

Water Protection Imagery and the Future Imaginary in the #NoDAPL Movement

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ABSTRACT

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A variety of images were created in solidarity with the #NoDAPL, a movement of nonviolent direct actions instigated in 2016 by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe to stop the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). This thesis argues that the imagery created in solidarity with the #NoDAPL movement helped water protectors and their allies create a “future imaginary,” a concept theorized by the digital media theorist Jason Edward Lewis (Kānaka Maoli, Samoan). Employing the concept of the future imaginary as a theoretical framework, this thesis examines various materials designed by Indigenous artists in 2016 in solidarity with the #NoDAPL movement, including the anti-extraction graphic *No Pipelines on Indigenous Land* by Dylan Miner (Métis), the banner design *Thunderbird Woman* by Isaac Murdoch (Ojibwe), the banner design *Thunderbird Woman’s Mom (Water is Life)* by Christi Belcourt (Métis), and the *Mirror Shield Project* by Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota). Divided into three sections, this thesis defines the future imaginary and draws its connection to the organizing that took place at Standing Rock, analyzes some of the iconography shared throughout the imagery created in solidarity with the #NoDAPL movement—focusing specifically on prophecies and the figures of Zuzeca Sape, or the Black Snake, and the Thunderbird—and considers the modes of production and the means of dissemination employed by artists both within and outside the Standing Rock camps.

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Introduction

When asked about his hopes for the #NoDAPL movement, artist Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota) answered that he and the other people at Standing Rock had no hope, because they were actively “*doing*.”¹ The #NoDAPL was a movement of nonviolent direct actions instigated in 2016 by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe to stop the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), a \$3.8 billion oil pipeline project announced to the public in 2014 by the American pipeline transport company Energy Transfer Partners (ETP).² Over nearly one year, it is estimated that 15,000 individuals from across the world travelled to several temporary camps established just outside of Cannonball, North Dakota, on the northern edge of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, to express their solidarity in the protection of Mni Sose, also known as the Missouri River, and to support the Indigenous-led actions opposing the DAPL.³ In a raw-cut interview recorded at the Oceti Sakowin Camp—the largest of the three main camps at Standing Rock—Luger stated,

We have no hope. We're *doing*. [...] Hope is such an empty thing. You can hope and you've completed your task. [...] If you're at home and you're watching it on Facebook, you're hoping. But every single person here, they're actually not hoping anymore, they're actively trying to make it better. [...] And really making effort with no freaking hope at all is one of the most beautiful things that there is. You know, that's like bravery. And that's what I think we're doing here.⁴

¹ Hrag Vartanian, “The Roles of Art and Artists at the Pipeline Protests in North Dakota,” interview with Cannupa Hanska Luger, Jesse Hazelip, Raven Chacon, and Dylan McLaughlin, *Hyperallergic*, December 2, 2016, Podcast, 01:01:22-01:02:30, <http://hyperallergic.com/342677/the-roles-of-art-and-artists-at-the-pipeline-protests-in-north-dakota/>.

² Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (Verso, 2019), 46. Although the #NoDAPL movement is best known for the events that occurred in 2016, the opposition to the DAPL began in 2014, right after ETP announced the project. On September 30, 2014, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe stated their opposition to the pipeline during a council meeting. They informed the DAPL and ETP representatives of a standing resolution passed in 2012 opposing any pipeline projects within the boundary of the Fort Laramie Treaties of 1851 and 1868.

³ Cannupa Hanska Luger, “Mirror Shield Project,” Cannupa Hanska Luger, <https://www.cannupahanska.com/social-engagement/mirror-shield-project>.

⁴ Vartanian, “The Roles of Art and Artists at the Pipeline Protests in North Dakota,” 01:01:22-01:02:30.

The water protectors who defended Mni Sose from the DAPL did not need hope because, every day at the camps near Cannonball River, they worked to protect their cultural practices and the “roiling water” that gives them life.⁵ At the Oceti Sakowin Camp, part of the daily work included producing visuals at the art tent, where artists and volunteers silkscreen-printed thousands of patches and banners to use during non-violent direct actions.⁶ Not restricted to Standing Rock, artists from across Turtle Island created various visual materials in solidarity with the movement. Among those artists were Dylan Miner (Métis), Isaac Murdoch (Ojibwe), and Christi Belcourt (Métis), who created anti-extraction graphics and banner designs intended for land and water protection.⁷

The NoDAPL was not the first nor the last movement or effort to resist pipelines in Turtle Island, and the camps near Cannonball were not the first established in response to a pipeline project.⁸ Instead, the struggles over the DAPL are part of a larger history of Indigenous resistance. In *Our History is the Future*, scholar Nick Estes (Kul Wicasa) situates the NoDAPL within a long tradition of Oceti Sakowin resistance.⁹ Two years before water protectors began

⁵ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 19. Mni Sose translates to “roiling water.” During the NoDAPL movement, the people who camped at Standing Rock to protect Mni Sose called themselves “water protectors” as opposed to “protestors” or “activists.” Estes explains that “the protestors called themselves Water Protectors because they weren’t simply against a pipeline; they also stood for something greater: the continuation of life on a planet ravaged by capitalism.” See Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 24.

⁶ Nicolas Lampert, “Screenprinting at the Art Tent at Standing Rock: Viktor Ortix Interviewed by Nicolas Lampert,” Justseeds, January 26, 2017, <https://justseeds.org/screenprinting-at-the-art-tent-at-standing-rock-viktor-ortix-interviewed-by-nicolas-lampert/>. In an interview with artist and member of Justseeds Nicolas Lampert, artist Viktor Ortix estimates that the Oceti Sakowin art tent produced around ten thousand patches during the six weeks he spent there.

⁷ The identity of the people I cite in this thesis has been confirmed to the best of my abilities through the information available at the time of writing. While I am not equipped and have no right to determine who is and who is not Indigenous, it is my responsibility to verify my sources. As art institutions and universities continue to encounter and enable cases of Indigenous identity fraud, there is an undeniable need to review how institutions support the declaration of Indigenous identity. For more on “Indigenous Identity Fraud in the Academy,” see Winona Wheeler, “Indigenous Identity Fraud in the Academy,” *VOX*, November 15, 2021, <https://usaskfaculty.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Indigenous-Identity-Fraud-in-the-Academy.pdf>.

⁸ For the sake of readability, I choose not to use the hashtag that usually stands before “NoDAPL” in the rest of this thesis unless it is part of a quote.

⁹ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*.

organizing at Standing Rock, Estes was one of the few who camped on the proposed route of the Keystone XL (KXL) pipeline—a tar sands oil extension pipeline project proposed by TC Energy (formerly TransCanada) in 2008—to protest its construction.¹⁰ Unlike the camps that occurred at Standing Rock, the small camp established in opposition to the KXL pipeline received little to no support or media attention. Yet, the resistance against the Keystone XL pipeline coalesced into the NoDAPL movement.¹¹ Estes’ experience and thoughts on these acts of resistance were captured in his book *Our History Is the Future*, in which he examines the past through the history of Oceti Sakowin resistance, while considering possibilities for the future. Throughout the book, Estes emphasizes how the struggles over the DAPL, and the many other social movements that informed Standing Rock, were not just fights for the present but “battle[s] for the future.”¹² He proposes that the NoDAPL camps “didn’t just imagine a future without settler colonialism and the oppressive institution of the state, but created that future in the here and now.”¹³

Building on Estes’s work, I argue that the imagery created in solidarity with the NoDAPL movement helped water protectors and their allies create a “future imaginary.” The concept of the future imaginary has been theorized by the digital media theorist, poet, and software designer Jason Edward Lewis (Kānaka Maoli, Samoan). Broadly, the future imaginary refers to a shared vision of the future that motivates change in the present.¹⁴ I employ Lewis’ concept as a

¹⁰ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 18. In this case, I employ the word protest because Estes does so.

¹¹ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*. The resistance to the Keystone XL pipeline is not the only movement that informed the development of the NoDAPL. Estes also considers the Red Power Movement, Idle No More, and #MMIWG (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls), as well as several instances of Oceti Sakowin resistance from across the years, starting with the Oceti Sakowin’s first encounters with the so-called United States in the nineteenth century.

¹² Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 37.

¹³ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 216.

¹⁴ Jason Edward Lewis, “The Future Imaginary,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Cofuturisms*, ed. Taryne Jade Taylor, et al., Routledge Literature Handbooks (Routledge, 2024), 11, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429317828>.

theoretical framework throughout my thesis in order to demonstrate how the imagery created in solidarity with Standing Rock not only helped water protectors and their allies collectively imagine the future but also enact that future at the NoDAPL camps. I analyze various materials, including banners, shields, photographs, and videos, all of which were designed by Indigenous artists in 2016 during the NoDAPL movement. My objects of analysis include the anti-extraction graphic *No Pipelines on Indigenous Land* by Dylan Miner, the banner designs *Thunderbird Woman* by Isaac Murdoch and *Thunderbird Woman's Mom (Water is Life)* by Christi Belcourt, and the *Mirror Shield Project* by Cannupa Hanska Luger.¹⁵

In addition to Estes' and Lewis' work, this thesis also draws on Indigenous feminist scholarship to properly highlight the undeniable relationship between environmental and gendered violence, and the impacts of the oil industry on Indigenous women, girls, trans, and Two-Spirit people. To do so, I engage with the work of scholars Melanie K. Yazzie (Diné) and Cutcha Risling Baldy (Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk).¹⁶ In "Introduction: Indigenous Peoples and the Politics of Water," Yazzie and Baldy approach the topic of water from an Indigenous feminist theoretical standpoint. They introduce the term "radical relationality," which describes an intersectional vision of relationality based on interdependency, reciprocity, equality, and responsibility.¹⁷ Yazzie and Baldy suggest that water protectors "activated a profound and

¹⁵ Just like the NoDAPL was a continuation of the Indigenous resistance that preceded it, the images I discuss in this thesis were not the first images created by Miner, Murdoch, Belcourt, and Luger in response to extractive industries and/or a social movement. For example, four years before the establishment of the Oceti Sakowin Camp and the creation of *Thunderbird Woman's Mom (Water is Life)*, Belcourt issued an open call on Facebook asking people to create moccasin vamps in honour of the lives of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, Trans, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWGT2S). Two years later in 2014, Belcourt and Murdoch founded the Onaman Collective, under which they hosted several events focused on Indigenous languages, Indigenous bodies, Indigenous art making, land reclamation, and relations with other-than-human beings. See Christi Belcourt et al., *Christi Belcourt* (Carleton University Art Gallery ; Goose Lane Editions, 2020), 115-117.

¹⁶ Melanie K. Yazzie and Cutcha Risling Baldy, "Introduction: Indigenous People and the Politics of Water," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 7, no. 1 (2018): 1-18.

¹⁷ Yazzie and Risling Baldy, "Introduction," 2.

powerful human/water relationality” when they chose to protect Mni Sose from the DAPL and, by doing so, enacted a form of radical relationality that opened possibilities for the future.¹⁸ The bodies of Indigenous women, girls, trans, and Two-Spirit people, much like the land, are subjected to violence and exploitation. Resource extraction exacerbates gendered violence, highlighting the need for resistance movements like the NoDAPL that are rooted in Indigenous feminist perspectives.¹⁹

Indigenous scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) notes that social movement theory, while it has been successful at diagnosing, revealing and interrogating colonialism, inadequately explains Indigenous resistance and resurgence.²⁰ Indeed, social movement theory is rooted in Western knowledge and worldview. It ignores Indigenous political culture and theory as well as the historical context of Indigenous resistance, which looks different than Western social movements. The struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline was a movement of Oceti Sakowin resistance and resurgence. As such, social movement theory, while sometimes appropriate for criticizing colonialism, is an inadequate framework for discussing the NoDAPL movement and analyzing water protection imagery. Instead of engaging with social movement theory in this thesis, I draw on the work of Indigenous scholars, such as Simpson, whose examination of Indigenous resistance is grounded in Indigenous political culture and theory, as well as the historical context of Indigenous resistance.

¹⁸ Yazzie and Risling Baldy, “Introduction,” 8.

¹⁹ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 37. For more on the links between resource extraction and gendered violence, see Erin Marie Konsmo, and A.M. Kahealani Pacheco, *Violence on the Land, Violence on Our Bodies: Building an Indigenous Response to Environmental Violence*, with Women’s Earth Alliance and Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2016, <http://landbodydefense.org/>; Ashley Noel Mack, and Tiara R. Na’puti, ““Our Bodies Are Not Terra Nullius”: Building a Decolonial Feminist Resistance to Gendered Violence,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 42, no. 3 (2019): 347–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2019.1637803>; Katherine Wiltenburg Todrys, *Black Snake: Standing Rock, the Dakota Access Pipeline, and Environmental Justice* (Bison Books, 2021), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=6534548>.

²⁰ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Arbeiter Ring Pub., 2011), 17.

