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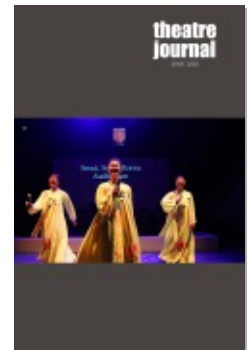
Oka Apesvchi : Indigenous Feminism, Performance, and Protest

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Oka Apesvchi: Indigenous Feminism, Performance, and Protest

Bethany Hughes

This essay is a provocation. Within it you will find an analysis focused on the elements mentioned in the subtitle. The analysis, as might be expected, works to articulate the framing idea that comes before the colon in the title. The conclusion it reaches is that Indigenous, feminist, protest performances challenge us (Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike) to enact a form of radical relationality toward water that is captured by the phrase *oka apesvchi*. That is the argument the article builds. There is another argument that builds the article.

Essay writing is an act of creation and obeisance. This essay's knowledge creation is indebted to Indigenous scholars, Indigenous theorists, and Indigenous artists. As Sara Ahmed has explained, "citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before us."¹ Because of this, I choose to site/ cite my act of creation within a lineage of Indigenous thinkers and doers rather than American and European scholars, because that is to whom I choose to defer. By doing so, I expect readers to join me in prioritizing Indigenous-centered analysis. I structure my thinking in the style of much Indigenous scholarship, forwarding Indigenous language, thought, and praxis. I look to my own nation's language, Chahta, to show with humility that my thoughts are not new, but have been anticipated by centuries of Indigenous knowledge captured in language.² Each section will begin with a brief meditation on a Chahta word or phrase as preparation for listening and seeing what comes next. I take as my intellectual starting point Indigenous thought that grounds theory in the lifeways of nations and peoples. I follow the practice of the Anishinaabe on whose homelands I reside to enact a position of obligation and care for water, which reflects the gendered role I inhabit. The argument that builds this article is: Indigenous knowledge is central to understanding Indigenous life.

Indigenous feminist theory provides the framework through which I argue for the contribution that Indigenous performances make to our understanding of aesthetic forms of protest. I look to Melanie Yazzie (Diné/Navajo) and Cutcha Risling Baldy's

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¹Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 15.

²The author is an enrolled member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

(Hupa, Yurok, Karuk) concept of *radical relationality* to understand the work that these performances do.³ Yazzie and Risling Baldy articulated radical relationality to explain Indigenous feminist actions that provide “a vision of relationality and collective political organization that is deeply intersectional and premised on values of interdependency, reciprocity, equality, and responsibility.”⁴ Radical relationality is a *how*, not a *what*; it is a way of being and acting that aligns with specific values—values that depend upon and demand kinship, obligation, reciprocity, and action.

To interrogate material instantiations of radical relationality, I have selected three protests about water performed by Indigenous women. These performances both respond to and illustrate the “popular discourse ‘Water Is Life’” that recently “has become ubiquitous across multiple decolonization struggles.”⁵ They represent a movement that has garnered increasing international attention and highlight the intensely specific locations and situations facing Indigenous activists. I follow literary scholar Chadwick Allen’s concept of the *trans-Indigenous* in choosing these three performances as a purposeful staging of “Indigenous juxtaposition.”⁶ The goal is to locate a protest song, a drum dance, and a play created by three different women in “the specificity of the Indigenous local while remaining always cognizant of the complexity of the . . . Indigenous global.”⁷ Beyond this methodological practice of analysis *across* nation, temporality, and genre, I further rely upon Yazzie and Risling Baldy to show how these performances are decolonial acts. They in turn rely upon what Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou, Maori) terms “struggle.”⁸ Struggle is “the dynamic, materiality of decolonization,” and struggle is the method through which radical relationality is performed and achieved. “How we struggle is how we remember, how we live, how we dream. It is how we *relate*,” explain Yazzie and Risling Baldy.⁹ Radical relationality is how struggle is constructed through temporally specific, material acts of decolonization through performances of protest that call us to a different way of relating to water.

In this article, I argue that aesthetic performances of protest created by Indigenous women expand our understanding of what protest performance is by offering a model of thought and practice that centers relationality, obligation, and active caretaking. These performances make clear that Indigenous feminist protest is not positioned *against* something, but rather *for* something: for the water; for the future; for each other. They ask us to expand our understanding of who is in our community by showing us that we are already part of a community larger, more intricate, and more interdependent than we might realize. We are enveloped by and constitutive of the relations that sustain us. These three performances teach us that water is our kin, as they model for us how to be a better relative.

³ Melanie K. Yazzie and Cutcha Risling Baldy, “Introduction: Indigenous Peoples and the Politics of Water,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 7, no. 2 (2018): 1–18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶ Chadwick Allen, *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xix. Allen’s concept motivated a trans-Indigenous performance-focused issue of *Theatre Journal* in 2015 that through editor Ric Knowles called out the slow response of theatre and performance studies “to the burgeoning of Indigenous studies globally.” See Knowles, “Editorial Comment: TransIndigenous Performance,” *Theatre Journal* 67, no. 3 (2015), ix.

⁷ Allen, *Trans-Indigenous*, xix.

⁸ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (Dunedin, NZ: Otago University Press, 2012).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12 (emphasis in original).

*Hvpia*¹⁰

Hvpia. We all are. I offer this word to center our thoughts on the connection, the collective this word suggests. We all are. Us. *Hvpia* can help us think through who is us. Indigenous concepts of relationality, particularly to water, have been and are being expressed in myriad ways and spaces. From the granting of legal personhood to rivers, to advocacy for Indigenous water rights, to the articulation of water as kin, water is actively included in an Indigenous “we all.”¹¹ *Hvpia* also reminds us that we all are already. It is not that we can become a more inclusive “we all,” but that we already are part of a “we all” that contains humans and nonhumans, like plants and rivers, and other-than-humans, like spirits. *Hvpia* is an acknowledgment of that which *is*, not a vision of that which *might be*. We all are (already).

