

# Native North America in Motion

## Performances of Resistance and Resilience

*Ashlyn King Barnett*



### Walking

For my ancestors, the Maidu and Konkow peoples of Northern California, walking has been a longtime source of knowledge production. In the Maidu origin story, our ancestral homelands were created through walking. The Maidu community also created knowledge by walking. It was through the act of walking the land that they generated knowledge of acorn gathering, hunting, and fishing. Traditionally, Maidu women walked all day, learning the best places to gather acorns.

### Student Essay Contest Honorable Mention

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The University of Colorado Boulder’s PhD program in Theatre and Performance Studies is committed to Performance as Research as integral to the study of the history, theory, and practice of theatre and performance from around the world. We approach performance simultaneously as an object of study, a way of knowing, and a methodological tool, and are invested in the ways in which it can help us better understand—and challenge—the complicated legacies of our own academic disciplines and artistic practices. We also produce a robust season of plays each academic year, ranging from classical texts to newly devised work, and our faculty and students play an active role in several community engagement programs.

Our men wandered on foot, searching for deer, or for the perfect salmon fishing spot along Butte Creek. I grew up walking to that very creek. Each fall I saw my family and community members walk miles every day: to fish, to swim, to work, or to collect ammunition for our infamous acorn wars (a game that would leave us kids covered in acorn-sized welts and bruises). I saw that walking was still a vital part of the Maidu community, our traditions, our meaning-making, and our way of life.

As a young adult, it made sense that I was drawn to long-distance walking. I walked 2,600 miles from Mexico to Canada, through California, Oregon, and Washington on the Pacific Crest Trail. The next year I walked from Georgia to Maine on the Appalachian Trail. The year after that I went from Mexico to Canada again, this time along the Continental Divide. I have also walked the length of both Arizona and the Pacific Northwest. These walks have taught me so much about the land, about determination, pain, and persistence; but they have also transformed my methodology as a researcher and shaped my understanding of knowledge and theory production, as well as Indigenous performance itself.

### Long-Distance Walking as Performative Sovereignty

Long-distance walking is a long-held and invaluable form of Indigenous knowledge production. What is this knowledge that could be generated and understood through walking? Long-distance walking is not only a practice of performance, but of performative sovereignty for Native peoples. What can this new understanding of walking tell us about the ways in which Indigenous peoples create and embody theory and sacred knowledge? I engage with these ideas with the primary goal of privileging Indigenous epistemologies, experiences, and sovereignty.

As noted by Jaye T. Darby, Courtney Elkin Mohler, and Christy Stanlake, there are “multiple dimensions of sovereignty” (2020:11). The term can often reference political and legal issues regarding self-governance. *Sovereignty* also refers to cultural self-determination. In “Self-Determination and the Concept of Sovereignty,” Standing Rock Sioux scholar and writer Vine Deloria, Jr. explains that “sovereignty can be said to consist more of continued cultural integrity than of political powers and to the degree that a nation loses its sense of cultural identity, to that degree it suffers a loss of sovereignty” (1979:27). He continues: “Sovereignty then revolves around the manner in which traditions are developed, sustained, and transformed to confront new conditions” (27). Thus, a Native story,

*Figure 1. (previous page) The author walking on traditional Mountain Maidu land, in what is now the Plumas National Forest in Northern California. September, 2018. (Photo courtesy of Ashlyn King Barnett)*

play, or walking performance can be described as enacting sovereignty. As Courtney Elkin Mohler describes it: “Centering our stories disrupts the monolithic imperial power structures that yearn for total domination” (2019:164–65).

In applying sovereignty to analyses of performance, Darby, Mohler, and Stanlake identify a concept they call “performative sovereignty” (2020:11). Relying on the work of Paula Gunn Allen to assert the usefulness of storytelling in contesting colonialism, they explain what performative sovereignty means to them: “In the case of Native theatre and performance, sovereignty exists not just in the creation of the performance texts. Sovereignty is literally embodied and performed publicly within a live community gathered for the production” (1998:12–13). To that end, Indigenous long-distance walks can be called performances of sovereignty in that they engage tribal-centered methodologies of resistance and cultural resurgence.

To develop a tribal-centered methodology for producing and analyzing uniquely Indigenous performances of resistance and resurgence rooted in long-distance walking, I begin at the crux of methodology itself: theory, or story. My story engages with two walking performances of sovereignty. The Anishinaabe Mother Earth Water Walkers and the 2016 Standing Rock youth movement both perform sovereignty by sustaining, reclaiming, and transforming Native cultural traditions and contexts to overcome colonial trauma and uplift Native communities.

