

Hearing Resistance through Wolakota: Lakota Hip Hop and Environmental Activism

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Abstract: Grounded in musical responses to the No Dakota Access Pipeline movement (NoDAPL), this article explores how music resonated with the #NoDAPL movement at Standing Rock and globally on social media. Thinking through Wolakota, the Lakota concept of treating others as relatives and living a Lakota life, the article suggests ways in which Lakota knowledge systems echo through resistant rap. This article offers a situated reading of “Black Snakes” by Lakota rapper Prolific. As an audio-visual engagement in the NoDAPL movement that circulated online, this music video allows, first, for an opportunity to theorize through Wolakota. Second, this example opens into global musical activism that centres on water. Finally, the reading shows a longstanding way to act through song. Overall, this article invites the reader to listen through the theoretical practices of Wolakota and consider how understanding water and land through kinship requires that people take appropriate care of these relatives. Although the physical manifestation of the protest came to a halt, the citizens of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe continue to be affected by pipeline construction. A global musical activism that centres water-based issues extends in place and time beyond the movement; musical responses enact environmental resistance in a manner that implicates a wide listenership.

Résumé : À partir des réactions musicales au mouvement « No Dakota Access Pipeline » (NoDAPL, « Non à l'oléoduc Dakota Access »), cet article examine la façon dont la musique est entrée en résonance avec le mouvement NoDAPL à Standing Rock, et au niveau global sur les médias sociaux. Par la pensée wolakota, concept lakota consistant à traiter les autres comme des membres de sa parenté et à vivre à la façon lakota, cet article suggère quelques manières par lesquelles les systèmes de savoir lakota trouvent un écho à travers le rap résistant. Cet article propose une lecture en situation de « Black Snakes » du rapper lakota Prolific. En tant qu'engagement audiovisuel dans le mouvement NoDAPL qui a circulé en ligne, cette vidéo nous procure tout d'abord l'opportunité de proposer une théorie inspirée par le wolakota. Deuxièmement, cet exemple nous amène à l'activisme musical mondial qui se centre

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sur l'eau. Enfin, la lecture montre une manière d'agir par la chanson qui remonte à loin. Dans l'ensemble, cet article invite le lecteur à écouter par le biais des pratiques théoriques du wolakota et à envisager que la compréhension de l'eau et de la terre sous l'angle de la parenté exige des gens qu'ils prennent soin comme il convient de ces parents. Bien que les manifestations physiques de protestation se soient interrompues, les citoyens de la tribu sioux de Standing Rock sont toujours affectés par la construction de l'oléoduc. Un activisme musical global qui se concentre sur des problèmes relatifs à l'eau s'étend en des lieux et en des temps qui dépassent le mouvement ; les réponses musicales constituent une résistance environnementale qui fait s'impliquer un large bassin d'auditeurs.

The No Dakota Access Pipeline movement (NoDAPL) used place-based and online activism to bring together a massive coalition of people dedicated to protecting water and reclaiming Indigenous sovereignty. While it built on previous anti-pipeline activism, the confluence of people in the NoDAPL protest was larger and more international than previously.¹ The movement focused on the prevention of the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline under the Missouri River and supported the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's duty to protect the land and their people. The Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, which is home to Lakota and Dakota peoples, is one of several reservations that comprise modern Oceti Sakowin territories (also known as the Seven Nation Council Fires) consisting of the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota peoples, who together are referred to as Oceti Sakowin or the Great Sioux Nation.² The foundational group to NoDAPL were the water protectors: community members and other Indigenous leaders who taught the importance of water to all living beings across the globe. Supporting the water protectors and the Oceti Sakowin, thousands of people converged at Standing Rock as allies of the NoDAPL protestors. Together, they formed the Red Warrior Camp, Oceti Sakowin Camp, and Sacred Stone Camp. Simultaneously, activists used various social media platforms to share their support and highlight the need to protect the sovereign rights of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.³ On these media platforms, activists fought the pipeline, asserted Indigenous sovereignty, and invited allies to engage in Oceti Sakowin practices of ecological stewardship. We assert that Lakota musicians specifically engaged in Lakota ways of knowing, encapsulated through the notion of Wolakota, the Lakota concept of treating others as relatives and living a Lakota life. Wolakota is conveyed through hip hop, shaping relationships between human and nonhuman relatives.⁴

To understand why NoDAPL gained such prominence, this article first provides historical grounding in treaty relationships between Oceti Sakowin and the government of the United States and offers focused contextual information about the No Dakota Access Pipeline movement within an Indigenous system of knowledge. Next, through deep readings of Sicangu⁵ Lakota rapper Prolific's music video "Black Snakes," we show how Indigenous understandings of environmental stewardship solidarity extend through online and in-person activism and inspire engagement in ongoing Indigenous resistance movements. "Black Snakes" is an apt name for this protest song, as, locally, the proposed pipeline is referred to as a black snake (see Fig. 1). Following in the footsteps of Sicangu Lakota rapper Frank Waln, Prolific stands among a number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous musicians who created music to spread awareness of pipeline-related injustices at the height of NoDAPL activism. Taken together, hip hop musicians shared their messages of support for NoDAPL on multiple platforms to inform local, national, and international audiences.

The Lakota concept of Wolakota is a theory and praxis that describes a Lakota intellectual way of knowing and being. It is also a shared principle of ecological stewardship amongst the Oceti Sakowin; Wolakota places the NoDAPL movement within a Lakota worldview and can frame and inform musical performances by Indigenous rappers. By drawing on Lakota knowledge systems in the NoDAPL movement, Oceti Sakowin and their allies engaged in Wolakota and created an orientation directed towards sustained protection of Unci Maka (embedded in Lakota language teachings, Unci Maka, or Grandmother Earth, is a relative). Wolakota as a concept explains the relationship of the Oyate and Unci Maka. Wolakota can serve as a model to address other issues of Indigenous sovereignty and environmental protection. As a way of knowing based in kin relations, it can serve all people to become responsible stewards of the land. Water and land need to be cared for, and speaking knowledge through Wolakota can offer these principles of what it means to be a good relative of the land.

Because of the importance of place to both the NoDAPL movement and to Wolakota, we begin this article with a description of the land and water that activists were attempting to protect. We provide an outline of the treaty background of Lakota land and further explicate Wolakota. Then, we contextualize how Wolakota is expressed in music with a focused discussion of Prolific's "Black Snakes," which leads into an assertion that clean water is relevant to everyone, including non-Lakota and non-Indigenous peoples. Sometimes, translations from Lakota into English fails to capture the full meaning. Sometimes, we revisit a section or lyric of a song again or think through an idea more than once. We invite you, as reader, to listen with us.

