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# SNAKES AND CONTINUANCE

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The Oceti Sakowin's Resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline and the  
Fight for Indigenous Environmental Justice



By

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Date: 23-07-2024

A Thesis submitted to  
the Board of Examiners  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of  
Master of Arts in Conflict Studies & Human Rights

Supervisor: Dr. Thijs Jeursen

Date of Submission: 23-07-2024

Programme trajectory: Research Lab Track 15EC

Word Count: 16.132

## *Acknowledgements*

This thesis would not have been possible without the support, guidance and contributions of many wonderful people. First, I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Thijs Jeursen. His guidance, feedback and support have been instrumental in shaping this thesis.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the amazing women in my life. You have been my rock throughout this journey. Your constant support - from listening to my worries to helping me structure and proofread my work - has been invaluable. Your encouragement and belief in me kept me going and I am deeply grateful for your friendship.

Finally, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to all the people whose interviews and testimonies have been included in the NoDAPL Archive. Their voices and experiences are at the heart of this thesis, and I am deeply honoured to have had the opportunity to amplify them. This thesis began with a story - a prophecy - and it is these people's stories that bring it to life. I thank them for their courage, their resilience and for allowing me to be a part of their story.

## ***Abstract***

Using the lens of Indigenous environmental justice (IEJ), this thesis examines the experiences and resistance of the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors within the NoDAPL movement to the environmental injustice brought by the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). Through a case study approach and drawing on the NoDAPL archive, this thesis argues that the pipeline's construction and anticipated pollution are experienced as manifestations of 'colonial ecological violence' because they disrupt the Oceti Sakowin's spiritual and cultural connection to the environment, culminating in cultural erasure. Resulting, the thesis argues that the Oceti Sakowin's resistance embodies 'collective continuance', a commitment to reviving and preserving traditional lifeways, asserting the right to cultural survival.

With these findings, this thesis contributes to Indigenous-centred critiques of conventional environmental justice (EJ) frameworks - distributive, procedural and recognitional - for failing to address the specific injustices faced by Indigenous communities. It argues that the focus on distributive issues as central to environmental injustice, and consequently the emphasis on distributive justice as a solution, remains inadequate. While procedural justice and recognition justice seek to improve the achievement of distributive justice and broaden the understanding of justice to include fair processes and recognition for cultural identities, they do not challenge the primacy of distributive justice and, thus, fail to address the cultural and spiritual dimensions of Indigenous realities.

This study, therefore, calls for adopting an inclusive and relational approach to EJ in which Indigenous perspectives are central. In particular, it argues for the integration of Indigenous knowledge into environmental policy-making and management in order to realise more comprehensive frameworks for EJ. This could include the preservation of ecosystems and the promotion of ecological restoration projects guided by Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), understood as the revitalisation of cultural practices and Indigenous sovereignty through the restoration of ecosystems. These frameworks aim to move beyond a top-down approach and focus on bottom-up, community-led initiatives that empower local communities by respecting diverse cultural contexts and promoting sustainable futures.

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### ***List of Abbreviations***

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Definition</b>
AIM	American Indian Movement
DAPL	Dakota Access Pipeline
EJ	Environmental justice
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
ETP	Energy Transfer Partners
IEJ	Indigenous environmental justice
ND	North Dakota
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
SD	South Dakota
TEK	Traditional ecological knowledge
USACE	US Army Corps of Engineers

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

It began with a story, a prophecy. The ancestors of today's Oceti Sakowin - the Dakota-, Nakota- and Lakota-speaking peoples - warned of a great Black Snake that would slither across the Earth, bringing destruction to the water, land and people, killing everything in its path.<sup>2</sup> A prophecy that came true on the day representatives of Dakota Access, a subsidiary of Energy Transfer Partners (ETP), one of the largest energy companies in North America, entered the council chambers of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota (ND).<sup>3</sup> They came to announce their plans for the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), a \$3.8 billion 1,771-mile pipeline designed to carry barrels of crude oil from the Bakken shale oil fields in ND to a storage in Illinois, crossing the Missouri River, *Mni Sose*, at Lake Oahe, less than a mile upstream from the Standing Rock Indian Reservation.<sup>4</sup> A spill at this location would have a devastating impact on the health and the lifeways of the Tribes downstream, as well as on the drinking water of millions of non-human and human souls who depend on the river for life.<sup>5</sup>

Subsequently, the start of construction in 2016 sparked widespread non-violent direct action, fulfilling the second half of the prophecy that predicted Native Nations would unite to protect Grandmother Earth, *Unci Maka*.<sup>6</sup> As the DAPL approached the shores of Mni Sose, Standing Rock youths and women spread the word of the snake threatening their home, unknowingly starting the largest Native-led environmental uprising in recent history known as the NoDAPL movement, comprised primarily of Oceti Sakowin 'Water Protectors', as they called themselves.<sup>7</sup> Quickly, countless allied non-Native people and more than three hundred Native Nations came to Standing Rock in solidarity against the Black Snake chanting the Lakota phrase, *Mni Wiconi*, 'water is life', and setting up encampments, including the Oceti Sakowin Camp, Rosebud Camp, Sacred Stone Camp and Red Warrior Camp.<sup>8</sup>

The NoDAPL movement, while on an extraordinary scale, is a continuation of long traditions of Indigenous resistance. More broadly, the DAPL case is one of many where Indigenous communities are increasingly caught up in environmental issues, including attacks on resources, land and self-determination from, among others, coal-fired power plants, landfills and the effects of climate change.<sup>9</sup> In response to these issues, movements similar to the NoDAPL movement exist among various Indigenous peoples,

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<sup>1</sup> When discussing the indigenous peoples of what is now the United States, a variety of terms are used, some of which are more appropriate depending on the context. In order to respect their preferences, I will use specific names of Native nations and bands, such as Oceti Sakowin and Lakota, where possible. When referring collectively to peoples living in the USA, I will use 'Native American' or simply 'Native'. For a more global reference to peoples with similar struggles against states, I will use the term 'Indigenous'.

<sup>2</sup> Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon, eds., *Standing With Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement*, Indigenous Americas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2019), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Gilio-Whitaker, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Estes and Dhillon, *Standing With Standing Rock*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Estes and Dhillon, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Estes and Dhillon, *Standing With Standing Rock*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Sun-Hee Park and Stevie Ruiz, 'Racial Minorities in the United States: Race, Migration, and Reimagining Environmental Justice', in *Environmental Justice: Key Issues, Key Issues in Environment and Sustainability*, ed. Brendan Coolsaet (London; New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 225.

including the Māori peoples' efforts against offshore oil exploration in Aotearoa, the Quichua peoples' resistance against oil extraction in Ecuador and the Native Hawaiian's protests against the Thirty Meter Telescope on Mauna a Wākea.<sup>10</sup>

Scholarship on these movements has provided valuable insights into broader issues of oppressive structures such as settler colonialism, capitalism and the patriarchy.<sup>11</sup> However, a specific focus on environmental justice (EJ) within these contexts is often underdeveloped. This gap is crucial considering that EJ issues are deeply intertwined with the social, political and economic injustices faced by Indigenous communities, thus, calling for a specific analytical focus on the environmental dimensions of the DAPL case.<sup>12</sup>

Conventional EJ frameworks centre on distributive justice, which is based on the premise that 'injustice' constitutes the unequal distribution of environmental harms and that 'justice' is, therefore, the equitable distribution of such harms across different communities.<sup>13</sup> While fundamental, distributive justice has already been criticised for its limitations in analysing the underlying context of systemic issues that explain why certain communities have been devalued in the first place.<sup>14</sup> To address this, EJ frameworks have expanded to include procedural justice, which emphasises inclusive decision-making, and recognition justice, which emphasises the importance of recognising cultural differences and identities, as important components of EJ.<sup>15</sup> With this, conventional EJ frameworks are understood to facilitate true distributive equity.

However, Indigenous scholars, most notably Kyle Powys Whyte, Winona LaDuke and Lina L'Álvarez, argue that in the context of Indigenous communities facing environmental harms, these conventional EJ frameworks are inadequate to address the spiritual and cultural dimensions of Indigenous realities.<sup>16</sup> This inadequacy stems from the fact that conventional frameworks are rooted in Western tendencies to value material accumulation, resulting in the commodification of the natural world in the name of 'development'.<sup>17</sup> Resulting, these frameworks do not question the environmental exploitation itself.<sup>18</sup> This is problematic considering many Indigenous lifeways are organised around ontologies rooted in relational understandings of the natural world and her inhabitants.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, for many Indigenous communities the universe is an interconnected web of life in which all beings of creation are interrelated with and dependent on the system, making it impossible to reduce the natural world to an exploitable

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<sup>10</sup> Katie M. Grote and Jay T. Johnson, 'Pipelines, Protectors, and Settler Colonialism: Media Representations of the Dakota Access Pipeline Protest', *Settler Colonial Studies* 11, no. 4 (2 October 2021): 488, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2021.1999008>.

<sup>11</sup> Lina Álvarez and Brendan Coolsaet, 'Decolonizing Environmental Justice Studies: A Latin American Perspective', *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 31, no. 2 (2 April 2020): 58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2018.1558272>.

<sup>12</sup> Álvarez and Coolsaet, 58.

<sup>13</sup> Álvarez and Coolsaet, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Álvarez and Coolsaet, 55.

<sup>15</sup> David Schlosberg, 'Theorising Environmental Justice: The Expanding Sphere of a Discourse', *Environmental Politics* 22, no. 1 (February 2013): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2013.755387>.

<sup>16</sup> Álvarez and Coolsaet, 'Decolonizing Environmental Justice Studies', 55.

<sup>17</sup> Álvarez and Coolsaet, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Álvarez and Coolsaet, 55.

<sup>19</sup> David C. Posthumus, *All My Relatives: Exploring Lakota Ontology, Belief, and Ritual*, New Visions in Native American and Indigenous Studies (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press: The American Philosophical Society, 2018), 34.



resource.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Indigenous scholars identify an incongruence between the conceptualisation of injustice and justice between conventional EJ frameworks and Indigenous realities, as conventional frameworks fail to challenge the exploitation of the natural world, rendering the complexity of many Indigenous realities invisible.<sup>21</sup>

In response, North and Latin American scholars assert the need to reconceptualise EJ by integrating environmental management and governance frameworks that incorporate Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies to reflect the realities of what they call Indigenous environmental justice (IEJ).<sup>22</sup> Building on these Indigenous-centred critiques, the research question guiding this thesis is: How do the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors experience and resist the environmental injustice caused by the Dakota Access Pipeline?

The research puzzle this thesis seeks to address is twofold. First, by using an IEJ lens to analyse the DAPL case, it provides concrete examples, rooted in a local context, that challenge the applicability of conventional EJ frameworks to address the needs of Indigenous communities. It does so by examining how the Oceti Sakowin experience the pipeline's construction and anticipated pollution to illustrate the specific incongruity of the understandings of environmental injustice and then by examining, how the Oceti Sakowin resist the DAPL to highlight the incongruity of the conceptualisations of justice. In order to do this, the thesis must address a research gap within IEJ itself, making this the second fold in the research puzzle. While it is widely agreed that relationality should be central, further theorisation of IEJ's implications has been limited, particularly, in terms of identifying the specificity of the incongruity in conceptualisations. I suggest to partially fill this gap by bringing this centrality of relationality into conversation with the concepts of 'colonial ecological violence' and 'collective continuance' from broader Indigenous literature.

Colonial ecological violence holds significant implications for IEJ, revealing an alternative conceptualisation of injustice that shows how environmental injustices, such as those perpetrated by the DAPL, are experienced as severing Indigenous communities' relationships with their environment, resulting in cultural erasure.<sup>23</sup> This perspective, thus, shifts the focus from distributive inequity to recognising the deep cultural and spiritual impact of environmental harms. In response to the experience of the DAPL as colonial ecological violence, collective continuance emerges as a concept that shows Oceti Sakowin preservation and reaffirmation of cultural practices and lifeways despite external pressures.<sup>24</sup> Thus, by applying the concept of collective continuance the study provides an alternative conceptualisation of justice within IEJ, arguing that true justice for Indigenous communities involves not just the equitable distribution of harms, but also the reaffirmation and preservation of cultural and spiritual practices to sustain their lifeways. With this, the thesis highlights the need for concrete actions that respect Indigenous knowledge systems in the context of environmental harms, with promising avenues being the preservation of

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<sup>20</sup> Posthumus, 34.

<sup>21</sup> Álvarez and Coolsaet, 'Decolonizing Environmental Justice Studies', 55.

<sup>22</sup> Meg Parsons, Karen Fisher, and Roa Petra Crease, *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene: Freshwater Management in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 39, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-61071-5>.

<sup>23</sup> J.M. Bacon, 'Settler Colonialism as Eco-Social Structure and the Production of Colonial Ecological Violence', *Environmental Sociology* 5, no. 1 (2 January 2019): 63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23251042.2018.1474725>.

<sup>24</sup> Kyle Whyte, 'Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice', *Environment and Society* 9, no. 1 (1 September 2018): 126, <https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2018.090109>.

Indigenous environments and the ecological restoration of ecosystems, informed by Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge (TEK).<sup>25</sup>

Concluding, this thesis attempts to expand the discourse on EJ by centring Indigenous perspectives, knowledge systems and experiences. In doing so, it contributes to the ongoing development of IEJ by offering insights that are critical to both academic theory and government policy.

### 1.1 Methodology

The research methodology is based on a case study approach, involving an in-depth examination of a specific case, actor, or event to understand a particular phenomenon within its real-life context.<sup>26</sup> Through this approach, the thesis provides nuanced insights into the dynamics of the NoDAPL movement, with the aim of exploring the perspectives and experiences of the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors within the framework of IEJ. In line with the case study methodology, I use qualitative research methods to collect and analyse data, as qualitative research is concerned with exploring and understanding social phenomena through the perspectives, experiences, and meanings of the individuals and communities involved.<sup>27</sup>

The primary data source for this thesis is the NoDAPL archive (See: <https://www.nodaplarchive.com/interviews.html>). According to scholars Malea Powell and Charles Eastman, archives on Native Americans curated by settler colonial governments have historically served to contain, objectify and marginalise these very communities.<sup>28</sup> I, therefore, chose to rely on the NoDAPL archive as my primary data source, considering it is a digital archive created by the movement itself to organise and record information emerging from the protection camps since 12 September 2016.