In the fall of 2016, the United States and a wider, global audience witnessed the tumultuous events occurring just north of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota. Standing Rock citizens, allied Indigenous people and nations, non-Indigenous supporters, and environmental activists collaborated in an attempt to protect the water of the Missouri River. Despite massive protests trumpeting “*Mni Wiconi*. Water Is Life,” international attention, a viral #NoDAPL campaign, many protest art works, federal government intervention, and numerous lawsuits, the Dakota Access Pipeline was built and is fully operational at the time of this writing.¹² One of the many works of protest art made in support of the #NoDAPL movement was a song that the multiracial singer / songwriter Raye Zaragoza (Pima) performed at Standing Rock and in a music video.

The video opens, blue sky in frame, rotating and panning the camera down until it finds its home: a lone young woman sitting among an outcropping of rocks and grasses.¹³ She strums a Godin guitar and twice sings, “There’s gotta be some hope.” In her folk-inflected protest song “In the River,” Zaragoza suggests just what hope might look like for those at Standing Rock: “There’s gotta be a way for you to send your dogs away, to leave the land alone.” Zaragoza wrote the song in part as a response to “security dogs being released on the water protectors” at Standing Rock.¹⁴

¹⁰ You can listen to any Chahta word in this essay at the linked lessons from the Chahta Anumpa Aikkhvna (School of Choctaw Language), available at [http://www.choctawschool.com/lesson-of-the-day/pronouns/hvpia-we-\(all\)-are.aspx](http://www.choctawschool.com/lesson-of-the-day/pronouns/hvpia-we-(all)-are.aspx).

¹¹ See Erin O'Donnell, *Legal Rights for Rivers Competition, Collaboration and Water Governance* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Merrell-Ann Phase, *Denying the Source: The Crisis of First Nations Water Rights* (Surrey, BC: Rocky Mountain Books, 2010); and Jason Robison, Barbara Cosens, Sue Jackson, and Kelsey Leonard, “Indigenous Water Justice,” *Lewis & Clark Law Review* 22, no. 3 (2018): 841–921.

¹² At the time of writing, a judge has struck down the federal permits for the pipeline construction and ordered a full environmental impact statement on the pipeline. The decision as to whether to shut down the pipeline during the extensive environmental review is expected in May 2020. See Nina Lakhani, “Dakota Access Pipeline: Court Strikes Down Permits in Victory for Standing Rock Sioux,” *Guardian*, March 25, 2020, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/mar/25/dakota-access-pipeline-permits-court-standing-rock>; and Lisa Friedman, “Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Wins a Victory in Dakota Access Pipeline Case,” *New York Times*, March 25, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/climate/dakota-access-pipeline-sioux.html>. In addition, the tribe opposed a proposed expansion of the pipeline that would double its capacity to over 46 million gallons of crude oil a day. See Earth Justice, “The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s Litigation on the Dakota Access Pipeline,” Earthjustice, November 8, 2019, available at <https://earthjustice.org/features/faq-standing-rock-litigation>.

¹³ The music video for “In the River” is on YouTube, available at <https://youtu.be/14eosRdP5gQ>.

¹⁴ Taylor Heussner, “Raye Zaragoza Didn’t Choose to Be a Political Songwriter,” *Westword*, June 15, 2018, available at <https://www.westword.com/music/raye-zaragoza-talks-indigenous-and-environmental-activism-in-music-10419564>.

Lyrically, she connects a specific violent action against protestors to the violence of resource extraction that the pipeline itself represents. Zaragoza continues to sing as maps and descriptions of the pipeline project and photographs of protests against it appear: “We’re fighting for our right to keep the future bright and protect the ones we love.” She begins the chorus,

In the river is our sisters and our brothers
We are camping out for each other
We are stronger when we band together
And we’re standing up for the water
Don’t poison the future away.

Zaragoza’s lyrics articulate the kinship and responsibility fundamental to radical relationality and Indigenous feminist practice. She offers us a way to think about the river as it impacts future relations, but also locates those relations in the water itself. The water is our sister and our brother. The water is one of “the ones we love.” In the introductory essay to their coedited special issue of *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, Yazzie and Risling Baldy declare that “within an Indigenous feminist framework, water is a relative with whom we engage in social (and political) relations premised on interdependency and respect.”¹⁵ This relationship between humans and water, this kinship, is not a newly created idea, but instead “has always been here.”¹⁶ People are dependent upon water and show their respect to water through interactions with it, just as water is dependent upon people for care and demonstrates its respect through supporting human life. Zaragoza’s lyrics insist on a preexisting kinship relation with water.

“You’ve gotta have a soul. Mother Earth protects us all,” she begins the second verse. “If you treat her with disrespect then what message have you left for your children and their home.” Zaragoza declares that by disrespecting the earth, you are leaving a message for your descendants and their home. But she places this disrespect within the context of a kinship relationship with Mother Earth, one in which humans already receive protection. The reciprocity that Zaragoza insists on—protecting the water as the water protects us—is why the act of disrespecting is so heinous. Dismissing the needs of water and the gifts of water is disrespecting your own family. She returns to the chorus, but this time the visuals are not maps, text, or photos of protests. Zaragoza herself fills the frame; the camera is slightly downhill from where she sits among the rocks. The grasses blur across the screen, ostensibly because the camera is placed on or near the ground. But she is in focus. Zaragoza plays the guitar and sings facing right so that the viewer sees mostly her profile and literally looks up at her. The power of the Indigenous female body soon fills the frame with a close-up of Zaragoza’s face singing the bridge.¹⁷ “How can you take, take, take and not appreciate the soil,” she sings with a pained expression, suggesting grief over the loss of land viewed as commodity, as resource, as energy, but not as that which grows and sustains. Zaragoza continues, “Don’t let this black snake contaminate our drinking water. This is for our

¹⁵ Yazzie and Risling Baldy, “Introduction,” 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁷ Zaragoza is open about her mixed-race/ethnic identity and her Mexican, Native American/Pima/O’odham, Taiwanese, and Japanese heritage; see “Raye Zaragoza Embodies Inner Strength in ‘Warrior,’” *Culture Collide* (n.d.), available at <https://culturecollide.com/raye-zaragoza-embodies-inner-strength-in-warrior/>.

sons and daughters," clarifying the action that must be taken, and a reason for doing so, before she reiterates the chorus a final time.

