

Article

# Theorizing Indigenous Student Resistance, Radical Resurgence, and Reclaiming Spiritual Teachings about Tma'áakni (Respect)

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**Abstract:** Indigenous dispossession and environmental devastation are intertwined outcomes of settler colonialism's cycle of violence. However, indigenous people continue to draw from cultural and spiritual teachings to resist such forms of violence, and engage in what Leanne Simpson calls "radical resurgence." Our paper analyzes the Yakama elders' teachings about Tma'áakni (Respect), to examine principles and forms of indigenous resistance and resurgence, demonstrated by indigenous students in support of the NoDAPL (No Dakota Access PipeLine) movement. Elders' teachings, which are rooted in spiritual traditions held by indigenous peoples since time immemorial, are useful for understanding and articulating the importance of the contemporary indigenous student activism. We assert that indigenous people, drawing from intergenerational forms of teaching and learning, provide systemic alternatives that can simultaneously protect the sacred, and heal social and ecological devastations by reclaiming indigenous cultural teachings and traditions that resist settler colonial paradigms.

**Keywords:** Native American; survivance; NoDAPL; indigenous activism; education

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## 1. Introduction

Our land bases are integral parts of the indigenous spiritualities, survival, and cultural revitalization practices. As a result of our spiritual roles as stewards of our Native nations, indigenous people are uniquely situated to provide a critical analysis of the contemporary ecological destruction being inflicted upon the indigenous homelands. Within the current global capitalist economy, not only is the environment direly threatened, but indigenous cultural ways of being and knowing—all of which are connected to place, are threatened simultaneously. Despite these challenges, indigenous people continue to draw from cultural teachings to engage in radical resurgence (Simpson 2017). Our article discusses historical, political, social, and economic forces that underlie indigenous dispossession in the U.S., focusing primarily on the student activism we witnessed, showing solidarity with the water protectors attempting to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline—the conflict that served to activate a nation of young indigenous leaders to rise and stand up, through acts of healing anchored in love and deep respect to all living things, seen and unseen (Kearney 2014). Through the transformation of collective healing, respect became a tool that guides the youth to move through the assault of ongoing colonialism, fueled by white superiority, capitalism, and ignorance, as a resistance to genocide and a demonstration of positive social change that centers and honors the wisdom of the stewards of these lands. We do so from a critical perspective, and our analyses both challenges the violence of the settler colonialism and celebrates the wisdom and resilience of indigenous people who have

survived hundreds of years of colonial and settler colonial violence on indigenous homelands (Jacob 2013; Simpson 2017; Vizenor 2014; Wolfe 2006).

We write as an interdisciplinary and inter-tribal collective of indigenous women, working from the fields of education, public health, and indigenous studies. In this article we examine the importance of Native American student activism to theorize the Yakama concept of Tma'áakni (Respect). We consider it a blessing to have witnessed the power of student activism and we are further blessed to understand the power of Tma'áakni, to guide our personal and collective work; yet, the westernized academic literature is missing this analysis. Our paper is an effort to begin filling this gap.

We take seriously the call of indigenous decolonizing research scholars, which demands that academic work have something helpful to contribute in the service of indigenous people. However, doing so requires an ongoing critical assessment. All work in Western academic fields, despite good intentions, can have a colonizing and disempowering impact on indigenous people (Smith 2012; Simpson 2017). For example, in the field of education, it has been well-documented that the U.S. government and the churches who served as partners in building and operating schools for Native American children (e.g., Boarding Schools), inflicted massive horrors, chaos, and cultural genocide, along with widespread physical and sexual violence, in their efforts to “kill the Indian and save the man” (Million 2013; Chang 2011; Child 1998; Deyhle and Swisher 1997; Manson et al. 1989). Such efforts were traumatizing and have had lasting harmful impacts on the ways the Native American people engaged or disengaged from the education system. In contemporary U.S. education, these efforts persist but might be less explicit as indigenous languages are assumed to be “dead” and not worth engaging in the curriculum, thus, perpetuating a legacy of subtractive education (Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar 2010). The field of public health also has a legacy of undervaluing and mistreating Native Americans, as evidenced by acts of government and church agents. For example, children were forcibly removed to sanatoriums that were far away from family, community, and culture—in response to diseases that settlers themselves brought either through infection or through an enforced poverty and dependency of the Native American people, resulting from various racist federal policies that resulted in reservation containment and a denial of traditional economic activities. These acts were enforced by laws and policies about “child welfare”, as well as the introduction of alcohol as a tool of chemical warfare that sought to destroy traditional household and family structures, and economies that were built upon a strong sense of individuals contributing to the collective good—not for a “nuclear” family—as has become the norm in the U.S., but for an extended intergenerational family (Smith 2016; Hearst 2012; Trafzer 1998; Trafzer and McCoy 2009).