The archive contains statements, testimonies, press conferences, art, and interviews from the camps. As I am interested in the experiences and resistance of the NoDAPL movement, I have chosen to limit my sources to interviews and testimonies, organised under ‘interviews’ and ‘camp videos’ within the ‘water protector camps’ folder of the archive. Interviews with Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors provide first-hand accounts of the challenges, motivations, and strategies involved in the movement. Additionally, camp videos capture the daily life, events, and collective actions of the protection camps, providing valuable documentation of the movement's activities. Moreover, I believe that these sources represent the peoples’ voices most clearly and authentically, uncut and unmediated.

To ensure comprehensive coverage of the available material, I reviewed and transcribed all accessible sources organised under ‘camp videos’ and ‘interviews’, nearly 100 videos in total. I then coded

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<sup>25</sup> Shiekh Marifatul Haq et al., ‘Integrating Traditional Ecological Knowledge into Habitat Restoration: Implications for Meeting Forest Restoration Challenges’, *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 19, no. 1 (10 August 2023): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13002-023-00606-3>.

<sup>26</sup> Lisa King, Rose Gubele, and Joyce Rain Anderson, eds., *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story: Teaching American Indian Rhetorics* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2015), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Sumaya Laher, Angelo Fynn, and Sherianne Kramer, eds., *Transforming Research Methods in the Social Sciences: Case Studies from South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019), 304.

<sup>28</sup> Malea Powell and Charles Eastman, ‘Dreaming Charles Eastman: Cultural Memory, Autobiography, and Geography in Indigenous Rhetorical Histories’, in *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*, ed. Gesa Kirsch and Liz Rohan (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 115.

and analysed the transcriptions using thematic analysis, a method involving identifying patterns within the data and organising the codes within broader themes that reflect the participants' perspectives on the DAPL in terms of experiences and resistance efforts.

It is important to note that I refrain from imposing external fixed frameworks that might misrepresent the perspectives of the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors, as this would risk colonising their voices.<sup>29</sup> Attempting to subvert hegemonic ways of conducting research, I built on Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work on decolonising methodologies when she calls for 'leaving space for other ways of knowing', allowing the themes to emerge from the data, guided by principles of relationality central to the Oceti Sakowin epistemology and ontology.<sup>30</sup> This approach helps to ensure that my analysis remains true to their voices. Additionally, throughout the thesis, I centre works of Indigenous scholars, ensuring that my study is grounded in Indigenous thought.

## 1.2 Ethics

In writing this thesis, it is important to consider my positionality. As an Indonesian-Dutch queer woman, my identity and experiences deeply inform my research approach. My personal journey towards self-acceptance have ignited a deep interest in cases resistance, especially those of marginalised communities, that resonate with me on a personal level. These communities, despite facing immense violence and hardship, find strength in being unapologetically themselves. They do not conform; they fight for their identities, inspiring me deeply. Thus, focussing on the voices and lifeways of the Oceti Sakowin, rather than the aggressors in the DAPL case, stems from my admiration and respect for Indigenous communities' determination to persevere under constant colonial pressure and from my anger at the ongoing efforts of governments, corporations and other powerful entities to erase Indigenous perspectives.

The focus on EJ and efforts to broaden the discourse on its frameworks through IEJ are largely influenced by my studies in human rights and conflict, as well as my interests in feminist and decolonial literature. I find the understandings of human rights within the Masters programme and conflict studies more broadly, to be rooted in Western liberal thought and, therefore, lacking in meaningful critical discussion and engagement with Indigenous peoples' ontologies, epistemologies, etc. For instance, traditional legal systems do take into account Indigenous knowledge, hindering justice for these communities, prompting my examination of the DAPL case.

However, as a non-Indigenous outsider, I acknowledge that there is knowledge of the community I research, such as their spiritual lifeways, that I will never fully grasp. While I write from a place of decolonial solidarity, I understand that I also write from a position of power risks contributing to colonising processes. Thus, I am mindful of how I engage with the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors, striving to speak 'with' them rather than on their behalf. This means prioritising their voices and actively listening to their perspectives,

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<sup>29</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, First published in Great Britain 2021, third edition (London: Zed, 2021), 14.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, 15.

leading me to rely exclusively on the NoDAPL archive. This archive allows me to listen and resist with the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors on their own terms, keeping each narrative as intact as possible. This commitment to decolonising research methodologies translates into an alternative way of analysing the data, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data, guided by principles of relationality, ensuring that my analysis respects and honours Oceti Sakowin ways of knowing and being.

Concluding, my personal journey drives my academic interests, making the DAPL case more than a study subject; it is a source of inspiration. In gratitude, through my research, I try to give back by answering the Standing Rock Tribe's call for solidarity from all relatives, meaning all beings of Creation.<sup>31</sup> With this thesis, I hope to honour these communities, amplify their voices and contribute to the broader struggle for IEJ.

### *1.3 Outline*

The thesis begins with a theoretical chapter. This chapter starts with a review of the evolution of dominant EJ frameworks, starting with distributive justice and progressing through procedural justice to recognition justice. It then analyses how, despite advances, these frameworks fail to meet the needs of many Indigenous peoples. The chapter concludes with arguments from Indigenous scholars who advocate for an approach to EJ that incorporates Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies to become more comprehensive and culturally sensitive.

The second chapter provides contextual background, including the historical and political context of the DAPL case. It examines the broader context of relations between the big oil industry and Native Americans, highlighting patterns of environmental injustice and the ongoing struggles for Indigenous land rights and sovereignty, and discusses the DAPL case in greater depth. Using the concept of colonial ecological violence, the third chapter examines how the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors experience the impact of the DAPL, analysing how the pipeline jeopardises their connection with and responsibilities to the environments. The aim is to provide an analysis of the actual impacts of the pipeline, calling for a broadening of our understanding of environmental injustice to include the violent disruption of human relationships with the environment.

Building on the third chapter's call for an expanded understanding of 'injustice' to include the impact of the DAPL as colonial ecological violence, the fourth chapter examines how the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors resist the injustice through acts of collective continuance. It illustrates their resistance through the revival, affirmation and preservation of their cultural practices and relational ontology. With this, the chapter advocates for broadening conventional EJ framework's understandings and modes of achieving justice towards a more culturally sensitive understanding that extends beyond mere equal distribution to include the right to maintain cultural identity, spiritual practices and ultimately the right to

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<sup>31</sup> StrengthAddicts, 'Revelations from Standing Rock! (Interview)', YouTube, September 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OznqroGM8s>.

determine their own processes in relation to their environment. Finally, a concluding chapter presents the findings and discusses the study's contributions to EJ and IEJ.

## 2. *Environmental Justice and Indigenous Perspectives*

This chapter provides a theoretical framework for understanding EJ with a focus on integrating Indigenous perspectives, highlighting the evolution of EJ frameworks and addressing their limitations in the context of Indigenous communities.

First, the chapter reviews the development of dominant EJ frameworks, including distributive, procedural and recognitional justice, which together aim to achieve genuine environmental distributive justice.<sup>32</sup> It then examines how, despite these advances, Indigenous scholars argue that these conventional frameworks are inadequate in addressing the spiritual and cultural dimensions of Indigenous realities.<sup>33</sup> This inadequacy stems from their roots in Western liberal thought, which enables the commodification of the natural world and fails to challenge environmental exploitation itself - a significant issue given that many Indigenous lifeways are organised around relational understandings of the natural world, making resource exploitation inexcusable.<sup>34</sup> Resulting, Indigenous scholars identify an incongruence in the conceptualisation of justice and injustice between conventional EJ frameworks and Indigenous realities.<sup>35</sup>

With these issues in mind, finally, the chapter examines the arguments for reconceptualising EJ through the integration of environmental management and governance frameworks that incorporate Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, reflecting the realities of IEJ.<sup>36</sup> As this thesis will demonstrate in the context of the DAPL, EJ must respect Indigenous cultures and identities through Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies if it is to construct a more robust concept of justice that responds to the actual injustices faced by different peoples around the world.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, this section introduces the concepts of colonial ecological violence and collective continuance, which I argue are essential for understanding the specificity of the incongruence of the conceptualisations of injustice and justice, setting the stage for the subsequent analysis of how the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors experience the DAPL, followed by how they resist based on their experience.

### 2.1 *Conventional EJ Frameworks*

#### 2.1.1 *Distributive Justice*

EJ studies have traditionally focused on the distribution and the physical proximity of particular communities to environmental harms, such as water, air and soil pollution.<sup>38</sup> Scholars trace the origin of the term EJ to the uprisings in the Black Belt region of the US in the early 1980s.<sup>39</sup> Here, poor communities

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<sup>32</sup> Schlosberg, 'Theorising Environmental Justice', 37.

<sup>33</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene*, 39.

<sup>34</sup> Posthumus, *All My Relatives*, 34.; Álvarez and Coolsaet, 'Decolonizing Environmental Justice Studies', 51.

<sup>35</sup> Álvarez and Coolsaet, 'Decolonizing Environmental Justice Studies', 55.

<sup>36</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene*, 39.

<sup>37</sup> Christine J. Winter, *Subjects of Intergenerational Justice: Indigenous Philosophy, the Environment and Relationships*, Routledge Environmental Humanities (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 13.

<sup>38</sup> Álvarez and Coolsaet, 'Decolonizing Environmental Justice Studies', 58.

<sup>39</sup> Esme G. Murdock, 'A History of Environmental Justice: Foundations, Narratives, and Perspectives', in *Environmental Justice: Key Issues, Key Issues in Environment and Sustainability*, ed. Brendan Coolsaet (London; New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 7.

and communities of colour, mostly African-Americans, argued that they were being unfairly overburdened by environmental hazards, including chemical and waste dumps, in or near their neighbourhoods.<sup>40</sup> In this context, demonstrations in Warren County, North Carolina, a predominantly low-income African American community, against a landfill designed to accept a highly toxic by-product, drew national media attention to the injustice at hand.<sup>41</sup> While this was not the first case of hazardous waste being sited near marginalised populations (e.g. a sewage treatment plant in West Harlem, New York), these events are widely recognised in both academic and activist spheres as the beginning of the EJ ‘movement.’<sup>42</sup>

Subsequent studies, both in the US and globally, further explored the differential exposure to environmental risks consistently finding that marginalised populations, such as undocumented migrants, ethnic minorities and Indigenous peoples, disproportionately bear the burden of environmental harms.<sup>43</sup> These studies, particularly those conducted in the US laid the groundwork for an important organising principle of EJ, namely, the notion of environmental racism, which Robert Bullard defines as ‘the ways in which race functions in the selection of particular communities as the sites of environmental harms.’<sup>44</sup>

Scholars like David Schlosberg and Shrader-Frechette were quick to criticise this early EJ research. Indeed, distributive justice acknowledges the fact that certain identity markers make individuals and communities more vulnerable to experiencing environmental injustice and, thus, seeks to redress this imbalance in vulnerability.<sup>45</sup> However, it fails to address the relation between these identity markers and being devalued in the first place.<sup>46</sup> In other words, to some extent, distributive justice addresses the symptoms of marginalisation rather than the systemic issues that create the unequal distribution of environmental harms specific to particular places and cultures.<sup>47</sup>

Resulting, EJ research expanded rapidly, acknowledging that solutions to environmental injustice should correct the prevailing prejudices that enable the injustice to occur, particularly by examining how processes such as decision-making and the recognition of cultural differences, relate to distributive equity.<sup>48</sup>

### 2.1.2 Procedural Justice

First, EJ was expanded to include procedural EJ, understood as the involvement of ‘frontline communities’, such as Indigenous communities, in decision-making processes related to environmental governance, rather than just federal and state officials.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Murdock, 7.

<sup>41</sup> Deborah McGregor, ‘Indigenous Environmental Justice, Knowledge, and Law’, *Kalfou* 5, no. 2 (16 November 2018): 283, <https://doi.org/10.15367/kf.v5i2.213>.

<sup>42</sup> McGregor, 283.

<sup>43</sup> McGregor, 283.

<sup>44</sup> Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, 3rd ed (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 2000), 98.

<sup>45</sup> Kristin Shrader-Frechette, *Environmental Justice: Creating Equality, Reclaiming Democracy*, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press New York, 2002), 24, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195152034.001.0001>; Schlosberg, ‘Theorising Environmental Justice’, 39.

<sup>46</sup> Schlosberg, ‘Theorising Environmental Justice’, 39.

<sup>47</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene*, 41.

<sup>48</sup> Murdock, ‘A History of Environmental Justice: Foundations, Narratives, and Perspectives’, 11.

<sup>49</sup> Murdock, 11.

Consequently, several US agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), developed and instituted programmes and policies, such as the EPA's Public Involvement Policy, to increase community involvement in decision-making processes.<sup>50</sup> However, as David Banisar et al. and others have shown, these participatory spaces have often failed to produce the results that communities hoped for because corporations or government agencies have controlled them with their own agendas.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, those in power are often unwilling to give it up. Indeed, decolonial and feminist scholars have shown that continuing discriminatory and patriarchal structures make it difficult for certain groups to achieve higher levels of participation.<sup>52</sup>

These criticisms are part of a larger academic debate on the role of public participation in environmental management, informed by Sherry Arnstein and David McCallum, who argue that most attempts to involve particular social groups are superficial.<sup>53</sup> Limitations on the ability of marginalised peoples to participate in environmental management include a lack of financial resources, technology or training. Moreover, spaces of participation are often designed to fit the knowledge and cultural traditions of the dominant social groups, reinforcing the exclusion of alternative knowledge and lifeways of different cultures. Resulting, Arnstein argues that marginalised communities seek a level of participation that extends beyond mere consultation to actively shaping decisions.<sup>54</sup> Achieving this level of participation requires a redistribution of power that allows these communities to influence decision-making processes, manage the dissemination of information, and drive social reforms that benefit previously excluded groups.<sup>55</sup>

In this context, scholars, such as Nancy Fraser, argued that a variety of political and socio-economic factors influence individual's ability to participate in decision-making processes, and called for the adoption of recognition-based justice.<sup>56</sup>

### 2.1.3 Recognition Justice

Recognition justice is the most recent component of conventional EJ frameworks, emphasising the recognition and respect of cultural identities and differences within marginalised communities.<sup>57</sup> Rooted in recognition theory, this understanding of justice argues that individuals and communities seek recognition and respect for their identities, cultures and lifeways.<sup>58</sup> Recognition in this context is not seen as merely symbolic, but as crucial to the social integration and overall well-being of individuals and collectives.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene*, 43.

<sup>51</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, 43.

<sup>52</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, 43.

<sup>53</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, 43.

<sup>54</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, 43.

<sup>55</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, 43.

<sup>56</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, 45.

<sup>57</sup> Murdock, 'A History of Environmental Justice: Foundations, Narratives, and Perspectives', 12.

