

Trigger Warning: *environmental destruction, *colonialism, *rape, *genocide

This section will explore climate change from a Lakota perspective. Herein, you will see one way in which history of science, specifically indigenous knowledge, can be used as a tool for activism. This component will entail intersectional, interdisciplinary, and alternative approaches to understanding climate change from an indigenous perspective, Keystone XL pipeline (KXL), environmentalism, reproductive justice, and indigenous activism.

You will first be asked to read an overview of the KXL battle from a Lakota perspective. You will then be provided with reading materials from activist networks who have centered their work around this issue. In this overview and as much as possible throughout this section, we will pay special attention to the Lakota, who have been central and diligent in their activism against KXL.

In addition to more traditional approaches to understanding questions, you will also be provided with memes, music videos, and political cartoons to gain a better understanding of this perspective.

Please keep an open mind while exploring this section. It will be necessary for us to begin by shifting our lens away from colonized, western perspectives.

Lakota – Indigenous Knowledge

The Lakota have a special connection with the Earth. We have a saying, Mitakuye Oyasin (Mee-dah-koo Oh-yah-say), which translates roughly into english as “we are all related.” For Lakota, there is a literal familial relationship with all of the inhabitants we share this space with – from humans, to animals, to rocks, water, and earth. Jenny Leading Cloud, a Lakota elder, explained this relational perspective of continuity and community and how it extends to the environment. She said,

We Indians think of the earth and the whole universe as a never ending circle, and in this circle man is just another animal. The buffalo and the coyote are our brothers; the birds, our cousins. Even the tiniest ant, even a louse, even the smallest flower you can find – they are all relatives.

Leading Cloud’s words give us a good idea of how Lakota view the world – everything within this circle is connected and everything – whether of earth, air, fire, water – shares a spirit.

Unci Maka (OON-chee Mah-kah), “Grandmother Earth,” is an especially important relative in the circle of life. Uncis hold a particularly special place in Lakota familial relations and family is sacred to the Lakota. Uncis are the keepers of knowledge and wisdom and they teach younger generations Lakota values like love, nurturing, patience, guidance, selflessness, and kindness. She is a living being and it is our responsibility to ensure her longevity, particularly because she is a sacred elder. This means we live in such a way that we disrupt her as little as possible and we take it upon ourselves to diligently protect her from those who seek to damage her or exploit her.

Of course, this mentality or philosophy is fundamentally at odds with the dominant western euro-american structure, which promotes the privatization and exploitation of Unci Maka's resources for capitalistic gain. Two key examples of this exploitation are pipelines and fracking. Here we will deal with human-made climate change by looking at the proposed KXL. First we will explore the activism against the KXL on behalf of the Lakota Nation in South Dakota. The Lakota Nation has always stood firm against the development of KXL because it threatens to destroy sacred land. The Lakota, and many other indigenous peoples around the world, consider this sort of destruction and exploitation nothing less than the literal rape of the Earth.

In the course of this section, we will also learn how the rape metaphor extends further, affecting the indigenous women living in areas where the pipeline extension construction was proposed. These places are hotbeds for human trafficking, since reservations are especially vulnerable places because of rampant poverty, violence, and what Seneca social worker Agnes Williams termed, "ethnostress," where you wake up and you are still Indian. For the Lakota, KXL threatens the very core of our identity and all that we hold sacred. This is very much a reproductive justice issue because KXL threatens harm and violence against our indigenous women and Unci Maka, our grandmother earth. The objective for this section is to gain an understanding of how indigenous knowledge can bridge the world of history of science and activism, as well as why the Lakota in particular are willing to stand up so ardently against KXL.

Brief History of the Lakota Oyate

The Lakota oyate (people) have a long and tumultuous history with the United States. We defeated Custer and the 7th cavalry, making us the only victors against the US army in a battle in the “United States.” We refused to be undermined by the US and thus continue to refuse to accept the illegal purchase of our sacred Paha Sapa (Black Hills), which were deliberately carved with the faces of our colonizers in an attempt to reinforce our place in American society through our colonizer’s eyes. We were the tribe who initiated and hosted the 1973 AIM (American Indian Movement) Occupation at Wounded Knee.

The Lakota were traditionally a nomadic people who followed buffalo herds and depended on them for their survival. There are seven bands of the Lakota – the members of these seven bands were all related and would come together and bolster each other’s efforts in order to maintain dominance over the northern Great Plains region. The bands and sub bands were formed when members from the tribe would decide to stay behind at a camp as the rest of the tribe moved on to the next location.

When settlers found gold in the Black Hills at the turn of the nineteenth century, the government put forts in and around the Lakota as a means to protect miners and settlers against the Lakota, whom they perceived as a great threat. Relationships between my people and the government remained dicey throughout the nineteenth century – treaties signed and broken – skirmishes and unsettled moments. By the end of the century, any semblance of peace was completely undone.