We listen through the relationship with Unci Maka, which conveys a maternal kinship. We pay attention to how kinship relationships with earth and water are expressed, and how these are framed in music as relationships with a maternal figure. We listen as Prolific criticizes government action, while also accepting his own responsibilities to care for Unci Maka. We also hear how kinship relations — with water and land and between Indigenous nations — are heard through a Māori NoDAPL solidarity video. We consider how Lakota rights and land activism through music predates NoDAPL through Frank Waln’s “Oil 4 Blood.” We listen as this music, like music that came before it and that will come after it, reminds listeners of all of our responsibilities to care for land and water as relations, a core principle of Wolakota.

Understandings of Land: Oceti Sakowin and Treaty History

While discussions of sovereignty often focus on treaties with settler state governments, Oceti Sakowin relationships to place and land pre-date colonization. Connections between Oceti Sakowin, Inyan, and White Buffalo Calf Woman provide context to the reciprocal relationship with the environment. Inyan, one of the Oceti Sakowin Creators, provided life to the Earth, and when Inyan gave their life, they bled blue, providing water. The White Buffalo Calf Woman presented the sacred White Buffalo Calf Woman pipe and instructed the people to respect the water. This is the relationship Oceti Sakowin have maintained since time immemorial.⁶ Before and after the first settlers arrived, this has been known: If Oceti Sakowin people take care of the land and water, the water and the land will take care of the people. This is a responsibility that defines Lakota relationships to the land and water and is shared with water protectors across Turtle Island.⁷

There are many ways to tell the story of how Oceti Sakowin came into relationship with the US government. While a comprehensive treaty history is beyond the scope of this article, we encourage readers to think about treaty formation centring on an important, and sometimes underemphasized, point of view: that of water. The first treaty between Oceti Sakowin and the US government, signed in 1851, was the initial Fort Laramie Treaty, which stipulated that this land — which includes parts of present-day North Dakota and South Dakota and parts of Mni Sose (the Lakota word for the Missouri River) — should be reserved for the “Great Sioux Nation.”⁸ Signed with the Great Sioux Nation, this treaty has not been respected (Ostler 2004: 36–39).

It is important to distinguish that the sites of resistance are traditional Oceti Sakowin territory because of the different approaches to understanding

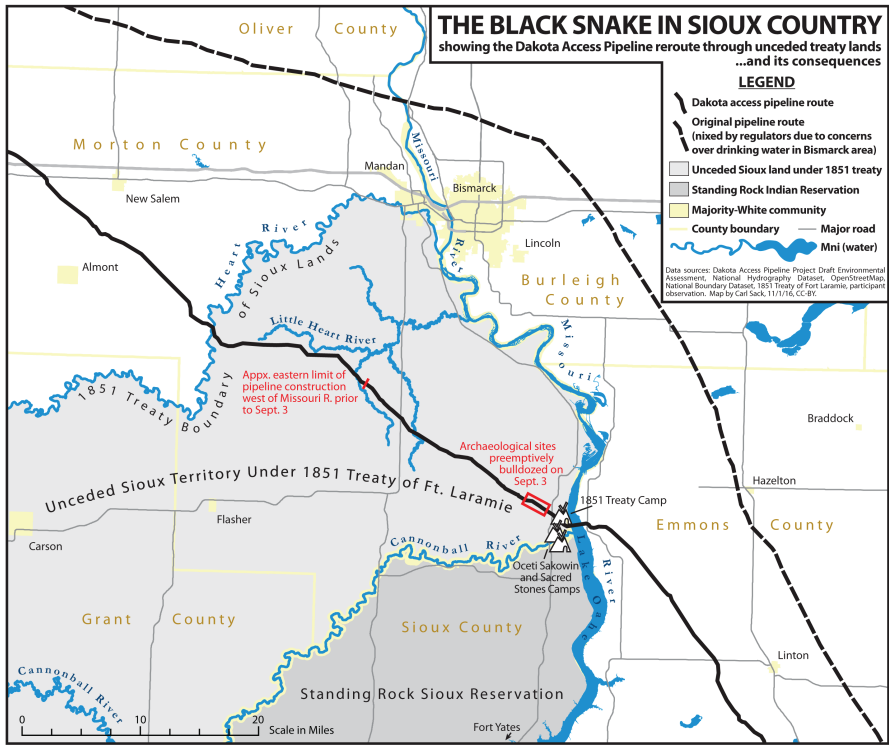


Fig. 1. Sioux Territory per the Fort Laramie Treaty juxtaposed with pipeline construction sites. Map by Carl Sack; available on Wiki Commons and licensed under CC-BY.

sovereignty within the context of the NoDAPL movement. Prior to American colonization, Oceti Sakowin peoples stewarded the land because they understood that this was their responsibility. When Indigenous nations signed treaties with the US government, they maintained the same philosophy. Indeed, the Dakota Access Pipeline project is one in a long line of industry and government projects wherein the rights of the Great Sioux Nation conflicted with the capitalist interests of industry and dishonoured the sovereignty of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (Estes 2019). At least since the 1887 Allotment Act, there have been various contracts for mining on the land designated for the exclusive use by Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, making it clear that the US government does not respect the treaty boundaries and their treaty obligations to Oceti Sakowin people. Importantly, in 1980, the US Supreme Court ruled that the Sioux Nation was owed compensation from the US government for violation of the Fort Laramie Treaties (*United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians* 1980).

The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe began its legal fight against the development of the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2014. Representatives from

the pipeline development company attended a meeting on September 30th, 2014, at Fort Yates, the headquarters of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (Estes 2019: 40). It took until June 2020 for a federal judge to rule that the pipeline must shut down and even then, the struggle against the development of the pipeline continued through a series of emergency motions, appeals, and illegal operations (Earth Justice 2020).

Unified resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline project took place in 2016 and 2017, centred around Cannon Ball, North Dakota, and was named NoDAPL. NoDAPL protests took place adjacent to the Missouri River at the present-day boundary of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. Contested areas where the camps were hosted and the Backwater Bridge, a site of violence in the protests, are not included in the contemporary boundaries of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. The site of the pipeline was, however, included in the original treaty, a treaty that is still considered the supreme law of the land by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, and was recognized as such by many NoDAPL water protectors. Many activists argued that their actions were holding the government accountable to the treaty relationship, highlighting the diminished territorial power of Oceti Sakowin and the abrogation of the treaty (Fredericks and Heibel 2018).