In addition to peer-reviewed sources by Indigenous scholars, I heavily rely on first-hand accounts and interviews conducted with water protectors and artists (including many non-academic sources) throughout my thesis, as well as second-hand accounts informed by lengthy interview processes. This decision is partly informed by my positionality as a settler of French-Canadian descent. As a white scholar descended from European settler colonialists, who did not participate in the efforts to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline, and who writes from the perspective of Western theory, my view and understanding of the works I engage with are limited. Although I cannot disregard my voice within this thesis, I can nevertheless include, to the best of my abilities, the voices of the people directly concerned by the issues and artworks I discuss, meaning the water protectors and artists themselves. To do so, I choose to quote when I cannot tell, and to prioritize the perspective of and vocabulary used by the water protectors and artists who were directly involved in the NoDAPL movement.²¹ Nonetheless, as American artist Jesse Hazelip points out in the same raw-cut interview recorded at the Oceti Sakowin Camp with Cannupa Hanska Luger, issues like the DAPL do not strictly affect Indigenous communities, they affect everyone.²² As climate change continues to progress and settler nation-states such as so-called Canada and the United States refuse to listen and act on the concerns and recommendations of water protectors, we are all at risk of losing access to clean potable water one day. Part of the reason why the NoDAPL managed to gain such global solidarity is because “water is life” and its protection concerns all of us.

²¹ When asked whether she considers her art “activist art,” Belcourt refused to define that term. Instead, she noted how her practice minimally interacts with the state (despite it being recognized by the state and art world). It would be inconsiderate of me to use the term “activist art” or any of its variations when Belcourt rejects this terminology. By giving too much importance to Western ‘social justice’ terms instead of prioritizing the vocabulary preferred by the artists and water protectors I discuss, I risk misrepresenting their work. As such, I choose to prioritize the words employed by the artists and water protectors I discuss, rather than inserting social justice terminology within my thesis. See Belcourt et al., *Christi Belcourt*, 118.

²² Such as the interview conducted by Vartanian for the Hyperallergic. See Vartanian, “The Roles of Art and Artists at the Pipeline Protests in North Dakota.”

My thesis is divided into three sections. In section one, I define the future imaginary and draw its connection to the organizing that took place at Standing Rock. In section two, I examine some of the iconography shared throughout the imagery created in solidarity with the NoDAPL movement, focusing specifically on prophecies and the figures of Zuzeca Sape, also known as the Black Snake, and the Thunderbird. In section three, I shift my focus to the modes of production and the means of dissemination employed by artists, both within and outside the Standing Rock camps. First, I examine collective art making and the ways in which artists and volunteers produced images throughout the movement. Then, I demonstrate how those images were disseminated physically and online through accessible means, which helped solidify the impetus of solidarity prompted by the NoDAPL. Although many scholars have written about Standing Rock, few have considered the images created in solidarity with the movement.²³ Scholars who analyze some of these visual materials do not address how those images helped water protectors and their allies create a future imaginary.²⁴ My thesis builds upon existing studies to explore how the imagery created in solidarity with Standing Rock helped water protectors and their allies collectively imagine and enact an alternative future. Through their

²³ Scholars who have written about Standing Rock include, among others, Nicholet Deschine Parkhurst, Nick Estes, Shelley Streeby, and Katherine Wiltenburg Todrys. See Nicholet Deschine Parkhurst, "From #Mniwiconi to #StandwithStandingRock: How the #NoDAPL Movement Disrupted Physical and Virtual Spaces and Brought Indigenous Liberation to the Forefront of People's Minds," in *Indigenous Peoples Rise up: The Global Ascendancy of Social Media Activism*, ed. Bronwyn Carlson and Jeff Berglund (Rutgers University Press, 2021), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2649466>; Estes, *Our History Is the Future*; Shelley Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making Through Science Fiction and Activism*, *American Studies Now: Critical Histories of the Present* ; 5 (University of California Press, 2018); Todrys, *Black Snake*.

²⁴ See Mary Louisa Cappelli, "Standing With Standing Rock: Affective Alignment and Artful Resistance at the Native Nations Rise March," *SAGE Open* 8, no. 3 (July 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018785703>; T. J. Demos, *Beyond the World's End : Arts of Living at the Crossing* (Duke University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478012252>; Robyn Lee, "Art, Affect, and Social Media in the 'No Dakota Access Pipeline' Movement," *Theory, Culture & Society* 40, nos. 7–8 (2023): 179–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764221146715>; Cortney Smith, "Ironic Confrontation as a Mode of Resistance: The Homeland Security T-Shirt at the Dakota Access Pipeline Protests," *The American Indian Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (2019): 339–64, <https://doi.org/10.5250/amerindiquar.43.3.0339>.

design, production, and distribution, the works of Miner, Murdoch, Belcourt, and Luger became recognizable symbols for not just the NoDAPL movement but pipeline resistance across Turtle Island.

I. The Future Imaginary

Lewis defines the future imaginary as “a vision of the future that is shared by a group of people and used to motivate change in the present.”²⁵ Lewis argues that future imaginaries offer various groups shared vocabularies they can use to imagine the future and strategies to help them achieve the future they envision.²⁶ Drawing from Lewis’s definition, I propose that the concept of the future imaginary applies to the NoDAPL and its imagery. In this section, I define the future imaginary and draw its connection to the organizing that took place at Standing Rock.

“The Imaginary Imperative”²⁷

Lewis describes the future imaginary as both a conceptual framework and a series of practices. As a conceptual framework, the future imaginary builds on Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor’s understanding of the “social imaginary.” In *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Taylor defines the social imaginary as “the way ordinary people imagine their surroundings [...] not expressed in theoretical terms, but [...] carried in images, stories, and legends.”²⁸ Lewis describes the notion of the social imaginary as a way to “capture [...] the set of social ‘facts’ that people take for granted as they operate in the mundane, everyday reality of their lives.”²⁹ In other words, the social imaginary is concerned with how people imagine their social existence as they navigate their daily lives. It suggests that people understand their surroundings and make assumptions

²⁵ Lewis, “The Future Imaginary,” 11.

²⁶ Lewis, “The Future Imaginary,” 11.

²⁷ Lewis, “The Future Imaginary,” 14.

²⁸ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Duke UP, 2003), 106.

²⁹ Lewis, “The Future Imaginary,” 14.

about the world based on the stories they tell each other rather than grounded in theory or ideology.³⁰ Building on Taylor's definition, Lewis is interested in how imaginaries of the future can affect the current social imaginary and influence how Indigenous peoples envision themselves in the future.

In addition to Taylor's understanding of the social imaginary, the concept of the future imaginary builds on literary scholar Grace Dillon's description of "Indigenous futurisms." In *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, Dillon highlights how Indigenous peoples have always engaged with science fiction while emphasizing the need for Indigenous writers to write more stories that envision the future.³¹ Lewis describes Dillon's call to action as an expression of the "imaginary imperative," which he refers to as "the necessary role that imagination plays in supporting Indigenous continuity by connecting the past and present to the future."³² The imaginary imperative counters strategies of elimination by highlighting the importance of recognizing Indigenous histories, current realities, and visions of the future as a continuation of the epistemological and cosmological frameworks that consistently evolve to reflect the experiences of Indigenous peoples.³³

The imaginary imperative is crucial to the concept of the future imaginary and its relationship to the NoDAPL movement. In the introduction to her book *Emergent Strategies: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, scholar and writer adrienne maree brown speaks of this imaginary imperative. They state,

We have to imagine beyond [...] fears. We have to ideate—imagine and conceive—together. / We must imagine new worlds that transition ideologies and norms, so that no one sees Black people as

³⁰ Lewis, "The Future Imaginary," 14.

³¹ Grace Dillon, ed., *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (University of Arizona Press, 2012).

³² Lewis, "The Future Imaginary," 14.

³³ Lewis, "The Future Imaginary," 14.

murderers, or Brown people as terrorists and aliens, but all of us as potential cultural and economic innovators. This is a time-travel exercise for the heart. This is collaborative ideation—what are the ideas that will liberate all of us?³⁴

brown asserts that “we are in an imagination battle.”³⁵ They contend that imagination is essential to liberation, and the more people collaborate to envision new worlds, the more people “practice the future together,” the more they will experience the results of collective ideation.³⁶ While Lewis ties the imperative to imagine new worlds specifically to Indigenous futures, which often centre the notion of resurgence, brown’s perspective as a Black activist who writes about collective liberation leads them to emphasize Brown and Black futures and the concept of emergence. brown concurs with Nick Obolensky’s definition of emergence as “the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions.”³⁷ Building on Obolensky, brown explains that “emergence notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies,” and “emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for.”³⁸ In other words, emergent strategy is about how we can make purposeful changes to help us build the liberated worlds we desire. Similarly, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson associates the notion of resurgence with the necessity to create new worlds with “profoundly different ways of thinking, organizing, and being.”³⁹ The Standing Rock camps embodied both resurgence and emergence, and by doing so, presented a vision of the future that becomes

³⁴ adrienne maree brown, “Introduction,” in *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (AK Press, 2017): 11, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1695429>.

³⁵ brown, “Introduction,” 10.

³⁶ brown, “Introduction,” 11.

³⁷ brown, “Introduction,” 2; Nick Obolensky, *Complex Adaptive Leadership: Embracing Paradox and Uncertainty* (Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315264929>.

³⁸ brown, “Introduction,” 2.

³⁹ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Indigenous Resurgence and Co-Resistance,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2016): 22, <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.2.2.0019>.

attainable when everyday Indigenous people assert their sovereignty over their lands and destinies while drawing upon traditional practices of resistance.⁴⁰

Science Fiction in Movement Building

Besides considering it a conceptual framework, Lewis describes the future imaginary as a set of practices. He prefers thinking about the future imaginary in terms of strategies instead of theories.⁴¹ Indeed, informed by Taylor's understanding of the social imaginary, Lewis claims that most people do not act in response to theory.⁴² Instead, most people use the "set of social 'facts'" that comprise their social imaginary as the foundation of the actions and strategies they use to respond to challenges.⁴³ As such, action is central to the concept of the future imaginary.

Building on Lewis's argument, I propose that the future imaginary is a particularly relevant framework to discuss organizing and movement building, especially in the context of Indigenous Studies. Lewis' concept of the future imaginary has been shaped over twenty-five years of research-creation and collaboration with Indigenous communities in Turtle Island.⁴⁴ It was developed to serve as a method for delineating the futures we aspire to and articulating the pathways necessary to attain those futures. While Lewis' concept has been primarily utilized in new media studies and has never been employed to analyze imagery explicitly created for direct action, the future imaginary offers a useful framework to examine the role that images play in helping people collectively imagine the future. Envisioning the future is essential to movement

⁴⁰ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 29.

⁴¹ Lewis, "The Future Imaginary," 15.

⁴² Lewis, "The Future Imaginary," 15.

⁴³ Lewis, "The Future Imaginary," 14-15.

⁴⁴ The refinement of the future imaginary into a conceptual tool emerged from the initiatives undertaken by the Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) research network, which Jason Lewis co-founded and co-directs. See Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC), "About," AbTeC, accessed July 27, 2025, <https://abtec.org/>; Lewis, "The Future Imaginary," 13.

building, and social movements such as the NoDAPL are great examples of how collectively imagining different futures is necessary to enact change.

In the introduction to *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movement*, educator, writer, public scholar, and spoken word artist Walidah Imarisha states that “all organizing is science fiction.”⁴⁵ She adds that “whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction.”⁴⁶ Because “all organizing is science fiction,” Imarisha contends that people envision “new worlds” every time they think about what could, should or needs to change in the world.⁴⁷ Likewise, she calls people’s work to transform society “science fictional behavior,” which she defines as “being concerned with the way our actions and beliefs now, today, will shape the future, tomorrow, the next generations.”⁴⁸ Throughout *Octavia's Brood*, Imarisha and her co-editors, adrienne maree brown and Sheree R. Thomas, clearly highlight the connection between science fiction and organizing by offering organizers the space to write science fiction—a practice that Imarisha argues they already participate in through direct action. Building on Imarisha’s argument, I propose that the organizing that took place at Standing Rock was science fiction, and by envisioning a world without the Dakota Access Pipeline, water protectors and their allies engaged in a practice of speculative fiction.

The connection between science fiction and organizing is also discussed by settler interdisciplinary scholar Shelley Streeby and settler art historian and cultural critic T.J. Demos. In *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making Through Science Fiction*, Streeby

⁴⁵ Walidah Imarisha, “Introduction,” in *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. Walidah Imarisha, et al. (AK Press ; Institute for Anarchist Studies, 2015), 1, <https://www.yourcloudlibrary.com>.

⁴⁶ Imarisha et al., “Introduction,” 1.

⁴⁷ Imarisha et al., “Introduction,” 2.

