

Dancing for Sovereignty

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On October 28, 2016, just days after hundreds of water protectors¹ were arrested and physically assaulted by the Morton County Police Department, leaders of the No Dakota Access Pipeline (NODAPL) movement called on jingle dress dancers to come to the resistance camps adjacent to the Standing Rock Reservation. A large conglomerate of approximately 50 dancers arrived to dance on the frontlines of the action just a day later, with police and armored vehicles just down the road. In this paper, I ask: How can we understand the jingle dress dancers' movements across colonial configurations of space and time as the embodiment of an indigenous radical tradition? I contend that while the U.S. settler colonial state perpetually demands that indigenous people disappear through processes of assimilation and physical elimination, the act of dancing on the frontlines of a fight for Native sovereignty forces the state to acknowledge a level of indigenous autonomy and incongruity with white settler society.

¹ First and foremost, this publication would not have been possible without the water protectors who risked their lives and livelihoods to advocate for Native sovereignty and the protection of Mother Earth's resources. To them I'd like to say: *Wopida taŋka ečičiyapi ye*. I am especially grateful to Antonia Juhasz and Simon Moya-Smith who created and made the important videos I analyze in this article available to the public. The personal conversations I had with each of these filmmakers illuminated their commitment to Native feminist values and the project of decolonization that are reflected in the videos. I look forward to continuing conversations with the filmmakers to build upon the analysis presented in this article.

The form of dance practiced in this contested space serves as a simultaneous embodied remembrance and imagining. The jingle dress dancers call on the memory of ancestors and cultural teachings to collapse impositions of settler time, space, and patriarchy. The act of dancing in the tradition of ancestors conjures a double presence that recalls the resistance of ancestors and proves that bodies not only remember the violence and pain of colonial conquest, but also the power of indigenous knowledge to subvert and overcome settler-colonial structures. Hence, the dance proves powerful because of its insistence on refusing to be regulated by normative colonial movements. This form of dance, as it accesses embodied memory, gives shape to the notion of indigenous autonomy as it generates the power to move between planes and provides the freedom to define oneself and to determine the parameters of indigenous identity. It legitimates the freedom to practice spiritual traditions regardless of restrictions imposed by the settler government.

Ultimately, the jingle dress dancers engage in an indigenous radical tradition of imagining an alternative mode of existence rooted in non-heteronormative interpretations of spatial and temporal relations and connectivity. Heteronormative space restricts mobility, especially for Native women. It seeks to confine them to designated domesticated spaces. In the same vein, heteronormative capitalistic notions of temporality are normally calibrated through ideas of sexual and economic productivity; however, this works differently for Natives. Natives are denied both coeval temporality and future temporality. They are primarily talked about as existing in a 'tragic' past.² For jingle dress dancers to so visibly move across this contested space and call upon ancestral knowledge in their imaginings of futurity is to fundamentally challenge colonial heteropatriarchal space and time. In other words, their movements and embodied memories map an unbounded spatial-temporal plane traditionally restricted by the settler state. Additionally, where heteronormative expressions of connectivity emphasize intimate relationships amongst men and women, the jingle dress dancers in the context of the NODAPL movement, express non-hierarchical connections that go beyond the human. Their movements engage a connection between the water, the Earth, ancestors, and animals. Thus, they connect not just to humans, but to energy and to other sentient life forces. These connections assert a precarious freedom, as it is incredibly powerful to be able to assert sovereignty through these reclamations of space, temporality, and futurity; however, these assertions are met with extreme repression to suppress sovereign claims.

This article explores the extent to which the jingle dress dancers conform to Jaqueline Shea Murphy's conception of 'doing indigeneity'.³ This concept encompasses an understanding of indigeneity as more than a static identity. Rather, much like Maile Arvin's notion of an *analytics of indigeneity*, this idea engages indigeneity as something in-

process, generative, and imaginative—rooted in traditional “stories protocols, epistemologies, and reciprocal responsivities.”⁴ As such, to ‘do’ indigeneity is a performative process of using indigenous methods of engaging with the world to ground and envision decolonial possibilities. I hope to illustrate that this method (re)maps—as in constructs and re-signifies—an indigenous feminist space over patriarchal social, geographic, and bodily colonial arrangements. The act of dancing, laughing, and loving in the face of immanent threats to life, freedom, and sovereignty is emblematic of an adamant rejection of the settler’s terms of order.