In 1876, George Armstrong Custer led the 7th Cavalry against the Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes. Crazy Horse, Chief Gall, and Sitting Bull were some of the leaders who cane

together and ultimately defeated the cavalry, killing Custer in the process. This victory was however temporary for the Oyate. Soon after, Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull were summarily murdered by the government. This was of course a huge blow to the Oyate, who were still struggling to exist in the face of brutal colonization through reservation life. The Lakota continued to lose more “freedoms” and began to feel the bounds of the reservation closing in around them as they were forced to occupy increasingly smaller tracts of land.

It was in 1890, however, when the Oyate’s relationship with the US was forever stained. During this freezing winter, near Wounded Knee Creek on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, the 7th Cavalry, this time led by Samuel Whitside, massacred 300 Lakota from Chief Big Foot’s band - most of whom were women, children, elderly, and infirm since the warriors were not at camp. For days, Lakota bodies remained frozen in the snow – left in the same position that death had found them in. There remain accounts of infants who were attempting to nurse from their dead mother’s bodies. Soldiers posed Chief Big Foot’s dead body for souvenir photos. All before throwing the bodies of my ancestors haphazardly into a mass grave.

We dealt with Assimilation, Termination, Self-Determination, boarding schools, stolen children, missing women, BIA, CIA, and FBI as though we were occupied. Because we were. We are.

Fast forward to 1973, when the American Indian Movement (AIM) organized a 71-day occupation at Wounded Knee Creek. The occupation began when Lakota elders came to AIM, bringing forth complaints about the actions and doings of then president Richard “Dick” Wilson, who is known in Lakota circles as corrupt and violent. During his presidency over the Oglala

Sioux Tribe, he organized a group of cronies known as the GOONs (Guardians of the Oglala Nation). This term was deliberate and tribal members were terrified of the violence the GOONs were known to exert.

AIM agreed to the elder's request and at least 200 AIM and Oglala Lakota members and other allies occupied the exact place the Wounded Knee Massacre took place in 1890.

In response to this, Wilson called on the US to help him regain control over the people. Marshalls, FBI, CIA, BIA and other government officials came in to stave off the occupation. AIM was successful in bringing attention to the plight of natives for 71, when on April 26, 1973, tunkasilawaye (my grandfather) Lawrence "Buddy" LaMont, a well-respected Lakota, was shot and killed by a sniper's bullet. He had returned from fighting in Vietnam and was met with a bullet from the government he had just risked his life for. To add more to the blow, the government held his body hostage from my great grandmother until AIM agreed to back down. Out of respect for my great grandmother, AIM agreed to end their occupation.

The 1973 AIM occupation of Wounded Knee marked a pivotal point in native activism and history. Natives began seeking to reclaim their identities and exert their sovereignty, looking to traditional culture and ways as a form of cultural and political resistance.

The Oglala Lakota living on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, however, were hit particularly hard by colonization. Statistics point out an unemployment rate of 80%, per capita income of \$4k annually, suicide rates, teen suicide, teen pregnancy, and infant mortality rates well above the

national average. Life expectancy is low. My people had seemingly accepted the fate forced upon them until KXL, after which the Lakota renewed their resistant spirit.

The Keystone XL Pipeline Extension

The Keystone Pipeline System, owned by TransCanada, is a four-phase export pipeline infrastructure, that if completed, will carry tar sands 1700 miles from Alberta, Canada, to oil refineries on the Texas Gulf. This will then be exported to the international market. Currently, there are three operational phases of the project—including the Southern leg, which carries oil from Oklahoma into Texas. All together, the cost of the Keystone Pipeline System will run into the billions – at around 12 – 13 billion US dollars. TransCanada proposed the Keystone Pipeline System project in 2005 and the extension, known as KXL, in 2008. Canada and the US approved the KXL extension in 2010.

The fate of the fourth phase, the subject at hand, KXL, has yet to be fully determined. Thanks in large part to the grassroots activism of indigenous communities and allies, this issue has remained in flux despite the desires of those who would gain capital from the project. The public weighed in against the proposal, our new Congress seeks to pass legislation allowing it, and our President has promised to stop KXL against Congress' wishes.

Indigenous Activism & KXL

While IdleNoMore and other women-led indigenous movements are revitalizing indigenous activism currently, it was former Oglala Sioux Vice President Tom Poor Bear who initiated the first official anti-pipeline rally and tribal resolutions to halt KXL. Poor Bear had participated in protests the year before in 2011 at the White House and later at one of President Obama's speeches in Denver, Colorado, which inspired him to organize his oyate around this issue. At the White House rally, Poor Bear said, "We've got to protect the water that our future generations are going to drink one day."