⁴⁸ Imarisha et al., “Introduction,” 9.

explores how Indigenous peoples and people of colour imagine the future of climate change through social movements, speculative fiction, and futurisms. She argues that people of colour and Indigenous peoples use speculative fiction to remember the past, imagine the future, help us think critically about the present, and connect climate change to social movements.⁴⁹ Streeby connects science fiction and Indigenous futurisms to the struggles over the Dakota Access Pipeline. In the chapter “#NoDAPL: Native American and Indigenous Science, Fiction, and Futurisms,” Streeby argues that the struggles over the DAPL were shaped through the synthesis of Indigenous science, Indigenous fiction, and Indigenous futurisms.⁵⁰ She proposes that water protectors and their allies utilized “high-tech cultural forms” to organize and collectively imagine the future during the NoDAPL movement.⁵¹ Streeby claims that in the fall of 2016, “the Standing Rock Sioux and their allies projected a different future of climate change by trying to protect the water, the land, and the whole web of life” dependent on Mni Sose.⁵²

In the introduction to her book, Streeby addresses the history of the term “speculative fiction,” which goes back to at least the 19th century. Although she employs both terms, Streeby prefers “speculative fiction” over “science fiction,” the latter of which she identifies as a subset of the former, broader term. Streeby notes that speculative fiction is the larger category specifically because it is not limited by the word “science” and, as such, encompasses other types of fiction and forms of knowledge that exist beyond white Western science, including work written by women and people of colour.⁵³

⁴⁹ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 5.

⁵⁰ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 36.

⁵¹ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 32.

⁵² Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 39-40.

⁵³ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 20.

About science fiction, Streeby concurs with Octavia Butler's proposition that science fiction is not predicting or attempting to predict the future. Rather, science fiction is about how we shape the future to come in the present by both discussing and envisioning it.⁵⁴ Drawing from Butler, Streeby states that "science fiction can help us take hold of the present and think about where things are heading."⁵⁵ She suggests that science fiction (and speculative fiction more broadly) can help us act instead of letting the future pass us by.⁵⁶ In particular, Streeby is interested in how the terms "speculative fiction," "speculative," "futures," and "futurisms" have been used by scholars, writers, artists, and organizers of colour to "describe the visionary work they are doing in imagining the future of climate change."⁵⁷ To that intent, she identifies both Afrofuturism and Indigenous futurisms as sites of 'visionary' envisioning of climate futures. Notably, she argues that Indigenous futurisms, particularly through low-cost mediums such as videos captured on cellphones, are at the forefront of imagining climate futures different from those imagined by the fossil fuel industry.⁵⁸ By futures that differ from those envisioned by the fossil fuel industry, neither Streeby nor I refer to strictly utopian or optimistic futures.⁵⁹ The works of speculative fiction discussed by Streeby and the future imaginary I examine in this thesis are not utopian in any way. On the contrary, the future envisioned by water protectors and their allies during the NoDAPL movement acknowledges the profound impact of the oil industry on the environment and proposes ways for us to navigate a world contaminated by pipelines.⁶⁰

The water protection imagery created in solidarity with the NoDAPL movement contributes to discussions regarding the future. In *Beyond the World's End*, Demos proposes that

⁵⁴ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 25.

⁵⁵ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 25.

⁵⁶ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 25.

⁵⁷ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 26.

⁵⁸ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 28.

⁵⁹ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 31.

⁶⁰ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 47.

the intersections of art and politics, which are exemplified by the NoDAPL, are “celebrating the imaginaries that will be crucial to building a socially right and flourishing future.”⁶¹ Demos highlights how Standing Rock generated various visuals such as graphics and print designs that helped mobilize on-the-ground actions and online engagement. He contends that these “aesthetic materializations” were not just reactive but, rather, “worked to define an alternative world of living together.”⁶² More than simply reacting to the struggles against the DAPL, Demos proposes that the art generated during the movement was essential to the process of “cultural survivance” and the creation of “projective world making.”⁶³ In other words, the images created in response to the movement helped people envision, define and enact an alternative future.

While Streeby and Demos both explore how water protectors collectively envisioned the future and the role that art plays in imagining such a future, they do not consider the images that were created in solidarity with the movement. Despite mentioning that water protectors designed graphics and prints during the movement, Demos does not analyze or describe the images. In the following sections, I build on Streeby’s and Demos’ work to consider how the imagery created in solidarity with the NoDAPL movement helped water protectors and their allies collectively imagine the future.

⁶¹ Demos, *Beyond the World’s End*, back cover.

⁶² Demos, *Beyond the World’s End*, 175.

⁶³ Demos, *Beyond the World’s End*, 177. The term “survivance,” which combines the terms “survival” and “resistance,” was coined by the Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor in 1994. In *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, Vizenor describes “native survivance” as “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion.” Unlike the term “resilience,” “survivance” emphasizes being actively engaged in life, rather than passively enduring hardship. Literary scholar, Vizenor perceives survivance as expressed through storytelling, which keeps Indigenous cultures alive and evolving, challenging harmful stereotypes that wrongly portray Indigenous peoples as static or solely defined by victimhood. Instead, survivance highlights the ongoing presence and resilience of Indigenous communities as active, living cultures, beyond just surviving hardships. See Gerald Robert Vizenor, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10312865>.

II. Iconography

One of the significant aspects of the imagery created in solidarity with the NoDAPL movement is its iconography, which is tied to two interconnected prophecies that were predominant at the camps at Standing Rock: the prophecy of Zuzeca Sape, also known as the Black Snake, and the prophecy of the Seventh Generation. In this section, I demonstrate how the symbols represented across the NoDAPL imagery helped water protectors and their allies imagine the future by illustrating these prophecies whose stories speak to the past, present, and future. First, I examine the figure of Zuzeca Sape and its depiction in Dylan Miner's anti-extraction graphic *No Pipelines on Indigenous Land*. Next, I analyze the figure of the Thunderbird, which is represented in several banner designs created by the Onaman Collective. To do so, I look more closely at Isaac Murdoch's *Thunderbird Woman* and Christi Belcourt's *Thunderbird Woman's Mom (Water Is Life)*. Lastly, I juxtapose the three works in order to highlight their relationship to the Zuzeca Sape and Seventh Generation prophecies.

Zuzeca Sape

When we were kids, our grandmothers used to talk about this Black Snake that would be coming to destroy the earth. [...]

I remember that as a child. As you get older you don't think about things like this anymore. Then we started seeing the oil. When they have an oil spill, it destroys the water. It kills the animals. It kills all the microorganisms and the insects. It kills the grass, the plants, and everything that grows. When we saw the pipelines being built that pushed this black fluid through, then we understood: this is what is coming to kill the world. The prophecy says that when the Black Snake comes, we will stand up and stop it. We have no other choice but to stop the Black Snake to save the world. People may think that

is a farfetched idea. But it is a reality because we must stop destroying what gives us life.⁶⁴

In this testimony, former water protector and tribal historian LaDonna Brave Bull Allard (Oglala Lakota) recalls how she heard her grandmothers talk about the prophecy of Zuzeca Sape when she was a child. According to this ancient Lakota prophecy, which became prevalent around the struggle to stop the Keystone XL pipeline, a terrible black snake would one day slither across Indigenous land, poison the water, and destroy the earth.⁶⁵ During the struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline, water protectors called the DAPL the “black snake,” directly referring to this prophecy.⁶⁶ At the camps at Standing Rock, LaDonna Brave Bull Allard stated, “We must stand together and fight the black snake.”⁶⁷ Concurrently, the figure of Zuzeca Sape became a recurrent symbol in the images created in solidarity with Standing Rock.

In *No Pipelines on Indigenous Land* (2016; Fig. 1), artist, activist, and scholar Dylan A.T. Miner (Métis) depicts the figure of Zuzeca Sape. The anti-extraction graphic illustrates a black snake creature with an “S” shape body, adorned with horns, fangs, and taloned feet. Industrial markings—rivets and welding seams—are evenly dispersed along the creature’s body, indicating that the snake also represents a pipeline.⁶⁸ This association is reinforced by the text displayed below the creature, which states: “No pipelines on Indigenous land.” While I associate the

⁶⁴ Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon, eds., *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 45, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2281695>.

⁶⁵ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 23; Todrys, *Black Snake*, 3.

⁶⁶ “Every direct-action training against the Keystone XL, for example, referenced the prophecy of the black snake, a figure out of Lakota myth that in recent times has been identified with pipelines.” Saul Elbein, “The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at Standing Rock,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/31/magazine/the-youth-group-that-launched-a-movement-at-standing-rock.html>.

⁶⁷ Karen Pauls, “‘We Must Kill the Black Snake’: Prophecy and Prayer Motivate Standing Rock Movement,” *CBC*, December 11, 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/dakota-access-pipeline-prayer-1.3887441>; Todrys, *Black Snake*, 11.

⁶⁸ Dylan A. T. Miner, “No Pipelines on Indigenous Land,” Justseeds, August 24, 2016, <https://justseeds.org/no-pipelines-on-indigenous-land/>.

creature illustrated by Miner with the figure of Zuzeca Sape, the anti-extraction graphic might also depict Mishipeshu, also referred to as “the Great Lynx.” Indeed, while the information provided by the artist describes the creature as a “black snake,” the other-than-human being illustrated by Miner also shares numerous characteristics common in representations of Mishipeshu, such as his taloned feet and horns, the latter of which symbolize his power.⁶⁹ Mishipeshu is an important underwater being for the Anishinaabe. Although he has feline characteristics and lives in water, he is usually described as a reptile.⁷⁰ This fantastic dragon-like creature is known for being the cause of waves, rapids, whirlpools, and death by drowning, and is thus generally feared. Despite being mainly perceived as harmful, Mishipeshu holds significant importance for the Anishinaabe, since the creature also provides protection. One important distinction between Miner’s and other representations of Mishipeshu is its tail. Whereas most representations of the Great Lynx depict a scaly tail, *No Pipelines on Indigenous Land* emphasizes the snake-like features of the creature through its striped tail, reminiscent of a rattlesnake.⁷¹

Notably, the images created for pipeline resistance, such as Dylan Miner’s graphic, rarely include depictions of oil. Instead, they focus on the image of the pipeline. This might be explained by the idea of oil being kin. Drawing from feminist scholars Heather Davis’s and Kim TallBear’s respective work on “the queer futurity of plastic” and kin, scholar Zoe Todd (Red

⁶⁹ Serge Lemaître, “Mishipeshu,” in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, March 4, 2015, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/agawa-pictograph-site>.

⁷⁰ Lemaître, “Mishipeshu.”

⁷¹ One of the most significant representations of Mishipeshu is the one from the Agawa pictograph site in Lake Superior Provincial Park, Ontario. It is said that the Ojibwe leader Shingwaukonce traced the pictograph himself when he led a revolt against miners who exploited the copper deposit of Mamainse, on the shores of Lake Superior. Other notable depictions of Mishipeshu include the drawing *Mishipeshu* by Carl Ray (1973) and several paintings and drawings by Norval Morrisseau, such as *Water Spirit* (1972). Serge Lemaître, “Agawa Pictograph Site,” in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, March 4, 2015, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/agawa-pictograph-site>.

River Métis) explores how oil can be conceptualized as kin.⁷² She proposes that oil is only harmful insofar as settler nation-states exploit it for profit as part of fossil fuel-based economies. In that sense, oil is weaponized through the machinery of pipelines.⁷³ Furthermore, scholar Stina Attebery notes that for water protectors, water remains worthy of protection even after it has been contaminated by leaking oil.⁷⁴ As an example, Attebery cites the Standing Rock Sioux nation's and other Indigenous nations' ongoing fight against pipelines, including those that have already leaked.⁷⁵ As Belcourt points out in her keynote lecture "The Revolution Has Begun" at the Maamwizing Conference with Laurentian University in November 2016, there are more than a thousand oil spills each year in so-called Canada. Speaking specifically about the Line 5 pipeline, she mentions that despite the pipeline being fifteen years past its prescribed lifespan, "millions of liters of oil flow through it each day, with little public outcry."⁷⁶ Yet, water protectors across Turtle Island continue to fight for the protection of waterways that have been impacted by oil and pipelines.

While its association is evident, the figure of Zuzeca Sape not only symbolizes pipelines. In a feature article published in the New York Times Magazine, journalist Saul Elbein emphasizes the connection between the struggle against the DAPL and the struggles against alcoholism, suicide, and abuse. Notably, Elbein focuses specifically on how these issues affect

⁷² Heather Davis, "The Queer Futurity of Plastic," Sonic Acts Academy, filmed February 28, 2016, video of lecture, <https://vimeo.com/158044006>; Kim TallBear, "Beyond Life/Not Life: A Feminist-Indigenous Reading of Cryopreservation Practices and Ethics, Interspecies Thinking, and the New Materialisms," UCLA Centre for the Study of Women, filmed November 5, 2013, video of lecture, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkUeHCUrQ6E>; Zoe Todd, "Fish, Kin and Hope: Tending to Water Violations in *Amiskwaciwâskahikan* and Treaty Six Territory," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 43 (March 2017): 106, <https://doi.org/10.1086/692559>.