NoDAPL water protectors found the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty to be the crucial point of reference in the NoDAPL movement for two main reasons, both of which prioritize relations with water. First, it included Mni Sose (the Missouri River) as part of The Great Sioux Nation: quite simply, it is on the map of the boundaries of the reservation. Second, the Oceti Sakowin agreed to the treaty based on their understanding that water was part of the agreement: in their worldview, water is a relative. No agreement would have been made by Oceti Sakowin without thinking about human and nonhuman kinship, and many other relations, including those with non-Oceti Sakowin and non-Indigenous peoples. Many allies felt compelled to participate in the NoDAPL movement to support Standing Rock in their resistance and due to their own commitment to care for water. As Joshua describes the events today, the Oceti Sakowin are continuing the work of their ancestors who signed the treaties. Their ecological stewardship responsibilities have never stopped and the NoDAPL movement reinforced their responsibility to water and the land that has existed long before treaty agreements with the United States.

Water protectors at NoDAPL offered knowledge about the importance of water to our world to all who would listen. The water keepers acted because it was their responsibility to do so, and they invited the collaboration of allies. Together, the actions of activists — in person and online — served to remind the federal government of the terms of the historical agreement that preserved

this area for Oceti Sakowin. Ultimately, understanding kinship with water and land is a teaching everyone can learn: all people need to take care of water and land and learn from the people who are originally from the land itself. Wolakota as a theory informs us how to protect the water.

Wolakota

Despite the failure to recognize the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's sovereign treaty rights through the United States legal system, Standing Rock Tribal members and other Oceti Sakowin looked towards the centre of their culture for guidance on how to protect the land and their rights as Indigenous peoples. As an intellectual tradition of the Oceti Sakowin, Wolakota is an ideology that can be discerned when considering the music produced in this resistance movement.¹⁰ Wolakota loosely translates as "To live and treat everyone and everything with value and equality," or treating everyone and everything as a relative.¹¹ From the perspective of Oceti Sakowin culture, sovereignty is not focused on power, but instead upon responsibility.¹² Scholarship on the Lakota language by Linda Fredericks, Dan Jesse, Robert Brave Heart Sr., and Melissa Strickland, has provided a description of Wolakota as "values of the Lakota people such as being humble and respectful" (2018: 63). A deeper exploration, rooted in language and culture, instructs Lakota on how to live a Lakota life in reciprocity with the environment.¹³

In the context of NoDAPL, Wolakota calls for Oceti Sakowin and all human beings to treat the water as a relative. Oceti Sakowin cultural knowledge bearers maintain this form of knowledge and utilize this term to teach members of our nations how to coexist with our non-human relations in a responsible way. Applying this philosophy to the environment calls for Oyate to gather and protect the water from any threat; in the case of NoDAPL, oil is the threat. In the NoDAPL supporters learned from Lakota knowledge by actively engaging in the Wolakota principles of taking care of the land and water through multiple kinds of presence: being present with one's body, either travelling to the resistance camps or continuing to hold presence on one's land; donating supplies; singing; advocating; and participating in sympathetic demonstrations around the country and around the world. Oceti Sakowin shared Wolakota as a practice of land and water stewardship. Oceti Sakowin peoples, other Indigenous peoples, and non-Indigenous people can all participate in caring for land and water. The cultural tenets of ecological stewardship guide how Oceti Sakowin people live. The purpose of sharing Wolakota is to instruct people how to take care of the environment as a relative. It is through Wolakota, moreover,

that the Indigenous rap produced for this movement can be conceptualized, as Lakota musicians have drawn precisely upon Lakota knowledge to produce music that centres Indigenous epistemologies.

Listening for Wolakota, Listening to “Black Snakes”

Lakota rapper Prolific’s “Black Snakes” manifests Wolakota in the form of an urgent appeal to protect the water. We invite the reader-listener to listen to this music critically because it offers an opportunity to engage with three interrelated issues. First, the song provides a space to theorize through Wolakota in connection to the environment, overlapping with the goals of the water protectors. Listening through Wolakota moves through theory and praxis to understand water and land as relatives or kin; this kinship requires care and stewardship. Second, the song engages a global musical activism that centres water-based issues and sovereignty. And, finally, the music is part of a long trajectory of activist interaction through song, including both historical and future-oriented forms of song engagement.

There is a long history of engaging Indigenous song in protest movements prior to Prolific’s “Black Snakes.” Indeed, Indigenous protest movements have long used popular music to focus attention on sovereignty issues that are rooted in land and water. For example, the James Bay Cree held public concerts to stop a development project of Hydro Quebec. Music also reinforces relations and shared goals between and amongst organizers, participants, and supporters, as evident in the resistance at Kanehsatà:ke (Ladner and Simpson 2010). When paired with digital activism, music has knitted together networks of action across online and offline worlds. Online organizing expands networks of activism, notably through #IdleNoMore and the international movement of this hashtag (Hoefnagels 2019; Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014; Przybylski 2017). The examples we discuss here are notable in that, through NoDAPL, music rallied allies to a water-based cause, connected people to locally grounded cultural knowledge in resistance, reached networked publics through online circulation, and celebrated successes in collective action.

With this context in mind, we turn to Prolific’s “Black Snakes” to hear how it invokes Wolakota lyrically and symbolically. “Black Snakes” was originally released in 2016 along with six other songs, and was then re-released with a monologue addressing Donald Trump as an EP in 2017. Prolific identifies as Lakota, Mexican, and European, and is a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe; on his website, he identifies as “Prolific the Rapper,” a “Hip hop artist. Human being. Protector” (Prolific 2020). As an artist, Prolific names sound, words,

and film as his canvas, and as a Sicangu Lakota rapper, Prolific expresses a commitment to defending the water and land of Oceti Sakowin (Prolific 2020). As a concerned Oceti Sakowin citizen and an active participant in NoDAPL, Prolific fights for the sovereign rights of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and calls for the protection of water. In “Black Snakes,” he incorporates his own story to illustrate the importance of Wolakota to his engagement with social issues.