<sup>58</sup> S. Kathleen Barnhill-Dilling, Louie Rivers, and Jason A. Delborne, 'Rooted in Recognition: Indigenous Environmental Justice and the Genetically Engineered American Chestnut Tree', *Society & Natural Resources* 33, no. 1 (2 January 2020): 91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2019.1685145>.

<sup>59</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene*, 54.



Central to recognition theory is the concept of ‘misrecognition’. Misrecognition occurs when one group fails to recognise or actively devalues the identities, values and knowledge systems of another group.<sup>60</sup> This can lead to asymmetrical relationships where one group subordinates the other, denying them equal status and dignity.<sup>61</sup> In the context of environmental justice, misrecognition occurs when decision-makers, often driven by dominant economic or cultural interests, disregard or undermine the environmental concerns and traditional ecological knowledge of marginalised communities.<sup>62</sup> This disregard can result in environmental policies and practices that perpetuate harm and deepen inequalities, particularly for those whose cultural identities and relationships with nature are disregarded.<sup>63</sup>

In the context of EJ, recognition theory has several practical implications. First, it asserts that meaningful participation in decision-making processes related to environmental governance requires both legal protection and the recognition of the cultural contexts, within which environmental issues unfold.<sup>64</sup> For example, Indigenous communities have deep ecological knowledge accumulated over generations, offering sustainable practices and insights into local ecosystems.<sup>65</sup> Integrating this knowledge into environmental decision-making processes could promote environmental sustainability and foster respect for cultural integrity.<sup>66</sup> Second, recognition theory challenges the dominant narrative of environmental decision-making, which often prioritises economic efficiency or technical feasibility over social and cultural dimensions.<sup>67</sup> By emphasising the importance of cultural recognition, EJ argues for policies that incorporate diverse perspectives and prioritise community well-being alongside environmental protection.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, recognition-based EJ emphasises the importance of acknowledging and respecting the cultural identities and differences of marginalised communities. It recognises that meaningful participation in social and political life requires more than just formal rights and legal protections; it also requires the validation of one's cultural identity.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, while recognition theory has provided a framework for understanding experiences of misrecognition, it faces challenges in accounting the realities of Indigenous peoples as it does not challenge the primacy of distributive justice.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Brendan Coolsaet and Pierre-Yves Néron, ‘Recognition and Environmental Justice’, in *Environmental Justice: Key Issues, Key Issues in Environment and Sustainability*, ed. Brendan Coolsaet (London; New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 59.

<sup>61</sup> Murdock, ‘A History of Environmental Justice: Foundations, Narratives, and Perspectives’, 12.

<sup>62</sup> Coolsaet and Néron, ‘Recognition and Environmental Justice’, 53.

<sup>63</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene*, 17.

<sup>64</sup> Barnhill-Dilling, Rivers, and Delborne, ‘Rooted in Recognition’, 84.

<sup>65</sup> Winter, *Subjects of Intergenerational Justice*, 190.

<sup>66</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene*, 45.

<sup>67</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, 46.

<sup>68</sup> Coolsaet and Néron, ‘Recognition and Environmental Justice’, 53.

<sup>69</sup> Coolsaet and Néron, 53.

<sup>70</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene*, 50.

## 2.2 *Indigenous Perspectives on EJ*

### 2.2.1 *Critiquing EJ*

Indigenous scholars have articulated several critiques of conventional EJ frameworks. Latin American decolonial environmental theorists Lina L'Alvarez and Brendan Coolseat argue that EJ research has been overly confined to a Western-centric conception of modernity and state-based political ideals, limiting the range of recognised environmental injustices and solutions.<sup>71</sup> Resulting, Maori philosopher Christine Winter, warns that the universal application of these frameworks can create new injustices by reinforcing colonial ideologies designed to marginalise and destroy Indigenous communities.<sup>72</sup>

Many scholars' critiques focus on the primacy of distributive issues as constituting environmental injustice and, thus, environmental equity as a solution.<sup>73</sup> L'Alvarez and Coolseat, for instance, argue that, given the notion of environmental equity originates in the African American context, the application of this idea to other contexts invisibilises claims that conflict with the very idea of environmental distribution.<sup>74</sup> For example, environmental equity as a solution to injustice, and its subsequent inclusion of procedural and recognition justice, does not challenge the environmental exploitation itself, resulting in the failure of conventional EJ frameworks to account for situations where different ways of thinking and living are fundamentally at odds.<sup>75</sup>

This is exemplified by the clash between the way of life of capitalist societies and many Indigenous lifeways.<sup>76</sup> Anthropologist Arturo Escobar notes that the first is characterised by a dualist division (mind/body, individual/community, culture/nature) and is centred on linear time and development.<sup>77</sup> This way of life values material accumulation, resulting in violence against nature and marginalised communities in the name of 'development.'<sup>78</sup> Contrastingly, Indigenous lifeways are often relational, organised around reciprocal relations between nature and her inhabitants.<sup>79</sup> Nature is seen as fundamental to human livelihoods, but is not reduced to an exploitable resource.<sup>80</sup>

Considering this, it is hard to see how a more equitable distribution would address the injustices at hand, if the injustices cannot be reduced to the misdistribution of environmental harms. Indeed, North and Latin American EJ thinkers contend, that the struggles of many Indigenous peoples is not for the equal distribution of benefits or harms, but for the right to live in accordance with their lifeways.<sup>81</sup> Some, theorists counter these critiques by stressing that the inclusion of recognition justice will naturally lead to

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<sup>71</sup> Álvarez and Coolseat, 'Decolonizing Environmental Justice Studies', 55.

<sup>72</sup> Winter, *Subjects of Intergenerational Justice*, 1.

<sup>73</sup> Álvarez and Coolseat, 'Decolonizing Environmental Justice Studies', 55.

<sup>74</sup> Álvarez and Coolseat, 55.

<sup>75</sup> Álvarez and Coolseat, 55.

<sup>76</sup> Álvarez and Coolseat, 56.

<sup>77</sup> Arturo Escobar, 'Thinking-Feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South', *AIBR, Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 11, no. 1 (1 January 2016): 23, <https://doi.org/10.11156/aibr.110102e>.

<sup>78</sup> Álvarez and Coolseat, 'Decolonizing Environmental Justice Studies', 56.

<sup>79</sup> Álvarez and Coolseat, 56.

<sup>80</sup> Álvarez and Coolseat, 56.

<sup>81</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene*, 87.

reconceptualisations of injustice and justice as the conventional EJ frameworks now recognise other ways of knowing.<sup>82</sup>

However, as Dene theorist Glen Coulthard points out, these recognition-based approaches emerged from Western liberal thought and consequently reconcile Indigenous sovereignty with the sovereignty of the nation-state.<sup>83</sup> However, this reconciliation process tends to perpetuate colonial power structures by transforming how Indigenous peoples relate to the land and accept state-led development projects.<sup>84</sup> This is illustrated by the Canadian government's dealings with First Nation communities regarding resource extraction projects.<sup>85</sup> Coulthard notes that although Indigenous peoples have been formally recognised through Treaties and legislation Canadian courts often uphold the authority of the settler-state to make environmental management decisions on Indigenous lands, permitting most government-sponsored projects, such as hydroelectric dams and mining activities, to proceed as long as certain procedural requirements 'consistent with the special relationship' between the government and the Indigenous peoples are met.<sup>86</sup>

Extending Coulthard's perspective, other scholars, thus, argue that neoliberal policies in settler-colonial states such as Australia and the US have limited the effectiveness of state recognition mechanisms in addressing injustices faced by Indigenous peoples, as they result in 'recognition from above', where the state decides what types of recognition are granted and under what conditions.<sup>87</sup> Thus, while the state may legally recognise Indigenous rights and identities, this is often done in a way that suits the state's economic interests, making it difficult to envision how such recognition would naturally lead to alternative conceptualisations of injustice and justice. In other words, how can existing EJ frameworks be rearticulated to be relevant to Indigenous communities when the system in which justice processes are embedded is designed to exploit their land and people?<sup>88</sup> With this, scholars emphasise the importance of Indigenous communities being the agents of their own recognition, allowing these communities to shape their social and environmental interactions independently of state recognition.<sup>89</sup>

Concluding, Indigenous critiques demonstrate that EJ frameworks must move beyond conventional EJ frameworks and embrace more radical, localised Indigenous realities to truly address the injustices faced by Indigenous communities.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Álvarez and Coolsaet, 'Decolonizing Environmental Justice Studies', 59.

<sup>83</sup> Glen S. Coulthard, 'Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the "Politics of Recognition" in Canada', *Contemporary Political Theory* 6, no. 4 (November 2007): 438, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300307>.

<sup>84</sup> Coulthard, 438.

<sup>85</sup> Coulthard, 438.

<sup>86</sup> Coulthard, 451.

<sup>87</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene*, 48.

<sup>88</sup> Louise Nacet, Caitlynn Beckett, and Kristina Sehlín MacNeil, 'Framing Extractive Violence as Environmental (in)Justice: A Cross-Perspective from Indigenous Lands in Canada and Sweden', *The Extractive Industries and Society* 12 (December 2022): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2021.100949>.

<sup>89</sup> McGregor, 'Indigenous Environmental Justice, Knowledge, and Law', 286.

<sup>90</sup> Winter, *Subjects of Intergenerational Justice*, 2.

### 2.2.2 *Moving Towards IEJ*

Indigenous scholars argue for broadening the dimensions of EJ to include Indigenous philosophies, ontologies and epistemologies, working towards a framework of IEJ. At present, there is little research on IEJ and therefore no consensus on what exactly it is, but there is broad agreement that such an approach should emphasise the importance of relationality, based on respect, responsibility and reciprocity.<sup>91</sup>

Indeed, the defining characteristic that distinguishes many Indigenous peoples from others, such as the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, the Māori of Aotearoa and throughout South and North America, is their existence in a highly dynamic continuum of relationships world.<sup>92</sup> In many Indigenous worldviews, people and their environment are inseparable, meaning that there is no distinction between people and the land, other life forms, or their ancestral connections.<sup>93</sup> It is, therefore, widely recognised that IEJ should not only be about the right to a safe environment, but must also include the duties and responsibilities of humans to all relatives or beings of creation, including animals, geology, spirits and supernatural beings, and conversely their responsibilities to humans, based on the notion of relationality.<sup>94</sup>

Whyte explains relationality as a kinship-based concept in which each being is part of an ongoing exchange of gifts that involves both giving and receiving.<sup>95</sup> In this relationship, each relative respects the gifts they give to others to support their well-being, and expects the other to be naturally motivated to do the same.<sup>96</sup> In the context of water justice, for example, research on Indigenous knowledge shows that many Indigenous cultures view water as a living entity with its own responsibilities and duties to maintain the well-being of itself and other beings.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, from an Indigenous perspective, water justice and security encompasses not only Indigenous peoples' equitable access to water, but also the broader concept of justice for water itself.<sup>98</sup> In this way, IEJ is widely-regarded as a question of balance and harmony, necessitating a consideration of relationality.<sup>99</sup>

It is important to note, however, that despite agreement on the centrality of relationality within IEJ, further theorising within IEJ has been limited and thus has a long way to go. For example, Matt Wildcat and Daniel Voth argue that despite this general consensus, little attention has been paid to the specific Indigenous sites and intellectual traditions in which relationality is situated.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, there seems to be limited theorising about identifying the precise incongruence in conceptualisations of injustice and justice between conventional EJ frameworks and Indigenous realities. I propose to partially fill this gap by bringing this centrality of relationality into conversation with the concepts of colonial ecological violence and

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<sup>91</sup> Winter, 2.

<sup>92</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene*, 55.

<sup>93</sup> Winter, *Subjects of Intergenerational Justice*, 1.

<sup>94</sup> Julian Agyeman, ed., *Speaking for Ourselves: Environmental Justice in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 27.

<sup>95</sup> Kyle Whyte, 'Anti-Colonial Action through Kinship', in *Environmental Justice: Key Issues, Key Issues in Environment and Sustainability*, ed. Brendan Coolsaet (London; New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 268.

<sup>96</sup> Whyte, 268.

<sup>97</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene*, 57.

<sup>98</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, 57.

<sup>99</sup> McGregor, 'Indigenous Environmental Justice, Knowledge, and Law', 2833.

<sup>100</sup> Matt Wildcat and Daniel Voth, 'Indigenous Relationality: Definitions and Methods', *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 19, no. 2 (June 2023): 477, <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801231168380>.

collective continuance from the broader Indigenous literature to examine the case of the DAPL. In doing so, it becomes possible to delve further into the specificity of the incongruence and, by extension, the broader implications of IEJ.

John Bacon defines the notion of colonial ecological violence as the manner in which ‘the settler-colonial state, the private industry, or settler-colonial culture as a whole disrupt the relationships between Indigenous peoples and the environment of their traditional lands’, resulting in an inability to form relationships with and responsibilities to their environment.<sup>101</sup> This notion argues that the projects of elimination within settler-colonial societies have specific ecological manifestations, namely in the form of ‘eco-social disruption’, including redistribution, privatisation, pollution and renaming, generally without the input or consent of the original inhabitants; the value of places and beings is redefined by the culture of the colonisers.<sup>102</sup>

Collective continuance is a concept that captures the resilience and preservation of traditional lifeways of Indigenous communities through ongoing practices that ensure their cultural, spiritual and environmental well-being.<sup>103</sup> Whyte defines collective continuance as ‘the ability of a society to maintain its identity, values and traditions over time in the face of external pressures’.<sup>104</sup> This concept is particularly relevant to Indigenous resistance because it emphasises ongoing efforts to maintain cultural integrity, social cohesion and ecological relationships in the face of colonial violence.<sup>105</sup> In essence collective continuance is not just about survival; it is about thriving and sustaining lifeways that are deeply connected to the land, water and all living things.<sup>106</sup>

### 2.3 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the evolution of EJ frameworks, from early distributive models to more inclusive approaches that incorporate procedural and recognitional justice. Despite these advances, these frameworks remain rooted in Western liberal thought and fail to challenge the primacy of distributive justice, thereby overlooking deeper systemic issues and limiting their relevance to Indigenous communities.

Indigenous scholars point to these limitations, emphasising that these conventional frameworks neglect relational worldviews that are central to Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. Thus, to authentically address Indigenous realities, EJ must go beyond the redistribution of environmental harms and challenge the exploitation itself.

Resulting, IEJ emphasises the importance of relationality. By incorporating Indigenous relational ontologies, EJ can more authentically address the interconnectedness of all beings and the responsibilities

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<sup>101</sup> J. M. Bacon, ‘Dangerous Pipelines, Dangerous People: Colonial Ecological Violence and Media Framing of Threat in the Dakota Access Pipeline Conflict’, *Environmental Sociology* 6, no. 2 (2 April 2020): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23251042.2019.1706262>.