⁷³ Todd, "Fish, Kin and Hope," 107.

⁷⁴ Stina Attebery, "Oil, Water, Lightning: Indigenous Posthumanism and Energy Futures in Elizabeth LaPensée's *Thunderbird Strike*," *American Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (2020): 697, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2020.0041>.

⁷⁵ Attebery, "Oil, Water, Lightning," 697.

⁷⁶ The keynote lecture was transcribed and later published. See Christi Belcourt, "The Revolution Has Begun," in *Toward What Justice?: Describing Diverse Dreams of Justice in Education*, ed. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (Taylor and Francis, 2018), 113-121.

Indigenous youth living on reservations. Dallas Goldtooth (Lakota), an organizer for the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) who spoke to Elbein in an interview, states that beyond its more recent association with pipelines, the figure of the black snake also “symbolizes a darkness, a sickness, whose only intention is to sow dysfunction and loss of life in [Indigenous] communities.”⁷⁷ The information presented by Elbein in his article is echoed by scholar Jeffrey Ansloos (Cree, Ochekwisipi) in “Nibi Onje Biimaadiiziiwin Is Not a Metaphor: The Relationship between Suicide and Water Insecurity in First Nations in Ontario.”⁷⁸ Ansloos demonstrates how water insecurity and suicide are linked in First Nations Ontario, and by doing so, illustrates how “water is life.” While suicide is often framed as a public health issue, studies show that suicide in Indigenous communities is dependent on multiple determinants ranging from mental health and socioeconomic status to intergenerational trauma and social and environmental factors.⁷⁹ According to Ansloos, research increasingly points to water insecurity being a contributing factor to mental health and suicide in Indigenous communities, not only affecting physical health but also mental health.⁸⁰ In some Indigenous communities, the loss of traditional practices related to water use and management has been found to contribute to feelings of anxiety, depression, and loss of cultural identity, which can exacerbate suicidality.⁸¹ As such, “water is life” is more than a “cultural sentiment.”⁸² “Water is life” is “the material status of [Indigenous people’s] lives.”⁸³ Recognizing this material reality is critical since, as Ansloos notes, “the metaphorization of ‘water is life’ resonantly depoliticizes and obscures the

⁷⁷ Elbein, “The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at Standing Rock.”

⁷⁸ Jeffrey Ansloos, “Nibi Onje Biimaadiiziiwin Is Not a Metaphor: The Relationship between Suicide and Water Insecurity in First Nations in Ontario,” *Yellowhead Institute*, May 3, 2023. <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2023/05/03/suicide-and-water-insecurity/>.

⁷⁹ Ansloos, “Nibi Onje Biimaadiiziiwin Is Not a Metaphor,” 1.

⁸⁰ Ansloos, “Nibi Onje Biimaadiiziiwin Is Not a Metaphor,” 1.

⁸¹ Ansloos, “Nibi Onje Biimaadiiziiwin Is Not a Metaphor,” 2.

⁸² Ansloos, “Nibi Onje Biimaadiiziiwin Is Not a Metaphor,” 2.

⁸³ Ansloos, “Nibi Onje Biimaadiiziiwin Is Not a Metaphor,” 2.

tangible stakes of water insecurity, bolstering settler-colonial power structures that render life unliveable.”⁸⁴ Thus, water protectors who opposed the Dakota Access Pipeline were not only fighting to protect Mni Sose (and all the life attached to it) but were also taking a stance against the various threats facing Indigenous youths across Turtle Island, all of which are tied to ongoing colonialism and, concurrently, resource extraction.⁸⁵

Related to the importance of Indigenous youth within the movement, the figure of Zuzeca Sape is also attached to another prevalent prophecy, the prophecy of the Seventh Generation. According to LaDonna Brave Bull Allard, it was said that the black snake would appear once “the seventh generation would rise up.”⁸⁶ The prophecy of the Seventh Generation was first envisioned in the late 1800s by the Oglala Lakota holy man Black Elk (Heháka Sápa), who had a vision at the age of nine during a near-death experience.⁸⁷ According to his prophecy, a great suffering would befall the Native people, and it would not be until seven generations later that a sacred duty would be laid upon them to rise for their relatives and the earth again.⁸⁸ About the Seventh Generation, Oglala Lakota leader Thášúnke Witkó (Crazy Horse) (1840-1877) stated,

The red nation shall rise again and it shall be a blessing for a sick world; a world filled with broken promises, selfishness and separations; a world longing for light again. I see a time of seven generations when all the colors of mankind will gather under the sacred tree of life and the whole earth will become one circle again.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Ansloos, “Nibi Onje Biimaadiiwiwin Is Not a Metaphor,” 1.

⁸⁵ It is relevant to note that, as demonstrated by the relationship between water insecurity and suicide rates in Indigenous communities, the threat represented by pipelines is larger than the threat of oil spills. Even if pipelines never spilled, they would still represent a considerable environmental risk. As key actors in settler nation-states’ fossil fuel-based economies, pipelines directly contribute to climate change.

⁸⁶ Todrys, *Black Snake*, 11.

⁸⁷ Danielle SeeWalker, “7th Generation,” *The Red Road Project*, February 2, 2020, <https://redroadproject.com/7th-generation/>.

⁸⁸ SeeWalker, “7th Generation.”

⁸⁹ SeeWalker, “7th Generation.”

According to the water protector Jasilyn Charger (Lakota), it was said that the Black Snake prophecy would be overcome by the Seventh Generation, which would rise and “bring balance to the Earth. Not just to its people. To the Earth.”⁹⁰ Many of the youths that Elbein spoke with understood this to signify that the Seventh Generation had a responsibility to “help restore order, on behalf of all beings, to a world thrown out of balance by modernity and greed.”⁹¹ According to Goldtooth, the prophecy of the Seventh Generation has almost become a “cliché” in Indigenous communities across Turtle Island. In his interview with Elbein, he claimed that any Indigenous person born between 1980 and the 2000s “hears about [the Seventh Generation] constantly.”⁹² Goldtooth indicates a general hope within Indigenous communities across Turtle Island that the current generation will not only witness but instigate a “significant shift toward community renewal and nation building.”⁹³ In her conversation with Elbein, Charger expressed how before the NoDAPL movement, “their elders liked to talk about them as the future, but no one seemed to pay much attention to how their lives were hard, bordering on hopeless.”⁹⁴ This began to change following a historic run that Charger helped coordinate with other Lakota youth from April to July of 2016. In opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline, a group of youth ran from the Sacred Stone Camp to Washington, D.C., to deliver a unified statement and petition in resistance to the proposed oil pipeline.⁹⁵ Relay runs hold particular significance for the Oceti Sakowin (Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota peoples), who have a long-standing tradition of relay

⁹⁰ Elbein, “The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at Standing Rock.”

⁹¹ Elbein, “The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at Standing Rock.”

⁹² Elbein, “The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at Standing Rock.”

⁹³ Elbein, “The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at Standing Rock.”

⁹⁴ Elbein, “The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at Standing Rock.”

⁹⁵ Dallas Goldtooth, “Lakota Youth Running 500 Miles In Opposition of Dakota Access Pipeline,” *Indigenous Rising*, April 27, 2016, <https://indigenusrising.org/lakota-youth-running-500-miles-in-opposition-of-dakota-access-pipeline/>; Elbein, “The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at Standing Rock.”

racing with horses.⁹⁶ Following the youth's run for Standing Rock, the elders, who had previously been hesitant about their movement, now emphasized the importance of the youth embracing the responsibilities outlined in the Seventh Generation prophecy.⁹⁷ "Who better to speak for the past than the voice of the future?"⁹⁸

Thunderbird

Another recurrent symbol in the images created in solidarity with Standing Rock is the figure of the Thunderbird, which is prominently displayed in the banner designs created by the Onaman Collective. The Onaman Collective was formed in 2014 by the artists, environmentalists, and activists Christi Belcourt (Métis) and Isaac Murdoch (Ojibwe). In 2016, in response to the struggle against the Dakota Access Pipeline, the Onaman Collective released a series of banner designs purposefully created for water and land protection actions. Amongst Belcourt's and Murdoch's designs, two images rapidly became widely recognizable symbols for not just the NoDAPL movement, but pipeline resistance across Turtle Island: The banner designs *Thunderbird Woman* (Fig. 2) by Isaac Murdoch and *Thunderbird Woman's Mom (Water is Life)* (Fig. 3) by Christi Belcourt. Both images, which exist in close relationship to each other, feature the Thunderbird.

In his design *Thunderbird Woman*, Isaac Murdoch depicts a hybrid being with the body of a woman and the arms of a bird. The Thunderbird woman is represented in the center of the frame, her wings extended on either side of her body. A heart symbol, which also figures in several other protest banners designed by the Onaman Collective, sits in the middle of her chest. Her body is surrounded by rain and lightning, as represented by the four lightning bolts that

⁹⁶ Jim Wells, "Relay Racing: A Cultural Tradition For Lakota," *Canterbury Park*, August 25, 2017, <https://www.canterburypark.com/relay-racing-a-cultural-tradition-for-lakota/>.

⁹⁷ Elbein, "The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at Standing Rock."

⁹⁸ Elbein, "The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at Standing Rock."

surround the Thunderbird's head. Because of their position, the lightning bolts look like they are protruding from the Thunderbird woman rather than the sky. On the ground, hatching eggs surround the feet of the Thunderbird woman, protected by her extended wings.

According to a correspondence between Murdoch and Amanda Fayant, a master's student who wrote about Murdoch's work, *Thunderbird Woman* was inspired by an Ojibwe story that Murdoch heard from his grandmother when he was a child. About the story, Murdoch recounts,

I really don't know anything other than from what my Grandmother told me as a child. Long ago, a young Woman fell in love with a Thunderbird. They eventually got married and had a family. She laid many eggs made of stone on top of the mountain where they lived. One day those eggs will hatch, and baby Thunderbirds will come out and save the earth.⁹⁹

In another story, the Thunderbird represents both an Anishinaabe spirit and an electric being who “transforms water protectors into hybrid lightning people.”¹⁰⁰ About the story, artist Elizabeth LaPensée (Irish, Anishinaabe, Métis) states,

For generations, the thunderers brought forth rain and fires that renewed the lands and the waters for the plants, the animals, the fish. However, the unsatisfiable greed of another people brought about such vast changes to the lands and the waters that the people cried out for the return of the thunderbird people and their searing lightning. And so they walked among the people again, through the people, in their hearts, in their eyes, in their voices, in their songs, and in their motion.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Amanda Fayant, “Thunderbird Women: Indigenous Women Reclaiming Autonomy through Stories of Resistance,” Master's Thesis (UiT The Arctic University of Norway, 2019), 2, https://www.academia.edu/40170277/Thunderbird_Women_Indigenous_women_reclaiming_autonomy_through_stories_of_resistance.

¹⁰⁰ Elizabeth LaPensée, “Thunderbird Strike: A Lightning Searing Sidescroller,” Thunderbird Strike, April 30, 2017, <https://www.thunderbirdstrike.com/stories>.

¹⁰¹ LaPensée, “Thunderbird Strike.”

The figure depicted by Murdoch could be interpreted both as one of the Thunderbirds born from the young woman's eggs and as a maternal figure herself, giving birth to the next generation of baby Thunderbirds who will save the Earth. These layers of interpretation concur with an Indigenous understanding of time that differs from what scholar Mark Rifkin calls "settler time" and aligns with Grace Dillon's description of "native slipstream," wherein the past, present, and future flow together like a stream of water.¹⁰² By "settler time," Rifkin broadly refers to the written histories and chronological frameworks established and employed by settler nation-states. In *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*, Rifkin argues for the recognition of "temporal sovereignty."¹⁰³ He proposes that failure to recognize Indigenous temporal sovereignty results in the perpetuation of settler-colonial state violence against Indigenous communities.¹⁰⁴ Based on the notion of time as relative, Rifkin's concepts of settler time and temporal sovereignty both acknowledge how one's perspective of time is dependent on cultural context. Recognizing and respecting Indigenous ways of "being-in-time" is essential to supporting Indigenous sovereignty efforts.¹⁰⁵ In *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, Streeby invokes the notion of "native slipstream," as well as other types of "time-bending," in relation to the organizing that took place at Standing Rock. Specifically, she proposes that the New York City Stands With Standing Rock Collective organized its #StandingRockSyllabus in a manner that echoes Dillon's notion of "native slipstream."¹⁰⁶

Drawing from Streeby's argument, I propose that *Thunderbird Woman* also resonates with the

¹⁰² Dillon, ed., *Walking the Clouds*; Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Duke University Press, 2017).