These biases, assumptions, and acts of settler colonial violence have led to another wave of Native American children being “stolen” from their families and communities, through sanctioned federal, state, and local policies; prior to the implementation of the Indian Child Welfare Act, roughly 30% of Native American children had been removed from their family homes, with nearly 85% placed in non-Indian homes (Hearst 2012). Thus, the purpose of any research that engaged indigenous people or issues must place supporting indigenous self-determination at the center of all concerns (Smith 2012).

The critiques of settler colonial violence noted above, present a bleak picture of the Native American collective well-being. Indigenous erasure from the present physical and political landscape is part of a settler colonial education, and largely remains unchallenged. Indigenous experiences within higher education, whether students are attending tribal colleges or mainstream universities, show that Native American students find, claim, and build spaces of an indigenous community (a home away from home or a home they never had) within the university, in order to survive epistemic violence (Tuck and Yang 2012).

Clearly, work is needed to better understand and articulate the importance of Native American identity development and spiritual empowerment, as it relates to the reclaiming and revitalizing of indigenous cultural teachings. Such information is necessary also to identify and address systemic inequities that oppress, marginalize, and harm Native American people, our cultures, and homelands. A part of this is the responsibility of the indigenous people themselves, and one way to reach this goal

is to celebrate the strengths of the indigenous people, and each other. The act of such a celebration among indigenous people is evidence that, healing from historical trauma and colonialism is occurring among individuals and collectively within communities. In the spirit of celebrating our people, we have written this paper, guided by a deep sense of responsibility and honor for our contemporary warriors/peacemakers—this article is dedicated to our Water Protectors of the present moment and for our future Water Protectors who are engaging in a radical resurgence to maintain humans' sacred relationship with water and the earth. We use the Yakama concept of Tma'áakni (Respect), as a framework for understanding the promise and possibility for continued radical resurgence, to heal our Indigenous communities and the environment. Tma'áakni translates into English as "Respect" and is described by Yakama Elder, Levina Wilkins, as showing "care and regard for preserving and protecting the cultural traditions, beliefs, and unwritten laws of Native people . . . you show respect for all that is living, for they are giving their lives for you. They are here for you . . . You recognize the country, the earth, and the earth will recognize you . . . what goes up comes back to you" (Wilkins 2008, p. 31).

In this paper, we theorized the activism of Native American students participating in the NoDAPL campaign, as a contemporary expression of the ancient teaching of Tma'áakni. Although Tma'áakni is a concept rooted in the Ichishkín language and culture, we find that it is applicable in understanding the significance of indigenous people's dedication to their communities—guiding their work and activism, as we have discussed in this article. In our analyses, we argued that Native American people are expressing Tma'áakni in their activist work, to better support tribal communal self-determination, and to promote healing and transformation from colonial mindsets, and the settler colonial cycle of destruction (Jacob 2016; Kearney 2014). In doing so, students are demonstrating the power and potential of a radical resurgence. We position indigenous radical activism as a form of healing and celebration to see indigenous students, and ourselves, through the reflection of the strength and wisdom of our ancestors (Cooper and Driedger 2018). According to Kearney (2014), many research studies have explored the traumatic legacy of conflict and resulting historical trauma, yet fewer studies have explored the impact this conflict has had in the long term, and how it might be placed in a schema of healing and survival, is underappreciated and under-explored. Kearney asserts that more research is warranted to explore the interrelationship of these issues, and in doing so we help to provide an analysis that centers the strengths and resistance of the indigenous people, in the context of colonial violence, which profoundly interrupts research frameworks that are deficit-based and are problematic (Buchanan 2008; Teufel-Shone et al. 2018). We also assert that indigenous people, drawing from intergenerational forms of teaching and learning, provide systemic alternatives that can simultaneously protect the sacred, as well as heal the social and ecological devastations, by reclaiming indigenous cultural teachings and traditions that resist settler colonial paradigms and connect with the cycle of healing (Jacob 2016).

## 2. Literature Review

The significance of Native American young people involved in the NoDAPL movement is connected with broader concepts that tell the damaging story of settler colonialism, including indigenous land dispossession, destruction of spiritual systems, destruction of gendered social orders, destruction of traditional place-based economies, and destruction of traditional education systems that place tribal elders in positions of authority, as teachers—all of which are known to impact Native American well-being (Jacob 2013). Leanne Simpson argues: "The parts of me that I drew on in this circle of Elders were liabilities at university—gentleness, humility, carefulness, and the ability to proceed slowly" (Simpson 2017, p. 14). Indigenous Studies literature articulates that settler colonial violence, as a process, perpetuates the processes of inequality and dispossession upon indigenous bodies and communities (Wolfe 2006; Simpson 2017). Settler societies are built upon the assumptions, expectations and goals that Native American people and communities will continue to be disempowered, obedient or eradicated.