<sup>102</sup> Bacon, ‘Settler Colonialism as Eco-Social Structure and the Production of Colonial Ecological Violence’, 63.

<sup>103</sup> Whyte, ‘Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice’, 126.

<sup>104</sup> Whyte, 126.

<sup>105</sup> Whyte, 126.

<sup>106</sup> Whyte, 126.

that humans have towards the natural world. However, despite a consensus on the centrality of relationality, theorising within EJ on the precise incongruence between conventional EJ frameworks and Indigenous realities remains underdeveloped. In doing so, I suggest that the concepts of colonial ecological violence and collective continuance are crucial to understanding these incongruities. Colonial ecological violence illustrates how projects such as the DAPL disrupt Indigenous peoples' relationships with their environment, resulting in cultural erasure, while collective continuance emphasises the resilience and maintenance of Indigenous lifeways despite these disruptions.

Building on these insights, the following chapters explore the implications of IEJ through the case study of the DAPL, focusing first on the experiences of the Oceti Sakowin, followed by an analysis of their resistance. This analysis aims to show how prioritising Indigenous perspectives, including colonial ecological violence and collective continuance, can pave the way for achieving genuine justice in the face of environmental harm.

### 3. *Native Americans and Fossil Fuel Extraction*

The DAPL case exemplifies the ongoing tensions between Native American nations and the fossil fuel industry. To understand the complexity of this case, it is essential to place it within a broader historical and socio-political context. This chapter provides that context, offering insights into the underlying issues and the significance of the Oceti Sakowin's experiences and resistance.

The chapter begins by examining the broader context of Native Americans' interactions with fossil fuel extraction, including an overview of land dispossession, key events and policies that have shaped their relationship with the US state. It then focuses on the Oceti Sakowin, highlighting their historical struggles and key treaties that have been violated over the years. Understanding this history provides crucial insights into their ongoing struggle for sovereignty over their culture and environment. Finally, the chapter delves into the DAPL case, covering its planning and rerouting, the emergence of the NoDAPL movement and key events during the protests. Taken together, this chapter places the DAPL case within the larger narrative of Native American experiences with the fossil fuel industry.

#### 3.1 *Native Americans, Settler-Colonialism and Fossil Fuel Extraction*

In the settler-colonial US, the need for land to advance capitalist expansion has consistently clashed with the land's original stewards.<sup>107</sup> Today, Native American Nations cover a small portion of the continent due to the process of settler-colonial westward expansion, characterised by efforts to annihilate and control Native populations through the dispossession of lands, concentration on reservations and outright massacres.<sup>108</sup> Importantly, settler colonialism differs from traditional colonialism as it seeks to displace and dominate Indigenous cultures rather than merely profit economically from exploiting resources and labour.<sup>109</sup> This emphasis on land highlights its crucial role as the very foundation of settler societies, facilitating capitalist exploitation through resource extraction and industrial development.<sup>110</sup>

Reinforcing the settler-colonial project and its capitalist motives, key historical events and policies have shaped the relationship between the US government and Native American Nations. First, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 forcibly removed tribes from their ancestral homelands to clear fertile, resource-rich land for economic expansion.<sup>111</sup> Building on this precedent of dispossession, the Dawes Act of 1887 further fragmented tribal lands by allotting parcels of land to individual tribal members, opening the remainder to settlers.<sup>112</sup> Aimed at 'civilising' Native Nations, this Act eroded collective sovereignty through agricultural

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<sup>107</sup> Jeffrey S. Bachman, *Cultural Genocide: Law, Politics, and Global Manifestations*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2019), 97, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351214100>.

<sup>108</sup> Jeffrey Ostler, 'Genocide and American Indian History', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, by Jeffrey Ostler (Oxford University Press, 2015), 3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.3>.

<sup>109</sup> Patrick Wolfe, 'Structure and Event Settler Colonialism, Time, and the Question of Genocide', in *Empire, Colony, Genocide*, ed. A. Dirk Moses (Berghahn Books, 2022), 103, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782382140-005..>

<sup>110</sup> Wolfe, 103.

<sup>111</sup> Jason Edward Black, 'Native Resistive Rhetoric and the Decolonization of American Indian Removal Discourse', *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95, no. 1 (February 2009): 67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630802621052>.

<sup>112</sup> Michigan Law Review, 'Tribal Self-Government and the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934', *Michigan Law Review* 70, no. 5 (April 1972): 959, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1287800>.

assimilation, setting the stage for intensified resource exploitation by settler and corporate interests.<sup>113</sup> The Indian Reorganisation Act of 1934 attempted to undo some of the damage done by the previous two acts by promoting self-governance and allocating additional stretches of land for tribal use, but its implementation varied across Native Nations leaving many injustices unresolved as the Act emerged within a framework defined by federal control.<sup>114</sup> These policies highlight how the US government's interaction with Native Americans have been shaped by both superiority ideologies and capitalist interests. The exploitation of land and resources has consistently intersected with cultural assimilation efforts, perpetuating a cycle of injustice.<sup>115</sup>

Many remaining Native lands face severe industrial interventions. The Worldwatch Institute reports that 317 US reservations are threatened by environmental hazards, mainly related to domestic energy extraction.<sup>116</sup> For example, currently 16 reservations are being considered as potential sites for nuclear waste dumps, amongst which the Yucca Mountain in Nevada, a site sacred to the Shoshone.<sup>117</sup> Resulting of such exposures, Native Americans have experienced negative impacts. For example, uranium mining in the Southwest from the 1940s to the 1980s, which exposed Navajo uranium miners and their families to high levels of harmful radioactive materials, has caused reproductive problems and high rates of lung cancer.<sup>118</sup> To this day, more than 1,000 tailings piles from abandoned uranium mines remain on Navajo land, releasing radioactive materials into the environment, and one of the world's largest open-pit coal mines operates nearby, contributing to significantly elevated cancer rates among certain groups of Diné youth.<sup>119</sup>

Recognising the severe environmental and health impacts, advocacy groups such as the Indigenous Environmental Network and movements like Idle No More have pushed for greater protection and justice.<sup>120</sup> Their efforts helped create laws such as the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which requires federal agencies to assess the environmental impact of proposed projects before making decisions, and the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act, which protects traditional religious and cultural practices, including access to sacred sites.<sup>121</sup>

Despite these legal protections, development projects continue to threaten Native lands and cultural practices. Understanding this historical context of environmental injustice, particularly in relation to the fossil fuel industry, and the responsive Native American resistance efforts that have led to significant legal protections, provides an important backdrop for exploring specific cases like the Oceti Sakowin's

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<sup>113</sup> Garcia J. Fritz, 'The Specification as an Instrument for Colonizing Oceti Sakowin Lands', in *History of Construction Cultures: Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress on Construction History (7ICCH 2021), Lisbon, Portugal, 12-16 July 2021*, ed. João Mascarenhas-Mateus et al. (International Congress on Construction History, Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2021), 256.

<sup>114</sup> Michigan Law Review, 'Tribal Self-Government and the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934', 955.

<sup>115</sup> Fritz, 'The Specification as an Instrument for Colonizing Oceti Sakowin Lands', 256.

<sup>116</sup> Thomas E. Shriver and Gary R. Webb, 'Rethinking the Scope of Environmental Injustice: Perceptions of Health Hazards in a Rural Native American Community Exposed to Carbon Black', *Rural Sociology* 74, no. 2 (June 2009): 273, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1549-0831.2009.tb00392.x>; Winona LaDuke, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (Cambridge, MA : Minneapolis, MN: South End Press ; Honor the Earth, 1999), 20.

<sup>117</sup> LaDuke, *All Our Relations*, 20.

<sup>118</sup> Shriver and Webb, 'Rethinking the Scope of Environmental Injustice', 273.

<sup>119</sup> LaDuke, *All Our Relations*, 20.

<sup>120</sup> Estes and Dhillon, *Standing With Standing Rock*, 2.

<sup>121</sup> Tarah Bailey, 'Consultation with American Indian Tribes: Resolving Ambiguity and Inconsistency in Government-to-Government Relations', *Colorado Natural Resources, Energy & Environmental Law Review* 29, no. 1 (2018): 198.



encounters with environmental injustice and their resistance efforts, which are key to understanding the case of the DAPL.

### 3.2 *The Oceti Sakowin*

The Oceti Sakowin (People of the Seven Council Fires), originated from a single council fire near the pine forests of Mille Lacs, Minnesota.<sup>122</sup> Over time, the single confederation split into three main groups: the Lakota-speaking Teton, the Dakota-speaking Santee and the Nakota-speaking Yankton, each of which was made up of smaller factions.<sup>123</sup> While the Oceti Sakowin share a common culture, kinship, traditions and history, they have always consisted of autonomous social groups living different locations within the original Oceti Sakowin lands, which stretched from the Mississippi River to the Bighorn Mountains.<sup>124</sup> To reaffirm their connection, the Oceti Sakowin gathered annually during the season of the Sundance ceremony, discussed in detail in later chapters.<sup>125</sup>

Throughout their recent history, the Oceti Sakowin have been subjected to invasive colonial processes of land dispossession and enclosure.<sup>126</sup> Most notably, in 1803 the US government purchased 827 million acres of Oceti Sakowin territory from France without Native consent.<sup>127</sup> Resulting, the Oceti Sakowin resisted land annexation paving the way for military campaigns such as the War of the Black Hills and the Red Cloud's War.<sup>128</sup> These conflicts included the deliberate slaughter of buffalo herds to starve the Oceti Sakowin and the invasion of the Black Hills in search of gold.<sup>129</sup> The Fort Laramie Treaties of 1851 and 1868 offered some temporary relief by creating the Great Sioux Reservation, encompassing almost all of the Oceti Sakowin's traditional territory.<sup>130</sup> However, subsequent legislation, including the Indian Appropriations Act of 1876 - which formally ceased the treaty-making process with Native nations - and the Black Hills Act of 1877 - which violated the 1851 and 1868 Treaties by illegally taking the Black Hills - ended this temporary relief.<sup>131</sup>

The states of SD and ND further oppressed the Oceti Sakowin by asserting authority over their lands, rivers, and people. In 1890 these states fomented anti-Native sentiment triggering the Ghost Dance crisis, which led to federal troops intervening to protect white settlers, the imprisonment of many Oceti

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<sup>122</sup> Estes and Dhillon, *Standing With Standing Rock*, 1.

<sup>123</sup> Fritz, 'The Specification as an Instrument for Colonizing Oceti Sakowin Lands', 257.

<sup>124</sup> Fritz, 257.

<sup>125</sup> 'Oceti Sakowin — Seven Council Fires', *St. Joseph's Indian School* (blog), accessed 16 June 2024, <https://www.stjo.org/native-american-culture/oceti-sakowin-seven-council-fires/>; David C. Posthumus, *All My Relatives: Exploring Lakota Ontology, Belief, and Ritual*, New Visions in Native American and Indigenous Studies (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press: The American Philosophical Society, 2018), 6.

<sup>126</sup> Paarth Mittal, 'Extraction, Indigenous Dispossession and State Power: Lessons from Standing Rock and Wet'suwet'en Resistance', *The Arbutus Review* 12, no. 1 (26 October 2021): 123, <https://doi.org/10.18357/tar121202120191>.

<sup>127</sup> Nick Estes, 'Fighting for Our Lives: #NoDAPL in Historical Context', *Wicazo Sa Review* 32, no. 2 (2017): 116, <https://doi.org/10.5749/wicazosareview.32.2.0115>.

<sup>128</sup> Estes, 116.

<sup>129</sup> Estes, 116.

<sup>130</sup> Estes, 116.

<sup>131</sup> Estes, 116.

Sakowin leaders and the Wounded Knee massacre on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, where over three hundred unarmed women, children, and elders were killed.<sup>132</sup>

Furthermore between 1907 and 1934, millions of acres were taken from the Great Sioux Reservation as the states sought to appropriate the Oceti Sakowin's water rights on Mni Sose for large-scale irrigation, proposing a system of dams that would flood Native's lands to create large reservoirs. Although the 1908 Supreme Court ruling known as the Winters Doctrine confirmed the tribes' water rights were protected by the 1851 and 1868 treaties, Congress passed the 1944 Pick-Sloan Act in response to seasonal flooding of the river.<sup>133</sup> This authorised the construction of five dams that flooded the territory of several Oceti Sakowin Nations, displacing thousands of people to less habitable lands.<sup>134</sup> Subsequently, the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), the federal government body responsible for issuing permits for federally regulated water crossings, claimed sole jurisdiction over the river and its shoreline, despite not being authorised to do so by Congress.<sup>135</sup>

In response to events and legislation such as Public Law 280, which allowed states to take jurisdiction over Native lands, the Oceti Sakowin, through organisations such as the National Indian Youth Council and the American Indian Movement (AIM), mobilised resistance against the destruction of Native life.<sup>136</sup> For example, in 1973, AIM occupied Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation for 71 days before being dispersed by police, to protest against corruption within the tribal government and the federal government's failure to honour treaties.<sup>137</sup> Additionally, with tar sands extraction and heavy crude oil pipelines on the rise, the Oceti Sakowin First Nations in Canada successfully organised against the Keystone XL pipeline in 2014, which threatened the Missouri River.<sup>138</sup> It is this context that the DAPL case is a continuation of defensive wars fought by their ancestors, in that it is aimed at protecting water and land from exploitation for profit.<sup>139</sup>

### 3.3 *The DAPL*

In late 2014, Dakota Access, proposed building the DAPL. Investors aimed to make a profit by providing a cheaper transport solution than rail, ensuring that the pipeline would reduce the environmental hazards associated with transporting oil by rail, increase US energy independence and create more jobs.<sup>140</sup>

Initially, the pipeline was planned to cross the Missouri River above the predominantly white city of Bismarck. However, the USACE, denied Dakota Access the permit, citing concerns about water pollution

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<sup>132</sup> Estes, 116.

<sup>133</sup> Estes, 117.

<sup>134</sup> Estes, 118.

<sup>135</sup> Estes, 117.

<sup>136</sup> Estes, 118.

<sup>137</sup> Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: New Press, 1997), 191.

<sup>138</sup> Estes, 'Fighting for Our Lives', 119.

<sup>139</sup> Estes, 119.