¹⁰³ Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 2.

¹⁰⁴ Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 1-47.

¹⁰⁵ Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 1.

¹⁰⁶ New York Stands With Standing Rock Collective, "#StandingRockSyllabus," NYC Stands With Standing Rock, last updated October 4, 2022, <https://nycstandswithstandingrock.wordpress.com/standingrocksyllabus/>; Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 51.

idea of native slipstream. In *Walking the Clouds*, Dillon explains that native slipstream “views time as past, present, and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream.”¹⁰⁷ By doing so, native slipstream replicates “non-linear thinking about space time” and thus opposes settler time.¹⁰⁸ Indigenous works that fit the definition of native slipstream mix different times and flashpoints in Native history, often moving back and forth between past, present, and future.¹⁰⁹

In *Thunderbird Woman's Mom (Water is Life)* (2016), Christi Belcourt also refers to the story recounted by Murdoch by depicting the mother of Thunderbird Woman. However, whereas Murdoch illustrates birth through the representation of eggs, Belcourt depicts a Thunderbird baby in their mother's womb. In Belcourt's design, a pregnant woman stands with her left fist raised toward the sky. Like in Murdoch's drawing, a heart symbol sits in the middle of her chest. In her right hand, the woman holds a pail, referring to the copper pails used by Indigenous water walkers across Turtle Island.¹¹⁰ Water emanates from the pail and cycles through the woman's fist, connecting to the baby Thunderbird inside her womb and to the sky. Water falls from the sky into the copper pail, completing the cycle. Positioned at the same angle as the flow of water, the baby Thunderbird is connected to this cycle, embodying the idea that “water is life.” Correspondingly, the slogan “water is life” is written in bold letters, framing Belcourt's drawing.

The decision to represent birth through pregnancy rather than hatching is particularly significant since reproductive justice was an important concern at Standing Rock. In *Making Kin*

¹⁰⁷ Dillon, ed., *Walking the Clouds*, 3.

¹⁰⁸ Dillon, ed., *Walking the Clouds*, 3; Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*.

¹⁰⁹ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 52-53.

¹¹⁰ One of the most well-known water walkers in Turtle Island is Josephine Mandamin (Anishinaabe), who walked around the Great Lakes from 2003 to 2017 to raise awareness about water pollution and the environmental degradation of the Great Lakes, as well as water insecurity in Indigenous communities across so-called Canada and the United States. Mandamin has passed on her water protection legacy to her great-niece Autumn Pelletier, a water protector recognized around the world. See David Joseph Gallant, “Josephine Mandamin,” in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, May 29, 2025, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/josephine-mandamin>.

Not Population, feminist scholar Adele E. Clarke mentions that reproductive justice was a concern of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe and others who opposed the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016.¹¹¹ According to Clarke, water protectors who were engaged in the NoDAPL movement affirmed that “*prolonged environmental degradation is multigenerational Indigenous reproductive injustice.*”¹¹² Through her portrayal of *Thunderbird Woman’s Mom*, Belcourt highlights the relationship between environmental and reproductive justice.

In “On Living the Good Life,” interdisciplinary curator and art historian Nadia Kurd emphasizes how Belcourt’s work is anchored in the teachings of mino-bimaadiziwin, or “living the good life.”¹¹³ According to Kurd, the concept of “living the good life,” which she proposes encompasses an entire worldview, highlights how all beings must live in harmony not only with the animate but also with the unseen things in this world.¹¹⁴ In addition, she specifies that mino-bimaadiziwin is also about considering the impact of our actions on future generations.¹¹⁵ Concerning her representations of water, Kurd argues that Belcourt—like in her paintings of birds, insects, and flowers—draws from the theme of interdependence that is central to the concept of “living a good life.”¹¹⁶ About *Thunderbird Woman’s Mom (Water is Life)*, she notes how the piece illustrates the pathway from the “womb to the waterways.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, Belcourt’s work demonstrates how we all originate from water, beginning with the womb. Kurd’s explanation of mino-bimaadiziwin relates to the idea of “living well,” which is central to Yazzie and Baldy’s concept of radical relationality.¹¹⁸

¹¹¹ Adele E. Clarke and Donna Jeanne Haraway, eds., *Making Kin Not Population* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018), 56.

¹¹² Clarke and Haraway, eds., *Making Kin Not Population*, 7.

¹¹³ Belcourt et al., *Christi Belcourt*, 82.

¹¹⁴ Belcourt et al., *Christi Belcourt*, 82.

¹¹⁵ Belcourt et al., *Christi Belcourt*, 82.

¹¹⁶ Belcourt et al., *Christi Belcourt*, 85.

¹¹⁷ Belcourt et al., *Christi Belcourt*, 86.

¹¹⁸ Yazzie and Risling Baldy, “Introduction.”

Thunderbird Strike

Dylan Miner's anti-extraction graphic *No Pipelines on Indigenous Land* and Isaac Murdoch's banner design *Thunderbird Woman* are both featured in the Indigenous futurist game *Thunderbird Strike* (2017; Fig. 4), created by the game designer Elizabeth LaPensée (Anishinaabe, Métis). *Thunderbird Strike* is a sidescroller game in which an Anishinaabe thunderbird is depicted protecting the Great Lakes waterways from the Enbridge Line 5 oil pipeline.¹¹⁹ Throughout the three levels of the game, LaPensée includes various water protection images and slogans.¹²⁰ Notably, during the short, animated sequences preceding each level, LaPensée not only showcases her art but prominently features Murdoch's and Miner's respective pieces.¹²¹ In addition to these animated cut-scenes, Miner's Black Snake is also depicted on signs held by water protectors in the second level of the game and is awakened in the last level when the thunderbird finally confronts the animated pipeline and boss of the game.¹²²

In "Oil, Water, Lightning: Indigenous Posthumanism and Energy Futures in Elizabeth LaPensée's *Thunderbird Strike*," scholar Stina Attebery argues that, by incorporating water protection art within *Thunderbird Strike*, LaPensée "transforms symbols of water protection activism into speculative science fictional images."¹²³ Although this argument is not unfounded, I propose that LaPensée does not "transform" the images, but rather highlights their already futuristic and speculative nature. *Thunderbird Strike* invites viewers to "imagine futures beyond oil."¹²⁴ Part of how it does so is by showing direct action images, whose purpose is partly to

¹¹⁹ Attebery, "Oil, Water, Lightning," 697.

¹²⁰ Attebery, "Oil, Water, Lightning," 711.

¹²¹ Attebery, "Oil, Water, Lightning," 711.

¹²² Attebery, "Oil, Water, Lightning," 711.

¹²³ Attebery, "Oil, Water, Lightning," 711.

¹²⁴ Attebery, "Oil, Water, Lightning," 698.

articulate shared goals for the movement, or, in other words, to invite viewers to think about the future.

In addition, Attebery argues that *Thunderbird Strike* “functions as a form of Indigenous survivance, imagining a futuristic ecology affected but not destroyed by the petroeconomy.”¹²⁵ By representing oil as a complex being, LaPensée illustrates a layered representation of energy futures in which environment, technology, and waste are intrinsically tied.¹²⁶ Attebery argues that, compared to common representations of “oil futures” in science fiction, which either fall into “techno-utopia” or “eco-apocalypse,” water protectors at Standing Rock imagined a “more hopeful science fiction narrative of energy futurity.”¹²⁷ Part of the reason why resides in how Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by the environmental consequences of leaking oil pipelines.¹²⁸ Attebery proposes that this unique perspective enables Indigenous peoples to imagine visions of the future, specifically energy futures that transcend the boundaries of techno-utopianism and ecological collapse.¹²⁹

Prophecies

When we examine Miner’s, Murdoch’s, and Belcourt’s water protection designs in relation to each other, it becomes clear that they tell the story of both the prophecy of Zuzeca Sape and the prophecy of the Seventh Generation. *No Pipelines on Indigenous Lands* depicts the black snake, which will destroy the world if not stopped. *Thunderbird Woman’s Mom (Water is Life)* represents the women giving birth to the thunderbirds, or the seventh generation that will save

¹²⁵ Attebery, “Oil, Water, Lightning,” 699.

¹²⁶ Attebery, “Oil, Water, Lightning,” 699.

¹²⁷ Attebery, “Oil, Water, Lightning,” 701.

¹²⁸ Attebery, “Oil, Water, Lightning,” 701.

¹²⁹ Attebery, “Oil, Water, Lightning,” 701.

the world. *Thunderbird Woman* illustrates the thunderbirds, or the seventh generation, who will save the world.

Notably, Dylan Miner engaged with prophecies in his work prior to the NoDAPL movement and his creation of *No Pipelines on Indigenous Lands*. In an interview with painter, curator, educator, and editor America Meredith (Cherokee), published in 2013, Dylan Miner discusses his solo show, *Waasawaabaamin* (Prophecies). About the notion of prophecies, Miner addresses how non-Native people often romanticize and fetishize Indigenous prophecies.¹³⁰ He explains that his approach to prophecies is “Indigenous in orientation” while acknowledging settlers’ “ongoing fascination with Indigenous prophets.”¹³¹ In *Waasawaabaamin*, Miner aimed to reexamine Indigenous prophecies from an Indigenous and anti-colonial perspective.¹³² To do so, he broadly conceptualized prophecies as a continual source of teachings that enable Indigenous peoples to directly engage with the challenges posed by globalization, colonialism, and capitalism.¹³³ This conceptualization of prophecies differs from a more Western understanding of prophecies as truth-telling or foresight into the future.¹³⁴ In addition, Miner notes that *Waasawaabaamin*, despite its year-long planning, was displayed at the same time as the Idle No More movement grew across so-called Canada. About the timing of the exhibition, Miner suggests that it was ideal, because “*Waasawaabaamin* speaks to the way that Indigenous activists use these teachings [from prophecies] to move [their] communities into the future.”¹³⁵ Miner’s conceptualization of *Waasawaabaamin* echoes Estes’ understanding of prophecies. In *Our History is the Future*, Estes highlights the role of prophecies within the NoDAPL

¹³⁰ America Meredith, “Dylan Miner: Métis Artist and Indigenous Activist, Interview by America Meredith (Tsalagi),” *First American Art Magazine* (Fall 2013).

¹³¹ Meredith, “Dylan Miner,” 28.

¹³² Meredith, “Dylan Miner,” 28.

¹³³ Meredith, “Dylan Miner,” 28.

¹³⁴ Meredith, “Dylan Miner,” 28.

¹³⁵ Meredith, “Dylan Miner,” 28.

movement. Similarly to Miner, he claims that “prophets and prophecies do not predict the future, nor are they mystical, ahistorical occurrences. They are simply diagnoses of the times in which we live, and visions of what must be done to get free.”¹³⁶ In addition, Estes adds that, “for the Oceti Sakowin, prophecies like the Black Snake are revolutionary theory.”¹³⁷ Prophecies help them consider their relationship to the land, to human and other-than-human beings, and to history and time.¹³⁸

Similarly to Estes, scholar Kaden Mark Jelsing asserts that Indigenous peoples, including Indigenous prophets, do not “believe” but, rather, “work from within their own understanding of reality.”¹³⁹ In his PhD dissertation “Sovereign Futures: Indigenous and Settler Prophecies in Two Nineteenth-Century American ‘Northwests,’” Jelsing explores both Indigenous and settler prophecies, which he argues “expressed fundamentally different modes of relationality” and “articulated divergent visions of the future.”¹⁴⁰ Building on the understanding that the apocalypse has already occurred, Jelsing proposes that ecological apocalypses, which have repeatedly happened across Turtle Island since the beginning of colonization, created the need for Indigenous peoples to find new ways to understand and maintain their relations.¹⁴¹ Jelsing argues that “prophetic visioning, dreaming, dancing, drumming, and singing” became essential tools for

¹³⁶ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 23.

¹³⁷ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 23.

¹³⁸ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 23-24.

¹³⁹ Kaden Mark Jelsing, “Sovereign Futures: Indigenous and Settler Prophecies in Two Nineteenth-Century American ‘Northwests,’” PhD diss (University of British Columbia, 2023), 18, <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/24/items/1.0432745>.

¹⁴⁰ Jelsing, “Sovereign Futures,” 2-3.