Prolific’s revised version of “Black Snakes” includes an important monologue before the song begins. In this commentary, he speaks to Trump’s decision three days earlier to expedite the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline through Executive Order 2017. In the first eight seconds of the updated video, he speaks directly to the authority of the US government: “With a stroke of a pen, Trump’s trying to undo everything we’ve worked so hard for.” Although the struggle to stop the pipeline spanned the terms of both President Barack Obama and Donald Trump, it was Trump who signed the executive order. Prolific uploaded his updated video to promote his song and make it clear that Trump had violated the sovereign rights of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. In the opening monologue, Prolific describes his own role in water activism and acknowledges the shared responsibility in its care: “We protect Mother Earth and the water because it’s who we are and we have no other choice.” Visual references to place underscore Prolific’s message: as snow falls lightly around him while he stands on a wintry prairie, he states, “I remain dedicated to peace and prayer. Pray with us.” This commentary anticipates the song’s lyrics, in which Prolific describes his own commitment to environmental stewardship and justice and land sovereignty. His opening words also invite the listener-viewers to take responsibility for their own actions and find ways to support environmental justice and land sovereignty.

As Prolific’s monologue comes to an end, A Tribe Called Red’s (ATCR, now The Halluci Nation) “Stadium Pow Wow (feat. Black Bear)” commences with the crisp beats of electric powwow music at a brisk tempo. Prolific’s choice to sample “Stadium Pow Wow” in “Black Snakes” is not incidental. An Ottawa, Ontario-based DJ crew comprising Cayuga, Mohawk, and Ojibwe members, ATCR has collaborated widely with popular artists in contemporary Indigenous music in what is known as electric powwow music. Their musical influences range from “modern hip-hop, traditional pow wow drums and vocals, blended with edgy electronic music styles” (The Halluci Nation 2020). ATCR was widely played throughout #IdleNoMore during the winter of 2012/13, so their inclusion in NoDAPL sonically connects environmental resistance across place and time.

Musical citation both reflects and creates loops of connectivity: when artists cite each other in hip hop, they create connections between musician-

activists, and allow listeners to hear resonances across time and across social issues. The selection of “Stadium Pow Wow” as the sampled song over which Prolific raps is significant. Both “Stadium Pow Wow” and “Black Snakes” were released in the same year. “Stadium Pow Wow” offers Pow Wow drum beats set with electronic dubstep rhythms, the long tradition of the big drum sounding with contemporary club sounds. ATCR brings the listener into contemporary powwow and urban nightlife music simultaneously, bridging sonic spheres as the artists make audible the current reality in which Indigenous life courses through genres and spaces. This articulation of continuity is also at work in “Black Snakes”: teachings that have long been part of Lakota life meet the contemporary reality in which petroleum products abound. While ATCR shows a continuity across time and space with their music, Prolific highlights a moment of conflict: as contemporary Lakota people and their allies remember and relive longstanding ways of connecting with the earth and water, they face companies and governments that promote extractivism. Yet there is a sense of overlap as well: water protectors and allies at Standing Rock must decide how to respond with their and our own desires to be part of contemporary economies that make and rely on petroleum products and companies that benefit from them.

Throughout “Black Snakes,” Prolific reinforces the cultural tenets of Wolakota invoking Unci Maka through references to the land and water. Prolific’s original 2016 music video ends with sounds and video footage from the protests that likewise stress the importance of stewardship of the land and water. Across this footage the text reads, “If you’re a Human Being you belong to this earth. Stand up for your mother with Standing Rock.” The lyrics, visuals, and music of “Black Snakes” invite listeners to draw from the centre of Indigenous knowledge and the lesson that we must maintain Lakota principles of land and water protection. Delivered in rhythm against the backdrop of ATCR’s electric powwow music and accompanied with the vivid imagery of NoDAPL, Prolific’s Lakota and English-language lyrics urge the listener-viewer to consider the logic of placing a pipeline in a body of water.

As “Stadium Pow Wow” unfolds in “Black Snakes,” the viewer-listener can both see and hear the regular rhythmic pulse: each drum hit corresponds to a new visual cue, cutting to a different image with each beat. This rhythmic precision intensifies with the addition of rattles and a vocal “hey” and corresponding visuals changing on both the strong and weak beats. The featured visuals include photos and video footage taken during NoDAPL: people on horseback; banners declaring solidarity; and police officers violently intimidating water protectors. Looking at these images, one can see text on banners that reveals the sentiments of the water protectors during NoDAPL:

“Water is Life”; “Standing Rock Awakens the World”; “Defend the Sacred”; and “Water is Our First Medicine.” These and other key phrases circulated around the world during NoDAPL, reminding everyone of the importance of protecting the environment while compelling people to take a stand for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.

The chorus of “Black Snakes” is especially powerful as it brings listeners to a place that centres the importance of protecting water through Wolakota. Emphasizing the personhood of the earth, the lyrics explain that “Turtle Island, not black snakes, the fresh water is her veins.” Many Indigenous nations refer to North America as “Turtle Island” and the term is utilized in many contemporary movements of Indigenous rights and environmental stewardship. By referencing Turtle Island, Prolific asserts how the treatment of water as kin is mutually understood across nations and that Indigenous ways of knowing complement one another. The use of common phrases allows listeners to recognize that the idea of protecting the Earth is not only a priority for Lakota peoples but others as well, while reinforcing the idea of interconnectedness and the importance of acknowledging Indigenous systems of sovereignty. The chorus text delineates a contrast of the earth in an unadulterated state with the threats of pipelines. The line “not Black Snakes” is applied in a metaphorical sense referencing the pipeline as a snake and the literal threat of oil when it is polluting the water. Referring to it as “black snakes” captures the menacing threat of freshwater contamination that the pipeline poses. The “black snake” threatens to pollute the fresh water through the “veins” of Unci Maka. Describing Unci Maka as having veins contextualizes the relationship to Grandmother Earth through a Lakota lens: Unci Maka here is understood as a relative.

In “Black Snakes,” Prolific also raps about his own journey and changing relations with Unci Maka, notably in the lines at the end of the first verse. Here, he closes the verse, rapping: “Some things worth more than gold / Some things they can’t be sold / Some things can’t be replaced / She is your mother, the fresh water is her veins.” Drawing on his own experience, Prolific recognizes that whatever money he had made working in the oil fields was not worth the damage done to Unci Maka. Inviting listeners to likewise consider the maternal kinship ties that link humans and Unci Maka, he uses the second person voice: the earth is “your” mother, and water is a living entity who requires care and respect.