During the bridge and final chorus, the shot remains focused on Zaragoza's face as she sings looking off-screen to the left. We no longer look up at her, but neither are we allowed to be looked at by her. She does not look directly into the camera during the entire video. In these most intimate moments of the video, where we see her intensity and pained expression over damage to her relatives, we are not invited to encounter her experience. We are challenged to act. She is claiming that the water *is* her family, but even more so, she is claiming that the water is *our* family. The first-person plural pronouns *our* and *we* used throughout the song draw a capacious circle around the community for which they stand. They imply that the listener is part of the *we* that works together for a better life for all. However, they also expand the definition of *we* to include humans and the water. Our relationship as both family and members of a shared community with shared goals includes nonhuman entities, who must also be protected and supported to reap the benefits of those shared goals. Water is our relative, and we must protect it. Through denying viewers a moment of eye-to-eye experience, the denial of direct address, the video enacts an Indigenous feminist ethic and praxis of radical relationality. Zaragoza does not challenge us as if we are opposite her (literally or figuratively); she calls for us to act because we are already with her. We look up at her, we are next to her. We see her pain, we hear her wisdom. We are family. Zaragoza joins the viewer to the plural pronoun community *we* as she reveals the water as already a part of that community. By shifting from her to images of protest then back to Zaragoza, the video fluidly creates a kinship among her song, the actions of the protestors, and the obligations of the viewers. "In the River" depicts a moment and a place where relations are broadly conceived, caretaking is expected from all family members, and the future is always in view.

In addition to the cleanly produced music video available on YouTube, Zaragoza posted a live recording of the song on Facebook in December 2016.¹⁸ Performed at the Oceti Sakowin Camp at Standing Rock, Zaragoza sings the song in -20°F weather on the snow-covered ground with dozens of tents and tipis in the background. She wears dark pants and coat, a black-and-white-striped scarf, a black stocking cap with the word "Vans" in white on it, and a glove on her left hand. Her right hand is gloveless, better prepared to hold the pick as she strums. She is framed to the right of center throughout the live stream. She sings often with her eyes closed, looks at the land around her or down at her guitar. She continues to avoid direct address to the viewers by making no eye contact with the camera. In the moment after she sings her last notes, the camera shifts slightly and the viewers can see a car's side mirror in the bottom left of the frame. The videographer appears to be inside the front passenger seat of a vehicle looking out at Zaragoza.

This moment disrupts the viewer's experience of the performance and suggests their own distance from the performance site. If the videographer is on the inside of the vehicle looking out, the viewer is even further removed, looking through their screen to another place and time (for those of us who did not watch the live stream of the performance). This jarring reality challenges the assumption that the performance is for the benefit of the viewers as a form of entertainment. Zaragoza performs this song

¹⁸ The performance can be viewed at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1374329889304383>.

more as a challenge to viewers to think about the ways in which they are joined or not yet joined to the camp, the water protectors, the protest movement, and the river. By serendipitously drawing attention to the distance between viewer and performance, the live stream offers another way that Zaragoza situates protest as a relationship, whether across space and time or across species and elements. She uses her physical presence at Standing Rock to issue another kind of invitation to action and kinship. Performing “In the River” is thus a protest song, an act of revealing kinship, and a demand for the carrying out of proper kinship obligations. In the river, we all are (already); Zaragoza pleads, “now act like it.”

*Oka Ohoyo*¹⁹

Oka Ohoyo. Water Woman. The special relationship between Indigenous women and water is recognized and practiced across many Indigenous nations in the continent now called North America. I write this article on the traditional homelands of the Anishinaabe peoples, the Ojibwe, Pottawatomi, and Odawa. Anishinaabe women have a special connection to and therefore responsibility for water “expressed through women’s ongoing role as keepers of the water.”²⁰ Women are revered as Water Carriers in other Indigenous nations, and their power to create life through their water filled wombs is honored.²¹ Powerful women perform powerful water work. It is a duty. It is a service. It is a sacred act of love.²²

During October 2016, as Energy Transfer Partners built a pipeline in North Dakota, protests of extractive energy production occurred farther north, in Muskrat Falls, near Happy Valley–Goose Bay, Labrador, Canada. The Crown corporation Nalcor Energy was constructing a hydroelectric dam that local Inuit and Innu asserted would contaminate the downstream waters with methylmercury, which would seep into the food sources of their communities and impact their health and way of life.²³ Protests at the construction site blocked supplies and personnel, halting operations.²⁴ These protests included a drum dance performed by Allyson Gear (Inuit) as part of the Muskrat Falls blockade captured on video and in a photograph.

¹⁹ For *Oka*, see [http://www.choctawschool.com/lesson-of-the-day/vocabulary-vol-ii/oka-water-\(1of-5\).aspx](http://www.choctawschool.com/lesson-of-the-day/vocabulary-vol-ii/oka-water-(1of-5).aspx); *Ohoyo*, <http://www.choctawschool.com/lesson-of-the-day/peopleperson/womanman.aspx>.

²⁰ Andrew T. Kozich, Kathleen E. Halvorsen, and Alex S. Mayer, “Perspectives on Water Resources among Anishinaabe and Non-Native Residents of the Great Lakes Region,” *Journal of Contemporary Water Research and Education* 163, no. 1 (2018): 94–108, quote on 94.

²¹ Kelsey Leonard, “Why Lakes and Rivers Should Have the Same Rights as Humans,” TEDWomen, December 2019, available at https://www.ted.com/talks/kelsey_leonard_why_lakes_and_rivers_should_have_the_same_rights_as_humans.

²² Deborah McGregor, “Indigenous Women, Water Justice and Zaagidowin (Love),” *Canadian Woman Studies* 30, nos. 2–3 (2013): 71–78.