In 2003, Josephine Mandamin and Mary Anne Caibaiosai organized the first of over a dozen yearly Mother Earth Water Walks. They gathered a few women from various Anishinaabe tribes and traced, on foot, the circumference of Lake Superior, starting and finishing in Bad River, Wisconsin. The roughly 1,200-mile loop took the group a month to complete and became an annual tradition. The Mother Earth Water Walkers eventually walked the circumference of all five Great Lakes plus Lakes Winnebago and Monona in Wisconsin.

The One Mind Youth Movement is an organization founded by Jasilyn Charger of the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota. She founded One Mind to give Native youths a support group and to help them “blossom into the sacred flowers of life they are” (OMYM n.d.). One Mind played a large role in the successful 2015 protests against the Keystone XL Pipeline, whose proposed route would have crossed under the Cheyenne River upstream of the reservation. In 2016, the group staged a 500-mile walking performance to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline, whose purpose was to transport oil underneath the Missouri River, just upstream of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, as well as many other Sioux reservations downstream.

## Theory vs. Story

Settler educational institutions, primarily the university, rely on a hierarchy of knowledge in which theory and perceived objective truths reign over stories, myths, and felt experiences. In her essay “There Is a River in Me,” Athabascan scholar Dian Million unravels this hierarchy by elucidating Indigenous stories, worldviews, and systems of knowledge as theory: “they posit a proposition and a paradigm on how the world works” (2014:35). Because Indigenous stories and narratives revolve around subjective felt experience, they have been dismissed and deemed invalid by settler institutions proclaiming the existence of so-called objective knowledge. Indigenous peoples have always been creators of knowledge, tellers of stories, and these stories have always been “practical, strategic, and restorative” (35). Indigenous stories present theories on why the world works the way it does and offer coded knowledge on how to act in, perform within, and perceive this world. Stories and myths contain vital knowledge for Indigenous communities’ health and continued survival. They tell you when to plant and harvest certain foods and how to engage in respectful relationships of reciprocity with the land and with each other.

Indigenous stories, or what Million theorizes as Indigenous narrative, are first and foremost practical. It is also strategic in that it “engages in questioning and reformulating those stories that account for the relations of power in our present” (33). Indigenous theory is always repositioning, reformulating, and re-explaining the felt experiences of Native peoples and strategically reprioritizing

Indigenous perspectives in response to the questions “What is happening” and “Why.” Narrative theory reveals new meaning in the face of shifting and transforming worlds, shapeshifting itself to remain useful and relevant to Indigenous peoples. Indigenous narrative theory is also restorative, in that it upholds Native sovereignty of land, heart, body, and nation above all else. As Million writes, “the stories, unlike data, contain the affective legacy of our experiences” (32). This legacy of subjective experiences contained in narrative theory asserts the legitimacy, vibrancy, and indestructibility of Indigenous systems of knowledge. Privileging this knowledge, even within the settler institutional setting, is vital to Native sovereignty.

## Indigenous Body-Logic

Brendan Hokowhitu’s theory of Indigenous body-logic helps explain how the act of performative walking fits into Indigenous systems of knowledge and theory. Hokowhitu is a Māori scholar and educator at the University of Waikato, Aotearoa/New Zealand. His theory of body-logic engages with Indigenous “corporeal intelligence that resides beyond rational thought and has the conviction to produce subjectivities able to live beyond the taxonomies ascribed by colonization” (2016:99). The term encapsulates how Indigenous bodily practices and performances operate outside of standard Western dichotomies, seeking to “disrupt the physical/metaphysical binary and mind/body duality” (99). Body-logic is what Indigenous narrative theory *feels* like in the moment of its enactment. Rather than writing down or preserving the Indigenous systems of knowledge that Million mentions, Hokowhitu’s body-logic generates theory through performance and the immediacy of felt Native experience in the body. Body-logic turns theory into a verb, a performed action: something that happens every day when Native bodies react to what is happening to them. It assumes presettler Indigenous metaphysical realities in its practice but allows this knowledge to transform and express itself through a contemporary Native body in a modern colonized world.