Prolific continues to situate Wolakota as a centre of knowledge for listener-viewers in the second verse of “Black Snakes,” where he raps: “Love is the strongest / This path is the hardest.” Continuing with specific references to Indigenous knowledge and sacred teachings, he continues: “But if we weren’t strong enough to do it we wouldn’t see it / Our prayers would not be needed

/ This movement's very needed / Indigenous wisdom unheeded / And sacred things depleted." The emphasis on Indigenous knowledge about water and land stewardship and relationality recentres the sacred as the way to once again respect Unci Maka. Prayer was central to the water keepers' activities during NoDAPL, as protectors recognized that their prayers — and this movement — were needed for the protection of the earth and her inhabitants.

"Black Snakes" shows how water — fundamental to Wolakota — can also be used as a weapon. Video footage highlights the heavy police presence at sites at the NoDAPL protest where water protectors congregated to protect the water and land. Sometimes, standoffs became violent and, as evident in video footage of Morton County Sheriff Officers spraying water cannons on water protectors in freezing temperatures at the Backwater Bridge, water was weaponized and used against water protectors. "Black Snakes" asks viewers to witness the violence that Indigenous people and their allies faced within the context of the protests.

Clean water is not only an Indigenous issue; it is a human issue: this is the lesson that Prolific is teaching. All people — regardless of cultural identity — need water to survive, and treating water as a relative should be a priority. Wolakota as a praxis of environmental stewardship and kinship is demonstrated through the imagery and lyrics of "Black Snakes." As a Sicangu Lakota rapper, Prolific draws upon the tenets of Wolakota to localize his message in "Black Snakes" within NoDAPL for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, while directing it to an international audience. By invoking Lakota knowledge about the importance of protecting water and land from the threat of oil, Prolific illustrates that respecting Grandmother Earth and all kin is a shared responsibility.

Global Solidarity and Online Music Video Dissemination

Oceti Sakowin and their allies engaged in Wolakota throughout NoDAPL, seeking to protect Unci Maka. Wolakota also demands Indigenous sovereignty and environmental protection, issues that resonate with Indigenous groups internationally. "Black Snakes" was part of NoDAPL's musical activism that successfully permeated local, national, and international borders, gathering widespread support from Indigenous people and allies across the globe. Demonstrations were held in cities across the United States, and residents of countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, and New Zealand likewise participated in rallies that called for halting the construction of the pipeline. Many of these national and international events were livestreamed using #NoDAPL and recordings of events were posted afterwards, creating a living

archive in support of the water protectors. Lakota community leaders and musicians invited and recognized international support and solidarity. For example, Prolific shared the following in the commentary accompanying “Black Snakes” when it was originally released in 2016: “Much love to everyone on the front lines!! Much love Standing Rock, Oceti Sakowin, Turtle Island, all Indigenous Nations overseas, all spiritual leaders, and all beautiful Human Beings of all colors (Black, Red, White, Yellow, Pink, and Orange haha! jk).” He writes that everyone is important, and “I love you all equally!” (Prolific 2016).

Indigenous and non-Indigenous people outside of the United States uploaded expressions of solidarity on the internet, showing international support for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and their own commitment to environmental stewardship and care for the earth. One example of this global Indigenous solidarity is the work of Māori activists from Aotearoa (New Zealand), whose traditional homelands are across the Pacific Ocean and far from the continental United States. Although some Māori activists travelled to Standing Rock to help the Lakota/Dakota, others used social media to engagement in NoDAPL. A large group of Māori performed, recorded, and uploaded a haka — a traditional Māori action song — to YouTube as an embodied and musical message of solidarity and support (Gisborneherald 2016). The YouTube video “#Live Haka supports Standing Rock” was uploaded on November 6, 2016, and has had over 141,000 views as of the fall of 2021. The video is accompanied with extended commentary that addresses Māori solidarity for the water protectors at Standing Rock. Many comments by viewers indicate how they are moved by the dance and the participants’ show of solidarity. The number of views this video has received demonstrates the significant international audience online for #NoDAPL solidarity videos. Considering the great distance between New Zealand and the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, it also shows the wide global spread of support for Standing Rock.

Despite being from two continents that are very far from one another, both Oceti Sakowin and Māori recognize the importance of water for their ways of life and the importance of environmental protection. In 2017, Māori activists won a legal battle to recognize the personhood of the Whanganui River, a waterway located on the North Island of Aotearoa that has historically supported their food, traveling, and village life (Evans 2020). Similar to members from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, many Māori, especially those from the Whanganui nations, protected the local waterways because of their kinship relationship with them. The responsibility of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and Māori to protect the water and land exhibits Indigenous allyship in relation to environmental stewardship.

The use of a haka to express Māori support for NoDAPL demonstrates both the magnitude of support for Standing Rock and the cultural specificity of Indigenous alliances. Māori dancers share traditional action songs (haka), which are stylized collective forms of music and dance that both depict values and enact relationships. Describing haka, Jennifer Shennan has written that the “Qualities of strength, unity, and courage are depicted; emotions (*aroha*, sorrow, hope); relationships between people (*tangata whenua* and *manuhiri*, performers and audience, one tribe and another, the ancestors and the living), and the expression of hospitality are the favoured imagery of action songs” (1984: 25). In the YouTube video, we see more than 100 people on Gisborne’s Waikanae Beach, with a group of about 60 people performing the haka. The first part of the video involves women performing “Ka Panapana,” an action song that expresses the power of women (Ihimaera 2000; Rangikoepa Palmer 2016). Next, the men join the women dancing the “Ruamoko” haka, with “imagery and actions [that] are reflective of Ruamoko, the god of earthquakes and volcanoes” (Gardiner 2007: 110). The themes of these haka resonate with messaging of the power and strength of women, including Unci Maka. This haka performance remains on YouTube, archived for future viewers to witness global and culturally specific responses in support of clean water for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.

Using an online platform, these Māori activists demonstrated their shared values around environmental protection and kinship, and broadcast their message of solidarity with Standing Rock. Haka organizer Holden Stirling stated that “It was just a collective of people, all coming together for a good cause” (Gisborneherald 2016). Just as Prolific sought to have Indigenous peoples’ rights and the importance of clean water recognized at Standing Rock through the creation of “Black Snakes,” this group of Māori demonstrators likewise used online platforms to demonstrate their shared values around environmental protection and kinship as well as to broadcast their message of solidarity. The online circulation of music videos and recorded actions expanded local responses to a global audience, showing how solidarity moves across space. Indeed, although Wolakota is an Oceti Sakowin concept, it is clear that it resonates with many Indigenous peoples globally. As we reflect on resonances of activism globally, we next consider how activist music and their invocation of Wolakota connect across time.