¹⁴¹ The understanding of the apocalypse as having already happened (or as currently happening) is common among Indigenous peoples, whose perspectives are rooted in long histories of adaptation to environmental change and other practices of colonialism, all of which continue to this day. This understanding of the apocalypse differs from a Western perspective, which often conceptualizes the apocalypse as something that will happen in the future because of ecological collapse. See Kyle Whyte, “Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene,” *English Language Notes* 55, nos. 1–2 (2017): 153–62, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-55.1-2.153>; Kyle Whyte, “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises,” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1, nos. 1–2 (2018): 224–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848618777621>.

recognizing, understanding, and healing the relationships harmed by colonialism.¹⁴² Through prophetic dreaming or visioning, Indigenous peoples bring back teachings from their ancestors and the Creator, which helps them address changing life conditions and seek guidance on how to reform their relationships with other-than-human beings.¹⁴³ For instance, Jelsing notes that while the prophecy of Zuzeca Sape is an end-time prophecy—which in Abrahamic traditions foresees the inevitable end of life—understanding the Black Snake prophecy motivates people to take action in the face of threats to their relations.¹⁴⁴

Notably, Jelsing connects Indigenous prophecy to the past, present, and future. In his dissertation, he asserts that Indigenous prophecies represent a way of engaging with the sacred that builds on the past, addresses current issues, and aims for a better future for the generations to come.¹⁴⁵ Indeed, Jelsing’s understanding of Indigenous prophecy draws on Mark Rifkin’s conceptualization of settler time as opposed to Indigenous times.¹⁴⁶ Drawing from Rifkin, Jelsing argues that, “above all, Indigenous prophetic visionaries have insisted on temporal sovereignty,” which involves recognizing how Indigenous peoples can experience time in ways that differ from the singular, linear time constructed by settlers.¹⁴⁷ About Standing Rock, Jelsing argues that “the #NoDAPL movement is an example of Indigenous temporal sovereignty.”¹⁴⁸ Although the movement was initiated as a response to the Dakota Access Pipeline and the violence of settler colonialism, Jelsing proposes that the NoDAPL was rooted in an understanding of time that differs from settler time. Partly through its emphasis on prophecies, the NoDAPL movement honoured ancestors, acknowledged future generations, and recognized the present existence of

¹⁴² Jelsing, “Sovereign Futures,” 5.

¹⁴³ Jelsing, “Sovereign Futures,” 20.

¹⁴⁴ Jelsing, “Sovereign Futures,” 302.

¹⁴⁵ Jelsing, “Sovereign Futures,” 19.

¹⁴⁶ Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*.

¹⁴⁷ Jelsing, “Sovereign Futures,” 8.

¹⁴⁸ Jelsing, “Sovereign Futures,” 9.

other-than-human beings, such as Mni Sose, a member of the Mni Oyate, or the Water Nation.¹⁴⁹ Within an Indigenous understanding of time, “there is no separation between past and present, meaning that an alternative future is also determined by our understanding of our past. Our history is the future.”¹⁵⁰

III. Collective Art Making/Sharing

In addition to their iconography, another aspect of the images created in solidarity with Standing Rock is the way in which they were produced collectively and shared through accessible means. In this section, I argue that the multi-layered modes of production and dissemination of the works I discuss were key in helping water protectors and their allies create a future imaginary. First, I demonstrate how collective art making, or producing art collectively, was integral to the images created in solidarity with Standing Rock. Art making was an essential part of the daily activities at the Oceti Sakowin Camp. Moreover, the production of water protection images was encouraged outside of Standing Rock through art builds and online tutorials, both of which were organized to facilitate the mass production of prints and banners. Finally, I examine how the works of Miner, Murdoch, Belcourt, and Luger were disseminated physically and online through accessible means, which helped solidify the impetus of global solidarity prompted by the efforts to stop the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Not only did the physical dissemination of the images I discuss help spur unity amongst the water protectors at Standing Rock, but the online dissemination of the same designs helped reinforce global solidarity for the movement. Collective art making and sharing, such as the production and dissemination of water protection imagery during the NoDAPL, not only helps build community but also helps generate shared

¹⁴⁹ Jelsing, “Sovereign Futures,” 9.

¹⁵⁰ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 24.

vocabularies of the future, both of which are essential to movement building. Overall, I argue that the accessible, multi-layered approach to both the production and dissemination of these images helped water protectors generate a shared vocabulary of the future. Whereas collective art making played a central role in defining what the future could look like, the distribution and widespread sharing of the images produced in solidarity with Standing Rock helped spread that vision of the future to a larger audience.

Art Tent

The Oceti Sakowin Camp, the largest of the three main camps formed near Cannon Ball, N.D., included a prominent art tent where artists and volunteers silkscreen-printed images and produced other types of visual works to use during actions, display around the camps, and distribute among the water protectors and allies. During the NoDAPL movement, people travelling to the Oceti Sakowin Camp were invited to bring supplies to support the art tent. The requested materials—muslin fabric, screen printing ink, and safety pins—provide insight into the types of projects undertaken by the artists and volunteers.

If you or people you know are travelling to Standing Rock and you want to specifically support the art tent, consider bringing these current need supplies with you to deliver to the art tent: 1. Cords or large rolls of muslin fabric. (unbleached / muslin fabric can be found at fabric stores or online / sold in “cords” or rolls that are sold by the yard.) 2. Screen printing ink. (Water-based. An example would be the brand Speedball Fabric Screen printing ink. Colors requested are blue, green, red, etc. Currently there is plenty of black ink in supply but that is also welcome. Ink is sold in quarts or gallons.) 3. Safety pins. These are for pinning the large patches onto jackets. (small safety pins are usually sold in quantities of 100.)

Note that the needs at the art tent change so check in with art organizers and artists at the art tent for future material needs, but fabric, ink, and safety pins would always be useful.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ Nicolas Lampert, “Art Tent at the Oceti Sakowin Camp at Standing Rock,” Justseeds, November 24, 2016, <https://justseeds.org/art-tent-at-the-oceti-sakowin-camp-at-standing-rock/>.

In a series of photographs dated November 2016, artist Nicolas Lampert captures a glimpse of the activities that took place at the art tent.¹⁵² The pictures, which are few and non-exhaustive, suggest that the activities of the tent centred around silkscreen printing and banner making. Silk screen printing is a practical, versatile, easily customizable, and cost-effective medium that still provides high-quality, durable prints. Unlike digital printing, silk screen printing allows for a vast range of materials to be printed on, such as muslin fabric and bedsheets—the primary materials used for the patches produced at the art tent—as well as thick cardboard and clothing, thus increasing the ways in which images can be made visible.¹⁵³ In one of the photographs shared on his website, Lampert depicts the exterior of the art tent, identifiable across photographs by the bright yellow flag attached above the large white tent (Fig. 5). The flag's design is based on a variation of Isaac Murdoch's *Thunderbird Mom*. This variation of Murdoch's design has been used in different water protection actions across Turtle Island and was particularly prevalent in the marches organized in solidarity with Standing Rock. Above and below the figure of the Thunderbird, the text reads, "We are here to protect / Water is Life / Mni Wiconi." In front of the tent, which is supported by a beamed wooden structure, a small window provides natural light as artists come and go through the front door. Tables are arranged adjacent to bales of hay lining the side of the tent, providing an additional workspace for campers to assemble and paint banners and signs. In two other photographs (Figs. 6 and 7), Lampert shows the inside of the art tent, where artists and volunteers utilize two silkscreen stations to print hundreds of their designs onto pieces of fabric. Most of the designs are turned into banners, some of which are adorned with paint on the tables outside the tent or attached to the back of jackets for the thousands of water

¹⁵² Nicolas Lampert, "Art Activism," Nicolas Lampert, accessed April 4, 2025, <https://www.nicolaslampert.org>.

¹⁵³ Lampert, "Screenprinting at the Art Tent at Standing Rock."

protectors and allies at the camps at Standing Rock. Before their distribution, the pieces of fabric are hung to dry onto makeshift clothing lines secured to the wooden beams that uphold the tent.

According to artist Viktor Ortix, who spent six weeks at the Oceti Sakowin Camp in September and early November 2016 to help produce patches for water protectors, the operation within the art tent functioned like a production line, with runners hanging up the prints, individuals loading the fabric, and others printing the designs.¹⁵⁴ During Ortix's time at the camp, the art tent was run by the Indigenous Peoples Power Project (IP3), a nonprofit organization that helps Indigenous communities by providing direct action training and support for nonviolent actions.¹⁵⁵ IP3 focuses on empowering these communities to claim their inherent right to environmental justice, cultural livelihood, and self-determination. At the Oceti Sakowin Camp, the IP3, in collaboration with the International Indigenous Youth Council, the Indigenous Environmental Network, and the Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation, helped manage multiple tents where they coordinated daily direct action training and the production of screen-printed patches for water protectors.¹⁵⁶ According to Ortix, the nonprofit organization approved which images would be printed and later distributed to water protectors. Once the images were approved, the artists and volunteers working at the art tent would alternate between designs, printing one set of images one day and another series the next. The production flow of the patches was smoother when the people printing them could focus on one design at a time, using a single colour or flood roll. Every day or the night before, the IP3 coordinator would brief the artists and volunteers working at the art tent about their next assignment.¹⁵⁷ Throughout the

¹⁵⁴ Lampert, "Screenprinting at the Art Tent at Standing Rock."

¹⁵⁵ Indigenous Peoples Power Project (IP3), "Our Story," Indigenous Peoples Power Project, accessed April 4, 2025, <https://www.ip3action.org/who-we-are/>; Lampert, "Screenprinting at the Art Tent at Standing Rock."

¹⁵⁶ Indigenous Peoples Power Project (IP3), "Our Story"; Lampert, "Screenprinting at the Art Tent at Standing Rock."

¹⁵⁷ Lampert, "Screenprinting at the Art Tent at Standing Rock."

six weeks he spent at the Oceti Sakowin Camp, Ortix estimates that the art tent produced around ten thousand patches, printing as many as one thousand patches in one day.¹⁵⁸

In addition to extensive patch production, the artists and volunteers at the art tent also screen-printed designs onto t-shirts and sweatshirts. Every day from noon to two o'clock, people at the camp, regardless of their role within the camp or their status as Indigenous or non-Indigenous, were invited to visit the art tent and have their shirts printed. In his interview with Lampert, Ortix recalls seeing lines as large as three hundred people waiting to get their t-shirts and sweatshirts printed. Ortix explains that wearing the same message, especially through such meaningful prints, created a sense of unity in the camp.¹⁵⁹ This sense of unity also extended outside the Standing Rock as t-shirts were sold to raise funds for the camps. People from across the world wore these designs as a show of solidarity with the movement. About his role as an artist within the camp, Ortix noted that seeing people's reactions to being able to wear these prints made him realize how big of an impact and presence art held within the movement.¹⁶⁰

Streeby argues that the efforts of the water protectors and their allies to collectively imagine an alternative future beyond the fossil fuel economy were evident at the Standing Rock camps.¹⁶¹ As an example, Streeby mentions the schools for kids set up at both the Sacred Stone Camp and the Oceti Sakowin Camp. In these schools, students were encouraged to tell their own stories through film, which involved research and interviews, while studying math, science, and Lakota values and languages.¹⁶² Not limited to education, the camps also enacted a different future by providing free meals (often Indigenous recipes), free healthcare (although with limited

¹⁵⁸ Lampert, "Screenprinting at the Art Tent at Standing Rock."

¹⁵⁹ Lampert, "Screenprinting at the Art Tent at Standing Rock."

¹⁶⁰ Lampert, "Screenprinting at the Art Tent at Standing Rock."

¹⁶¹ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 41.

¹⁶² Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 41.

resources), and other essential life necessities that are unfortunately hard to access in the so-called United States.¹⁶³ Building on Streeby's argument, I argue that the art tent was another example of how water protectors and their allies collectively imagined and enacted a different future at the Oceti Sakowin Camp.

Art Builds

While the on-the-ground creative work that took place at the Oceti Sakowin Camp's art tent was crucial to the movement and its future imaginary, the images that were produced outside of the Standing Rock camps are also noteworthy. In addition to the few photographs capturing the art activities at the Oceti Sakowin Camp, Lampert's website also features several other instances of what he terms "art activism" actions.¹⁶⁴ Dating back to 2009, with the most recent pictures dated January 2025, Lampert documented over seventy actions he participated in and/or helped organize. The types of actions documented range from sign and banner making, to wheatpasting campaigns, mud stencil actions, marches and demonstrations, street painting, and mural creation. Amongst the vocabulary employed by the artist, the most overarching term is the phrase "art built," which appears repeatedly across the sources I consulted throughout my research.¹⁶⁵

Banner-making workshops, or "art builds," are an important aspect of the Onaman Collective's work.¹⁶⁶ Indeed, the collective regularly organizes art builds as part of their exhibitions and educational efforts. It is estimated that the Onaman Collective has silkscreen printed and distributed over ten thousand banners and posters as a result of banner-making

¹⁶³ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 41-42.

¹⁶⁴ Lampert, "Art Activism."

¹⁶⁵ Among others, the term "art build" is employed by Miner and Lampert. See Belcourt et al., *Christi Belcourt*, 117 ; Lampert, "Art Activism."