Indigenous body-logic sees the body itself as a holistic producer of material thought. Hokowhitu positions Indigenous body-logic as an alternative for Indigenous scholars who continue to lock themselves into the colonizer/colonized binary, which aids the continual production of a recognizable Indigenous population. Once recognizable in the eyes of the colonizer, an Indigenous population is subject to state control. Indigenous body-logic, however, constructs knowledge outside of settler-colonial binaries by reasserting Indigenous “metaphysical genealogies” and reappropriating and recoding Indigenous myth so there is “no genealogical distance between nature, corporeality, and knowledge” (Hokowhitu 2016:98). The differences between theory and practice, ceremony and performance, and mind and body completely disappear. Body-logic tears Indigenous knowledge out of a romanticized presettler past. Hokowhitu explains that “believing Indigenous peoples have devolved since colonization implies that postcolonized Indigenous ontologies are inherently less than pre-colonial ways of being” (86). This essentialist idea of presettler legitimacy and authenticity is rejected by Indigenous body-logic, which asserts Native subjective reality here and now as the expression and performance of fully authentic and potent Indigeneity. Body-logic affirms that Indigenous peoples today have not lost something essential to their identities, are not missing something authentic from presettler time, and that the felt experience of Native bodies is legitimate Indigenous knowledge.

Long-distance walking is an example of body-logic in performative praxis. While performing long-distance walking, one is simultaneously producing theory and performing it. This walking theory subverts and transcends settler-colonial taxonomies of knowledge that dominate educational institutions and instead privileges Indigenous bodies (pardon the pun) of knowledge. Through this form of body-logic, the political materialism of Indigenous bodily practices isn’t separated from Indigenous metaphysical genealogies. Myth, knowledge, theory, history, ghosts, songs, chants...all are contained in the body and free themselves through walking. Walking, as a methodology and a form of body-logic, frees Indigeneity from the halls of settler institutions, from the colonizer/colonized taxonomy, and places it in the immediacy of an Indigenous body. Walking is a manifestation of the biopolitical power of Indigenous bodily knowledge. Each step generates theory. Each step is a performance of contemporary Indigenous reality and authenticity of experience.



## Relationality, or Walking With

Walking is not only a way to produce Indigenous knowledge and create worlds, but is also a relational act and a collective performance. In the introduction to her book, *Presente!*, Diana Taylor writes about her own walking practice as “an embodied form of engagement with others that takes us beyond the disciplined and restrictive ways of knowing and acting that our Eurocentric traditions offer us” (2020:23–24). Taylor’s research involves walking with and alongside Indigenous communities in Central America and Mexico. She centers her research around the knowledge created through being in movement with others. She understands walking in its Indigenous sense: as deeply relational. It is through the action of walking *with* that she engages those she meets along the way. Walking together creates a relational bond in which you are tied to the outcome of another’s movements. There is a shared goal. My grandmothers, Maidu and Konkow women setting out to gather necessities for the community, did not do so alone. They went with their sisters, cousins, neighbors, and daughters. While they walked, they produced knowledge of sustenance, survival, topography, and geography. This knowledge was produced for the entire community, not for each individual. And the entire community was reliant upon the information.

As Margaret Kovach writes, “a relational research approach is built upon the collective value of giving back to the community” (2010:149). My ancestors knew this. As they walked, they gathered knowledge that benefited their community and their world. Walking *with*, as Taylor points out, creates a chain linking the walkers to one another and to the knowledge produced together. This relational chain is in opposition to the *modus operandi* of settler-colonial research, in which a researcher will enter a community, use the population to create and generate knowledge, then return to the lab, never to be heard from again. Because of this extractive practice, Indigenous communities have grown intensely weary and distrustful of researchers. Alternatively, with the relational nature of an Indigenous walking performance comes responsibility. The knowledge produced must always be useful for the Indigenous community. Walking together, generating knowledge collectively, and bringing that knowledge back to the community are key aspects of what differentiates Indigenous walking performance from settler-colonial modes of knowledge production.

Relational walking practices differ from top-down colonial knowledge that the elite few create and hold, then impose downward on local communities. Indigenous walking practices generate knowledge from the ground up, producing knowledge by and for local communities rather than the elite few. This is attributed to the relational necessity of Indigenous methodologies. If you do not walk with and for your community, you walk against it. The performance of walking *with* is political in that it places power back in the hands of communities and negates the stronghold of settler institutions of knowledge. Producing relational knowledge by walking with is an inclusive practice directly inverse to the exclusivity of colonial knowledge production. Relational knowledge production reminds communities of their responsibilities to each other.

