendencies (while asking them

to continue being mindful of how they engage in the space). For those who haven't thought as much about their Whiteness, critically compassionate community can push folks to consider and unsettle this element of their identity more deeply.

The idea that people cannot survive in decolonizing spaces without radical relationality, and that radical relationality subverts colonialism is not new. Many scholars, Indigenous and otherwise, have spoken to radical relationality; being in good relation is part of many different Indigenous teachings. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson articulates this:

We cannot just think, write or imagine our way to a decolonized future. Answers on how to re-build and how to resurge are therefore derived from a web of consensual relationships that is infused with movement (kinetic) through lived experience and embodiment. Intellectual knowledge is not enough on its own. Neither is spiritual knowledge or emotional knowledge. All kinds of knowledge are important and necessary in a communal and emergent balance.<sup>7</sup>

I again want to note the risk here of it seeming like I am calling for White people's comfort to take priority in decolonizing spaces. This is not at all what I mean. I mean to say that White folks need to actively work to build relationships in decolonizing spaces, to get uncomfortable and push them/ourselves by being vulnerable and owning up to where we need to grow, staying open to feedback, engaging in reciprocity. We are not little individual soldiers of some greater decolonizing army. We are hoping to support the (re)building another way of living. I also do not mean that White folks can claim radical relationality and Indigenous relationship building as their own, or appropriate Indigenous knowledge. Rather let us learn of and from a diversity of ways of existing. As

Simpson notes, “true engagement requires consent,” so the decolonizing relational engagement cannot include appropriation.<sup>8</sup> And so we return to the beginning of this project and to White folks’ decision to engage in decolonizing resistance. We return to the act of (re)grounding and the need to negotiate such an entrance rather than impose oneself on the space. Consent is necessary for radical community building, otherwise our presence imposes colonial ideas of dominance that undermines (re)grounding.

Folks have been calling for community for so long. Why does it take such a direct experience as participating in Standing Rock—and the labor of Indigenous folks and people of color—for White people to feel this call more potently? Why does it take proximity to violence for White people to see the truth of this? Are these learnings extractive, particularly because so few of my interviewees continue to engage in Standing Rock? Is there a way that we can build these sorts of communities without extracting learnings? Are these learnings actually a result of reciprocity between folks who went to Standing Rock and the resistance? Is my labelling them extractive once again imposing White settler notions of how “good White activists” should act? Where is the line between extraction and reciprocity?

“There is nothing inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary about theory,” says Grande.<sup>9</sup> So, how do we translate these incomplete and theoretical thoughts into action? How do we continue to build and participate in critically compassionate communities? What can we White folks do to open ourselves to

the thought of being utterly changed? I pause writing with so many questions. Let us continue this conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> Meg, interview with the author, December 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Pam, interview with the author, January 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Sienna, interview with the author, December 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Sienna, interview with the author, December 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Samantha, interview with the author, December 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Jon, interview with the author, November 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Simpson, "Land," 15-16.

<sup>8</sup> Simpson, "Land," 15.

<sup>9</sup> Grande, "Red Pedagogy," 7.

## **(in)conclusions**

I pause now at the end(?) of this writing to (re)look at myself. In this new(?) light what do I see? What of myself has become more familiar to me and what has become strange after all of this reflecting on other people's words, scholarship, action? I pause now to engage in critically compassionate relationality with myself. Maya, where might you go further? Where might you reckon with what you (do not) have to lose?

I feel as though throughout this process I have been finding bits of myself I didn't know were there. I can't stop thinking about the places where I could have been firmer, kinder, shown up more, asked a different question. But I seek to (re)ground in the present, in the future, to radically relate to myself and others and the world.

And where do we go from here? How do I act upon this practice? How do I call myself and others to collectively crack ourselves open?

Being in good relation asks that we reckon with our current relationship and our Whiteness. Asks that we think about the White filter over our understandings, asks that we be open to and actively seek out disrupting and unsettling this filter. Asks that we build and exist in critically compassionate community, that we participate, that we be transformed, that we rupture, that we entangle ourselves in this web of relation that doesn't disappear our positionality but actively engages with it. Asks that we remember radical relationality, that we relinquish, that we return and return and return. Can we sit with this, really let this sink in, and move from there?

I leave us with more words from Simpson:

If you want to learn about something, you need to take your body onto the land and do it. Get a practice. If you want to learn about movement building, get yourself outside involved with people that are building movements. That doesn't mean don't read books, or don't talk to people with all kinds of intelligences. It doesn't mean don't find mentors. It does mean, get out, get involved and get invested.<sup>1</sup>

So, let us build a practice. A practice of radical relationality and critically compassionate community building. Perhaps, as these interviews speak to, we don't know where to begin, but we can begin by opening ourselves to learnings, to being changed, to actively deepening critically compassionate relationships, to considering the possibility of transformation.

How can you love more wholly?

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<sup>1</sup> Simpson, "Land," 18.

# Appendix

## *Sample Interview Questions:*

**Name**

**Age**

**Gender Identity**

**Identifies as White?**

**Work/Activities**

**Place of Origin/Where you live**

Would you describe yourself as an activist? An environmentalist?

**\* optional\*** Have you done any thinking/learning about race/sovereignty/Whiteness? If so how much?

Can you explain your familiarity with the resistance movement at Standing Rock? Who were the key actors involved?

What was this resistance about? Who is it for? What is its main goal?

What is your understanding of the history of this place?

How were you involved?

How did you originally hear about this resistance?

Why did you decide to participate?

What research did you do prior regarding ways to participate?

How did you think your presence would contribute to the movement?

How did you understand your role while participating? How do you locate yourself in this resistance movement?

If you were at the camp, where were you and who were you surrounded by?

Who was in charge there? How did you interact with this person/people?

Did you notice how other non-Native people were behaving? Did you participate in any of these activities with them?

How have you talked about your involvement? With who? Using what sort of language?

How do you think about your presence at Standing Rock/your participation in the movement in retrospect? What did your participation mean?

Do you know what's going on right now? Do you stay current on what's happening there?  
How? Using what media/sources?

How do you engage with the resistance now? What is your relationship with the resistance?  
With the Native folks there?

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