Sustaining Engagement: Lakota Musical Activism Historically, Presently, and Into the Future

Breaches of Indigenous land rights are frequent across Turtle Island and in Indigenous communities internationally. Efforts to hold state and national governments accountable for existing land agreements and to recognize Indigenous sovereignty are both challenging and ongoing and many of these efforts have taken place over many years. There is nothing fast about the processes for recognition of sovereignty and environmental justice — Oceti Sakowin have been involved in environmental resistances for generations as these struggles require sustained engagement. Music is an important tool in Indigenous rights movements, supporting community while documenting the struggles for future generations.

Through the long trajectory of Indigenous activism, music is a mainstay. Even after the peak of NoDAPL, people continue to listen and respond to music made for Standing Rock. Since its release, listeners continue to like, share, and comment on Prolific’s “Black Snakes.” The official 2017 YouTube version had over 1.5 million views as of fall 2021. The comments feed for “Black Snakes” attests to the ongoing relevance of the issues raised in the song, including references to new pipeline battles, statements of solidarity, and calls to environmental action. At the height of NoDAPL, viewers posted and replied to the sometimes-confusing series of legal determinations about DAPL. Listeners also mention specific lyrics that stay with or motivate them. The online dialogue also extends to related contemporary issues, such as police violence (seen both in NoDAPL and in comments from 2020 supporting the Black Lives Matter movement), extending the song’s relevance to broader social issues.

The work of the “Black Snakes” music video, as it circulates online, is notable, but it is not new or unique. As Cutcha Risling Baldy has summarized, “Native peoples have engaged with social media networking sites to gather support for Idle No More, to rally against the Keystone XL pipeline, and to protect sacred sites” (2016: 105). As an example of Indigenous online activism, “Black Snakes” is exemplary for its large number of views and the ways audiences are connecting with the contemporary issues it invokes. Importantly, as people participated in global NoDAPL organizing, many listeners of “Black Snakes” and similar songs supporting Standing Rock became keenly aware of the links between clean water, Indigenous land sovereignty, and resistance to oil pipelines, placing this song and others on a trajectory of musical Indigenous resistance. Wolakota as a theory and praxis existed long before the actions at Standing Rock in the 2010s and also informed other Oceti Sakowin resistances and music creations.

Sicangu Lakota activist hip-hop predates NoDAPL, as evident in Frank Waln's "Oil 4 Blood," released in 2013 in response to the Keystone XL pipeline. A rapper and producer from the Rosebud Reservation, Waln frequently uses his music to address political concerns and social issues, often inspired by singers, storytellers, and fighters of the past. Proposed by the oil company TransCanada in 2008, the 2,700-mile Keystone XL pipeline was to move crude oil from the Alberta tar sands through the US/Canada border and into Texas. Concerns about the pipeline included crude oil leakage, carbon emissions, habitat loss, and environmental damage (Palliser 2012), with particular urgency around potential risks to drinking water and public health. Since significant portions of the pipeline were to go through Indigenous territories, additional concerns about process were raised, citing the UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples that requires consultation with Indigenous peoples for projects such as Keystone XL. As with the Dakota Access Pipeline, critics contend that appropriate consultative processes were not met (Anderson 2018).

Waln's response to Keystone XL was a music video that questioned the relationship between oil, blood, and water, "Oil 4 Blood." As with Prolific's music video, "Oil 4 Blood" can be read through Wolakota, showing a responsibility to Uinci Maka; it also draws similar parallels with reference to oil replacing water, the lifeblood of Uinci Maka. Posted on Waln's official YouTube page on February 2, 2013, the video begins with the grainy flicker of Waln portrayed as a silenced hostage, with his hands tied and eyes covered with a red and white bandanna, and his mouth taped with the letters "NDN." Listeners can hear the female voices and hand drum of Ulali as their song, "Mahk Jchi," is heard in the background, but the song is interrupted by the static buzz of a glitching videocassette. In a disorienting series of sonic layers, Waln's voice repeats the line, "Everything's Red" as "Mahk Jchi" starts and stops, is pitch shifted up, and continues despite the alterations.

As with the intertextuality of sampling "Stadium Pow Wow" in "Black Snakes," this sampled song offers additional layers of meaning. In this case, "Mahk Jchi," which loosely translates to "Heartbeat Song," implies a narrative of continuation: the Tutelo-Saponi lyrics tell of the constancy and continuity of the drum, the heartbeat of Mother Earth, and the voices of ancestors. Ulali, a popular trio consisting of Indigenous women founded in 1987, gained international popularity in the 1990s. Waln came to appreciate this music through Robbie Robertson and the Red Road Ensemble, who featured Ulali on the 1994 album *Music for the Native Americans*. In Mahk Jchi in particular, the drum plays the role of a heartbeat. As Waln chose to sample and repeat this rhythmic pattern, a listener can hear his appreciation. He describes: "the traditional drum, I try to incorporate that into almost every beat, bury it in

there. It's like the heartbeat of our people, so I believe it's the heartbeat of my music" (Waln 2013b). Through the citation of the song "Makh Jchi," a listener can hear Waln's appreciation for pop music that carries forward traditional song. The rapper found inspiration in Robertson's album because "the way he so seamlessly intertwines traditional music with rock or psychedelic rock, it didn't sound like two separate things" (Waln 2013b). Waln attempts this kind of genre-crossing in his own music, in which he creates something that feels like a meaningful whole. This continuity through multiple layers of citation has the potential to deepen listener experience on "Oil 4 Blood."

As the video unfolds, Waln merges the hand drum in "Makh Jchi" with a new recording of a hand drum song that increases in volume. Video footage shows a child holding the Rosebud Sioux Tribe flag. Then, it shows Waln holding the same flag as he stands next to a hand drummer, dry grass behind them. The same proud image is tattooed on a muscled bicep, and then held in front of a mural. The Rosebud Sioux flag shows the significance of local place. It is also a declaration of identity and sovereignty. Intercut with these images, a globe appears on a rocky surface, then reappears, covered with thick black liquid. No longer a hostage, Waln can tell his story of local resistance to the global crisis of resource extraction over two lyrically dense verses.