## Relationship to Land

Responsibility to our communities is not the only responsibility Indigenous walking performers uphold. Both of the long-distance walking performances I engage with here take on the responsibility to restore an Indigenous relationship to the land. Obligations and service to the land and to the animals who live upon it is the Maidu way, and similar relationships to land are at the root of Indigenous epistemologies across North America. Cherokee Nation scholar Daniel Heath Justice argues that “nothing matters more” than “Indigenous peoples’ complex and overlapping sets of relationships, obligations, legacies, loyalties, and languages” that are necessarily “dependent on specific *places* and their meaningful histories” (2016:21). Nothing matters more than the relationship between Indigenous peoples and place, as place is the holder of inextricably deep and complicated systems of meaning. This is the very reason, Justice argues, that “colonialism in its myriad forms is fundamentally invested in undoing those relationships to place and imposing new, extractive structures in their stead” (22). Restoring Indigenous relationships to land and place is vital to any decolonizing performance. The act of long-distance walking reminds those who walk of our dependency on and connection to the land.

## Settler State Boundaries

Indigenous long-distance walking performances seek to decolonize the human relationship to land and place, as seen through the revitalization of Indigenous ways of relating to land through respect and reciprocity. Such decolonizing efforts can also be seen by taking a deeper look at the relationship between Indigenous walking practices and settler state borders. In his essay “Making Peoples into



*Figure 2. Photo of sign at the California-Oregon state border taken on the author's 2014 thru-hike of the Pacific Crest Trail, where the trail crosses from California to Oregon near Ashland, OR. August, 2014. (Photo courtesy of Ashlyn King Barnett)*

Populations,” Mark Rifkin questions the “presumptive coherence of US legal geography” (2014:161). According to Rifkin, “the hyperbolic, and somewhat hysterical, reiteration of the obviousness of the contours of US territory testifies to a sense of the logical and normative tenuousness of that very claim in light of prior Native occupancy” (161). This “somewhat hysterical reiteration” becomes strikingly apparent when walking across settler-colonial state borders. As I have stood on the United States/Mexico territorial borders in Campo, California, and in the Bootheel of New Mexico, the daunting chain-link fences prohibited me from walking south. I have also hiked across state borders, and even in the middle of a forest, glaring signs of “California/Oregon border” or “Colorado/Wyoming state line” persistently reminded me that I was held in place within the seemingly rigid boundaries of the settler state. Such a fixation on borders does seem to betray a sense of “self-conscious tenuousness,” as Rifkin suggests (161).

Borders aid the settler state in authorizing its jurisdiction and when those borders are in question, so too is the extent of state dominion and control. This

tenuousness becomes even more clear when walking through Native nations divided between two settler-colonial states or countries, such as with the Ojibwe or Mohawk Nations. In these cases, settler-colonial nations such as the United States and Canada rely on the jurisdictional interiority of these tribal nations in order to produce tribal dependence on the settler nations' governance. Long-distance walking performances that actively cross these imposed borders engage in a decolonizing performance against a state power that has sought to subjugate Indigenous sovereignty through the creation of said borders and boundaries. Such performances call attention to the fact that these colonial borders are not objective, timeless truths, but rather imposed, subjective, superficial, and violent nontruths.

The settler-colonial empire emits a gaze that is carried within the bodies of Indigenous peoples. The result of this gaze is what Anishinaabek scholar and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson refers to as “the unspoken shame we carry collectively” (2011:13). This shame is carried within the body, and the physicality of walking through the land in a space of cognitive freedom can begin to alleviate this embodied, collective Native feeling of shame. Through walking the land together, cultural resurgence is safely born for Indigenous peoples. Indigenous knowledge can bloom and grow safely, outside of the cage of the colonial gaze. Through this space of cognitive and bodily freedom Indigenous long-distance walkers can “come to understand the Earth as their Mother” and “come to understand the Earth as themselves” (36). This knowledge is a true resurgence of Indigenous relationships to the land. The intimate relationship between Native peoples and the Earth is born of sacred tribal knowledge, and also of spending intimate time with the land itself. Long-distance walking—spending every waking moment with the land for long periods of time—allows walkers to connect to the Earth’s “seasons, her moods and her cycles” (36). This, in turn, connects Indigenous walkers to tribal teachings, tribal knowledge, and tribal lifeways, all of which enable sovereignty.