<sup>140</sup> US Army Corps of Engineers, 'Dakota Access Pipeline', Recent Project Update, accessed 23 April 2024, <https://www.nwo.usace.army.mil/Missions/Dam-and-Lake-Projects/Oil-and-Gas-Development/Dakota-Access-Pipeline/>.

in the event of an oil spill. Resulting, the pipeline was rerouted to its current location just upstream from the Standing Rock Indian Reservation<sup>141</sup> Significantly, the USACE, as it did in 1944, claimed sole jurisdiction over those parts of the Oceti Sakowin treaty territory that include the river.<sup>142</sup> Indeed, under the 1851 and 1868 Fort Laramie Treaties, the land beginning on the east bank of the Missouri River still belongs to the Oceti Sakowin, challenging the federal government's authority to proceed without the community's consent.<sup>143</sup>

Following, as early as 2014, the Standing Rock Tribe expressed concern about the proposed new location of the pipeline, citing treaty violations and significant risks to their water quality and vegetation, and consequently hunting and fishing activities, in the event of an oil spill.<sup>144</sup> They also argued that the bulldozing of treaty lands and expected water pollution will seriously threaten the Oceti Sakowin's cultural and spiritual heritage by destroying many important sites and altering their relationship with the river.<sup>145</sup>

Furthermore, the Standing Rock Tribe has challenged the adequacy of the cultural resource surveys and consultation process, despite claims by the USACE and Dakota Access that they have complied with federal law, apart from failing to recognise the 1851 and 1868 Treaties.<sup>146</sup> Namely, because the USACE recognises Lake Oahe as a navigable US waterway, the NEPA requires it to prepare and Environmental Assessment and, if significant impacts are found, an Environmental Impact Statement.<sup>147</sup> Moreover, the National Historic Preservation Act requires consultation with tribes due to potential historic sites on the land.<sup>148</sup> In light of this, the tribe argued that permits were issued and construction began before any meaningful consideration of the environmental impact or consultation had taken place, highlighting significant gaps in due process.<sup>149</sup>

It was in this context that the NoDAPL movement emerged when construction began in 2016. Standing Rock youth led hundred-mile runs to spread the word about the snake threatening their home and a small group of Standing Rock women put their bodies in front of the bulldozers, unknowingly starting the largest Native-led environmental uprising in recent history known as the NoDAPL movement.<sup>150</sup> Between the summer of 2016 and the winter of 2017, more than three hundred Native Nations expressed their solidarity with Oceti Sakowin by planting their flags at the protection camps.<sup>151</sup> The movement was explicitly non-violent, with people setting up prayer camps and organising peaceful marches.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Estes, 'Fighting for Our Lives', 115.

<sup>142</sup> Estes, 116.

<sup>143</sup> Estes, 116.

<sup>144</sup> Carla Fredericks et al., 'Social Cost and Material Loss: The Dakota Access Pipeline', *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2018, 46, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3287216>.

<sup>145</sup> Fredericks et al., 8.

<sup>146</sup> Fredericks et al., 8.

<sup>147</sup> Bailey, 'Consultation with American Indian Tribes: Resolving Ambiguity and Inconsistency in Government-to-Government Relations', 199.

<sup>148</sup> Bailey, 200.

<sup>149</sup> Bailey, 199–200.

<sup>150</sup> Estes and Dhillon, *Standing With Standing Rock*, 1.

<sup>151</sup> Estes and Dhillon, 1.

<sup>152</sup> Estes, 'Fighting for Our Lives', 119.

While the movement itself was non-violent, it was seen as a significant threat to the settlers' land claims, leading to the state's use of political violence against the Water Protectors.<sup>153</sup> In August 2016, ND Governor Jack Dalrymple, concerned that an Indigenous uprising could threaten oil companies and the state's oil-dependent economy, declared a state of emergency, bringing in the support of over seventy-five law enforcement agencies including Border Patrol, Homeland Security and the ND National Guard.<sup>154</sup> The protest area became heavily militarised, with checkpoints, concrete barriers, armoured vehicles and long stretches of razor wire.<sup>155</sup> This increased police and military presence led to the arrest of over 800 Water Protectors. Investigations later revealed that Dakota Access had hired TigerSwan, a private security firm known for counter-insurgency operations in the Middle East.<sup>156</sup> TigerSwan applied these tactics domestically, treating peaceful protesters as insurgents and providing intelligence to local law enforcement.<sup>157</sup> The collaboration between corporate interests and state forces blurred the lines between the public and private sectors, creating a powerful counter-intelligence campaign against the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and peaceful water protectors.<sup>158</sup>

For nearly a year Water Protectors tried to stop the DAPL in defence of Mother Earth and the Mni Sose, showing steadfast resistance to pepper sprayings, water cannons, disinformation tactics and dog attacks.<sup>159</sup> Eventually, on his second day in office, Donald Trump signed a Presidential Memorandum authorising the DAPL, quickly followed by the granting of the easement by USACE. The DAPL was then pushed through and became operational in June 2017.

### 3.4 Conclusion

This chapter provided essential context for understanding the DAPL by examining Native Americans' interactions with fossil fuel extraction. It provided insight into the historical land dispossessions and policies that have shaped their relationship with the US state. The chapter then focused on the Oceti Sakowin, highlighting their historical struggles that are crucial to the context of their ongoing struggle for sovereignty over their culture and ecosystems. Finally, the chapter looked at the specifics of the DAPL, revealing how the construction process has been highly problematic, characterised by systematic disregard for treaties and Oceti Sakowin sovereignty and inadequate consultation processes.

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<sup>153</sup> Kyle Powys Whyte, 'The Dakota Access Pipeline, Environmental Injustice, and US Settler Colonialism', in *The Nature of Hope*, by Char Miller and Jeff Crane (University Press of Colorado, 2019), 320, <https://doi.org/10.5876/9781607328483.c015>.

<sup>154</sup> Estes and Dhillon, *Standing With Standing Rock*, 4.

<sup>155</sup> Estes and Dhillon, 4.

<sup>156</sup> Estes and Dhillon, 4.

<sup>157</sup> Estes and Dhillon, 4.

<sup>158</sup> Estes and Dhillon, 4.

<sup>159</sup> Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows*, 14.

Despite the completion of the pipeline, the NoDAPL movement cannot be considered a failure. This movement offered a fleeting but powerful glimpse of an alternative future, igniting and sustaining the enduring flame of Native anti-extractivist resistance.

#### ***4. Voices from the Frontlines: The impact of the DAPL***

This chapter uses the concept of colonial ecological violence to answer the question of how the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors experience the environmental injustice brought by the DAPL. Colonial ecological violence, as defined by Bacon, is the inability of Indigenous peoples to form relationships with and responsibilities to their environment, caused by the actions of the settler-colonial state, the private industry, or settler-colonial culture as a whole.<sup>160</sup> This concept argues that the projects of elimination within settler colonial societies have specific ecological manifestations, such as privatisation, pollution and redefining land by culture of the colonisers.<sup>161</sup>

Through an examination of the narratives of Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors, this chapter shows how the construction of and the threat of pollution by the DAPL fit the characteristics of colonial ecological violence, despite the lack of explicit intent to commit violence. The narratives reveal that the injustice brought by the DAPL are associated with specific destructive outcomes for the Oceti Sakowin as its impact is experienced primarily as foreclosing the possibility of relationships with and responsibilities to ecologies through an assault on their relational ontology, resulting above else in cultural erasure.

With these findings, this chapter contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the struggle surrounding the DAPL and its broader implications for EJ and IEJ. Indeed, the findings of the narratives reveal that, while Native communities are indeed disproportionately affected, the ‘injustice’ at hand goes beyond the unequal distribution of environmental risks, meaning that an equal distribution of these risks would be insufficient to achieve justice. Therefore, through the application of the concept of colonial ecological violence, this chapter argues for broadening our understanding of what constitutes environmental injustice to account for the violent disruption of human relationships with the environment in order to respect and honour Indigenous lifeways. It is from here, that the next chapter applies the concept of collective continuance to understand the resistance as a direct response to the injustice at hand, making it possible to envision how our concept of justice might evolve.

First, the chapter examines the ways in which the DAPL represents a form of colonial ecological violence by disrupting the Oceti Sakowin's spiritual and cultural connections to their land and water. Second, it deepens our understanding of this representation by analysing the psychological impacts and intergenerational trauma that are understood to result from this disruption.

##### *4.1 Assault on Spirituality and Culture*

As briefly discussed in the theoretical chapter, in many Indigenous worldviews, humans are enmeshed within the universe rather than standing outside of it.<sup>162</sup> The Oceti Sakowin, specifically, see the universe as an

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<sup>160</sup> Bacon, ‘Dangerous Pipelines, Dangerous People’, 1.

In this context, ‘environment’ refers to the space that connects human and non-human beings, such as animals and plants, non-living beings and entities, including spirits and elements, and collectives, like waterscapes and mountains. See: Whyte, ‘Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice’, 125.

<sup>161</sup> Bacon, ‘Settler Colonialism as Eco-Social Structure and the Production of Colonial Ecological Violence’, 63.

<sup>162</sup> Whyte, ‘Anti-Colonial Action through Kinship’, 270.

interconnected web of life in which humans are dependent on and interrelated with the system.<sup>163</sup> In this regard, the universe is alive and all beings of creation are related.<sup>164</sup> Spirits, ghosts, rocks, trees, meteorological phenomena, medicine bundles and animals are recognised as persons, capable of interpersonal relations and agency because they have the spirit of the Creator, *Wakan Tanka*, the unifying energy force of the universe flowing through all things.<sup>165</sup> This force is the foundation of the Oceti Sakowin's metaphysical concepts, which are expressed in terms of kinship and the principles of reciprocity, responsibility and mutual respect that naturally flow from it.<sup>166</sup> The Lakota, for instance, consider all living beings to be relatives, bound together in the sacred circle of kinship. Consequently, they respect all beings, are responsible for caring for all beings and are expected to reciprocate all that they receive, as the exploitation of one relative by another will have catastrophic effects on the coexistence of kinship relations.<sup>167</sup> These beliefs constitute the foundation upon which all domains of Oceti Sakowin cultures are built.<sup>168</sup>

In this context, the most prominent way in which the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors experienced the impact of the DAPL was through a disruption of their relational ontology. This section examines the DAPL as a form of colonial ecological violence that causes cultural erasure by discussing: 1) the disruption of the Oceti Sakowin's connection to their water due to the threat of inevitable pollution, and 2) the destruction of land and sacred sites along the Mni Sose, which are not only physical but also deeply spiritual and cultural.

#### 4.1.1 *Sacredness of water*

For Natives, water itself is sacred and holds a honorary place in their understanding of the world.<sup>169</sup> For the Oceti Sakowin in particular, the concept of water embodies a deeply sacred living entity, a relative, a bearer of life, consciousness, and interconnectedness.<sup>170</sup> For example, in the Lakota creation stories, the first creation was the sacred stone and the second creation was the sacred water. When these came together they created a sacred sound, the energy of life.<sup>171</sup> It is no coincidence, for instance, that babies grow in water in their mothers' wombs. Considering the sacredness of water, it plays a vital role in ceremonies and is understood as the first medicine with healing powers.<sup>172</sup> In this context, many Oceti Sakowin Water

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<sup>163</sup> Posthumus, *All My Relatives*, 34.

<sup>164</sup> Posthumus, 35.

<sup>165</sup> Posthumus, 35.

<sup>166</sup> Alexander Cavanaugh, 'From Relationality to Resilience in Contemporary Dakota and Ojibwe Environmental Justice Literature.', September 2021, 2.

<sup>167</sup> Posthumus, *All My Relatives*, 43.

<sup>168</sup> Posthumus, 37.

<sup>169</sup> June-Ann Greeley, 'Water in Native American Spirituality: Liquid Life, Blood of the Earth and Life of the Community', *Green Humanities: A Journal of Ecological Thought in Literature, Philosophy & Arts* 2 (April 2017): 158.

<sup>170</sup> Center for Humans & Nature, 'Living With Relativity', *Center for Humans & Nature* (blog), 26 August 2016, <https://humansandnature.org/living-with-relativity/>.

<sup>171</sup> Indigenous Environmental Network, 'Nahah'c'i Le Okunpi: We're Still Here: Nahah'c'i Le Okunpi: We're Still Here on September 20, 2016 Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Chairman David Archambault II Addressed the United Nations Human: By Indigenous Environmental Networkfacebook', Facebook, September 26, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/ienearth/videos/nahahci-le-okunpi-were-still-here/10153997971575642/>.

<sup>172</sup> Vi Waln, 'Water Is Sacred', *Lakota Times*, August 1, 2019, <https://www.lakotatimes.com/articles/water-is-sacred/>.

Protectors explain the impact of the DAPL as threatening the Oceti Sakowin's relations with the water because the pipe will inevitably pollute the Mni Sose.

For instance, in explaining the impact, many reinforce the message of 'Mni Wiconi', invoking the sacred place of water in the universe and underscoring its role in Oceti Sakowin lifeways. Melanie Stoneman (Wakinyan Ska/Wi Sicangu Lakota) from the Rosebud Indian Reservation, SD, reflecting on the impact of an oil spill notes:

Some people say 'Mni Wiconi', is just water, but for us Lakotas, it is more than just water, more than just praying for water, it is our way of life, 'water of life'... There is a whole story tied to this water that goes all the way back. There is a spirit involved, a spirit that is within us and also within this water.<sup>173</sup>

Melanie's testimony highlights the water's deep spiritual and cultural significance to the Oceti Sakowin, specifically the Lakotas. She emphasises that the phrase 'Mni Wiconi' transcends a simple translation of 'water is life'; it encompasses the understanding that water embodies life itself, thus, underscoring the Oceti Sakowin's worldview of water as essential to their existence, both spiritually and physically. The notion of a spirit within the people and the water further highlights this interconnectedness between the Lakota and their waters, emphasising the relational ontology, in which all life forms are seen as living relatives, central to the Oceti Sakowin's lifeways. Furthermore, Melanie's reference to a story going 'all the way back' situates the importance of the Mni Sose within a historical and cultural continuum, further emphasising that it is integral to Lakota identity.

Thus, Melanie's statement emphasises the importance of the water to Oceti Sakowin's, culture, spirituality and identity, implying the belief that to disturb the water is to disturb the way of life itself, encapsulating the existential threat posed by the DAPL to the Oceti Sakowin's lifeways when it ruptures.