The lyrics of "Oil 4 Blood" invoke Wolakota and the continuity of Lakota practices. Waln raps that there is "hope in this Lakota Sioux way," invoking Wolakota in contrast to a capitalist extraction mindset. Reference to specific Lakota ceremonies, here the Sundance, shows how the continuation of Lakota practices will help his people, presenting a path forward from destruction: "Free all my people get them out of prison / Take them to Sundance show them how we're livin'." Waln raps about his reservation, while firmly grounded on it. His reference to Unci Maka is read through a well-circulated trope of the earth as mother. Speaking out against water and land pollution in the chorus, he raps: "Oil 4 Blood, Oil 4 Blood / My Mother is clean, that oil is mud." Like Prolific does four years later in "Black Snakes," Waln builds the lyrics around a reference to maternal kin. Lyrically, he links resource extraction to government policy, referencing commodity foodstuffs, airborne cancer, and underfunded schools. In his lyrics, Waln invokes those who have come before as he spreads his message about the dangers of the Keystone XL pipeline, rapping: "Keystone XL, you smell like an atrocity / To my home and my ancestors I am loyal / Build that pipeline and I'm burning down your oil." He cites his inspiration musically.

Musically, Waln's words are supported by a hand drummer, and bolstered by their connection with Ulali's "Mahk Jchi" — a song about Mother Earth and continuity across generations. Sampling "Mahk Jchi," "Oil 4 Blood" references

musical activism that predates Waln's own work. In modelling his message of continuation through transformation of this earlier song, written by Pura Fé and performed by Ulali, Waln pays homage to these artists and their message. This musical reference places Waln's output within the long trajectory of North American Indigenous protest music, notably through what Elyse Carter Vosen has identified as a "driving responsibility to advocate for the next generation" (2013: 264). Through Waln's musical choices, we hear a living history of musical activism and futurity for Lakota protest music, grounded in Wolakota.

Waln's "Oil 4 Blood" from 2013 and Prolific's "Black Snakes" from 2016 are only two of several hip hop music video responses that grew from anti-pipeline activism.²³ It is possible to see and hear multiple collaborations that were rooted in Standing Rock and #NoDAPL they circulated to broad audiences through online activism, including the Māori haka described earlier and the dizzying array of musical performances, albums, and videos for Standing Rock.²⁴ Allyship took many forms and was found internationally. These many media examples demonstrate a network of live musical interventions, and also provide opportunities for a dispersed audience to engage online and over time. Importantly, they also show the interconnections and relationships that are inherent to Wolakota — taking care of kin and protecting Unci Maka.

Conclusion: Learning from Wolakota

We return now to a striking moment in the "Black Snakes" music video. Midway through the music video, at 1:56, the music stops. Prolific repeats the chorus, rapping: "What is going on? Have we all lost our minds? Every human needs clean water to survive," synchronized with three close-ups that feature young people's faces looking straight into the camera. Then, the last image fades to black, and the beat stops; everything cuts out, punctuating the video with an unusual — and thus jarring — moment of silence. In this moment we ask you, the listener to think through Wolakota: what is your responsibility here? Who are your kin and what relations do you have with Unci Maka?

Highlighting police violence against the water protectors at NoDAPL follows this opportunity for reflection in "Black Snakes." After the moment of silence, the video continues with a sample from a phone call with visuals showing law enforcement officers firing on water protectors; the only sound for a moment is the three-note piercing beeps of a telephone, followed by a recorded voice telling the caller, "We're sorry, but your call cannot be" Like the call itself, this phrase is not completed. It is pitched down and swallowed as listeners witness a call to the Sheriff's department. On screen, the call is

stamped with the time and date: Nov. 20th, 9pm. A woman's voice enters: "I need to report an assault." A male voice asks her where it occurred. She fills in the details: it is at Standing Rock, people are being attacked with water, police are "firing at point-blank range with high-powered mace on unarmed people." The dispatcher explains that if the police are already there, there is nothing he can do. The woman continues, "People could lose eyes, people are going to get hypothermia, people could die. We have elders here, we have children here." The video shows protesters' bloodied faces and injuries. Still images reveal powerful sprays, water being turned into a weapon against people who identify as water protectors. The listener-viewer hears the dispatcher as he fails to help, instructing the ally on the phone to call the governor's office because he is not able to help her with the violent situation. This scene and its message highlight state complicity in colonial violence against Indigenous defenders of their land and environment.

A short flute melody transitions out of the interlude. The drummers and singers come back in, and Prolific continues: "Love is the strongest, this path is the hardest," offering serious reflection — resources are depleted, Indigenous wisdom ignored. He raps about his own mixed background, saying "I'm mixed with everyone, so part of me's just like you." As he writes in his professional bio, "I am Indigenous. ... Mexican, Lakota, European and am a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. I'm a human being with an important purpose, and so are you. We all are" (Prolific 2020). These words show how he relates to others and invite listeners to relate to the cause. At the end of this serious verse, his face changes, cracking a smile: "If the Earth is not your mother, are you from Mars?" This text directly asserts the relationships and responsibilities between humans and their surroundings that are central to Wolakota. In this way, Prolific implicates his listeners as also having an "important purpose" and a responsibility to care for Unci Maki.

Prolific's video is steeped in, and reflects, racialized violence that is common in contemporary United States and Canada. Yet Prolific's music video is also specifically grounded in the local and in Wolakota: the resources that are poisoned are the water — Unci Maka's veins — that is flowing through Oceti Sakowin territory. The violence manifests itself in the specific actions taken by officers against those gathered at Standing Rock, captured on camera. These are the faces that were bloodied, these are the lands that are harmed through environmental violence and aggression against water protectors. Heard in conjunction with other responses to NoDAPL, the viewer-listener is invited into a variety of interpretations and to stand up for a specific cause. "Black Snakes," "Oil 4 Blood," and the Māori haka encourage listener-viewers to think about the overlap of violences against Unci Maka, Oceti Sakowin, and all who

inhabit the earth with state-sanctioned violence, environmental degradation, and structural racism. Listeners have choice. We can hear responses to the Dakota Access Pipeline as a lesson learned on a closed case and move on, or we can hear this piece within the trajectory of Indigenous resistance and land and water protection over time and place. We can hear the fight that is not over, and ask what can we do now? How does the fight for recognition of sovereignty continue every day? Listening through Wolakota, what is our responsibility?