²³ The Muskrat Falls Generating Facility is expected to be fully operational in 2020; see Nalcor Energy, “Muskrat Falls Generating Project,” available at <http://muskratfalls.nalcorenergy.com/project-overview/muskrat-falls-hydroelectric-generation-facility/>.

²⁴ At the time of writing, the dam has been completed but is under intense scrutiny for massive cost overruns and oversight failures; see Nalcor Energy, “North Dam Completed,” available at <https://muskratfalls.nalcorenergy.com/construction-activities/muskrat-falls-hydroelectric-generating-facility/north-dam/>. See also CBC Newfoundland and Labrador, “What’s the Deal with Muskrat Falls? Answers to a Few Frequently Asked Questions,” May 4, 2019, available at <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/muskrat-falls-whats-the-deal-1.5083458>.

Gear, a 13-year-old young Inuk woman from Postville, Labrador, stepped onto the Trans Labrador Highway and began a drum dance. The dance was captured on film for less than a minute.²⁵ That day, she joined dozens of other Inuk activists protesting the construction of the Muskrat Falls Generating Facility. The facility's construction included the creation of a dam and reservoir in the Lake Melville river valley.²⁶ The organic matter remaining in the reservoir (for example, soil and plants) would decay in the water and create methylmercury, which the Nunatsiavut Government (the Labrador Inuit self-government body) explained in a summary report for policymakers is a "central nervous system toxin."²⁷ This toxin, once created in the reservoir and released during use of the facility, would enter Lake Melville and contaminate marine life, which is a significant source of food for the Inuit and Innu in the region. Since methylmercury accrues as it moves up the food chain, humans who eat multiple, larger forms of marine life are more profoundly impacted by its toxicity. The protestors, including Gear, were trying to halt supplies and personnel from getting to the facility construction site as a tactic of preventing the large-scale poisoning of their food source.

The Indigenous leaders of the region (Inuit and Innu) called for a thorough removal of organic material from the reservoir area to prevent methylmercury creation and objected to the narrow geographic focus of Nalcor's initial study of the project's environmental impact. Assuming that there would be no downstream impact of building the dam and reservoir, Nalcor excluded Lake Melville from its environmental assessment. The Nunatsiavut Government initiated an additional environmental-impact study working with scientists from Harvard University, who concluded that there would be "significant impacts on methylmercury concentrations in the Lake Melville ecosystem and increased Inuit exposure to methylmercury from Muskrat Falls."²⁸ The practice of excluding Indigenous communities from environmental assessment was also seen in the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. A rejected path for the pipeline lay directly north of Bismarck, North Dakota. It was rejected because of concerns that a possible leak or spill would contaminate the drinking water of the state's capital populated by primarily white inhabitants.²⁹ Despite the fact that the pipeline would go under the Standing Rock Sioux's water source, it was not seen as a significant enough threat to the drinking water of Native Americans to build it elsewhere. The environmental racism at work in North Dakota and Labrador is a contemporary iteration of centuries of colonial acts that devalue Indigenous lives and assert settler colonial interests as superior to Indigenous interests and sovereignty. Indigenous protests of these energy projects are grounded not just in concern for the environment, but also in concern for Indigenous humanity.

Gear's performance joined other acts of Indigenous protest that day in October. As she drummed and danced she wore an *atigi*, or dickie, a traditional Inuk garment

²⁵ A video of Gear's dance is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZEXPyLILGw>.

²⁶ Nunatsiavut Government, "Make Muskrat Right" (n.d.), available at <http://makemuskratright.com>.

²⁷ Nunatsiavut Government, "Lake Melville: *Avatitut, Kanuittailinnivut* (Our Environment, Our Health)," 2016, available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/580d656346c3c40d23a77f8f/t/580d7605ff7c505c4edc2b3e/1477277259023/Policymakersreport.pdf>, 10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁹ Andrew Buncombe, "North Dakota Pipeline: How It Favours White Community over Native Neighbors—in One Map," *Independent*, November 30, 2016, available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/north-dakota-access-pipeline-protests-map-white-indigenous-latest-a7448161.html>.

that “is a symbol of Inukness.”³⁰ The surrounding protestors chanted “Make Muskrat Right,” the cry and hashtag of the movement. They repeated these disruptive cries and actions throughout the day. Gear reprised her drum dance in the dark, again on the road, which was captured in a photograph titled “Drum Dancing” by freelance Inuk journalist Ossie Michelin (fig. 1).³¹ His title emphasizes the movement in the moment; the photo is filled with motion and an Indigenous feminist praxis of caring for the water.

The video of Gear’s earlier dance shows her looking around, changing where her body faces as she dances, making eye contact with fellow protestors, and repeatedly looking in the direction of security personnel and a moving bus. In the photo, her gaze is focused and targeted. Behind her is a blue bus, headlights on, the bus driver clearly visible. She does not look at the bus, but instead gazes off to the viewer’s left. Between her and the bus is a man standing casually, wearing a baseball cap and plaid shirt, jacket open, his hands tucked into pockets. Neither does he look at the bus, but rather off to the viewer’s right. His stillness, in contrast to the potential for and expectation of movement that the bus represents, provides background for the motion of Gear, who is the focal point.

Gear’s act of resistance, her dance for the future, moves in and through her body enacting the power of Indigenous women and girls to demand accountability. Strands of her hair, most of which is tied back in a ponytail, blow in front of her face. Drops of rain or snow fall behind her and are visible only because of the bus’s headlights. The fringe around her forearms is blurred as it swings away from her arms in motion. The edge of the drum itself is blurry because it moves up and down as she strikes the rim to create her music. Although her body appears motionless, her bent knees suggest that she is about to move. Her body both stores and expends energy. It performs a traditional Inuit drum dance, which used to be reserved only for men, and is a contemporary Inuit act of sovereignty.³² Gear drums and dances, actively resisting the destruction of her future.

As a young Indigenous woman, she is, as Yazzie and Risling Baldy have made clear, engaging “in social (and political) relations [with water] premised on interdependency and respect.”³³ Gear is caring for the water as a relative and asserting both her own and the water’s political standing as self-governing beings responsible to and for the Inuit and Innu of the region. This dance is political not just because it protests the action of a

³⁰ Ossie Michelin, personal communication with the author, February 4, 2019.