## The Anishinaabe Mother Earth Water Walkers

Relationship to land is central to Anishinaabe thought systems and since the land is in a constant process of change, that relationship continues to change. That which is meaningful in nature becomes so due to its context, its course, its process. Simpson points out that in Anishinaabe cultures, meaning “is derived from context, including the depth of relationships” (2011:91). Meaning expands from relationships: with spirit, with family, with community, and with the land. The meaning within these relationships is process-based and is in constant flux. But like the land, the goal is to be fluid, “with the flux” (91). The goal is “to experience changing forms, and to develop a relationship with the forces of change, thus creating harmony” (91). Relational meaning is essential to the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge, and something that long-distance walking embodies daily. Long-distance walking is a slow, intentional, always moving process. Long-distance walking teaches us how to find balance and harmony in an ever-changing landscape. Simpson asserts that “modern society primarily looks for meaning in books, computers, and art, whereas Indigenous cultures engage in processes or acts to create meaning” (93). Long-distance walking is meaning *making*. It is a process of *becoming*, not a product. The process of *how* one walks is important, and that is where resurgence springs from.

The Anishinaabe Mother Earth Water Walkers provide an example of how long-distance walking can function as a performance of sovereignty. The Mother Earth Water Walks began in 2003 with two Anishinaabe Grandmothers and a group of Anishinaabe women and men who decided to take action regarding water pollution issues in the Great Lakes. Josephine Mandamin and Violet Caibaiosae (respected elders from Manitoulin Island and Thunder Bay) envisioned not just a protest, nor simply a resistance movement, but rather an act of performative sovereignty and Anishinaabe resurgence. They organized a long-distance walking performance. In 2003, the group walked the circumference of Lake Superior. The following year, Lake Michigan. After that, Lake Huron. They continued annually until they had walked the circumferences of all five Great Lakes (MEWW n.d.).

The Mother Earth Water Walks draw on a long history of mobilization and foot travel among the Anishinaabe, a group of Indigenous communities connected by culture, geography, and language, which includes the Ojibwe nations. As Simpson reminds us, the Anishinaabe ancestors “were able to maintain a strategic and organized mass mobilization over an incredibly long period of time” (2011:65). The very first Anishinaabe prophecy calls for the people of the community to mobilize in the face of colonialism’s imminent destruction of their culture. Mobilization as an act of cultural survival is the fountainhead instruction for Anishinaabe communities. Mandamin and Caibaiosae rely on this instruction in the face of colonialism’s latest destruction: the sacred water of the Great Lakes (called *nibi* in Ojibwe, a language spoken widely across Anishinaabe tribes). As Scott Richard Lyons points out, Indigenous migration generates diversity as it supplements and

blends the traditional knowledges with newer, contemporary ceremonies, stories, and relationships (2010:4). Movement is resurgent because it propels new life and new contexts for cultural meaning. He also writes that this diversity afforded the Ojibwe people “some protection against the forces of colonialism because different pockets of [the] nation were able to continue aspects of their culture and lifeways that others were not” (4). This tactic is utilized by the Mother Earth Water Walkers. The walks rely on traditional Ojibwe knowledge and practices but, because of the migratory nature of walking itself, the Water Walks engender a diversity that asserts a growing and flourishing contemporary Anishinaabe culture. The Water Walks celebrate and uphold the old traditions while also creating new traditions, with new people, ultimately expanding and nurturing Ojibwe and the larger Anishinaabe culture.

An example of the tribal-centric diversity that mobilization brings lies in the Mother Earth Water Walkers’ practice of singing traditional Ojibwe *nibi* prayer songs. The songs are rooted in Anishinaabe culture—in the Anishinaabe perspective. These are old songs, sung in the Ojibwe language, expressing what it means to be Ojibwe and what water means to the Ojibwe people. They are sung throughout the day as the walkers move along the water’s edge. The Mother Earth Water Walkers, now well known throughout the Great Lakes district amongst Native and non-Native communities, welcome anyone who wants to come walk alongside them for a day. People from various tribes, and many non-Native people as well, join in the walking and in the singing. Thus, it isn’t uncommon to have a diverse group of walkers singing Ojibwe *nibi* prayer songs led by an Anishinaabe elder. This creates what Simpson refers to as “pockets” of places and people who can begin to understand how the Ojibwe relate to water and how they pray to it (2011:92). This keeps that aspect of Ojibwe culture alive, even in the face of colonialism, encouraging a resurgence of the Ojibwe knowledge of their relation to water.