¹⁶⁶ Miner highlights this importance in "Gwayako-Bimaadizi // She Lives the Right Kind of Life." See Belcourt et al., *Christi Belcourt*, 117.

workshops.¹⁶⁷ Notably, the art builds organized by the collective utilize what Belcourt calls the “pick-a-date-and-go” methodology.¹⁶⁸ Straightforward, this approach involves committing completely to one’s ideas. Whereas most of us choose not to act in fear of failure or imperfection, the Onaman Collective has taken the habit of realizing their ideas even when they have yet to be fully conceptualized. When Belcourt and/or Murdoch have an idea for a project, they “pick-a-date-and-go,” ensuring that their vision will come to life. This approach enables others to participate in these projects and contribute to their success. One example of such collaboration can be found in the art builds organized by David Solnit, an arts and direct-action organizer based in San Francisco. During the NoDAPL, Solnit coordinated art builds to produce banners featuring the Onaman Collective’s designs, which were later sent to the camps at Standing Rock.¹⁶⁹

Notably, both Dylan Miner and Nicolas Lampert are part of the Justseeds Artists Cooperative.¹⁷⁰ The Justseeds project began in the early 2000s as a website where artist Josh MacPhee shared radical graphics. The Justseeds Artists Cooperative was formed in 2007 when approximately a dozen printmakers who knew each other through their artistic practices joined forces.¹⁷¹ Over time, the decentralized network has expanded to encompass forty-one artists whose work is dedicated to social, environmental, and political engagement.¹⁷² A large part of how the Justseeds Artists Cooperative operates is through the organization of art builds. Dylan Miner, who designed several anti-extraction graphics in solidarity with Standing Rock, including *No Pipelines on Indigenous Lands*, has been a member of the Justseeds Artists Cooperative since its founding

¹⁶⁷ Belcourt et al., *Christi Belcourt*, 117.

¹⁶⁸ Belcourt et al., *Christi Belcourt*, 117.

¹⁶⁹ Mary Annette Pember, “Onaman Collective Puts Art Into Resistance,” *ICT News*, September 13, 2018, <https://ictnews.org/archive/onaman-collective-art-resistance>.

¹⁷⁰ Justseeds, “About,” Justseeds, accessed April 4, 2025, <https://justseeds.org/about/>.

¹⁷¹ Justseeds, “About.”

¹⁷² Justseeds, “About.”

in 2007.¹⁷³ In a blog post shared on the Justseeds Artists Cooperative's website, Miner mentions how the anti-extraction graphics he created in solidarity with the NoDAPL movement were printed by other artists during the movement, similar to an art build, to raise funds for the Standing Rock camps. Specifically, he highlights the work of Minneapolis-based designer and activist Ashley Fairbanks (Anishinaabe) and Witt Siasoco, who screenprinted 100 posters on August 25.¹⁷⁴ These posters were made available to people who could donate at least \$25 to the Sacred Stone Camp. Moreover, in an interview with the art magazine *måg*, Miner explains how community workshops are important to his work. Indeed, he states that his practice “combines gallery exhibitions with community workshops and other pedagogical interests.”¹⁷⁵ He claims that his teaching is an important aspect of his work as an artist.¹⁷⁶ Miner argues that his work “highlights both the failures and potentials of what new futures may look like.”¹⁷⁷ Regarding collaborative work, Miner notes that working collectively with other artists is both “exciting and difficult.”¹⁷⁸ Indeed, he mentions that while working with so many people from different places is challenging and brings in a lot of difficulties, it is also highly generative. Notably, Miner highlights how the types of collaborative projects created by Justseeds are only possible because of the collective's non-hierarchical structure.

Online Tutorials

Online tutorials also played an essential role in the production of images created outside Standing Rock. Indeed, while the works I discuss in this thesis were designed by artists, a substantial portion of the prints and mirror shields were produced by anonymous creators who

¹⁷³ Dylan Miner, “Biography,” Dylan Miner, accessed April 4, 2025, <http://dylanminer.com/bio>.

¹⁷⁴ Miner, “No Pipelines on Indigenous Land.”

¹⁷⁵ Audhild Dahlstrøm, “Dylan Miner,” *Måg*, no. 4 (2011): 24.

¹⁷⁶ Dahlstrøm, “Dylan Miner,” 24.

¹⁷⁷ Dahlstrøm, “Dylan Miner,” 30.

¹⁷⁸ Dahlstrøm, “Dylan Miner,” 15.

followed the respective tutorials shared online by the Onaman Collective and Cannupa Hanska Luger on how to assemble protest banners and build mirror shields for water protectors. Along with PDFs and JPGs of their designs, the Onaman Collective provide people who visit their website with a tutorial on how to assemble banners.¹⁷⁹ In the video, Belcourt mentions how she and Murdoch printed a considerable number of their designs onto canvas fabric, which they planned to send to water actions all over Turtle Island. Similarly, in his tutorial on creating “mirror shields,” Luger explains the materials and steps necessary to make six shields using a single sheet of Masonite.¹⁸⁰ He urges the viewers to send their creations to the camps at Standing Rock, where protectors will use them to both protect their bodies from the water and chemicals weaponized against them and reflect the image of the police officers and security guards hired by Energy Transfer. By providing these tutorials on their respective websites, Murdoch, Belcourt, and Luger extended their reach beyond the NoDAPL camps to a broader demographic.

In “Art, Affect, and Social Media in the ‘No Dakota Access Pipeline’ Movement,” scholar Robyn Lee explores how social media shapes affective engagement in activism.¹⁸¹ To do so, she analyzes the Mirror Shield Project created by the artist Cannupa Hanska Luger in response to the NoDAPL movement (Fig. 8). Born on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota, Cannupa Hanska Luger is a Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara and Lakota artist and a member of the Three Affiliated Tribes of Fort Berthold.¹⁸² In 2016, inspired by photos of women activists in Ukraine, Luger created a tutorial on how to create affordable, easy-to-make mirror shields to use

¹⁷⁹ Onaman Collective, “Isaac Murdoch & Christi Belcourt Banners,” Onaman Collective, accessed June 2, 2024, <http://onamancollective.com/murdoch-belcourt-banner-downloads/>; Onaman Collective, “How to Assemble Protest Banners,” 2016, video, 6:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXsTvorMogY>.

¹⁸⁰ Cannupa Hanska Luger, “How to Build Mirror Shields for Standing Rock Water Protectors,” filmed and edited by Razelle Benally, November 13, 2016, video, 4:43, <https://vimeo.com/191394747>.

¹⁸¹ Lee, “Art, Affect, and Social Media.”

¹⁸² Cannupa Hanska Luger, “Bio,” Cannupa Hanska Luger, <https://www.cannupahanska.com/social-engagement/mirror-shield-project>.

at the Standing Rock camps during actions. Through a tutorial he shared on social media, he invited people to build mirror shields that would be used for frontline actions at the camps. The project inspired the creation of more than a thousand mirrored shields, which were then transported to the Oceti Sakowin Camp.¹⁸³ Since the dismantling of the Standing Rock camps, the Mirror Shield Project has been adapted to support other resistance movements across the world. Lee argues that Luger's Mirror Shield Project utilized social media in order to support direct action, thus demonstrating how physical and digital activism are linked.¹⁸⁴ The Mirror Shield Project highlights how Indigenous-led activism against pipelines on Turtle Island has relied on social media to mobilize engagement and frontline action. Lee also argues that Luger's project works as a type of "alterlife," a concept introduced by scholar Michelle Murphy in "Against Population, Towards Alterlife."¹⁸⁵ She proposes that the mirrors illustrate the past and present, showing us our current reality ("the racist history of settler colonialism, dispossession of Indigenous lands, environmental destruction"), while also generating new possibilities and forms of relationality.¹⁸⁶

Dissemination

The patches distributed at the Standing Rock camps and the online tutorials shared by Cannupa Hanska Luger and the Onaman Collective represent only a small fraction of the varied means of dissemination utilized during the NoDAPL. One significant aspect of how water protection images were shared throughout the movement is the way they were made readily accessible online. Indeed, Dylan Miner's *No Pipeline on Indigenous Land*, Isaac Murdoch's *Thunderbird Woman*, and Christi Belcourt's *Thunderbird Woman's Mom (Water is Life)* were all shared online

¹⁸³ Luger, "Mirror Shield Project."

¹⁸⁴ Lee, "Art, Affect, and Social Media."

¹⁸⁵ Clarke and Haraway, *Making Kin Not Population*; Lee, "Art, Affect, and Social Media," 181-2.

¹⁸⁶ Lee, "Art, Affect, and Social Media," 188.

to be downloaded for free and used during water protection actions. When the Onaman Collective released their series of banner designs in solidarity with Standing Rock, they made the images available on their website in PDF and JPG format. On that website, Belcourt and Murdoch explicitly grant people permission to download and use their banner images for water and land protection. They specify that the images are for non-profit, non-commercial use only.¹⁸⁷ Similarly, Dylan Miner's anti-extraction graphic *No Pipelines on Indigenous Land* is also readily available online. Indeed, while his website does not clearly state that the image is available to download for free, Miner has shared the graphic on the Justseeds Artists Cooperative's website, which is known for offering images for free download to support direct action. In a blog post shared on Justseeds on August 23, 2016, Miner encourages readers to download and share a selection of his graphics, including *No Pipelines on Indigenous Land*, all of which he created in solidarity with Standing Rock.¹⁸⁸ Miner, Murdoch, and Belcourt made their banner designs readily accessible to the public and, by doing so, provided anyone involved in protests and water actions, including social media activists, with images that would help garner solidarity.

Streeby argues that, in addition to the activities at the Standing Rock camps, the efforts of the water protectors and their allies to collectively imagine an alternative future beyond the fossil fuel economy were evident in how they organized online.¹⁸⁹ She argues that part of how water protectors and their allies worked to protect Mni Sose was through their use of social media.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (and many other actors involved in the movement) disseminated their message, "Mni Wiconi" or "Water is Life," across social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Indigenous women, such as LaDonna Brave Bull

¹⁸⁷ Onaman Collective, "Isaac Murdoch & Christi Belcourt Banners."

¹⁸⁸ Miner, "No Pipelines on Indigenous Land."

¹⁸⁹ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 40-41.

¹⁹⁰ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 40.

Allard, and Indigenous youth, including Bobi Jean Three Legs, Montgomery Brown, and Joseph White Eyes, who organized a nearly three thousand-mile relay run to deliver a petition against the DAPL to the White House, were at the forefront of these online organizing efforts.¹⁹¹ In “From #Mniwiconi to #StandwithStandingRock,” scholar Nicholet Deschine Parkhurst (Lakota, Diné) analyzes the role that social media played in the NoDAPL movement.¹⁹² Informed by her own experience in the Oceti Sakowin camp and participation in the movement, she argues that, during the NoDAPL, social media activism helped gather both virtual and physical solidarity across nations with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. Beyond disseminating information and raising consciousness, social media activism helped protestors organize and physically gather at the Oceti Sakowin camp. Funds were solicited through social media platforms to procure supplies and to post bail for individuals who were arrested and charged. Convoys departed from urban centers, transporting people and supplies to the front lines. The water protection imagery created in support of the movement helped solidify this impetus of solidarity. The designs created by Miner, Murdoch, Belcourt, and Luger, along with the numerous photographs taken of their works in action, provided readily accessible images that social media activists could use to garner attention for the movement.

Notably, in his interview with Hyperallergic, Cannupa Hanska Luger highlights how Standing Rock required a different approach to image-making than protests in cities.¹⁹³ Indeed, whereas direct actions in urban environments are witnessed by a large number of people, the NoDAPL camps were isolated. The only people witnessing (first-hand) the on-the-ground resistance to the DAPL were the water protectors, their allies, and the police and security hired

¹⁹¹ Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change*, 40.

¹⁹² Deschine Parkhurst, “From #Mniwiconi to #StandwithStandingRock,” 32–47.

¹⁹³ Vartanian, “The Roles of Art and Artists at the Pipeline Protests in North Dakota,” 30:23-31:36.

by Energy Transfer. Due to this context, water protectors had to employ various methods to increase their visibility, including social media organizing. Moreover, the isolated nature of the Standing Rock camps augmented the ruthlessness of the police who, in the absence of bystanders, escalated the violence against water protectors.¹⁹⁴ Part of the reason why Luger designed the mirror shields was to physically protect the bodies of people on the frontline. Similarly, in the same interview, artist Jesse Hazelip highlights how art at Standing Rock was used in a “protective manner,” with water protectors using not just Luger’s mirrors but also banners to shield themselves from the police’s water cannons. Like Luger, he compares the role of banners in the city to the imagery used at the NoDAPL camps. Hazelip states, “Normally you're making banners to carry in a protest so the city can see it, but there's no city here to see it [...] it's just it's a direct message to the oppressor.”¹⁹⁵

Notably, I choose to ignore how the images created by the artists I discuss have been displayed in art institutions and exhibition spaces more broadly. While significant from an art historical perspective, this aspect of how the images were disseminated had little impact on how water protectors and their allies collectively imagined the future. My lack of interest can be partly explained by the types of audiences targeted by art and cultural exhibitions. I believe that the galleries that “mattered” during the NoDAPL movement were not the exhibition spaces that displayed Miner’s graphics, the Onaman Collective’s banners, or photographs of Luger’s mirrors on their plain white walls but, instead, the organic sites of display that people created as they marched, demonstrated, and occupied. During the NoDAPL movement, the streets and the Standing Rock camps became art spaces where both artists and non-artists shared and displayed their creative work. Nonetheless, over time, through their circulation on social media, the water

¹⁹⁴ Vartanian, “The Roles of Art and Artists at the Pipeline Protests in North Dakota,” 30:23-31:36.