³¹ His photograph of Gear’s performance was selected as a finalist in the Canadian Museum for Human Rights’ juried exhibition of Canadian photography from 2016. The photo was placed within the theme/category, “Reconciliation.” Indigenous protest against governmental attempts at poisoning water is perhaps an ironic and likely critical statement on the limitations and failures of the reconciliation movement in Canada. See Canadian Museum for Human Rights, “Reconciliation Finalist: Drum Dancing, 2016, Ossie Michelin, North West River, Newfoundland and Labrador,” available at <https://photo.humanrights.ca/photocontest/detail/reconciliation/drum-dancing-13-year-old-allyson-gear-stops-a-bus-load-of-construction-work/>.

³² According to ethnomusicologists Tara Browner (Choctaw) and Mary Piercey, while drum-dance songs were traditionally composed by men and performed with the women of the community, it is now common for women to perform them as well. The songs were also traditionally personal but not proprietary; no permission was needed before performing someone else’s drum-dance song. Mary E. Piercey, “Gender Relations in Inuit Drum Dances,” *Canadian Folk Music* 39, no. 3 (2005): 1; and Paula Conlon, “Iglulik Inuit Drum-Dance Songs,” in *Music of the First Nations: Tradition and Innovation in Native North America*, ed. Tara Browner (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

³³ Yazzie and Risling Baldy, “Introduction,” 3.



Figure 1. "Drum Dancing." (Photo: Ossie Michelin.)

Canadian provincial government's corporation, but because Inuit self-government, the Nunatsiavut Government, is driven by fundamental principles built into the Labrador Inuit Constitution, one of which is preserving "lands, waters, animals, and plants."³⁴ Protecting water is protecting political life, just as it is protecting social and cultural life. And it is through and with her body that Gear is protecting both her nation and water.

Gender studies scholar Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Band of Seneca) declares that "[t]he bodies of Native women are dangerous because they produce knowledge and demand accountability" on multiple scales in answer to questions of integrity for individual bodies, bodies of land or water, or national bodies.³⁵ Gear's performance produces knowledge of the kinship and obligation that water and Inuk women have with each other. It demands accountability from the Canadian government, the workers attempting to build the dam, and the Inuit that join in her performance of protest. Gear's performance is an enactment of radical relationality, as are all the performances analyzed in this article, but it also only exists in, on, and through a young woman's body. Indigenous women's bodies have been, and continue to be, undervalued in the dominant North American culture.³⁶ But, as Goeman articulates, they are also bodies that inherently challenge settler colonial structures, practices, and ideology. Performances of protest by Indigenous women are not just powerful enactments of radical relationality, calling attention to the kinship and obligation of others, but are also powerful sites of protest, action, and demands.

Gear's youthfulness further strengthens her performance because she demands the protection of her own and others' futures.³⁷ She is calling out the provincial government and its energy-production projects to account for her future and health and the continuance of her people. The National Energy Board of Canada identifies one of the outcomes of the Muskrat Falls Generating Facility as "provid[ing] renewable energy from Newfoundland and Labrador to new markets in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick," which "could potentially also serve New England electricity markets."³⁸ It

³⁴ Nunatsiavut Government, "About Nunatsiavut Government," 2019, available at <http://www.nunatsiavut.com/government/about-nunatsiavut-government/>.

³⁵ Mishuana R. Goeman, "Ongoing Storms and Struggles: Gendered Violence and Resource Exploitation," in *Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies*, ed. Joanne Barker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 99–126, quote on 121.

³⁶ For more on the expendability of Native American women and girls in settler colonial spaces, see the national inquiry into Missing Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) in Canada, available at <http://www.mmiwg-ffnda.ca>. For specific information on Indigenous women and resource extraction, see Gloria Steinem and Mary Kathryn Nagle, "Sexual Assault on the Pipeline," *Boston Globe*, September 29, 2016, available at <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2016/09/29/sexual-assault-pipeline/3jQscLWRcmD12cfefQTNsL/story.html>.

³⁷ I call attention to her youth and position her as not yet a woman to highlight the ways in which North American societies target Indigenous women and girls, contributing to what the national inquiry into MMIW called Canada's "staggering rates of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLG-BTQQIA people." I contend that to call Gear a "woman" would contribute to the hyper-sexualization of Indigenous girls that creates an environment in which a child, such as 15-year-old Tina Fontaine, is found dead in a river. For an overview of Fontaine's life, the trial that resulted in acquittal of the white man who was charged with killing her, and the epidemic levels of violence against Indigenous women, see Bilefsky, "'Why Are So Many of Our Girls Dying?' Canada Grapples with Violence against Indigenous Women," *New York Times*, May 30, 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/30/world/canada/canada-indigenous-violence.html>.

³⁸ National Energy Board, "Market Snapshot: Newfoundland Joins the Interconnected North American Electricity Grid," June 27, 2018, available at <https://www.neb-one.gc.ca/nrg/ntgrtd/mrkt/snpshst/2018/06-04nwfnldnd-eng.html>.

would seem that Nalcor decided that the energy and money to be made from electricity production and export are more valuable than the food supply of a people. Gear's dance challenges that decision by centering her own body. She is a youth whose future as an Inuk woman depends on the safety of the water that provides her food. The knowledge that her body produces through the dance is one of Inuit relationality to land, water, community, and the future. Gear dances alone, but stands in for her community; she blocks a bus to protect land and water, and protests throughout the day to create a future that is welcoming and safe for Indigenous life. Her body demands accountability. Who will be accountable if the water is poisoned? Who will account for the destruction of Inuit sovereignty? (Sovereignty includes the ability to secure food in ways that benefit the community and all its relatives.³⁹) Who will carry the burden of caring for Inuit, animal, land, and water futurity? Gear's dance asks all these things and offers the answer: water is life; care for the water and you care for life—all lives. Her drum dance enacts radical relationality through its dynamic and material struggle to decolonize, to challenge a settler colonial government to listen to and heed Inuit sovereignty through care for Inuit principles of water protection. Gear demonstrates what it means to be an Indigenous water woman.