However, as tribally-based people who have resisted (and continue to resist) eradication in the U.S. settler society, our identities are communal. A strong individual identity development process for young adults, necessitates that they have a clear understanding of their social, political, and cultural responsibility to the collective well-being and self-determination of indigenous people (Cajete 2016; Davis 2013; Morrill 2017; Nakata et al. 2012; Sabzalian 2016). Western education was and still is a key tool used in the cultural genocide and control of the indigenous people and nations. The U.S. settler state has refused to acknowledge the harm and lasting historical legacy of the trauma of the boarding school experience for the Native Americans. While Native American students encounter epistemic violence in schooling experiences, these students also continued to be present and active in their educational communities. Many native students find community and support in Native American student organizations and in native studies classes, which honor and center indigenous peoples, and contribute to the healing from, and resisting the internalization of the settler colonial dominance. Native students meet other native students from other native nations and learn many different protocols and other cultural practices and Tma'aakni for other Native nations. This is an example of what Vizenor refers to as survivance. "Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name" (Vizenor 1999, p. vii). Native American students are actively continuing Native American stories and are, therefore, enacting survivance. In working together on campaigns such as NoDAPL and divestment initiatives, as well as building community within hostile environments, Native American students are demonstrating that "[s]urvivance is a practice, not an ideology, dissimulation, or a theory" (Vizenor 2008, p. 11). Relationships, care, love, and Tma'aakni between Native students, nations, and indigenous lands have the power to heal and decolonize institutions of higher education; and in this way positive social- and system-level change becomes possible.

Education for indigenous students is almost always about trying to civilize, assimilate, and dislocate native students, culturally and geographically, away from their families, communities, and land bases. This holds true for the brave few who made it into universities, hundred years ago, and for those starting college this year. Change and development for native college students continues to be about survival, resistance, and resurgence. Indigenous based ways of knowing should and could transform the university. For indigenous peoples, learning is a sacred process, as Leanne Simpson writes, "the way we are taught . . . is by being open . . . and by being engaged in a way of living that generates a close, personal relationship with our Ancestors and relations in the spirit world through ceremony, dreams, visions, and stories" (Simpson 2017, pp. 157–58). Such an approach to education is a radical resurgent practice, because it relies on indigenous intelligence and stories, as knowledge of how to be in the world, with the land and people. Resurgence is a gentle approach to learning and shifts the focus away from the settler ways of knowledge and control toward indigenous knowledge practices that are guided by ancestral wisdom and love. In other words, how you come to learn (stories, protocol, practice, and modeling) is more important than memorizing facts for the exam (Simpson 2017). Sharing knowledge with others occurs through stories, observation, witnessing, and connecting the mind with the heart; this is a way that counters frameworks, which make grades the sign of knowledge and knowing. This idea of collectivity is an important indigenous educational practice, which challenges the settler ideas of individuality and competition. This approach to education, which challenges settler education, is an act of survivance, and is a representation of respect and dignity. Gerald Vizenor writes, "[s]urvivance is an intergenerational connection to an individual and collective sense of presence and resistance in personal experience and the word, or language, made particularly through stories" (Vizenor 2014, p. 107). In this article, we examine media coverage about, and share some stories of, native students who are working for change and survivance. Importantly, this is not only survivance for indigenous people or even indigenous students. Native students in the NoDAPL campaign were working to form partnerships with other indigenous nations, support for the Water Protectors, and trying to raise awareness about the connections between indigenous sovereignty and environmental racism directed at indigenous nations and traditional homelands.

### 3. Results

In the previous sections, we have briefly outlined the historical, social, and cultural reasons why settler colonialism has persisted in denying the presence and power of indigenous people and cultural ways of being and knowing. Yet, we have also drawn out the tensions of such assumptions, noting the widespread ignorance of the resilience of the Native American communities. We have argued that Tma'áakni is a helpful concept upon which to analyze the importance of radical resurgence. We now turn our attention to the NoDAPL campaign and issues to articulate the importance of Tma'áakni in the radical resurgence work that aims to heal the damaged relationship between humans and Mother Earth.