Native American movements for environmental sovereignty are rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems. Applying Wolakota — a Lakota philosophy of responsibility to *Unci Maka* and her inhabitants — as an assertion of Indigenous sovereignty then situates the musical responses to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline within a Lakota knowledge system. Wolakota principles guide Lakota people in how to live. While non-Lakota people cannot claim a Lakota identity or practice Lakota traditions, they can learn *Oceti Sakowin* ecological stewardship practices of being a good relative to the water, treating it with respect and caring for it. Prolific, a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, produced and released “Black Snakes” online to call people to action, to protect water, to assert sovereignty, and to disseminate information about the struggle at Standing Rock. The impact of NoDAPL and the connections with Wolakota philosophy had international resonance. Likewise, by tracing Wolakota messaging in songs that predate NoDAPL, as exemplified in Frank Waln’s “Oil 4 Blood,” we can also see how “Black Snakes” fits on a trajectory of Indigenous activism through music. These musical examples show various degrees of rootedness and distance both in and from *Oceti Sakowin* environmental movements. Producing and sharing music on social media platforms extends approaches to activism, fostering a larger space and audience for Indigenous artists to share cultural teachings and raise social justice issues through music. 🌿

Notes

* Pilamayelo (thank you) to the water protectors and Indigenous musicians who supported the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. This movement protects the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe from the threat of the Dakota Access Pipeline. We extend deep appreciation to Jacqueline Shea Murphy and Jack Gray for their assistance in interpreting the haka solidarity music and dance, to the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions, and to special issue journal editors Anna Hoefnagels and Judith Klassen for their feedback.

1. Activity to protect water at Standing Rock has been both in-person and online. It is sometimes referred to as NoDAPL and #NoDAPL to differentiate

offline from online activism. In this article, we use NoDAPL as an umbrella term for in-person and online activism, because they mutually inform each other.

2. Oyate translated into English means “the people”; throughout the chapter Oceti Sakowin people and Oyate are used interchangeably. For an in-depth look at Oceti Sakowin bands, see Waggoner (2013: 39–52).

3. See <https://www.nodaplarchive.com/> for an online archive of the solidarity expressed for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.

4. Inspired by collaborative research approaches, this article is a written document, and is also part of a process. This work is a collaboration that emerged as we prepared for a conference presentation on the same topic. Co-author Joshua Thunder Little, a member of the Oglala Lakota Nation who grew up in Southern California, is a Native American history scholar who researches the history of water rights in Lakota communities, while co-author Liz Przybylski is a hip-hop scholar whose work addresses online music participation and distribution. We learn from collaborative writing strategies that present collective and individual voices, and recommend that readers consult Firmino Castillo, Guarcax González, and Brito Bernal (2019) as well as Strigley and Sutherland (2018). We (Joshua and Liz) spent hours on conference calls, sometimes talking and sometimes writing alongside each other without speaking, sometimes talking through ideas together and jotting down notes about new understandings that emerged in dialogue. This article also has as its unwritten backstory some of our shared participation in in-person events, for example a round dance and solidarity event for NoDAPL on the University of California, Riverside campus. Individually, we each bring our own experience of in-person and online connections with NoDAPL and other previous and subsequent movements.

5. Sicangu is one of the sub-groups within the Lakota Nation, also known as the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. Although this is a separate reservation than Standing Rock, the two communities share ongoing and historic connections as Oceti Sakowin.

6. Joshua explains this relationship based on what he has been taught as a learner. See also Powers (1986).

7. As discussed later in the essay, “Turtle Island” is commonly used by Indigenous Peoples to refer to North America.

8. For full text of the treaty, see Government Printing Office (1904).

9. For a legal history of treaties with Oceti Sakowin, see Ostler (2004) and Lawson (1982).

10. Wolakota as ideology is largely shared among Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota peoples.

11. It is difficult to directly translate the meaning of Wolakota into English because Indigenous knowledge is best understood within Indigenous languages. The translation is offered here into English for accessibility, but it falls short of encapsulating a Lakota worldview.

12. Personal conversation with family on how I (Joshua) came to understand Indigenous sovereignty within a Lakota cultural worldview.

13. For more on Lakota methodologies as described in culturally relevant language, see also Robertson, Jorgensen, and Garrow (2004).

14. I, Joshua, include myself within the context of this statement because I am a part of this community as an Oglala Lakota tribal member.

15. Notably, a “Ban the Dam Jam” concert was held in 1991 featuring well-known popular musicians as well as organizers, who spoke directly to the cause (see Siegel 1991).

16. See Meyer (2017) for additional context.

17. The Halluci Nation (2020), formerly “A Tribe Called Red” announced the change in their name on April 5th, 2021.

18. This track was released as a single in 2016.

19. For example, some protesters reckoned with their own complicity through commerce, and advocated actions like divesting from banks such as Wells Fargo, which funded the pipeline (see Action Center on Race & the Economy 2021). Others, like Prolific, reflected upon their participation in the labour of working on pipelines for financial reasons, and chose to seek other employment.

20. See <https://www.nodaplarchive.com/> for an online archive of the solidarity expressed for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe; <https://www.nodaplarchive.com/cities-in-solidarity.html> specifically catalogues many of the cities that held support rallies.

21. Waln speaks in more detail about his inspiration in an interview with Kaufman (2015).

22. Connections to Wolakota can be found in other songs as well. For example, Waln’s “AbOriginal” responds to environmental damage and celebrates cultural continuity. Other songs also connect to musician-activists beyond the hip-hop genre who participate in social critique, as in Prolific’s “Human Beings,” which features poet, musician, and American Indian Movement leader John Trudell.

23. Some songs written for NoDAPL, like “Black Snakes,” are grounded in Standing Rock, while others not addressed here focus more on NoDAPL as a metaphor. Recirculating songs for and about Standing Rock can keep the spirit of resistance alive in the long and necessary fight for water and land protection.

24. A compelling example of a collaborative musical response to NoDAPL is rapper Taboo’s “Stand Up / Stand N Rock” that features a large team of musicians that includes Taboo, Mag7, actress Shailene Woodley, flutist Tony Duncan, traditional and popular singers Perry Cheevers, Gerald Danforth, Spencer Battiest, Kahara Hodges, PJ Vegas, and rappers Drezus, MyVerse, Emcee One, Doc Battiest, and Supaman. Reminiscent of other music videos made for causes such as natural disaster relief and medical fundraising, popular figures attract a wide audience to a cause that may be new to them. See, too, the multi-volume Songs for Standing Rock compilation albums. (Various Artists, Songs for Standing Rock, digital download. See www.songsforstandingrock.com; these albums are also available on Spotify, Amazon, iTunes, and other sources.)

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