This topic necessitates a theoretical analysis of cultural production because the NODAPL movement relied so heavily on images and videos to spread their message. This movement has relied greatly on social media to garner support and to hold the state accountable for its inherent violence. Thus, the videos I am analyzing are found on news outlets and social media sites like Twitter. It should be noted that in contrast to many forms of analysis, I will not be detailing the cultural aspects and meanings of the jingle dress. While this form of analysis may be important in some instances, there has already been scholarship that speaks to this topic. Furthermore, the goal of my paper is not to make the jingle dress dance a ‘legible’ form of cultural expression. In fact, making the dance legible runs counter to the claim I wish to make—that it is, in part, the illegibility of the dance that makes it so powerfully subversive to the white settler state. Thus, this paper engages in an extension of Audra Simpson’s theory of ‘ethnographic refusal’, by refusing to unpack the anthropological genesis of the jingle dress for a racist academic audience.⁵ This work is not meant to make sense of the jingle dress dance in a way that facilitates cultural appropriation. Rather, my analysis aims to draw attention to the jingle dress dancers and their filmmakers as proponents of forceful assertions of sovereignty.

To ground this analysis, it is important to describe what I am tentatively calling an indigenous radical tradition. This term derives from Cedric Robinson’s discussion of the ‘Black radical tradition’. Robinson describes this tradition as Black people’s revolutionary practice of consistently resisting the terms of order that premise their oppression by obstinately opposing the worldviews that rationalize white supremacist mythology (i.e. scientific racism, manifest destiny, democratic nation-building, and so on).⁶ Robinson explains that the root of Black resistance is located in a distinctly African consciousness, which in turn facilitates what Ashon Crawley, among many others, calls an imagining of being/existing ‘otherwise’.⁷ We see a similar form of consciousness existing in various Native-led resistance movements, particularly in the actions engaged by NODAPL water protectors. Their resistance gives us insight into the process of imagin-

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realm of existence, in contrast to the terms of settler colonial order. Though the oppression faced by Black people in the United States should not be assumed commensurate with the oppression experienced by Natives, there is comparable overlap in traditions of resistance. Like the Black movements described by Robinson, which are influenced by a metamorphosed African consciousness, Native people have also held-on to—and consistently (re)constructed—indigenous consciousness. This consciousness is mobilized in resistance to the destructive forces of settler colonialism. The NODAPL movement, and other movements like it, are underpinned by a Native-based ontology,⁸ as evidenced by NODAPL's insistence on prayer based resistance, their emphasis on the power of women, and the assertion of a symbiotic relationship between men, women, ancestors and the Earth's resources. Thus, any analysis of Native social movements must acknowledge both their grounding in indigenous epistemologies and their locus within a tradition of radical resistance.

Before I commence the discussion of the jingle dress dancers, it is important to also call attention to the inextricably *gendered* context of the NODAPL movement. First, it is important to note that Native women still experience sexual assault at rates higher than any other demographic in the United States.⁹ There is a trend of increased sexual assault when pipelines are built adjacent to Native communities. In the North Dakota Bakken oil fields, 'man camps' provide shelter to the primarily male temporary workforce. The communities adjacent to these camps have experienced increased levels of sexual violence, prostitution, and drug use.¹⁰ Many of the activists arguing against the Dakota Access Pipeline have used this as an example of how the Dakota Access Pipeline not only poses environmental risks, but also heightens the risk of patriarchal-misogynist violence against Native women.¹¹ Instances of sexual assault have long been used as tools of settler colonial governance and rule, and many scholars have called attention to the interrelation between this violence and the lethal human conquest of Mother Earth.

Despite the resistance of water protectors and the threat of environmental pollution Dakota Access insisted on building the pipeline. The phallic representation of a drill digging into Mother Earth against her resistance has serious undertones of sexual assault. These violations in conjunction with the violence enacted on Native women are indicative of the sense of entitlement settler society claims in relation to Native women and Native land. They never seek permission from Native people to make the land 'productive'. Rather, they appeal to the colonial government whose interests are always invested in asserting rightful claim to indigenous land. Since Native ideology sees the Earth just as sentient as humanity, the violation of either is an egregious offense. Thus, it is ever more powerful to see Native women responding to such offenses in the form of social movements. Yet this also means they continue to bear the brunt of state repression

in quotidian, day-to-day life. This is certainly true at Standing Rock, where it seems the heaviest exactions of violence were exerted on women's bodies. By enacting violence against Native women, who are often the leaders of resistance movements, and in many cases considered the cultural bearers of Native societies, the colonial project aims to repress the indigenous radical tradition. Still, even in the face of this violence the women at Standing Rock continued to unsettle patriarchal logics and the coherence of settler self-knowledge, thereby engaging in an indigenous radical tradition that is also rooted in Native feminist praxis.