#### 3.1. Analyzing NoDAPL at the Local Level

One of the most highly visible recent collective activist struggles for Native Americans has taken place around the efforts to block the Dakota Access Pipeline. This collective action, known as NoDAPL, occurred most visually through the encampment of protestors (the Water Protectors) to use their bodies to block the workers building the pipeline. The NoDAPL campaign has also been waged in the local and federal courts. Many of those battles have been lost, and one of the first things Donald Trump did when he took presidential office in the U.S. was to continue construction on the pipeline, after the Department of Justice's September 2016 decision to block the pipeline. The NoDAPL student activists moved their protest to the financial backers of the pipeline and for investment groups and individuals to close their bank accounts at Citi Bank, TD Securities, The Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ, Mizuho Bank, Wells Fargo, and more than twenty other banks. According to the #DefundDAPL website, personal divestment from these banks total over \$89,000,000 (U.S. dollars) and city divestment is over \$4 billion U.S. dollars.<sup>1</sup> Divestment has been an important part of the ongoing activism around the NoDAPL campaign. The Dakota Access Pipeline required capital investment to financially fund the construction and labor necessary to build such a large project. The pipeline received financial backing from banks, cities, universities, and a number of other sources. Many people did not know that the universities they attended or worked for had investment in, and therefore literally funded, schemes like the pipeline. Divestment is an important part of organizing campaigns to educate the public about where their money goes and how it gets invested.

We witnessed at the local level that, for the Native American student activists, divestment is about research and education, providing students with the opportunity to draw from their cultural teachings to make a difference at their schools and within their communities, and to speak back to the global capital processes that continue to destroy Mother Earth. Divestment is also important for indigenous political and social development because Native American student groups often work with non-Native groups on divestment campaigns, with the potential to cultivate allies. The successful campaign to eliminate fossil fuels from the University of Oregon in 2017 gives the Native American student groups credit for their work on this campaign, which lasted for years. The University of Oregon Divestment student campaign had a great success when the University of Oregon decided to divest from fossil fuels in September 2016. While the University of Oregon Foundation refused to state why it decided to divest in fossil fuels, much pressure was applied by student activists for years (Dietz 2016). These student movements began before the NoDAPL campaign and continued, and Native American students continued to be involved.

When working with non-indigenous groups and even with Native American people from many different backgrounds, nations, and cultures, Native American students have to learn to work through many complex issues. Often, there can be cultural misunderstandings on both sides and the burden to educate non-Natives about the indigenous culture and the meaning of being a decolonized ally, becomes

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.defunddapl.org> accessed 12 August 2017.

the responsibility of the Native American student groups. This is an immediate way that Native American students become responsible to their communities; early on in their lives they understand the widespread ignorance about their communities and must step in to address this problem. Despite these challenges and the strain of working on a campaign for years, Native American student groups accept the challenges of working with other student groups because Indigenous students might have a limited number of students willing or able to work on several campaigns. There are so many issues facing Native American students, such as repatriation claims, health, murdered and missing indigenous women, concerns about the wellness and stability of family members back home, financial hardships, access to food, etc., that it is often challenging for Native American students to choose where they want to start their survivance practices. Additionally, student activism occurs within a larger context of ignorance and white superiority, within the broader context of university education where Native American people's experiences and needs are either absent from the curriculum or are often misguided. These issues are on top of their normal university coursework and homework loads and the difficulty of being Native American students in a university setting, which was created by and for colonial settlers and settlers. Additionally, they are often in a racial group of 1% or less, in the university population of students, as well as the faculty.

In order for Native American students to have a healthy identity development, they have to learn what they value most. We witness that our students typically try to be involved in too many organizing projects, because these are all so important to our survival. While administrators sometimes call these political organizing campaigns distractions, noting that students might privilege their activism and out of that choice, miss class, turn in late assignments, or skip meetings that the administrators request, indigenous political organization can actually help Native American students realize their own sense of empowerment—as individuals and as a collective. It can help them realize that they do have power because this work connects them to their ancestors, to the future of Native America, and also helps them feel like they have a voice and could make a difference; these feelings and experiences of empowerment are incredibly rare for Native Americans in Western institutions, and serves as protection from the real distractions—racism, white superiority, patriarchy, ignorance, and indifference. Especially in the university, Native American students' classes and education, rarely make them feel powerful and might stimulate a type of necessary internal conflict, to promote the process of protection or healing toward transformation, as an indigenous leader guided by 'respect'. Such a process is furthered through working with other indigenous students, whether losing or winning a campaign, always reminding them that they are not a dead and dying group of people but, indeed, they are a group of people to be celebrated. It is this collective strength that helps Native American students transform through the love of self and their people into powerful, whole adults, anchored in strength. Often, it helps lead them onto a contemporary "education warpath" that helps them make clear links between their work of survivance, within the context of a colonial university system and the well-being of their communities; an act in which the mind, body, spirit, and heart of the Native American student and student groups create resilience against the ongoing harms of colonialism. This can also help lead Native American students to graduate school, by empowering these students to skillfully connect their individual well-being and scholarly research to their Native nations' collective self-determination.