¹⁹⁵ Vartanian, “The Roles of Art and Artists at the Pipeline Protests in North Dakota,” 43:19-44:29.

protection images created in solidarity with Standing Rock have become mnemonic devices to remind the public of the direct action taken by the Lakota people and their allies.

Conclusion

I feel like the first thing I want to say is just that it feels like home. It's gorgeous. It feels like prayer. It feels like peace. [...] People aren't saying 'this is all peaceful, it's all beautiful' because that wouldn't quite be the right message. Because it's not. Because it's complex. I mean, there's layers to it all. I mean, it's also aggressive and it's hostile and it's terrifying and it's difficult, but... But for me personally, I just feel like the first layer that I would want to communicate is that it's beautiful, it's calm, it's peaceful, it's nourishing. I feel fed. I feel full like an enlivened, full human being.¹⁹⁶

In *Beyond the World's End*, Demos points out how the “#NoDAPL’s accomplishment, even if yet to be fully realized, offers a glimpse of one possible emancipatory future and a vision beyond the end of one actually existing world.”¹⁹⁷ The movement’s impact extends beyond its immediate results, and its full extent remains to be seen. In “From #Mniwiconi to #StandwithStandingRock,” Nicholet Deschine Parkhurst proposes that we should not measure the success of the NoDAPL movement in terms of whether the minds of the federal government and ETP were changed or in terms of whether the pipeline was stopped or rerouted. She states,

When we look outside of transforming ETP’s behavior, we can see alternate ways in which the #NoDAPL movement was transformative by raising consciousness of people and solidarity around the world, building virtual and physical communities, centering Indigenous voices and representations, disrupting public spheres, and creating communities of change.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ Vartanian, “The Roles of Art and Artists at the Pipeline Protests in North Dakota,” 48:37-49:42.

¹⁹⁷ Demos, *Beyond the World's End*, 179.

¹⁹⁸ Deschine Parkhurst, “From #Mniwiconi to #StandwithStandingRock,” 42.

While the NoDAPL movement did not succeed in stopping the construction of the pipeline or in altering the behaviour of Energy Transfer Partners, Standing Rock was nevertheless successful in raising the consciousness of people and solidarity across the globe. Indeed, during the many months that people lived in the Oceti Sakowin Camp, the NoDAPL movement garnered attention from all over Turtle Island and around the world. In the fall of 2016, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe received dozens of resolutions and letters that expressed solidarity with the tribe and their fight against the construction of the DAPL. During her time living in the same area as the Oceti Sakowin Camp, Deschine Parkhurst recorded numerous instances of groups visiting the camp to express their solidarity, including clergy members, people of faith, and veterans. Apart from the individuals and groups who visited the Oceti Sakowin Camp, Māori people across Aotearoa (New Zealand) were uploading videos of themselves performing haka in solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.¹⁹⁹ At the same time, a Facebook group called Haka with Standing Rock, which had over 11,000 members in 2016, was created.²⁰⁰

The impetus of solidarity generated at Standing Rock, in part due to the images created in support of the water protectors and their allies, serves as a perfect example of why we should rethink how we measure the results of the movement, or even whether its success should be measured at all. Deschine Parkhurst's approach to the question of success in the context of the NoDAPL movement aligns with an Indigenous conception of justice that diverges from Western ways of thinking. In "Indigenous Resurgence and Co-resistance," Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues that justice, as a Western concept, is intrinsically linked to settler colonialism. Simpson explains that to her, justice "means the return of land, the regeneration of Indigenous

¹⁹⁹ Deschine Parkhurst, "From #Mniwiconi to #StandwithStandingRock," 37-38.

²⁰⁰ HAKA WITH STANDING ROCK!!!, Facebook, accessed June 2, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1102073623245751>.

political, educational, and knowledge systems, the rehabilitation of the natural world, and the destruction of white supremacy, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy.”²⁰¹ Within settler colonialism, “social justice” gets overwhelmed to the point of paralysis or inaction in the face of those demands. As a result, Simpson does not think about justice as much as she thinks about the concept of resurgence and the possibilities of movement building. Instead of focusing on justice, as Western thought conceives it, Simpson concentrates her energy on “Indigenous resurgence, nation building, addressing gender violence, movement building, linking up and creating constellations of co-resistance with other movements.”²⁰² Because Standing Rock was fundamentally an Indigenous—specifically an Oceti Sakowin—resistance movement, it would be remiss to analyze it through the lens of social justice or to measure its results purely by the binary of success and failure. While some might argue that the movement ended (or failed) with the construction of the pipeline, the resistance against the DAPL was profoundly transformative and remains alive to this day. Water protectors continue to fight against the DAPL, demanding the removal of the pipeline, while also protecting waters from pipelines across the continent.²⁰³

Through their opposition to extractive industries, people from across Turtle Island, especially Indigenous peoples and people of colour who engage in direct action, imagine alternative futures beyond the fossil fuel economy. Water protection images, through their iconography, production, and dissemination, play an essential role in envisioning those futures.

²⁰¹ Simpson, “Indigenous Resurgence and Co-Resistance,” 21.

²⁰² Simpson, “Indigenous Resurgence and Co-Resistance,” 21. The concept of “co-resistance” provides an interesting framework to think about solidarity in non-Western terms. Although I do not actively engage with the concept of “co-resistance” in this text, I want to identify this framework as an area for further research within the topics of pipeline resistance and solidarity across nations.

²⁰³ Nayanika Guha, “6 Years After Standing Rock, Native Tribes Still Fight Dakota Access Pipeline,” *Truthout*, October 9, 2023, <https://truthout.org/articles/5-years-after-standing-rock-native-tribes-still-fight-dakota-access-pipeline/>; Mary Steurer, “Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Files New LawsUIT over DAPL,” *North Dakota Monitor*, October 14, 2024, <https://northdakotamonitor.com/2024/10/14/standing-rock-sioux-tribe-files-new-lawsuit-over-dapl/>.

The NoDAPL movement and its imagery, particularly the works I discuss in this thesis, are only one example of how direct action images can help organizers create future imaginaries. As settler nation-states such as the so-called United States and Canada continue to ignore the recommendations of water and land protectors and increasingly invest in extractive industries, it is “imperative” that both artists and non-artists continue to collectively imagine and enact alternative futures in the here and now.

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FIGURES

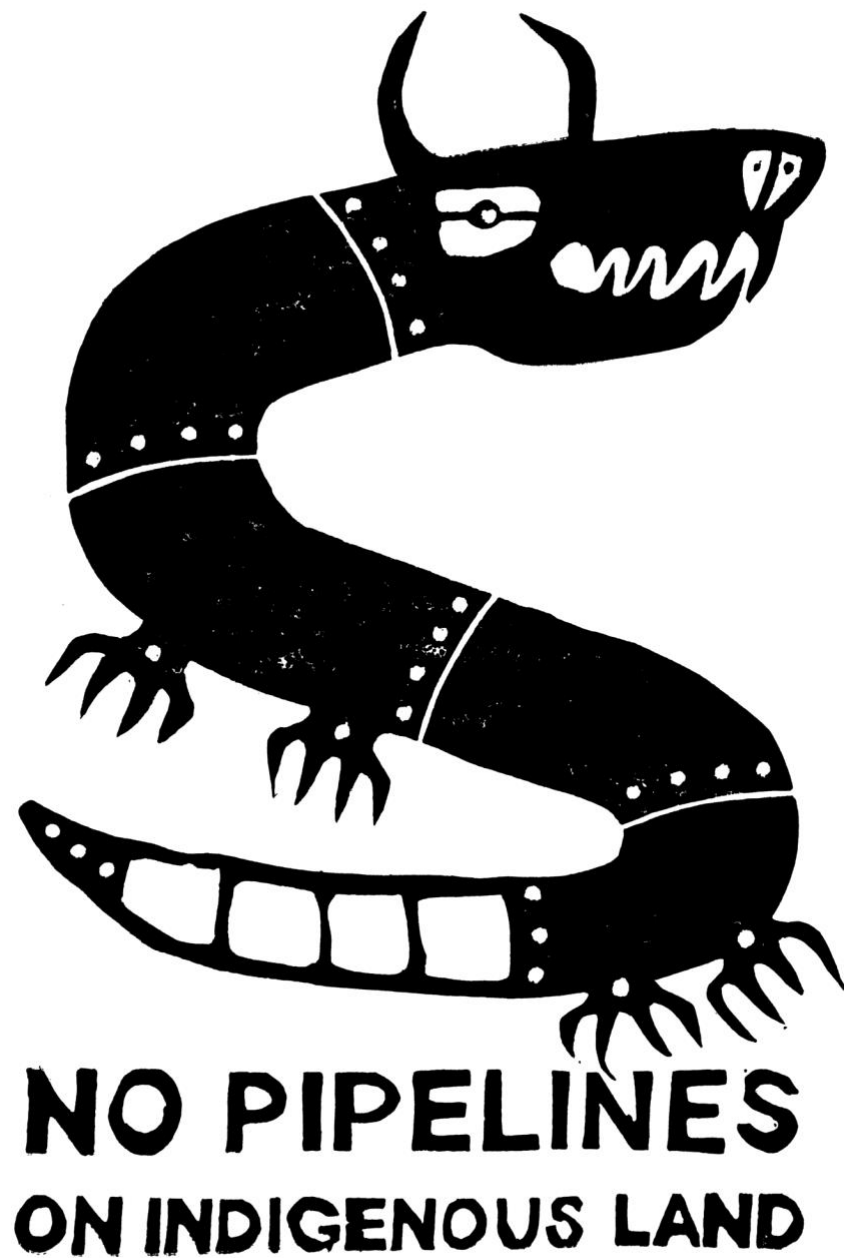


Figure 1. Dylan Miner, *No Pipelines on Indigenous Land*, 2016. Anti-extraction graphic. Image source: Justseeds. "No Pipelines On Indigenous Land." Accessed March 24, 2025. <https://justseeds.org/graphic/no-pipelines-on-indigenous-land/>.



Figure 2. Isaac Murdoch, *Thunderbird Woman*, 2016. Banner design. Image source: Onaman Collective. "Isaac Murdoch & Christi Belcourt Banners." Onaman Collective. Accessed June 2, 2024. <http://onamancollective.com/murdoch-belcourt-banner-downloads/>.



Figure 3. Christi Belcourt, *Thunderbird Woman's Mom (Water is Life)*, 2016. Banner design. Image source: Onaman Collective. "Isaac Murdoch & Christi Belcourt Banners." Onaman Collective. Accessed June 2, 2024. <http://onamancollective.com/murdoch-belcourt-banner-downloads/>.



Figure 4. Elizabeth LaPensée, *Thunderbird Strike*, 2017. Side-scroller game, still image. Image source: LaPensée, Elizabeth. "Thunderbird Strike." *Thunderbird Strike: A Lightning Searing Sidescroller*, April 30, 2017. <https://www.thunderbirdstrike.com/stories>.



Figure 5. Nicolas Lampert, Art Tent, Oceti Sakowin Camp, Standing Rock, November 2016. Photograph of the exterior of the art tent at the Oceti Sakowin Camp. Image source: Lampert, Nicolas. "Art Activism." Nicolas Lampert, accessed April 4, 2025. <https://www.nicolaslampert.org>.



Figure 6. Nicolas Lampert, Art Tent, Oceti Sakowin Camp, Standing Rock, November 2016. Photograph of the inside of the art tent at the Oceti Sakowin Camp. Image source: Lampert, Nicolas. "Art Activism." Nicolas Lampert, accessed April 4, 2025. <https://www.nicolaslampert.org>.



Figure 7. Nicolas Lampert, Art Tent, Oceti Sakowin Camp, Standing Rock, November 2016. Photograph of the inside of the art tent at the Oceti Sakowin Camp. Image source: Lampert, Nicolas. "Art Activism." Nicolas Lampert, accessed April 4, 2025. <https://www.nicolaslampert.org>.



Figure 8. Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Mirror Shield Project*, 2016. Photograph of mirror shields at the Standing Rock camps. Image source: Luger, Cannupa Hanska. "Mirror Shield Project." Cannupa Hanska Luger, n.d. <https://www.cannupahanska.com/social-engagement/mirror-shield-project>.