The jingle dress dancers exemplify the spirit of this Native feminist praxis. As discussed above, the American settler colonial project involves intricate injections of heteropatriarchy and hetero-paternalism into the structure of Native communities;¹² however, the NODAPL movement has worked to subvert those arrangements in unique and notable ways. Both videos I examine involve powerful and strategic choices in terms of how and where the jingle dress dancers are filmed. For example, the jingle dress dancers and organizers of the action chose to position the dancers on the frontlines rather than dancing in the camps, or in spaces considered more 'safe'. This is impressively dissident considering it refuses to be regulated by the threat of violence. This choice, when compounded with the filming choices, becomes an even more subversive move.

In the first video,¹³ the dancers are focused in the foreground and take up most of the frame; however, just beyond the dancers we see what appear to be military vehicles on the hilltops and a barricade created by the police to restrict the water protectors from moving into the construction zone of the pipeline.¹⁴ By foregrounding the women in the video, the colonial social arrangements of heteropatriarchy are overturned. In this arrangement, the matriarchal traditions of the Očeti Šakówin¹⁵ are given primacy over settler colonial heteropatriarchal structures. Furthermore, although there are several men in the frame, they are standing in supportive roles in a circle surrounding the dancers, and we do not see any of the predominantly white male police force. By reversing the social organization, and by positioning men and the police vehicles in the background, the dancers and filmmakers collectively redefine whiteness and patriarchy. By dancing on the land before the instruments of settler colonial violence, these Native women call out the white supremacist settler state for its violence, hypocrisy, illegitimacy, and inability to assert dominance over Natives. This new interpretation of whiteness is part of the (re)mapping of space discussed by Mishuana Goeman. Goeman explains (re)mapping space as the labor of generating new possibilities. She writes: "(re)mapping is not just about regaining that which was lost and returning to an original and pure point in history, but instead understanding the processes that have defined our current spatialities in order to sustain vibrant Native futures."¹⁶

Thus, Native women engage in an act of (re)mapping by calling on dance as the embodiment of both traditional and contemporary indigenous epistemologies of resistance. The U.S. has been heavily invested in establishing a heteronormative patriarchal social structure; however, it's important to recognize the interconnections between social and physical space, as for Natives, the colonization of social space is just as important as the colonization of physical space. The colonial configurations of social space are integral to the dispossession of Native women in particular, as many Native women lost their independence and their rights to own and maintain property through redefining women's roles according to the European standard.¹⁷ Thus, to (re)map a more indigenous social space is to also imagine a (re)mapping of physical space.

This physical space is further (re)mapped through the application of Jacqueline Shea Murphy's discussion of 'doing indigeneity'. According to Shea Murphy, "indigenous dancers' bodies...are a location of ways of being and knowing...[a]nd movement practices...are a tool for locating and unearthing these ways of knowing."¹⁸ In this sense, it is not only the location of the filming and dancing, but also the very movements the dancers employ that (re)map space. The fact that the dancers are engaged in unified, but improvisational dance, and that their regalia is vastly different from person to person, makes their dance practice less legible, predictable, and controllable, and therefore, it can be regarded as 'threatening' to the state. The spontaneity of the dancers also introduces the notion of Native temporalities that are not confined by the disciplinary regimes of punitive linear-progressive colonial time. Such normative conceptions of time are important to the settler state because of its predictability, as opposed to the more multi-dimensional indigenous conceptions of time. This form of dance disrupts the state's ability to expect and manipulate a future, as the future becomes tangled with the present and thus, becomes unregulated by the confines of colonial temporality and spatial organization. Hence, this form of dance compels an interpretation of indigeneity and Native futurities as *multiple, contingent, and constantly being formed and re-calibrated*. By disavowing colonial conceptions of linear time where the future is inevitable, the Jingle dress dancers call on indigenous epistemologies to produce an imagining of an indigeneity yet to come, and for this reason the dance can be considered to be 'doing indigeneity' rather than simply being an indigenous performance. The latter assumes a more stagnant identity while the former acknowledges indigeneity as resilient, inventive, and fluctuating.

This indigeneity yet to come is further enunciated through the slogan Mni Wiconi, Water is Life. This slogan invokes a notion of time that is also antagonistic to capitalistic notions of time. Settler capitalist ideologies of time place primacy over instantaneous extractive values, while the indigenous perspective espoused by Mni Wiconi calls attention to time's continuity and generative power. Where Dakota Access ignores

the environmental and health consequences of building this pipeline that will affect present and future Native generations, the indigenous consciousness informing the efforts of water protectors' is bound up with a consideration of future generations. This consideration tethers the future to the present and continuously disturbs hegemonic structures of power maintained through the pervasive acceptance of linear time within settler society.