Kandi Mosset (Hidatsa/Mandan/Arikara), also known as 'Eagle Woman', from the Fort Berthold Reservation, ND, explicitly voices this insinuation when she argues that projects such as the DAPL are not only a violation of the sacred, but also represent a disconnection from sacred relations. Kandi speaks of being confronted with the fact that humanity is setting aside plots of the natural world, such is the case with the creation of National Parks, in order to destroy the rest through industry. She explains:

It is a really heavy burden to understand how humanity does not understand our connection with the sacred anymore. The disconnect with the very thing that gives us life, Mother Earth. Like a mother, she takes care of you and she cannot possibly take care of us if we continue to batter, desecrate and rip her apart. This is why we say water is the first life. When we say 'Mni Wiconi', it is not just a saying. Water is the very asset of humanity, it makes up. So when we abuse that, we are abusing ourselves. Our bodies are made up of water, that water is sacred and in this day and age, the powers that be are trying to commodify the sacred, put a price

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<sup>173</sup> BrittanyApp, 'Where There Once Was Water : Standing Rock Stories: Melaine & J.C.', Vimeo, June 28, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/194266511>.



on it and what we have always understood as Natives is that there are alternatives to oil, but there are no alternatives to water.<sup>174</sup>

With this, drawing on traditional Oceti Sakowin knowledge, Kandi argues that projects like the DAPL, represent humanity's disconnection from the relationship with the sacred. She then highlights the irreversible consequences of this disconnection. The commodification of water represents a fundamental misunderstanding and exploitation of Indigenous values, perpetuating a form of cultural erasure, as the exploitation at hand is not only environmentally, but also spiritually and culturally damaging, undermining the basic principles that have sustained Indigenous peoples for centuries. Her assertion that 'there are alternatives to oil, there are no alternatives to water' underlines the irreplaceable nature of water.

Adding depth and support to Melanie's and Kandi's testimonies, LaDonna Bravebull Allard (Ihanktonwan Pabaksa, Sissintonwan Dakota/Hunkpapa, Sicasu/Oglala Lakota) also known as 'Her Good Earth Woman', the former Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's historic preservation officer, further highlights the connection between the Oceti Sakowin and the Mni Sose by emphasising its ceremonial importance. She notes:

We love the water, every year our people sacrifice, we go four days without drinking water to remind us how important this water is. I ask everybody, if you go for four days without water, what happens to your body on the third day? Your body starts to shut down. So we remind ourselves every day how important it is. We say and sing Mni Wiconi, water of life, every time we drink water. We cannot live without water.<sup>175</sup>

With this, LaDonna enriches the discussion by bringing in the ceremonial significance of water for the Oceti Sakowin. Her reference to the practice of abstaining from water for four days as a reminder of its importance, refers to the Oceti Sakowin's most important ceremony, the Sun Dance, which takes place on the shores of the Mni Sose.<sup>176</sup> This ritual serves to emphasise the life-sustaining and sacred nature of the water and is understood as renewing and strengthening the kinship circle, which will be further discussed in the next chapter. Thus, by invoking this ritual LaDonna adds depth to the understanding of the impact the DAPL poses to the Oceti Sakowin's lifeways.

Taken together, the testimonies of Melanie, LaDonna and Kandi demonstrate the profound spiritual, cultural, and existential significance of water to the Oceti Sakowin. The narratives reveal that water is not merely a resource but a sacred, living entity that embodies life, consciousness, and interconnectedness. The phrase 'Mni Wiconi', encapsulates this holistic worldview, highlighting the bond between the people and their environment. Therefore, the DAPL, represents more than an ecological threat, it signifies a deeper disconnect from these sacred relationships and an assault on the very essence of their cultural survival. As

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<sup>174</sup> BrittanyApp, 'Where There Once Was Water: Kandi Mossett: #NoDAPL', Vimeo, October 27, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/189248592>.

<sup>175</sup> Democracy Now!, 'Dakota Access Company Attack Comes on Anniversary of Whitestone Massacre', YouTube, September 8, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVbQMtvT2WI>.

<sup>176</sup> Chas Jewett and Mark Garavan, 'Water Is Life: An Indigenous Perspective from a Standing Rock Water Protector', *Community Development Journal* 54, no. 1 (1 January 2019): 44, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsy062>.

Ron Lafrance, Chief of the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe notes: ‘once we lose the river and lose our connection to the water we will no longer exist.’<sup>177</sup>

#### 4.1.2 *Desecration of Land and Cultural Sites*

Connected to the previous section, many of the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors emphasised the experience of cultural and spiritual loss, constituting cultural erasure, resulting from the desecration of sacred sites and ancestral burial grounds along the banks of Mni Sose, as the pipeline's construction involved the clearing and grading of a 3-metre-deep access corridor on both sides of Lake Oahe.<sup>178</sup> Resulting, Dakota Access destroyed a total of eighty-two cultural sites, including some of the most significant stone structures.

In this regard, Tim Menz, the former Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, describes the destroyed sites as places where the people sought ‘vital spiritual connections through prayer’.<sup>179</sup> He notes that these cultural and religious stone features are irreplaceable to the Oceti Sakowin, specifically the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, and, therefore, their destruction heavily impacts their lifeways. Tim explains:

These types of sites are significant places where our people gathered. We are star people, here (gesturing to a specific stone formation) we have one of many star constellations. This formations represents the handle of the Dipper, where the N'auchas people fasted. Indicating the importance of them, there is a small drainage area here as every site of cultural significance to us is linked to water. The presence of a spring downhill further ties this site to our traditions. The significance of this water source is rooted in the spiritual practices of our people, who came to these areas to make pledges and spiritual commitments. When it (the effigy of the constellation) sits on the Earth it brings a spirit to life...Today we are looking at an area that has seen a complete destruction of a part of our society's walk of life, where commitments were made and gifts were given.<sup>180</sup>

Tim's reflection on the destruction of sacred stone formations provides an insightful look at the intersection of spirituality, cultural heritage, and the physical environment. Tim's description of the sacred sites reveals that the physical effigy of the constellation called the Dipper serves not only as a cultural marker but also as an embodiment of cultural continuity and spiritual energy that comes to life through its earthly manifestation, reflecting the interconnectedness of the Oceti Sakowin's spiritual beliefs and the physical environment. The presence of a drainage area to the downhill spring further ties these formations to the Oceti Sakowin, considering water is sacred, making these formations places where pledges and spiritual commitments were made. Thus, the destruction of these formations and its connection to the spring, by the

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<sup>177</sup> Kolc-TV, ‘Dakota Access Pipeline: Ron Lafrance’, YouTube, September 1, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQaMjk\\_8liQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQaMjk_8liQ).

<sup>178</sup> Haydee J Dijkstal, ‘The Dakota Access Pipeline and the Destruction of Cultural Heritage: Apply the Crime Against Humanity of Persecution Before the ICC’, *Minnesota Journal of International Law* 28, no. 1 (2019): 166.

<sup>179</sup> Kolc-TV, ‘Tim Mentz: Updated’, YouTube, September 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6NapCXUjU0>.

<sup>180</sup> Kolc-TV.

DAPL represents both a physical and a deep spiritual disconnection that heavily impacts Oceti Sakowin lifeways. As Tim explains, it results in ‘the complete destruction of a part of our society’s walk of life’<sup>181</sup>

Adding to this narrative, Linda Black Elck (Korean, Mongolian and Catawba), ethnobotanist and food sovereignty activist, explains the experienced cultural and spiritual destruction by reflecting on the DAPL’s impact on natural medicines. She explains:

I have seen the wealth of incredible medicinal plants that were right there in the path of that pipeline. Therefore, I could see what was getting destroyed...It is not just grass, there are all sacred medicines here and there are literally thousands of them getting bulldozed by Dakota Access every day.<sup>182</sup>

Linda points to the vast wealth of medicinal plants growing in the pipeline's path, emphasising their importance beyond mere vegetation. According to her, these plants are sacred medicines, essential elements of the Oceti Sakowin’s centuries-old traditional healing practices rooted in Native culture and spirituality. With this, Linda’s testimony broadens the scope of the DAPL’s impact, highlighting that it is not limited to sites like stone formations, but extends to the natural environment that sustains the lifeways. The bulldozing of the medicinal plants is equivalent to erasing the pharmacopoeia of the Oceti Sakowin, thus, disrupting their traditional ecological knowledge and healing practices which are vital to their cultural and spiritual identities.

Concluding, both Tim and Linda illustrate the important spiritual, cultural and existential significance of the historical sites and the natural environment to the Oceti Sakowin. The desecration of these sites and natural resources by Dakota Access constitutes an assault on the very essence of their cultural survival. With this, the DAPL perpetuates a form of cultural erasure by disrupting spiritual practices and traditional lifeways.

#### 4.2 *Psychological Impact and Intergenerational Trauma*

Building on the experience of the DAPL as an immediate assault on Oceti Sakowin spirituality and culture by altering the relation between the Oceti Sakowin and their environment, many emphasise that the devastating impact of such alterations takes a great psychological toll that extends to future generations, as the struggles of the current generation are understood as having significant implications for the health of their descendants and, thus, the cultural continuity of the Oceti Sakowin through the transmission of knowledge.

For example, Dave Archambault (Tokala Ohitika Lakota), the former Tribal Chairman of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation explains that for the Oceti Sakowin, the destruction of their cultural sites and the subsequent severing of their the connection to the environment, ‘deprives the communities of their physical connection to and memory of their past, destroying the ability to transmit knowledge and values to

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<sup>181</sup> Kolc-Tv.

<sup>182</sup> End of the Line: Women of Standing Rockfacebook, ‘Linda Black Elk: Plants Have Spirit’, Facebook, November 17, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/endofthelinefilm/videos/linda-black-elk-plants-have-spirit/1460156000678932/>.

future generations by depriving them from them of the ability to learn of their own culture.<sup>183</sup> This understanding of the intergenerational impact of the current destruction creates great feelings of grief and trauma, which are believed to be consistent with the so-called ‘Indigenous soul wound’, the internalisation of environmental damage to emotional pain.<sup>184</sup> The concept of ‘intergenerational trauma’, also known as historical trauma, is particularly relevant here, referring to the passing of trauma from one generation onto the next.<sup>185</sup> This can happen biologically through epigenetics, meaning that the experiences of our ancestors are literally ‘alive’ within our DNA and can be activated through markers and imprints developed generations ago. Secondly, behaviourally we can pick up on and emulate things in our environment.<sup>186</sup>

For Native Americans, historical trauma takes form of emotional and psychological wounding resulting from collective group trauma from centuries of genocide.<sup>187</sup> This ongoing trauma affects not only those who directly experienced it, but also subsequent generations, affecting their mental, emotional and physical health and influencing their social and cultural practices.<sup>188</sup> Research shows that children of parents who have experienced trauma often face emotional and mental health challenges, including depression, suicidal thoughts, addiction and severe feelings of guilt.<sup>189</sup>

In this context, the DAPL has exacerbated historical trauma by desecrating sacred sites and threatening cultural continuity, perpetuating the cycle of intergenerational trauma among the Oceti Sakowin. For example, in the testimony described above, Kandi emphasises the psychological burden, speaking to the heavy emotional toll of understanding the disconnection from the sacred. This psychological stress is that can be passed on to future generations, affecting the health and the social cohesion of Indigenous communities, potentially altering their lifeways.

To illustrate this danger Wasté Win Young (Ihunktowanna/Hunkpapa), former Tribal Historic Preservation Officer of the Standing Rock Reservation, refers to how intergenerational trauma has affected her own generation. She explains:

We were free, and so were the animals and the birds and the rivers. Then the white man hit this land by accident. We welcomed him. We fed him. We took care of him. We believed that God had sent him to help us...Now our great chiefs are gone, our buffalo are gone, our weapons are gone, our arrows are gone and

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<sup>183</sup> Dijkstal, ‘The Dakota Access Pipeline and the Destruction of Cultural Heritage: Apply the Crime Against Humanity of Persecution Before the ICC’, 204.

<sup>184</sup> Eduardo Duran et al., ‘Healing the American Indian Soul Wound’, in *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, ed. Yael Danieli (Boston, MA: Springer US, 1998), 342, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4757-5567-1\\_22](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4757-5567-1_22); and K. Whitney Mauer, ‘Undamming the Elwha River’, *Contexts* 19, no. 3 (August 2020): 625, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504220950399>.

<sup>185</sup> TedxTalks, ‘What We Carry for Our Ancestors: Intergenerational Healing, Serene Thin Elk, Tedxsiouxfalls’, YouTube, October 5, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjCoYvXNaUA>.

<sup>186</sup> TedxTalks

<sup>187</sup> TedxTalks

<sup>188</sup> TedxTalks

<sup>189</sup> Duran et al., ‘Healing the American Indian Soul Wound’, 342.

they sell our bones as souvenirs. If we did not remember how it used to be, it would not be this hard for us. We could just become like everyone else.<sup>190</sup>

Wasté's reflection captures the sense of loss and betrayal felt by Indigenous communities who welcomed white settlers only to have their world dismantled in return, a deep historical trauma passed down through generations. The mention of the loss of cultural artefacts and the commercialisation of her ancestors' remains underlines the ongoing disrespect experienced by the Oceti Sakowin, intensifying this trauma as current generations struggle with the weight of these intergenerational injustices, hindering their ability to fully heal and move forward.

Adding depth to this narrative, LaDonna, in regards to the dams built under the Pick's Loan Act, discussed in the contextual chapter, explains:

We were self-sufficient: we planted our own gardens and we owned our own cattle. Then in 1948 they decided to build the dams. They came and moved our people out of their homes and into low-income housing... We lost whole communities. They took all of our medicines, our plants, the things that we survive of. If you talk to the people you can hear the grief in their voice, because we still grief for the loss of this land and they moved us on top of the hill where there is a more clay-based soil, preventing us from growing gardens.<sup>191</sup>

LaDonna's testimony illustrates the drastic changes imposed on Indigenous communities by external forces. The shift from self-sufficiency to dependence and forced relocation to less fertile lands symbolises the wider dispossession experienced by Indigenous peoples. This displacement has disrupted not only their physical environment, but also their social structures and cultural practices. The lingering grief and loss expressed by community members is indicative of unresolved trauma that continues to be felt by subsequent generations, undermining their ability to fully reconnect with their traditional ways of life and maintain their cultural identity.

These testimonies and experiences emphasise the profound and lasting impacts of the DAPL on the cultural continuity and the long-term health of Oceti Sakowin Nations. Once again, the DAPL is experienced not just as an ecological issue, but as an assault on the survival of cultural heritage and the well-being of future generations.

### 4.3 *Conclusion*

The DAPL clearly illustrates the devastating impact of colonial ecological violence on the Oceti Sakowin's deeply rooted spiritual and cultural connections to their environment. The narratives of the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors have demonstrated how the construction and potential pollution of the DAPL inflict significant cultural erasure and psychological trauma, with consequences that span generations. These impacts extend beyond environmental degradation, threatening the very fabric of Oceti Sakowin lifeways,

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<sup>190</sup> Shannon King, 'End of the Line: The Women of Standing Rock Online', Prime Video, June 25, 2021, <https://www.primevideo.com/detail/End-of-the-Line-The-Women-of-Standing-Rock/0N57T49P9P5OVVYTLEGRQBWZYQ>.