For our analysis, we examined local media accounts of Native American student activism around the NoDAPL campaign to understand how Native American identity development differs from the mainstream literature understandings. We also drew from personal communication with students. One gap in the existing literature is an understanding of how young adults (1) use their bodies to express their identities in political, economic, and environmental struggles; and (2) engage in their activist work out of an indigenous culture-informed notion of relationality and respect. It is not sufficient to just "thrive" in isolation, but rather how well one and one's collective is doing, is also important. Shawn Wilson (2008) describes this in terms of "relationality" and notes, "the shared aspect of an Indigenous ontology and epistemology is relationality (relationships do not merely shape reality, they are reality). The shared aspect of an Indigenous axiology and methodology is accountability to

relationships" (p. 7). We observed Native American university students carrying out this commitment to relationships in their work, with the younger students, extending beyond the university walls into the community, with guidance and wisdom from elders. They demonstrated a dedication to intergenerational collaborations, by partnering with high school student organizations, for example, as well as with parents, in collaborative planning and carrying out protest actions. At a protest in March 2017, University of Oregon Native American Student Union and Churchill High School Native American Student Union members, marched together to call attention to the Dakota Access Pipeline as environmental racism and an assault on tribal sovereignty. Students linked the Dakota Access Pipeline with broader struggles against racism, sexism, and an oppressive political and economic structure in the U.S. Tribal cultural leaders supported the students' activism, noting the spiritual roots of the students' work. Students' parents also participated in these collaborative marches, and offered their support and praise for the students' collective action. For example, one Native American high school parent, Joe Morales, emphasized the spiritual importance of the students' actions, "any Native movement has to be a spiritual movement first we have to call the creator to help us help the people" (Moore 2017). Mr. Morales' comment notes that protests are spiritual movements, and that students are working together for a broader vision of relationship building which originates from an understanding of the sacred (Jacob 2016). Protests are not just an expression of support for environmental protection and justice, but it is an act to fulfill our responsibility to protect the sacred relationship between humans and Mother Earth.

The NoDAPL student activists used their bodies in protest, which sought to protect Mother Earth, to support the Water Protectors who set up camps on and adjacent to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, which straddles the settler colonial-drawn borders of North and South Dakota. In doing this activism, the students were carrying out a vision of relationality, in which humans understand and hold sacred our connections and accountability to the natural world, as relatives. As the Yakama Tribal elder, Virginia Beavert, describes, "the Indian eyes see life in everything on this earth that has life and claim them as relatives" (Beavert 2017, p. 93). As we observe student activism, reflect on our own in the past, and theorize a distinctive Native American identity development processes, we understand that an anthropocentric notion of identity development is insufficient for explaining the concerns and experiences of Native Americans. Central to indigenous self-determination is the deep understanding of relationality that makes us accountable to our collective well-being—with all of our relations, including the natural world. We cannot be truly self-determined if we do not stand up for protecting our relatives—the water, air, land, and all living beings. The students engaged in NoDAPL activism understood and accepted this responsibility and expressed a vision of Native American spirituality that is powerful and generative. For example, University of Oregon Native American Student Union Co-Director, Anna Hoffer, helped organize protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Anna helped coordinate protests in November 2016 outside of the local Bank of America branch, standing with other protestors and holding signs, leading chants, and raising awareness of how economic and environmental injustices dovetail to erode tribal sovereignty and undermine the indigenous spiritual strength. With chants such as "Bank of America, you suck, you stole our future for a buck!" students identified the inherent risks in pipeline infrastructures, as all pipelines eventually leak, and place clean water supplies at risk (Olson 2016). Beyond the environmental implications, however, is the concern about tribal sovereignty and self-determination. Students used their bodies to conduct protest action to draw attention to this issue. The future of tribal sovereignty is at risk when tribal consent is not obtained for economic and infrastructure projects, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline. Anna noted this, stating that the protest actions were "in solidarity with Standing Rock and the Sioux tribe" (Olson 2016).

Anna was part of a collective who utilized university resources to support the NoDAPL movement, bringing tribal leaders, activists, artists, and camp attendees to the campus, to share a broader message of the importance of tribal sovereignty. In doing so, Anna drew from the individual experience as a Water Protector on the front lines at Standing Rock, to share with the campus community. Anna