The most noticeable aspect of the second video is the cinematography.¹⁹ Rather than panning across the dancers or looking down on them, the video focuses primarily on the dancer's feet, and scrolls up to occasionally film the dancers' faces. This modality of filming from the bottom up reverses colonial implementations of a top-down hierarchical structure, and is indicative of an indigenous consciousness that focuses more on grass-roots organizational systems. This combined method of filming and dancing makes (re)mapping its central tool of decolonization. Colonial logics of seeing tend to be more removed from subjects and spaces in order to capture the entirety of a performance, and can be connected to the desire to manipulate and control the future. For example, anarchist anthropologist James C. Scott comments on the historical objective of modern nation-states to create legibility, control, authority, and engineer society, most crucially in periods of systemic unrest.²⁰ In order to do this, state planning of cityscapes necessitates the use of airborne tools to capture entire spaces and involves a heavy emphasis on "straight lines and hard right angles."²¹ The choice to film only portions of dancers' bodies and to film from various angles defies the colonial desire to create orderly and controllable space. Thus, the jingle dress dancers and the film makers use the camera from below to (re)map space as illegible and uncontrollable—as free and sovereign. It thus locates power in illegibility and invisibility. I contend that the choice to film in a spatially adjacent position to the dancers exploits the camera's inability to fully capture the dancers' essence as insurgent, unruly, imaginative, and powerful. As such, the dancers' bodies, the embodied knowledges of their movements, and the ancestors who dance alongside them can be defined as excess by the colonial state, and the indigenous futurities their bodies create refuse to be subsumed under colonial logics. The video merely provides a glimpse into their embodied knowledge by filming several dancers' feet and portions of their bodies, but it cannot fully capture their complexity. While the camera provides the opportunity to compress space-time so viewers can connect to the movement, its inability to fully contain the dancers' bodies indicates that the camera, as a colonial apparatus, is fundamentally unable to regulate Native bodies. Thus, the dancers' movement through contested and surveilled space signifies their refusal to be governed by colonial logics and a decision to move on their own terms.

Therefore, I assert that the NODAPL jingle dress dancers both enact and provide a model for an inhabitation of the indigenous radical tradition. Their movements and (re)mappings of both social and physical space reveal the limits of settler colonial logics of violence, heteropatriarchy, and containment. The embodied knowledge and futures created through the dancers' movements invoke spirits of ancestors past, and together they envision futures unknown. These ghosts, like the 'lawless' dancers who conjured them, move freely between planes unable to be controlled or made visible. Their autonomy lies in the choice to become visible when it suits them, but they cannot be made legible. The dancers' refusal to be made legible creates an affinity between them and the ghosts they conjure. Ghosts and dancing water protectors move on their own terms, to their own beat, and according to their own time. Their movements, remembrances, and visions of the future transport them through closed portals to realms untraveled. The settler state can't follow them there. They are free.

Endnotes

1. The term 'water protector' is itself a method of resistance in its refusal to be defined by settler society's definition of resistance/right/wrong/legitimacy/illegitimacy.
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5. Audra Simpson. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham; Duke University Press, 2014.
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12. Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill. "Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy." *Feminist Formations* 25:1 (2013): 8-34.
13. Antonia Juhasz, "'We Have Come to Dance for Our People'." *Pacific Standard*. 7 Nov. 2016. <https://psmag.com/we-have-come-to-dance-for-our-people>.
14. Antonia Juhasz, telephonic communication with author, September 14, 2017.
15. Očeti Šakówin (pronounced oh-chet-tee sha-koh-ween) is the Dakota/Lakota/Nakota term for the seven council fires. This term is used to reference the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota nations as a whole.
16. Mishuana Goeman. *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2013, 3.
17. Jean M. O'Brien, "'Divorced From the Land': Resistance and Survival of Indian Women in Eighteenth-Century New England." In *Native Women's History in Eastern North America before 1900: A Guide to Research and Writing*, edited by Rebecca Kugel and Lucy Eldersveld Murphy. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. 333-67.
18. Jacqueline Shea Murphy. *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing Native American Modern Dance Histories*, 10. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
19. Simon Moya-Smith. "Jingle Dress Dancers Took to the Front Line at Standing Rock in North Dakota Saturday.." #NoDAPL, <https://twitter.com/SimonMoyaSmith/status/792483544639561728>. *Twitter*, 29 Oct. 2016.
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21. *Ibid.*, 57-58.

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