*Apesvchi*⁴⁰

Apesvchi. To guard. To manage. To care for. A guard. A manager. A caretaker. This word is both a verb and a noun. It is a capacious noun that when coupled with another word can have meanings that range from cowboy / rancher (*wak apesvchi*), to nurse (*abeka apesvchi*), to babysitter (*vlla apesvchi*).⁴¹ As a verb it means to watch over, to look after, to care for (someone).⁴² It is an active verb and an active noun of vocation; it encompasses physical, emotional, and mental labor; it embodies protection and nurture; it assumes futurity and fights for it.

In March 2017, as Dakota Access Pipeline construction continued and leaders from the Nunatsiavut Government, the NunatuKavut Community Council, and the Innu Nation were still working with the governments of Newfoundland and Labrador to ensure the long-term safety of their communities' food and lifeways, a play opened in Los Angeles.⁴³ Native Voices at the Autry, the only Equity theatre company in the United States dedicated to developing and presenting work by Native American / Native Alaskan / First Nations playwrights, presented the world premiere of Mary

³⁹ See Devon A. Mihesuah and Elizabeth Hoover, eds., *Indigenous Food Sovereignty in the United States: Restoring Cultural Knowledge, Protecting Environments, and Regaining Health* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019).

⁴⁰ For *Apesvchi*, see <http://www.choctawschool.com/lesson-of-the-day/careersoccupations/apesvchi-manager,-caregiver.aspx>.

⁴¹ For *Wak apesvchi*, see <http://www.choctawschool.com/lesson-of-the-day/careersoccupations/wak-apesvchi-cowboy,-rancher.aspx>; *Abeka apesvchi*, http://www.choctawschool.com/lesson-of-the-day/are-you-___/abeka-apesvchi-nurse.aspx; *Vlla apesvchi*, http://www.choctawschool.com/lesson-of-the-day/are-you-___/vlla-apesvchi-babysitter.aspx.

⁴² Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, *Chahta Anumpa Tosholi Himona: New Choctaw Dictionary* (Durant, OK: Choctaw Printing Services, 2016), 20.

⁴³ For an extensive timeline of legal proceedings related to #NoDAPL, see <https://earthjustice.org/features/faq-standing-rock-litigation>; for information on the agreement between Indigenous nations and Canadian provincial governments, see the July 13, 2017 update from the Nunatsiavut Government, available at <http://www.nunatsiavut.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Make-Muskrat-Right-Update-July-2017.pdf>.

Kathryn Nagle's (Cherokee) *Fairly Traceable*, a play about rising sea levels that threaten Indigenous land and lifeways in the Gulf of Mexico region of the South.⁴⁴

Fairly Traceable follows Erin (Chitimacha/Pointe-au-Chien) and Randy (Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma) who meet and fall in love in law school. They survive law school, hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and a tornado in Randy's hometown of Joplin, Missouri. They work through the destruction of her hometown by Rita and the personal and professional turmoil that oil-extraction industries bring to the environment, their communities, and their relationships. Moving fluidly between 2005 and 2042, the story unfolds tribal sovereignty, personal complicity and refusal in resource extraction, racism, and a 1992 legal doctrine written by the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. The future as envisioned by Nagle's pessimistic (or is it realistic?) framing is one in which climate change is not halted and Indigenous nations are continually seeking legal avenues to create change and resist colonization.

The play offers an illustration of Indigenous feminist caretaking as aggressive and avenging. Lest radical relationality be seen as passive, warm, and fuzzy, Nagle shows it enacted through litigation and conflict. *Fairly Traceable* insists that Indigenous feminist caretaking does not mean always being nice. It means shrewdly assessing and implementing strategies for survival and what Anishinaabe author Gerald Vizenor calls *survivance* (often glossed as survival plus resistance, but encompassing significantly more).⁴⁵ Nagle reveals that resistance is an act of caretaking; it is not enough to honor and appreciate the water—one must also fight for it. The Indigenous women in *Fairly Traceable* each approach and comprehend that fight differently, although all ultimately share an Indigenous feminist view of relations, futurity, and Indigenous responsibility in decolonization.

Erin's (played by Kyla Garcia, Taino) goal is to become an environmental lawyer and fight for her people's federal recognition, which would result in the protection of their land south of New Orleans. Being recognized by the US government brings rights and access to particular resources that many Indigenous nations desire, although recognition itself is not a unequivocal good.⁴⁶ Randy's (played by Jason Grasl, Black-foot) goal is to prove to himself and everyone else that his racial/national status as a citizen of the Ponca Tribe does not define or limit his ability to succeed as a lawyer. Nagle brings these two together in the first moments of the play as they learn about the "fairly traceable" doctrine. "Fairly traceable" refers to a standard created by the Supreme Court in *Lujan v. Defenders of Wildlife* indicating that for a court to have jurisdiction over a plaintiff's claim, "there must be a causal connection between the injury and the conduct complained of."⁴⁷ In short, it must be clear who caused the damage in order to bring a lawsuit about that damage. In the case of environmental law, this doctrine has, according to Nagle, "been used repeatedly by federal courts to prevent climate change victims from holding those who profit from environmental destruction

⁴⁴ See Autry Museum of the American West, "Native Voices at the Autry Presents the World Premiere of *Fairly Traceable* by Mary Kathryn Nagle," January 11, 2017, available at <https://theautry.org/press/native-voices-autry-presents-world-premiere-fairly-traceable-mary-kathryn-nagle-2017-01-11>.

⁴⁵ For a fuller articulation of *survivance*, I suggest beginning with Gerald Robert Vizenor's *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994).