<sup>191</sup> Democracy Now!, 'Dakota Access Company Attack Comes on Anniversary of Whitestone Massacre'.

identities and continuity. These findings call for a broadening of our understanding of environmental injustice, one that acknowledges and addresses the violent disruption of Indigenous relationships with their environment.

This understanding provides the foundation for examining the resistance to the DAPL. The following chapter examines how this resistance can be understood as a form of collective continuance, a direct response to the cultural and spiritual assaults described in this chapter. Through acts of resistance, the Oceti Sakowin and other Indigenous communities seek to restore and maintain their disrupted connections and assert their right to cultural survival in the struggle for IEJ.

## 5. *Voices from the Frontlines: The Resistance*

Building on the previous chapter's argument that the DAPL represents colonial ecological violence, this chapter answers the question of how the Oceti Sakowin resist the environmental injustice brought by the DAPL, arguing that the Oceti Sakowin's resistance embodies more than a struggle against the unequal distribution of environmental harms; it represents a commitment to collective continuance, which Kyle Whyte defines as the 'ongoing preservation of Indigenous cultures, traditions and relations to the environment.'<sup>192</sup> Examining the Oceti Sakowin's resistance through this notion, this chapter highlights how the resistance centres on the revival and reaffirmation of traditional lifeways, including embracing spiritual practices and holding ceremonies that prioritise harmony with the land and all living beings.

These findings have significant implications for IEJ, as conventional understandings of justice in EJ frameworks have traditionally focused on the equitable distribution of environmental risks, often emphasising state-centred solutions and legal avenues.<sup>193</sup> Indeed, in light of the previous chapter's call for a broadening of the understanding of injustice to include the impacts of the DAPL as colonial ecological violence, this chapter argues for an expansion of EJ frameworks' understanding and modes of achieving justice. Therefore, this chapter advocates for a paradigm shift towards a more culturally sensitive understanding of justice that extends beyond mere equal distribution. This broader concept encompasses the right to maintain cultural identity, spiritual practices and ultimately the right to determine their own processes in relation to their environment.

First, this chapter examines how Oceti Sakowin resistance involves a rejection of the Western worldview that prioritises materialism and exploitation. Instead, they advocate for more harmonious and respectful relationships with the environment by affirming the Oceti Sakowin relational ontology through rhetorical practices as a way of 'writing' for survival. Building on this, the chapter examines the ways in which the Oceti Sakowin continue to revive and reaffirm their lifeways and cultural identities, creating a 'Native reality' by embracing traditional ways of living and performing ceremonies and rituals as acts of resistance.

### 5.1 *Preservation through Rhetorical Practices*

A prominent dimension of collective continuance as embodied in the Oceti Sakowin's resistance to the cultural erasure represented by the DAPL involves a fundamental rejection of the prevailing hegemonic ideologies rooted in Western worldviews, particularly the exploitative ideologies that understand nature as a resource for human advancement, and highlighting their explicit conflict with Oceti Sakowin lifeways, which are organised in accordance with relational ontology and its extending principles of reciprocity, responsibility and respect.<sup>194</sup> The Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors do this by focusing their rhetorical practices on rejecting the philosophy of greed and reaffirming relationality instead.

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<sup>192</sup> Whyte, 'Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice', 126.

<sup>193</sup> Parsons, Fisher, and Crease, *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene*, 39.

<sup>194</sup> Posthumus, *All My Relatives*, 34.

In this context, it is important to note that for Native Americans, spirituality is the way ‘in which language creates, maintains and shifts meaning.’<sup>195</sup> Kenneth Morrison shows that the use and the understanding of language differ between Native Americans and Western communities.<sup>196</sup> The former see language as generative, creating and bringing reality into being.<sup>197</sup> The latter see language as a representation of a given reality that is ‘out there’.<sup>198</sup> Given this understanding, the Oceti Sakowin believe that language is very powerful because it is the medium through which they create spiritual relations with other beings of creation.<sup>199</sup> Thus, the rhetorical practices of the Oceti Sakowin are not exclusively communicative acts, but also transformative of reality.<sup>200</sup> However, admittedly this is primarily true for the use of the Lakota, Nakota and Dakota languages, what if the language used is English?

In this regard, Elizabeth Archuleta (Yaqui/Chicana) argues that if English continues to be perceived solely as the language of the ‘enemy,’ many Native voices will be silenced, given Native languages are rapidly disappearing and English has become the first language for many.<sup>201</sup> Therefore, she calls for challenging the belief that usage of English erases Native identity, seeing instead the potential for it to become a tool for empowerment and resistance, conveying survival.<sup>202</sup> Connie Fife (Cree) reinforces the idea that language can convey resilience and survival, arguing that it is possible to embrace and utilise the English language while maintaining and affirming Native identity, traditions and values.<sup>203</sup>

Thus, by rejecting Western materialism and reinforcing relational ontology through language, the Oceti Sakowin can be understood as actively creating and sustaining their lifeways. The power of language in this context means that their words and narratives are acts of resistance that challenge and subvert dominant Western ideologies. Using the colonisers’ language signals the ‘reinvention of the enemy’s language’ and speaks for survival, empowerment and healing.<sup>204</sup>

Helen Red Feather (Oglala Lakota) from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, SD, for instance, explains:

In my time everything was in a circle and we never had any problems, but now everything is square. Look at the map, even our land is square. Now they are making my grandchildren’s brains square. These people want to kill the whole world... As my grandpa said: ‘Tell them there is land on the moon and they will destroy that too’. Look at the weather, they have destroyed our weather, they are destroying everything. I wonder where they come from, are they from this Earth? Is that why they disrespect the Earth so much? All they live for is how much money they can get, how easy life can be until they die. They do not care about how their children

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<sup>195</sup> Kenneth M Morrison, ‘Beyond the Supernatural: Language and Religious Action’, *Religion* 22, no. 3 (July 1992): 201, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0048-721X\(92\)90016-W](https://doi.org/10.1016/0048-721X(92)90016-W).

<sup>196</sup> Morrison, 202.

<sup>197</sup> Morrison, 202.

<sup>198</sup> Morrison, 202.

<sup>199</sup> Posthumus, *All My Relatives*, 56.

<sup>200</sup> Posthumus, 56.

<sup>201</sup> Elizabeth Archuleta, “‘I Give You Back’: Indigenous Women Writing to Survive”, *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 18, no. 4 (2006): 90, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ail.2007.0000>.

<sup>202</sup> Archuleta, 90.

<sup>203</sup> Archuleta, 90.

<sup>204</sup> Meredith Privott, ‘An Ethos of Responsibility and Indigenous Women Water Protectors in the #NoDAPL Movement’, *The American Indian Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (January 2019): 80, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aiq.2019.a720014>.



will survive in the future. Let's take back our Grandmother. Heal her as much as we can for our future generation. We must get rid of these money-hungry, greedy people. I cry for her. I come from her and when I die I will return to this Earth. Why can you not respect my Grandmother and respect my ways? Your ways do not work, because you have money in front of you. You killed your god. And now you are here to destroy mine.<sup>205</sup>

With these words, Helen reflects on the philosophical and spiritual divergence between the circularity of Oceti Sakowin kinship and its destruction by colonial capitalist structures resulting in 'squareness'. She emphasises the disruption of lifeways caused by the pursuit of greed. In response to this disruption, Helen's invocation of circularity – held sacred by the Oceti Sakowin because Wakan Tanka imbued nature with roundness - emphasises the importance of honouring and preserving the earth and its resources.<sup>206</sup> Helen's invocation of the Earth as her grandmother further highlights and actively strengthens the web of kinship within the natural world. Thus, Helen's resistance calls for a reassessment of social norms and reaffirms a respectful and reciprocal relationship with the environment that is crucial to the survival and well-being of future generations, embodying collective continuity through the invocation of circularity in line with relational ontology.

Adding depth, Phyllis Young (Lakota/Dakota), a Native-American activist from the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, rejects the capitalist interests underpinning the DAPL and frames the Oceti Sakowin's resistance aligned with relational ontology, focusing, particularly, on the principle of responsibility. She states:

They continue to trespass on our lands and violate sacred objects in the name of monetary gain. We understand why we are here. Water is sacred. Water is life's first gift. As a woman, I have a responsibility to protect the water of Mother Earth because all life begins in water. We have an obligation to protect and to continue in prayer. We, the Oceti Sakowin, are the predecessor sovereign of this territory and if they do not like it, they need to secede from us. I was a good American for forty years. Time to be a good member of the Oceti Sakowin, to do what is best for my own people.<sup>207</sup>

With this, Phyllis rejects the capitalist motivation behind the trespassing and desecration of the Oceti Sakowin's environment and emphasises how relationality includes all elements of nature, including water, which she positions as a sacred gift of the first life. By invoking water as a gift in relation to the obligation to protect it, she situates the Oceti Sakowin's resistance within the broader framework of relational ontology, specifically the principle of reciprocity, where the act of protecting becomes a responsibility as part of giving for all that is taken between kin. In this way, Phyllis strengthens the collective continuum by affirming and creating the mutual obligations that sustain the Oceti Sakowin lifeways.

Furthermore, Phyllis strengthens this reaffirmation of relationality by referencing her identity as a woman in relation to the Earth as a feminised entity, a strategy specifically grounded in Native maternal

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<sup>205</sup> BillProuty, 'Voices of Standing Rock – Helen', YouTube, October 11, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cawAk4xeR9A>.

<sup>206</sup> Posthumus, *All My Relatives*, 38.

<sup>207</sup> Shannon King, 'End of the Line: The Women of Standing Rock Online'.

knowledge that reflects the specific role Oceti Sakowin women play in maintaining kinship. As Kim Anderson (Metis) argues, unlike being the embodiment of women's annihilation, as is true for dominant Western maternal knowledge, Oceti Sakowin motherhood is the assertion of leadership and authority, linked to women's socio-cultural responsibility for life-giving and community building, regardless of whether they biologically produce children.<sup>208</sup> With this, Phyllis reaffirms the unique interconnected understanding of womanhood, mothering, the feminised Earth and resistance within Native maternal knowledge that is integral to the survival of her community.<sup>209</sup>

Lastly, Chas Jewett (Miniconjou Lakota) of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe adds another layer to the invocative resistance to dominant cultural paradigms discussed so far. She explains:

We have come so far in civilisation that we have all this technology, we have this consumer culture that is soulless. We are depressed, anxious and we are taking pills. The consumer culture leaves a lot to be desired because there is always something that you have to get in order for you to be whole. The opposite of this consumer culture, which I like to call rape culture because they do not ask consent, is consent culture. We ask consent for things and we give respect to whoever we are asking consent from or whatever we are asking consent from. But this is not the way people do things now. They just jam the flag down and claim it in the name of whoever. They have to move around to another way. As a Tribal nation we should be able to make our own decisions and be able to live according to our ways and be able to practice our religion the way everyone else in America gets to.<sup>210</sup>

Chas rejects the prevailing consumer culture, noting its soullessness and its lack of consent. In contrast, she advocates for an adaptation of a culture of consent that is integral to Native lifeways, specifically reflecting the principle of respect, for within the circle of kinship it is important to respect all beings precisely as they are kin. In relation to this rhetorical strategy, Chas frames the importance of sovereignty for Americans and Native Nations alike as an extension of this same context of relationality. With this, she recognises Native peoples as rightful stewards of their lands and resources, affirming their authority to determine the fate of their resources and territories. With this, Chas not only reaffirms the relational ontology in terms of its extended principles, but also reclaims Native agency in environmental decision-making as grounded in this ontology, advocating for practices that uphold Oceti Sakowin cultural and ecological integrity in ways that promote harmonious relationships between humans and the natural world.

Concluding, the testimonies of Helen, Phyllis and Chas illustrate the Oceti Sakowin's resistance to the cultural erasure perpetrated by the DAPL and other forms of colonial and capitalist encroachment. By invoking relational ontology through their rhetorical practices, these women reaffirm the principles of reciprocity, responsibility and respect that underpin their lifeways. Their use of language, although English,

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<sup>208</sup> Kim Anderson, 'Giving Life to the People: An Indigenous Ideology of Motherhood', in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, ed. Andrea O'Reilly (Bradford, Canada: Demeter Press, 2007), 775.

<sup>209</sup> Lisa J. Udel, 'Revision and Resistance: The Politics of Native Women's Motherwork', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 22, no. 2 (2001): 43–44, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3347054>.

<sup>210</sup> Love and Courage podcast, 'Chas Jewett, Native American Standing Rock Activist', YouTube, September 17, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pmKJjNMpv1Q>.

serves as a powerful tool for creating and maintaining their cultural identity and worldview. Through their words, they transform reality, challenge dominant ideologies and promote collective continuance. This resistance not only asserts their sovereignty and right to self-determination, but also reinforces a harmonious relationship with the natural world that is essential for the survival and well-being of their communities and future generations.

## 5.2 *Ceremonies and Rituals as Acts of Resistance*

The invocative resistance discussed above is inextricably linked to the Oceti Sakowin's practical resistance efforts to revive and reaffirm their traditional lifeways through the use of ceremonial gatherings, prayer circles and traditional living structures, which are believed to promote healing, solidarity and empowerment within their communities and to strengthen harmony with the environment. This section explores these practical resistance efforts, highlighting how spiritual dimensions underpin the struggle for an alternative understanding of justice in the context of EJ.

A key dimension of the resistance is the structuring of the encampments in accordance with traditional communal ways. Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors explain that living in these encampments, through this traditional structure, reinforces authentic lifeways because it reaffirms the relational ontology of everyday life. For example, one male Water Protector notes:

When you lived in an old community where there were tipis, you had to behave differently than in a square house where you could go in and holler at your family and do inappropriate things. When you live in a community like this with other people, everyone hears what you do. Living in a community like we do here in Cannonball is a beautiful thing because we are learning how to be relatives again, we are learning the old ways of living and having respect and honour in our daily lives.<sup>211</sup>

This testimony illustrates the transformative effect of living together in tipi-based camps. His reflection contrasts the communal responsibility and respect fostered in traditional settings with the anonymity of modern housing. This comparison underscores the revival of Native communal norms as a form of resistance to the cultural erasure brought by the DAPL. By organising in traditional ways, the Water Protectors are not only resisting the DAPL, but also asserting their cultural identity and sovereignty. This communal approach fosters a deeper sense of mutual respect and responsibility, especially, the principles of relationality, among community members, strengthening cultural resilience and solidarity. Ultimately, their actions symbolise a profound strategy of resistance rooted in cultural revitalisation, spiritual strength and a pursuit of justice that integrates environmental stewardship with community well-being.