traveled to the camps at Standing Rock, and like many other students, paid one's own expenses, and with the understanding that doing so would take up an additional burden to complete school work on time, despite the rigorous travel and stressful protest actions taking place under conditions of violence at the Standing Rock, and the constant threat of police brutality and incarceration facing the Water Protectors. Anna and thousands of other pipeline protestors placed themselves at risk, in a demonstration of solidarity with the Sioux people, homeland, and the understanding that an assault on the Standing Rock Sioux Tribal sovereignty is an assault on all people. Anna herself, in protest, became the site of critical pedagogy (Jacob 2013), in which Anna could demonstrate what Native American spirituality means—by acting in support of inherent indigenous rights to live and thrive on indigenous homeland. Anna's protest actions represented embodied resistance to the settler colonial violence. Anna's body became the evidence of the indigenous cultural teachings that emphasize how our bodies are sacred and connected to Mother Earth. Notably, Anna and many other Water Protectors were far from their indigenous homelands when they were on the front lines of activism at the Standing Rock. Anna is Grand Ronde/Yakama from the Pacific Northwest; yet like the Yakama Tribal Council, who immediately expressed solidarity and sent food, firewood, and needed supplies to the Standing Rock encampments, Anna also utilized whatever resources were accessible to show support for the indigenous peoples' rights to live their cultural traditions on their indigenous homeland. Anna is part of the many thousands of indigenous young adults, who participated in protests, in a strong statement of their indigenous identities, and in support of indigenous rights. They represent the next generation of tribal leaders who understand that many tribal nations coming together to support one another, is an embodied expression to advocate for tribal sovereignty. Native students are reading about the importance of these issues in their Indigenous Studies-related college classes, they are thinking through the issues in their assignments, and they take direct action to bring the theorization about social change into their lived experiences, as they develop their identities as to who they want to be and how they want to live in this world.

Sadly, these powerful visions of survivance, which articulate the power of education to heal humans' damaged relationship with Mother Earth, are commonly ignored within university bureaucracies. Native American student leader and activist, Anna Hoffer, mentioned above, at the time of writing was present on the University of Oregon's institutional website ([University of Oregon Division of Equity and Inclusion 2017a](#)). Anna is listed as a student office assistant for the Division of Equity and Inclusion. However, Anna's brief bio on the university website does not highlight any leadership in the protest actions. This is typical of the ways in which students, and student organizations, are classified according to institutional views and statements. For example, the Division of Equity and Inclusion is the umbrella under which the Native American Student Union (NASU) student organization exists. While there is some awareness within the Division of Equity and Inclusion about the university as a site that continues patterns of inequity, there is a lack of critical reflection on how the settler colonialism is a system of violence that continues to devastate indigenous communities, and students' lives. While NASU is praised for its leadership in advancing multiculturalism on campus, there are few solid plans for addressing the problems that student activists raise. University statements, such as those in honor of Native American Heritage Month, identify the isolation that Native Americans face at universities, but no solutions are presented: "All the work being done by these dedicated students, staff, and faculty, however, coincides with the fact that the number of Native American students at the University of Oregon has decreased significantly, in recent years. According to the data compiled by the University of Oregon Office of Institute Research, the percentage of Native American students decreased from 1.17–0.65%, between 2004 and 2014. Meanwhile, between 2005 and 2015, the percentage of Native American faculty remained at 1% of placements" ([University of Oregon Division of Equity and Inclusion 2017b](#)).

### 3.2. Native American Student Activism and *Tma'áakni*

We found the concept of *Tma'áakni* was helpful for theorizing the importance of Native American student activism. Specifically, *Tma'áakni* necessitates that a young adult be able to connect one's individual well-being to a collective indigenous community's well-being. NoDAPL provided this generation of Native American young adults with an ideal opportunity to engage in this work, in a locally and nationally prominent way, and in doing so enact what Vizenor calls indigenous survivance. Native American students enacted survivance by drawing on traditional cultural teachings and practices, to affirm their identities, build community (locally, and at the protest camps in the Dakotas), reach out to Tribal elders to center community-building around prayer and ceremony, and to articulate an intergenerational vision for well-being, which respects the past, takes responsibility in the present, and makes it possible for the future generations to have a better future. For example, Shalene Joseph (Aaniiih) explained in a personal communication, March 22, 2019:

While being in the territories of the Standing Rock Nation, through the NoDAPL movement, you could visibly see the intergenerational wisdom that is deeply embedded in the community. When visitors came to their territory they were met with compassion and welcomed to stand in solidarity with the Standing Rock Nation in the fight for not only water, but sovereignty and equity. Myself being a visitor, occupying space as an indigenous person, I had the great opportunity to share space with people from all over the world. Sharing stories and hearing the teachings of people from their own original homelands. I see intergenerational wisdom in all people when they speak of where they are from and what brought them to the space.

Shalene's quote demonstrates the powerful ways in which intergenerational teaching and learning took place among the international gathering of the water protectors on the Standing Rock homelands. Shalene analyzes the shared stories from one's own indigenous homeland as evidence of the intergenerational wisdom. In our analysis, sharing the words and teaching of elders and ancestors, passed down through the generations, connected to a place, is a powerful form of *Tma'áakni*.