⁴⁶ For a critique of recognition, see Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

⁴⁷ Mary Kathryn Nagle, *Fairly Traceable* (unpublished), 4.

accountable.”⁴⁸ As Erin’s mother, Suzanne, explains succinctly, “Because all of them are responsible, none of ‘em are.”⁴⁹

Erin and Randy’s relationship is torn apart by their professional and personal commitments. Randy seeks success and prestige and chooses to work for a law firm that represents an oil company. His Ponca mother, Carol (played by Jennifer Bobiwash, Ojibway), a lifetime employee of another oil company in Oklahoma and Missouri, approves of his choice of employment, but not his choice of girlfriend. Erin works for a law clinic specializing in environmental law that files suits against oil companies for causing and then profiting from the climate change that devastates gulf coast communities like the Chitimacha. Randy and Erin inevitably end up arguing opposing sides in one litigation case, which breaks up their romantic relationship. Randy’s side—the oil companies—wins the case, but he ultimately decides to leave the firm, reunite with Erin, and become an environmental law professor.

Erin follows in her father’s footsteps fighting through legal channels for increased sovereignty and accountability to the Chitimacha. Her father fought for federal recognition of the tribe, and she fights for the environment, because “What’s the point of recognition if we have no land to live on?”⁵⁰ Asking for sovereignty from the US government and asserting it by protecting your homeland are different tactics in the fight for Indigenous sovereignty and decolonization. The Indigenous feminist ethic of radical relationality motivates Erin to fight for the land and its preservation. She views the water as a relative that is being abused and devalued by industries that regard it as expendable and inessential. Erin’s act of relation, her “struggle,” to use Smith’s term, faces these challenges head on and demands accountability through courts of law.

Nagle argues in the play that lawsuits are acts of decolonization precisely because they dismantle settler colonial harms and authorities rooted in historical and material reality; they are relational because every decision handed down impacts both the present and future. But the playwright also realizes that utilizing settler colonial laws is insufficient to fully express the resistance and sovereignty of Indigenous nations. In a tense scene in which Erin and her mother Suzanne (played by Shyla Lefner, Choctaw) discuss their legal options after losing the oil company case, the former advocates for appealing the case. She does not want to give up on the law as a way of decolonizing. In response, Suzanne declares: “The law! What has the *law* ever done for us? Our children, our language, our culture, and now, our lands, we’ve lost everything. And your *law* let you [that is, the settler-colonial governments and corporations] take it.”⁵¹ Even when assured by legal counsel that environmental law will return all that the Chitimacha have lost, Suzanne remains unconvinced. She rejects the legal structures of the country as a sufficient basis for Indigenous nationhood and survival: “Under our law, we recognize the Earth as our Mother because we come from her. She gives us life. And as Native women, we give life. The future generations of our Nations come from our bodies. So we, Native women, we’re the environment. We’re inseparable. Without us, our Nations cease to exist.”⁵²

⁴⁸ Dara McBride, “The Climate of Change in ‘Fairly Traceable,’” *American Theatre*, March 14, 2017, available at <https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/03/14/the-climate-of-change-in-fairly-traceable/>.

⁴⁹ Nagle, *Fairly Traceable*, 94.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁵² *Ibid.*

In this moment, Suzanne declares her inseparability from the environment, the land and water of the gulf coast, and her inseparability as an Indigenous woman from her nation. Her body is housed in the environment that sustains her nation, and her body literally *is* the environment that sustains her nation.⁵³ Water and land are life; Indigenous women are life. Federal Indian law cannot comprehend or contain this truth; it has tools only to separate and compartmentalize. Therefore Suzanne reminds Erin of not only the necessity for radical relationality within decolonial actions, but the primacy of relationality that cannot be divorced from Indigenous existence and futurity. Without Indigenous women and land and water, our nations have no future. Suzanne chooses to perform her struggle in relation to all parties involved, not just the legal parties in a court case.

Nagle's play displays more than one Indigenous woman navigating her duties to both the water and her nation. Erin fights through legal channels; Suzanne utilizes those channels, but does not rely upon them. And Carol, Randy's mother, develops a broader sense of who she is to care for over the course of the play. In the first act, the audience learns that Carol conceives of the oil company as a kind of relative who provides benefits to the community and therefore should be supported. She is proud of her work for the "company that built our schools, fed our families, and made us who we are today."⁵⁴ In Carol's mind, to oppose the company is "to turn on your people."⁵⁵ However, by the end of the play, she indicates that she has developed ambiguous feelings about the oil company and considers Indigenous protest and legal actions to be part of her and her son's identity. She tells Randy of the rampant sickness and cancer among her community near an oil refinery and assures him that "[w]e're descendants of Chief Standing Bear. His blood runs through our veins. That's not a stereotype. It's who you are."⁵⁶ In doing so, she changes her mind and approves of his choice to quit the prestigious firm and instead teach environmental law. Carol approves because her conception of community and relatives is expansive. And she is beginning to understand resistance through legal action as a decolonial act fighting for Indigenous futurity. In fact, in connecting Randy to the legacy of Standing Bear, Carol defines their family identity as one that fights for Indigenous humanity and futurity. Although beginning at a different place, she eventually finds herself, like Erin and Suzanne, understanding her relations as linking both backward and forward in time and identifying the tactics that will ensure the futurity of her people, land, and water. All three women work toward enacting radical relationality through struggle—struggle that works to actively care for family, nation, and nonhuman relatives.

⁵³ Although this essay focuses on Indigenous women and their roles as performers and protesters, as well as their significant power in Indigenous communities, it also acknowledges the breadth of gendered roles and identities among the nations of this continent. Many, although not all, Indigenous communities conceive of gender more expansively than the binary widely accepted in mainstream American culture. A discussion of these gendered identities and their specific relations and obligations is beyond the scope of the essay. For those interested in a starting place to explore Indigenous gender and sexuality studies, see Joanne Barker, *Critically Sovereign Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁵⁴ Nagle, *Fairly Traceable*, 30.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 116. Standing Bear was a Ponca chief involved in the landmark federal Indian law case referred to as *Standing Bear v. Crook* that first established that Native Americans were "persons under the law"; see Mary Kathryn Nagle, "Standing Bear v. Crook: The Case for Equality under Waaxe's Law Immigration Law," *Creighton Law Review* 45, no. 3 (2011–12): 455–502.