Another key dimension of the resistance was the centrality of ceremonies and rituals in the everyday life in the encampments, constituting expressions of collective continuance. In this regard, Chas highlights that the days are 'filled with prayers, ceremonies, sacred songs, meetings, and traditional marches', all of

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<sup>211</sup> Mask Magazine, 'Standing Rock: All My Relations: 'Our Roots Go so Deep They Go to Creation', Facebook, November 25, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/maskmagazine/videos/standing-rock-all-my-relations/1017607811695765/>.

which she understands as ‘using Native cultural resources to resist, act, and assert an alternative perspective of caring for the Mni Sose.’<sup>212</sup>

For instance, every morning an elder stands by the sacred campfire and performs rituals with tobacco while the people stand in a circle and absorb the teachings.<sup>213</sup> Afterwards, the elder and the people descend to the river where prayers are said, tobacco is sprinkled and songs are sung.<sup>214</sup> Importantly, central to this morning ritual and similar practices, including councils, marches and sweat lodge meetings, is the *canupa*, the sacred pipe, one of the most important symbols of relational ontology. Crucial here is the concept of *wac’ekiya*, which translates as ‘to address a relative’.<sup>215</sup> It is believed, that when humans smoke the *canupa*, they bind themselves together, or *wac’ekiya*, in a recognised relationship build on relational principles, as offering the smoke to Wakan Tanka invokes spiritual powers that reinforce the unity of all life forms, emphasising the concept of kinship.<sup>216</sup> Spiritual leader and Sundance Chief Lee Plenty Wolf (Oglala Lakota) explains:

The Creator, through the White Buffalo Calf Woman (mediating spirit), gave us our teachings and showed us how to use the *canupa*. This pipe allows direct communication from our people to Wakan Tanka. Through the *canupa*, we connect with our ancestors, the Creator, and the natural world, strengthening our bonds and reaffirming our commitment to protecting our way of life.<sup>217</sup>

With this, performing ceremonies and rituals in the encampments emphasises the spiritual and communal dimensions of the Oceti Sakowin’s resistance. Namely, the *canupa* is not merely a religious artefact; it embodies the essence of their relational ontology. Through the *canupa*, the Water Protectors establish and affirm their connection to the Creator, their ancestors and the natural world, reinforcing the bonds of kinship and mutual obligation, challenging the individualistic extractive paradigm of Western culture.<sup>218</sup> With this, ceremonies become acts of cultural revitalisation and ,thus, collective continuance.

In line with this, the resistance, specifically, includes a revival of the Sun Dance ceremony, which Chas describes as follows:

The Sundance, where participants go to the edge of the water to fast, sing, and endure physical trials for four days and nights, has seen a revival during Standing Rock. It is a ceremony of healing, representing the willingness to sacrifice oneself for others. This act of sacrifice illustrates our deep connection to our ancestors and environment, highlighting our commitment to cultural and personal recovery.<sup>219</sup>

In this reflection, Chas emphasises the importance of sacrifice, a concept deeply honoured within Lakota culture, as it centres on taking responsibility for others and acting selflessly on their behalf.<sup>220</sup> This is a

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<sup>212</sup> Jewett and Garavan, ‘Water Is Life: An Indigenous Perspective from a Standing Rock Water Protector’, 52.

<sup>213</sup> Jasmine Krotkov, ‘Standing With The Standing Rock’, n.d., 2.

<sup>214</sup> Krotkov, 2.

<sup>215</sup> Posthumus, *All My Relatives*, 55.

<sup>216</sup> Posthumus, 55.

<sup>217</sup> Lee Plentywolf, ‘Lakota Ceremonies and Standing Rock Movement by Lee Plenty Wolf1’, YouTube, December 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YA3FnUucrY>.

<sup>218</sup> Posthumus, *All My Relatives*, 38.

<sup>219</sup> Love and Courage podcast, ‘Chas Jewett, Native American Standing Rock Activist’.

<sup>220</sup> Posthumus, *All My Relatives*, 55.

healing process needed for cultural and personal recovery, contrasting what Chas call ‘rape culture’, which is fundamentally structured around trauma.<sup>221</sup> Reviving this ceremony, thus, both reaffirms principles of relational ontology and ensures the survival and prosperity of the community through cultural and personal healing.

Similarly, the direct actions undertaken by the movement illustrate the inextricable link between spiritual practice and resistance. For example, reflecting on one of the many marches, Chief Lee's explains that, according to traditional custom, the spiritual elders walk in front, followed by the eagle staff bearers, followed by the canupa bearers. He continues:

We had a drumming group and horse warriors escorting us on horseback as we sang and walked all the way to the entrance. When we got to the entrance we prayed and I noticed that there were seven canupas and seven eagle staffs, a sacred number in our way of life, and nothing in a sacred way happens by chance, so it was it happened the way the Creator intended. We prayed, sang songs and then went back to camp to rest.<sup>222</sup>

With this, the march symbolises unity, solidarity and a reaffirmation of the commitment to protect the Oceti Sakowin lifeways. Indeed, by organising their march in accordance with traditional custom, the Water Protectors strengthened their relation to their ancestors, the Creator and the natural world once more, affirming their collective identity and resilience in the face of adversity.

Concluding, with each ceremonial gathering and the traditional living structure, the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors demonstrate a deep commitment to preserve their cultural heritage amidst the ongoing challenges posed by colonial and capitalist incursions. These acts of resistance are not merely symbolic, but integral to their daily lives, fostering solidarity and community strength. By centring ceremonies such as the Sun Dance, which embodies sacrifice and communal healing, they reaffirm their connection to ancestral wisdom and environmental stewardship. Through these practices, the Water Protectors assert their sovereignty over their lands and resources, challenging dominant narratives that prioritise profit over planetary and cultural sustainability. In doing so, they offer a powerful alternative model of justice - one rooted in reciprocity, respect and collective well-being - that resonates far beyond their encampments and inspires movements for environmental and social justice worldwide.

### *5.3 Conclusion*

This chapter examined how the Oceti Sakowin's resistance to the DAPL embodies a deep commitment to ‘collective continuance’ - the preservation of Indigenous cultures, traditions, and relational ties to the environment. By examining their resistance using this concept, the chapter finds how the Oceti Sakowin actively preserve, revive and reaffirm their cultural identity amidst the encroachments of colonial ecological violence, through rhetorical and ceremonial practices informed by relationality.

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<sup>221</sup> Jewett and Garavan, ‘Water Is Life: An Indigenous Perspective from a Standing Rock Water Protector’, 45.

<sup>222</sup> Lee Plentywolf, ‘Lakota Ceremonies and Standing Rock Movement by Lee Plenty Wolf!’.

With this, the chapter has significant implications for both EJ and IEJ as the findings emphasise that their resistance transcends conventional EJ paradigms, which typically prioritise the equitable distribution of environmental risks and outcomes through legal and regulatory channels, overlooking the deeper cultural and spiritual dimensions of injustice faced by Indigenous peoples. Instead, the Oceti Sakowin's resistance calls for an expansion of our understanding of and approach to justice and offers a powerful alternative model- one that includes their right to maintain cultural sovereignty and determine their environmental future in accordance with their traditional lifeways. Indeed, as we reflect on their resistance, we are compelled to re-evaluate and expand our definitions of justice to ensure that they honour and uphold the multiple dimensions of humanity's relationship with the natural world.

## ***6. Concluding Chapter***

This thesis explored the complex and profound injustices faced by the Oceti Sakowin in the wake of the DAPL. Through an in-depth examination of the lived experiences and resistance efforts of the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors through the lens of IEJ, this thesis highlighted the specific inadequacies of conventional EJ frameworks in addressing the realities of the Oceti Sakowin.

### *6.1 Findings, The Contribution to Critiques of EJ and Implications of IEJ*

Using the lens of IEJ to examine the narratives of the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors, the central research question of this thesis - how do the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors experience and resist the environmental injustice brought by the Dakota Access Pipeline? - was answered by highlighting the complex threat the pipeline poses to the Oceti Sakowin's lifeways and the responsive resilient forms of resistance.

With this, the thesis contributed to Indigenous-centred critiques of conventional EJ frameworks by providing concrete examples that challenge the legitimacy and applicability of these frameworks in the context of Indigenous communities facing environmental harms, as they inadequately address the spiritual and cultural dimensions of Indigenous realities. Indeed, while some critics argue that the inclusion of procedural and recognitional justice has made conventional EJ frameworks more inclusive and universally applicable, as they emphasise the inclusion of marginalised communities in environmental management decision-making processes and aim to recognise and respect cultural identities and differences, the notion of environmental equity perseveres at the centre of all frameworks. With this, these frameworks invisibilise claims informed by lifeways that conflict with the very idea of the environmental exploitation itself. Furthermore, the thesis advanced the ongoing development of IEJ by bringing the consensus on relationality in conversation with the concepts of colonial ecological violence and collective continuance, thereby revealing the specific incongruence between the conceptualisations of injustice and justice between conventional EJ frameworks and Indigenous realities.

Primarily, through an examination of interviews with and testimonies from the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors, the thesis strongly critiqued the primacy of distributive justice within conventional EJ frameworks. First, in answering the question of how the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors experience the environmental injustice brought by the DAPL, the thesis found that conventional EJ frameworks are inadequate because the impact of the DAPL goes beyond mere distribution of environmental risks and instead fit the characteristics of colonial ecological violence. Indeed, the injustice brought by the DAPL is experienced as foreclosing the possibility of relationships with and responsibilities to ecologies through an assault on their relational ontology. Indeed, for the Oceti Sakowin water is not just a resource, but a sacred relative, integral to their spiritual practices, identity and existence. With this, the DAPL, through its construction, threat of pollution and desecration of numerous sacred sites along the banks of Mni Sose, severs this sacred connection, undermining the very foundation of the Oceti Sakowin lifeways, culminating in both immediate and intergenerational cultural erasure. Thus, with these findings, the thesis revealed the specific incongruence between what constitutes injustice within conventional EJ frameworks and the actual

lived experiences of the Oceti Sakowin, calling for a broadening of our conventional understanding to account for the violent disruption of human relations with the environment.

Second, building on the argument that the DAPL is experienced as colonial ecological violence, the thesis critiques the primacy of distributive justice by revealing that the Oceti Sakowin's resistance embodies a commitment to collective continuance, defined as the ongoing preservation of Indigenous cultures, traditions, and relationships with the environment. Indeed, in answering the question of how the Oceti Sakowin Water Protectors resist the environmental injustice brought by the DAPL, the findings highlight how the Oceti Sakowin's resistance, as a response to the endangerment of the very foundation of the Oceti Sakowin's lifeways, is not only a struggle against environmental harms, but also a proactive effort to restore and maintain the disrupted cultural and spiritual connections to the environment through the revival and affirmation of traditional lifeways and the assertion of their right to cultural self-determination. This includes rejection Western worldviews that prioritise exploitation and, instead, advocating for harmonious and respectful relationships with the environment by preserving their relational ontology through rhetorical practices – using language to create and maintain cultural identity. Moreover, their practical resistance efforts include the use of ceremonial gatherings, prayer circles and traditional living structures to promote healing, solidarity and empowerment within their communities by strengthening their connection to their ancestors and the environment. Through these findings, the thesis revealed the specific incongruence between what constitutes justice within conventional EJ frameworks and the actual lived experiences of Indigenous peoples, as the centrality of cultural revival, reaffirmation and preservation in response to the experienced cultural erasure implies the inadequacy of distributive equity. Instead, the findings emphasise the need for a broader understanding of justice - one encompassing the rights to cultural survival, environmental stewardship and self-determination.

Taken together, the findings emphasise the need to integrate Indigenous perspectives into EJ frameworks. By highlighting the experiences and resistance of the Oceti Sakowin, the research illustrates the potential of IEJ to promote true justice, emphasising relationality and acknowledging the rights of Indigenous peoples to maintain cultural sovereignty and determine their environmental futures according to their traditional lifeways. This broader conception of EJ recognises that achieving true justice requires more than legal and regulatory frameworks, which tend to be passive in nature and are inherently flawed because they originate within a colonial framework. Instead, it calls for concrete action in pursuit of Indigenous cultural and environmental preservation.

Promising avenues include the preservation of Indigenous ecosystems and ecological restoration through practices that are consistent with Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), offering a more culturally appropriate approach to EJ.<sup>223</sup> This approach emphasises the interconnectedness of all beings and prioritises the health of the land, water and community.<sup>224</sup> The restoration of the Elwha River in Washington State, involving the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, is a powerful example of ecological

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<sup>223</sup> Haq et al., 'Integrating Traditional Ecological Knowledge into Habitat Restoration', 2.

<sup>224</sup> Haq et al., 2.



restoration. The removal of the Elwha and Glines Canyon dams, the largest dam removal project in history, has resulted in significant ecological recovery and the revival of traditional fisheries, central to the Klallam's ontology.<sup>225</sup> This project demonstrates how ecological restoration guided by Indigenous knowledge can restore both the environment and cultural practices, culminating in the reinstatement of Indigenous sovereignty.<sup>226</sup>

Moreover, ecological restoration, when approached through TEK, inherently goes beyond top-down methods.<sup>227</sup> Top-down approaches are often insensitive to Indigenous realities. The Bell Waterline Project, initiated by Cherokee chief Wilma Mankiller, is an example of a successful water project that was driven by the community's expressed need for access to running water. By centring TEK, the project ensured that it was consensus-driven and community-led, by directly involving the community asking for their knowledge. This model demonstrates the effectiveness of bottom-up, community-led initiatives in achieving sustainable and culturally appropriate environmental solutions.

In conclusion, using the lens of IEJ, this thesis argues that only by adopting a more inclusive and relational approach to EJ, particularly its conceptualisation of injustice and justice, can we hope to address the injustices faced by Indigenous communities in the context of environmental harms. Recent developments around the DAPL underline the urgency of this approach. Despite ongoing legal battles and protests, the DAPL remains in operation, posing significant risks to the environment and cultural sovereignty of the Oceti Sakowin.<sup>228</sup> These ongoing threats highlight the shortcomings of conventional EJ frameworks and the urgent need for solutions that truly incorporate Indigenous perspectives. I, therefore, encourage scholars and activists alike to continue to develop frameworks that integrate Indigenous perspectives into environmental policy and practice, promoting justice that is truly respectful of diverse cultural contexts. Such frameworks will not only benefit Indigenous peoples, but will contribute to a more just and sustainable world for all.

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<sup>225</sup> Mauer, 'Undamming the Elwha River', 625.

<sup>226</sup> Mauer, 625.

<sup>227</sup> Mauer, 625.

<sup>228</sup> Mike Soraghan, 'The Legal Long Shot That Could Shut down Dakota Access', E&E News by Politico, April 9, 2024, <https://www.eenews.net/articles/the-legal-long-shot-that-could-shut-down-dakota-access/>.

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