The Water Walks also restore Anishinaabe ways of relating to the land. Modeling themselves after the Anishinaabe ancestors, the Water Walkers choose to walk with the seasons. Mandamin and Caibaiosae set out on the first Mother Earth Water Walk in the spring because spring is the time for “natural regrowth of our natural habitat,” and “it is a time for renewal, re-growth, and re-birth” (MEWW n.d.). The walkers learn to model themselves after the land and learn from its teachings. In the Anishinaabe worldview, women are particularly connected to *nibi*. Their life-giving powers reflect those of *nibi*, and when the young women grow to understand the seasons, cycles, and moods of their land, of *nibi*, they will in turn understand their own. When the young women understand this connection, “they will understand that they are sacred and beautiful. They will understand that they must take care of themselves, and that they are the mothers to generations yet to be born” (Simpson 2011:37). This understanding leads to and nurtures life and Anishinaabe sovereignty.

Every woman, young and old, who joins the Annual Water Walk, even just for a day, must take part in the carrying of the water pail. As women are the traditional Anishinaabe caretakers and keepers of the water, it is only the women amongst the Water Walkers who take part in the ceremony. At the start of the Annual Water Walk, the Anishinaabe Grandmothers fill up a copper pail with water. The pail must never stop moving until the ceremony is ended that evening with a traditional cleansing ritual. The pail can move slower or faster, but it cannot stop moving, just as water is a life-giving force that must constantly move. The women take turns passing it off to one another, carrying it for as little or as long as they choose. Simpson writes about the importance of passing these teachings to the younger Anishinaabe generations: “we do this for our young women so they will be guided by our Mother’s wisdom and so they will model themselves after this Earth. So that together, we might be a strong nation again” (2011:37).

The Mother Earth Water Walkers practice carrying the water, but they also learn to become *one* with the water. Each day they walk like water: moving continuously all day long until they reach their destination. Oneness with the spirit of *nibi* extends past the water itself, and into other aspects of the land. The Water Walkers are walking for the water, but also for the land, and all humans and nonhumans who depend upon it. The walk is for Anishinaabe peoples and the Ojibwe Nation’s sovereignty.





Figure 3. Ribbons hanging from flags in Oceti Sakowin camp, Standing Rock, Dakota Access Pipeline protests, 25 November 2016. (Photo by Becker1999, Creative Commons)

Like Anishinaabe thought systems, the Mother Earth Water Walks are process- rather than product-based. For Mandamin and Caibaiosae, the purpose of the Water Walks is the walking itself. The process of singing Ojibwe nibi songs, speaking the prayers, laying down sacred tobacco, and carrying the pail of water together create Anishinaabe knowledge and relationships. Finding balance and harmony within the constantly changing forces of life—that is what being “process-oriented” means, and what the act of walking *with* the water teaches.

Rather than fighting and resisting the destruction of colonialism from within the system of the settler state (and therefore within the colonizer/colonized binary), resurgence movements such as the Water Walks decolonize and create meaning from Indigenous contexts. Resurgence walks nurture and strengthen Indigenous perspectives from within, moving outwards to expand Indigenous sovereignty. They build a future in which Indigenous peoples flourish in political, cultural, and relational contexts. Moving from Native elders to youth, from Ojibwe territory down to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, Indigenous long-distance walking can not only engender cultural resurgence but also spark resistance.

### **The Standing Rock Youth Movement**

The 2016 Dakota Access Pipeline protests at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation took both the US and its Indigenous nations by storm, with thousands of people, Native and non-Native, making pilgrimage to the protest camp to show solidarity against the pipeline. The protest made national news for months on end and united not only the Sioux Nations, but the larger Native American and international Indigenous communities as well, with “more than three hundred Native nations planting their flags in solidarity at Oceti Sakowin Camp, the largest of several camps” (Estes 2017). Lesser known in the national memory bank is that the Standing Rock protests began with two long-distance walking performances (Elbein 2017).

In 2015, President Obama denied the easement necessary for the pipeline. The company responsible, Energy Transfer Partners, then focused their efforts on building the Dakota Access Pipeline. Upon hearing about this new proposed pipeline Jasilyn Charger and One Mind Youth



Figure 4. Signs in front of Oceti Sakowin Camp, Standing Rock, Dakota Access Pipeline protests, 25 November 2016. (Photo by Becker1999, Creative Commons)

Movement packed up their camp at the Cheyenne River Reservation and moved to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, where youth members needed help convincing tribal elders and the tribal council to develop a resistance strategy.