The activist's work of water protectors is remarkable under any circumstance, but especially when considering that Native American students are also carrying full college course loads, meeting financial obligations of attending higher education institutions, and are often doing so in contexts that have very little to offer in terms of affirming this healthy vision of *Tma'áakni*. Some students specifically pointed this out, such as using activism around NoDAPL as a way to link the erasure of indigenous peoples in their university curricula, to the ongoing legal, political, and spiritual crises facing indigenous people. In such instances, students called for the implantation of Native American/Indigenous Studies. As student activism has consistently pointed out the spiritual foundation of their NoDAPL activism, Indigenous Studies programs can perhaps be viewed as sacred spaces for the indigenous self-determination and decolonization taking root in an otherwise assimilative educational system for indigenous students. Activism was repeatedly referred to as work that brought about healing—for Mother Earth; for tribal communities; for individuals; families; and past, present, and future generations. Shalene Joseph, again in a personal communication, March 22, 2019, reflected:

Looking back, we all have 20/20. I think the largest thing I come back to is that the Standing Rock people are a community of Tribal members who are a sovereign Nation and not a date in time for history to remember as an event. This was a prime example of our people coming together for a purpose together, and also many examples of the work still need to be done. I think it is an incredible moment in history that the movement itself has played, but the community itself I believe has the most valid opinions, since they were affected the most. There is always work to be done, and it does not end because a camp is shut down . . . these movements live through us.

In her reflection, Shalene notes several important connections. Although Shalene is an indigenous Aaniiih person, her comments reflect her clear understanding that the NoDAPL movement was in

support of the Standing Rock people and their sovereign rights, to protect their waters, homelands, and culture. Shalene urges that Standing Rock not be viewed as a “date in time for history to remember as an event”, but rather as a dynamic community with sovereignty, inherent and ongoing. Shalene also notes that although the movement was in support of the Standing Rock, participants from other communities, such as Shalene, received a powerful gift through their participation, and that the power of community and the wisdom shared at the international and intertribal gathering, will live on—as Shalene states “these movements live through us.”

Our analysis provides insight into the theoretical foundation of the Native American decolonial education praxis. Native American student activism in the NoDAPL protests was guided and grounded in indigenous cultural values, spiritualities, teachings, and practice—doing so is inherently decolonizing, as colonial education systems have a primary aim to erase indigenous cultures and identities. Native American student activism placed community and relationships at the heart of the movement, and the movement was carried forward through prayer and ceremony that gave greater meaning to the protests. Native American students created a space for prayer, when they came together each morning; their work was done through nonviolent approaches, even when the government- and corporate-fueled resistance they faced was detrimental to their wellbeing. Native American student activists connected their work to the past, present, and future—which helped them to find purpose and meaning, and reminded them of their own individual and collective courage to stand up, show up, and resist. This purposeful linkage of intergenerational well-being and a central concern with community building is largely absent in studies concerning Native Americans, in the fields of Education and Public Health. We find that these fields can benefit from adopting more Indigenous Studies approaches in research and teaching, including those that draw on ancestral wisdom to counter dominant deficient-based characterization and framing of the Native American people.

Another insight regarding the Tma’áakni of Native American student activism concerns the benefits to health of the indigenous people and the broader dominant community. The protest itself, the ceremony, and connection to indigenous values and ancestral wisdom, helped many students and other protestors to feel a sense of connection and purpose for themselves, the people around them, and towards Mother Earth. Moreover, it was an act that helped them to enact a traditional cultural value of responsibility to community and traditional homelands, which requires spiritual practices. In these ways, it was an act of healing from historical and intergenerational contemporary forms of trauma. For example, elder-protestors led ceremonies at the Standing Rock to support the emergence of women into adulthood. Indigenous coming-of-age ceremonies are what traditionally marked the transformation of indigenous children into adulthood. However, due to forced assimilation, boarding schools, removal, incarceration, and traumatic histories, many families and communities have stopped doing the ceremonies—and some have lost the knowledge or intergenerational connections between elders and the younger generation to pass along those teachings. In the context of NoDAPL, the students, reached out for guidance from elders, the act helped to bridge a gap that prevented some of the youth from being connected to their cultural practices, necessary to grow toward becoming a whole human. Although not our primary concern, we did note that the health benefits were also a highlight for members of the dominant culture as well, where the protest gave non-indigenous people an opportunity to stand up for indigenous rights, and for some, to use their social, political, and economic capital to further support the movement.

In summary, this analysis helps us understand how healthy individual identity development is always tied to supporting collective indigenous self-determination and the concept of Tma’áakni. Shalene Joseph reflected, in a personal communication on March 22, 2019, on the interplay of individual and collective reasons for joining the water protectors at the Standing Rock:

Through camp you would see a diverse—in many senses of the word—groups of people who were there to help. I am grateful to have traveled with my sister and friends who had an understanding that where we were going was not a movement, it was a real community, a real sovereign nation who put a call to action for help in this battle against the pipeline.