Conclusion

Oka Apesvchi

Oka Apesvchi. Water Protector. Water Guardian. Water Caretaker. This phrase invites us to imagine a vocation and an action that actively nurtures, guards, and cares for water. How can we nurse the water to health? How can we create an environment for water to flourish and develop as we do with children? How can we protect and guide the water as a relative who we respect, value, and rely upon?

Yazzie and Risling Baldy explain that “water is theory; theory that is built from relationality to the land, the earth, everything,” and also that “Indigenous people are (re)activating water as an agent of decolonization.”⁵⁷ Thus in Indigenous feminist thought, water is simultaneously a tool for understanding and articulating the world in which we live (theory), a relative with whom we are in a reciprocal relationship (kin), and a site from which change is enacted and empowered (decolonial location). That change is called *decolonization* because it directly responds to and actively dismantles a system of colonization that has structured Indigenous life in the Americas for centuries.⁵⁸ That water is a site of decolonization is neither a surprise nor an anomaly; in settler colonial, capitalist societies, natural resources exist to be extracted and profited from to power the settler project.

In these three performances, Indigenous women are protesting “energy is life” as the dominant ideology. Water, like air, is assumed as abundant, accessible, and expendable. To challenge settler colonial ideology through water, then, is to claim that water is not a commodity, that sovereignty is not simply the ability to consume but also to conserve, and that powering life is not a matter of sustaining current projects but of investing in future possibilities. Indigenous feminist praxis of radical relationality is, then, a glimpse of an alternative form of sovereignty. Not a sovereign’s power to *take life* or *let live* or a Foucauldian *biopower* to foster life or disallow it, but an Indigenous feminist form of sovereignty.⁵⁹ Such a form is not about creating boundaries, dominating, and ruling over life and death; rather, Indigenous feminist sovereignty is an act of binding together, of making relations, and of caring for that which already is. These performances of radical relationality answer the call by Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiiik Stark (Turtle Mountain Ojibwe) for Native peoples to look “to their own epistemologies and practices” in order to “put forward definitions of sovereignty that are distinct from [US and Canadian conceptions that] diminish Native sovereignty and self-government.”⁶⁰ Zaragoza, Gear, and Nagle share in the project of Indigenous feminism: the demand for and creation of a future that perpetuates Indigenous sovereignty, communities, and relatives. “In the River” gently reminds those who hear it that they are already implicated in Indigenous protests of the Dakota Access Pipeline. The river is already part of their family. Gear’s dance insists upon Indigenous futurity and enacts the special

⁵⁷ Yazzie and Risling Baldy, “Introduction,” 1.

⁵⁸ For an extensive discussion of settler colonialism—the specific kind of colonialism that the Americas are subjected to—see Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.

⁵⁹ For a brief overview of Foucault’s *biopower*, see Chlöe Taylor, “Biopower” in *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, ed. Dianna Taylor (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 41–54.

⁶⁰ Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiiik Stark, “Nenabozho’s Smart Berries: Rethinking Tribal Sovereignty and Accountability,” *Michigan State Law Review* 339 (2013): 339–54, quote on 343.

relationship and obligation that Indigenous women have to water. And *Fairly Traceable* forcefully demands redress on behalf of water, and reveals the power of Indigenous women to protect and safeguard their families, communities, and nations.

These performances show how Indigenous performances of protest expand what is possible through aesthetic protest performances. They are not only beautiful and persuasive as rhetorical tools, but are powerful and constructive as political praxis of relation-making, obligation-fulfilling, and action-taking. They challenge theatre artists to conceive of their work as already inclusive and responsive to audiences larger than those in a theatre. Academics have already explored how the arts have been used as a form of cultural diplomacy, a way to understand protest, and a medium of protest, as well as theatre's distinct role in performing protest.⁶¹ Perhaps it is time to explore how the arts can also be a decolonial act of sovereignty-building. As Kim Tallbear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate, Cheyenne and Arapaho) has articulated, "Indigenous movements do this not only for Indigenous peoples, but for everyone."⁶² How might theatre artists and theatre academics practice following "these Indigenous women-led movements that provide alternative visions for being better relatives with each other and with the planet?"⁶³ If radical relationality is a *how* and not a *what*, then what is to stop us, as thinkers and creators and makers, from shifting how we do what we do? Perhaps we can more clearly recognize our interconnectedness with all our relations. Perhaps we can take seriously the obligations we have to those relatives. Perhaps we can actively nurture and fight and guard over the water, the people, the world. Indigenous feminism invites all of us to embody radical relationality and enact *oka apesvchi*.

⁶¹ The following is a brief sampling of recent works touching on these topics: Roland Bleiker and Sally Butler, "Radical Dreaming: Indigenous Art and Cultural Diplomacy," *International Political Sociology* 10, no. 1 (2016): 56–74; Lois Ruskai Melina, "Being the Change: Protest as Performative Discourse in the Occupy Portland Encampment," *Global Discourse* 4, nos. 2–3 (2014): 308–22; Susanne Foellmer, "Choreography as a Medium of Protest," *Dance Research Journal* 48, no. 3 (2016): 58–69; Jeffrey S. Juris, "Performing Politics: Image, Embodiment, and Affective Solidarity during Anti-Corporate Globalization Protests," *Ethnography* 9, no. 1 (2008): 61–97; Helena Buffery, "Bodies of Evidence, Resistance and Protest: Embodying the Spanish Civil War on the Contemporary Spanish Stage," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 94, no. 8 (2017): 863–82; Lara Stevens, *Anti-War Theatre after Brecht: Dialectical Aesthetics in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and Gooyong Kim, "When Schoolgirls Met Bertolt Brecht: Popular Mobilisation of Grassroots Online Videos by Korea's Unknown People," *Critical Arts: South–North Cultural and Media Studies* 28, no. 1 (2014): 123.

⁶² Kim Tallbear, "Badass Indigenous Women Caretake Relations: #Standingrock, #IdleNoMore, #BlackLivesMatter," in *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement*, ed. Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 13–18, quote on 14.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 15.