Charger and One Mind set up a prayer camp called Sacred Stone, much like the one at the Cheyenne River Reservation. After a month they were still receiving very little interest and financial support from the tribal council, and almost no national attention. The youth group knew they needed to do more. “It was important to make the adults see that if you’re going to sit there and argue, we’re gonna go wake up our brothers and sisters,” Charger told *New York Times* reporter Saul Elbein (2017). That is exactly what they did. Bobbi Jean Three Legs, a young mother from Standing Rock, who had experience as a long-distance runner and walker, took it upon herself to organize a long-distance performance from the Sacred Stone Camp at Standing Rock, to Omaha, Nebraska: nearly 500 miles. The walk would be relay-style, with different youth members taking on different legs of the journey. The relay gave anyone the opportunity to participate in the movement, even if they had never run or walked long distances before.

The goal was to hand deliver a letter to the Army Corps of Engineers office in Omaha, asking them to deny permission for the pipeline to cross the Missouri River. The hope was that they could not be denied a meeting after traveling so far on foot. Just before the relay began, an Army Corps representative got in contact with the movement, agreeing to meet with them. The tribal council believed the performance could now be called off, as the goal had been achieved, but the youths insisted the long-distance performance commence as planned. The goals of the protest had evolved into something far greater than a government meeting. The Standing Rock youth movement had begun to envision the 500-mile journey as a performative call to action, a way to bring together young people from all of the remaining bands of the Sioux Nation. They wanted to unite all the Oceti Sakowin youth.

The original seven bands of the Sioux people were once called the Oceti Sakowin, or the Seven Council Fires. The Oceti Sakowin was once a giant tribal empire, spreading its territory across what is now the Dakotas, Minnesota, Kansas, and Nebraska. Oceti Sakowin territory is now much smaller, after more than a century of land treaties broken by the United States government and

forced relocation.<sup>1</sup> Before colonization brought horses from Europe, messages between the Oceti Sakowin tribes were delivered by foot. This was the model that Three Legs, Jasilyn Charger, and the Standing Rock youth wanted to revive. They planned to connect all nine Sioux Reservations on foot, effectively igniting a messenger network among all the bands.

On 24 April 2016, the team left the Sacred Stone camp on their first leg: walking along the Cannonball River, then down towards the Cheyenne River Reservation. At each reservation, they spoke to tribal leaders, but they made it a point to also meet with community youth. “It really caught them off guard,” Charger said, “that they saw youth like them doing it” (in Elbein 2017). By meeting with young people from each reservation, the foot travelers were able to inspire other Oceti Sakowin youth to raise their voices in protest and to fight for what they hold sacred. By the time the Standing Rock team reached Omaha, they had garnered much attention and gained hundreds of new young faces for the fight at Standing Rock.

Despite the ever-growing numbers of protestors showing up to the many camps at Standing Rock, the Army Corps of Engineers was still moving forward with the pipeline. As Saul Elbein narrates in the article “The Youth Group that Launched a Movement at Standing Rock,” Three Legs and the other Standing Rock walkers refused to be disheartened. Instead, they planned an even longer performance of protest. This time, they were going to walk straight to the Army Corps’ Headquarters in Washington, DC, where they would present a petition to stop the pipeline. On 15 July, 30 young walkers set out from Sacred Stone camp. More travelers joined them as they made their way to Washington. Eleven days later, they received terrible news: the Army Corps of Engineers had approved the Dakota Access Pipeline easements. Heartbroken, they contemplated what they should do. Would they turn around, heading back to Standing Rock defeated? No.

The walkers kept moving, raising their voices louder until the whole country could hear. “We are running for our lives against the Dakota Access Pipeline because it’s right in our backyard,” said Three Legs, “so now is the time for the people to hear our voices, that we are here, and we will stand strong” (ICT Staff 2018). So, they kept moving. And the United States started to listen. Thousands of protestors arrived at the camps at Standing Rock every day. That fall, when the Standing Rock walkers returned home, they could barely believe how the camps at Standing Rock had transformed: their performance of protest had worked. The Standing Rock youth had connected people from tribes all over the country, creating a web of brothers and sisters.

## Tribal-Centered Resistance

Both Standing Rock youth long-distance protests embodied tribal-centered performance of resistance that is rooted in tribal culture, privileges Indigenous methodologies, and champions Oceti Sakowin sovereignty. Both long-distance movements exemplified the relational nature of tribal resistance and restored Indigenous land relationships. As Three Legs, Charger, and the Standing Rock youth later described to Elbein, their resistance methodology was born of Oceti Sakowin tribal tradition (Elbein 2017). Long-distance foot travel was once the primary method for delivering messages and sharing information among the Oceti Sakowin tribes. This is the methodology, the framework, that shaped the Standing Rock walks. The idea came not from settler notions of justice but from Oceti Sakowin culture itself. Through modeling their performance on uniquely Oceti Sakowin knowledge, the movement leaders ignited a tribal-centered resistance, in which Oceti Sakowin sovereignty and political power was both the means and the end.