Traveling with people who already had an understanding of indigenous communities, made the conversations and our interactions with each other easy. We were occupying that space for many reasons—personal, for the larger picture, to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. Whatever it may be, it really depended on the time you visited the camp, who you went with, and the dynamics within the community.

Shalene’s reflection demonstrates that multiple levels of connection and growth happened as a result of going to the water protector camp at the Standing Rock. Shalene connected with family and friends, and her reasons for attending were personal and for “something bigger.” Shalene notes that she understood she was traveling to the camp because she wanted to support the sovereignty of the Standing Rock community, which had asked for people to come help in their battle against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Thus, Shalene’s personal, familial, and intertribal connections were all part of her experience and growth, as a result of her involvement. We find Shalene’s reflection indicative of the power of *Tma’áakni*, as she is showing respect and caring for all.

Our paper has theorized the importance of *Tma’áakni* and Native American student activism, noting that students enact survivance and engage in radical resurgence—showing us a pathway forward for humans to repair our damaged relationship with Mother Earth. These insights will be important for the fields of Education and Public Health, as we critique social systems that fail to serve the needs of Native American young adults, and together imagine futures of possibility, as the young NoDAPL activists so wisely modeled for us all. Key to this process is the notion of survivance, particularly in Western education institutions, which are an extension of the settler colonial logic that erases and marginalizes indigenous presence and contributions. We use the activism around NoDAPL as an opportunity to connect and honor powerful acts of survivance into our analysis, and to speak to the strengths and weaknesses of our respective home disciplines. To conclude our work, we will end with a brief summary of our main points, and then provide recommendations for supporting the Native American students so that they may continue to engage in and build their work of bringing radical resurgence into our educational institutions.

#### 4. Discussion

In our article, we have examined the importance of Native American student activism as a contemporary expression of *Tma’áakni*. We have theorized indigenous student activism as a pathway towards decolonial Native American identity development. We argued that by placing the concept of *Tma’áakni* at the center of our analyses, we can make important contributions in understanding Native American cultural teachings as having the power and potential to address environmental crises on indigenous homelands. We have examined Native American student activism as an indigenous identity development that resists settler colonial violence. Rather than defining indigenous young adults as at-risk, we argue that the university is a site where Native American students enact visions of survivance, to become empowered leaders. We critically note that perhaps the U.S. academy is the least likely place where the nurturing of healthy Native American identity and values might happen. The U.S. academy is an extension of the settler colonial logics that render indigenous people as erased, vanished, and lost as a part of the Manifest Destiny. However, despite odds stacked against healthy Native American students in the university, we indeed see courageous students drawing from their own communities’ cultural teachings that draws on ancestral wisdom, and utilizing their understandings of relationality to take this space of the university and make it their own. This is survivance. This is healing. This is *Tma’áakni*. While NoDAPL is a nationally prominent example, we also witness, on a daily basis, the strength and courage of Native American students, as they carry on the beautiful traditions of caring for one another in the process of becoming strong, empowered adults, who contribute to a collective, self-determined indigenous community. We see these Native American students resisting the dominant power structures, persisting in telling and living their Native stories, and actively pursuing survivance. We see them doing these acts in ways that embody and project the teachings and *Tma’áakni*—for self, each other, Mother Earth, and all living things.

For those readers who want to learn more about Native American values, and who want to support indigenous self-determination, there are several things you can do. We recommend that you reach out to your university's diversity unit (perhaps it is called the Division of Equity and Inclusion), ask about resources, staff, and faculty who are sources of support for Native American students; get to know them, be humble and ask how you can support their work; ask how many Native American students attend your university; ask what the outreach plan is to increase those numbers, including tuition remission and endowed positions for Indigenous scholars. Universities can also adopt and implement land acknowledgement as standard practice. In these ways, the university demonstrates a strong commitment to the centering of Native American people and their education and wellness, and helps to preserve a process that encourages us to consider the complex colonial history and legacy of broken agreements between universities and tribal communities. Understanding that universities are on occupied and stolen lands, gives us a framework to ask 'where are the indigenous people within the classroom, curriculum, faculty, and broader university system?' Asking if there is a Native American student organization, if it is funded, and if the students are satisfied with the bureaucratic process, will also help ensure the organization's existence. Asking students what you can do to support them; attending their events and meetings if they invite you; revising your curricula and syllabi—and those in your department, college, and university, so that Native American authors and topics are respectfully included; committing to using an anti-oppression and anti-racism approach to replace the settler colonial cycle of violence with the cycle of healing (Jacob 2016), could all help create environments that support healthy Native American identity development in the university setting, and beyond, as we all work to push back against settler colonial violence and bring forth a vision that supports the emergence of Native Americans into future leaders, and to place Tma'áakni at the heart of all work and relations.

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