As I mentioned above, Indigenous walking practices are relational, and they generate communal knowledge from the ground up. Translating this idea into a resistance methodology means that any tribal-centered resistance performance must be generated from the ground up, from the community. This can be clearly seen in the Standing Rock youth movement. The Oceti Sakowin

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1. For more information on this history visit the National Museum of the American Indian’s web exhibit titled “Oceti Sakowin” (National Museum of the American Indian 2018) and Native Hope’s webpage “Sioux Native Americans: Their History, Culture, and Traditions” (Native Hope 2021). See also Estes (2019) and Ortiz (1977).





Figure 5. The Coronado National Monument as the US-Mexico settler border in Arizona. The Southern terminus of the Arizona National Scenic Trail (AZT). Taken the first day of the author's AZT thru-hike, 16 March 2019. (Photo courtesy of Ashlyn King Barnett)

walkers engaged their bodies in resistance alongside one another, creating a performance born *of and for* the Standing Rock Reservation and the larger Oceti Sakowin community. As a political Indigenous resistance tactic utilized by the Standing Rock youth walkers, *walking with* handed power to communities. It privileged Indigenous bodies in motion together, walking as a community on its own behalf. The protest grew from the soil of Oceti Sakowin territory and began with young Oceti Sakowin feet walking on that very same soil. As they moved outwards toward other territories, the walkers multiplied, gathering more bodies and voices traveling together as a community.

Neither of the Standing Rock youth's two long-distance performances garnered much mainstream media attention, but they were both immensely powerful and successful Indigenous resistance performances. Resistance is more than a large-scale political movement. Resistance happens any time Indigenous peoples come together on their land to stand against the destructive power of settler colonialism.

As Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson points out, every single day for Indigenous peoples contains “the hard labor of hanging on to territory, defining and fighting for your rights, negotiating and maintaining governmental and gendered forms of power” (2014:3). It is not an easy task. And in the face of the all-consuming evil of settler colonialism, the defeats are frequent. But resistance is an Indigenous tradition that will never be erased. As Ojibwe activist Dennis Banks says,

[W]e're walking for Mother Earth. We're walking for things that should be right. That's what we're walking for! Native people, we will always take up the gauntlet. We will never lie down in the face of struggle. If we have to keep walking this continent, we'll walk it again. (in Hartmann 2011)

Nick Estes, from the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, describes what this means for Oceti Sakowin and Standing Rock: “Oceti Sakowin and Native resistance, as it has for centuries, will always continue until our common enemy is defeated” (2017). Indigenous peoples will keep finding new ways of turning tribal-centered knowledge into resistance performances, just as the Standing Rock youth movement did.

Indigenous long-distance walking performances imagine expressions of Indigeneity apart from the “shallowness and foreignness” of colonial dialogues (Hokowhitu 2016:95). Indigenous walkers



assert active presence on the land, form new relational bonds, cross settler-colonial boundaries, tell stories that are only right now becoming. As Hokowhitu prophesizes beautifully, through the bodies of Indigenous peoples, “rivers will speak, ghosts will appear, the earth will move in retaliation” (95). Indigenous bodies will continue to produce knowledge and to perform new worlds into existence through the act of long-distance walking.

## Becoming

While giving a talk, Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) scholar and author David Chang mentioned his desire to continue producing “better work” for Indigenous studies (2020). I asked him what he meant by this and he replied that he would like to see more work focused on the resiliency of Native peoples. He wanted the younger generations to see the ways in which Native peoples have fought bravely, are resilient beyond reason, thrive against all odds, and have proved to be the unconquerable peoples. So much decolonizing work focuses on what has been taken away from Indigenous peoples, on the violent histories, on the wounds and traumas that remain rampant in all Native communities. Alternatively, it is important to illuminate the ways in which Indigenous communities have always and will always continue to show up with resilience. The walking performances I explore focus on that which has *not* been taken away from Native peoples, on that which is healthy and vibrant in Native cultures still. These performances are life-affirming. Million writes that “it is from this potential, the potential of our proposition for other ways of being and living, that we generate and attach ourselves to our intensely dreamed future, always becoming” (2014:40). The performance of walking *with* allows Native peoples to physically move through this idea of becoming, to imagine and create futures not just with minds, but with bodies—not just *on* the land but *in* the land.

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