On February 11, 2012, more than 100 Oglala Lakota attended a rally against KXL. They voted by consensus to support a resolution that would appeal for the Great Sioux Nation Treaty Council to demand that President Obama oppose the tarsands crude oil project on the premise that it violates the Ft. Laramie Treaty of 1868.

Article I of this treaty reads,

If bad men among the whites, or among other people subject to the authority of the United States, shall commit any wrong upon the person or property of the Indians, the United States will...proceed at once to cause the offender to be arrested and punished according to the laws of the United States, and also reimburse the injured person for the loss sustained.

The Oglalas also used the UN's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as justification for their claim. Article 32, parts 1-3 states,

Indigenous peoples have the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for the development of their lands or territories and other resources, particularly in connection with the development, utilization or exploitation of mineral, water or other resources.

The Lakota drew on these points of environmental protection and justice from the outset. A month later, the Oglalas organized their first direct action against KXL. On March 6, 2012, upwards of 75 Oglalas formed a human blockade in hopes of halting two tractor trailers that were on their way to Canada. According to reports, the trucks were hauling materials to be used for the Keystone extension, however, when they attempted to cross onto the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, the oyate were ready thanks to organizing via social media. At this action, 5 members were arrested. Debra White Plume, another activist and one of the arrestees, said that the state of South Dakota made an agreement with Canadian officials to route the trucks through the reservation. If the vehicles had used the state roads, they would have been made to pay fees of \$50,000 per vehicle at Interstate Highway System weigh stations. That they were willing to risk putting sacred Lakota sites and Unci Maka at risk without Lakota consent did not sit well.

This story quickly became the buzz item in Lakota and Indian country at large. The solidarity among the Lakota at this action inspired the tribe to pass a resolution opposing KXL. Resolution 13-60 was passed by the Oglala Sioux Tribal Council on March 26, 2013, “reaffirming the...administration’s opposition to the KXL Pipeline from crossing the Mni Wiconi Water Line, any part of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and any and all 1851 and 1868 treaty lands.” In

this resolution, tribal council members cited the traditional as well as the current responsibility of all Lakota people to respect and maintain “good relations with the animals, air, land, and water of our traditional homelands,” because we have done so “since time immemorial.” This statement effectively and officially reaffirmed the role Lakota saw themselves playing as protectors of Unci Maka.

Around the same time, Debra White Plume initiated Owe Aku, an organization to help educate and train others who want to help protect sacred water. Owe Aku participated with Great Plains Tar Sands Resistance and Tar Sands Blockade in a training session known as Moccasins on the Ground, which trains people to take direct non-violent action against the pipeline. Around 300 people participated in the first session.

President Obama & KXL Environmental Impact Statement

While the Lakota consistently stood against the pipeline since 2011 at the latest, it was the release of the State Department’s KXL Final Environmental Impact Statement at the end of January 2014 that really set off waves in Indian Country.

President Obama stated that he would only approve the project if it “does not significantly exacerbate the climate problem.” However, even with a mountain of evidence exposing the environmental risks of the infrastructure project by climate scientists, he remains in a precarious situation because Big Oil lobbies, congressional Republicans, and those who stand to profit from the Pipeline have put immense pressure on the president.

While the patronage aspect of politics and science is unfortunate and disheartening, it is a fact that activists and allies must continue to deal with. In the history of science, we learn that science is not value-free. Fortunately, despite this, KXL shows us an example of how people who are oppressed can regain and exert agency. Thanks to nationwide grassroots movements and a repeated series of direct non-violent actions, as well as social media organizing, President Obama put his decision on whether or not to approve the Pipeline on hold, passing the issue on to the State Department and Senator John Kerry. Obama tasked the State Department with studying the KXL proposal thoroughly in order to determine the potential economic and environmental impacts of the project – which Kerry would then provide an official decision. The State Department concluded that the proposed KXL project would be unlikely to alter global greenhouse gas emissions, however it acknowledged that extracting tarsands from Canada for the pipeline would in fact produce more green house gases. For a select period, the State Department accepted public input on the question and because of the impending uncertainty, the project was put on hold.

Lakota Response to the Environmental Impact Statement:

Immediately following the official Environmental Impact Statement's release, Honor the Earth, The Oglala Sioux Nation, Owe Aku, and Protect the Sacred released a joint statement. It stated,

The Oglala Lakota Nation has taken leadership by saying “NO” to the Keystone XL Pipeline. They have done what is right for the land, for their people, who,

from grassroots organizers...have called on their leaders to stand and protect their sacred lands. And they have: KXL will NOT cross their treaty territory, which extends past the reservation boundaries. Their horses are ready. So are ours. We stand with the Lakota Nation, we stand on the side of protecting sacred water, we stand for indigenous land-based lifeways which will NOT be corrupted by a hazardous, toxic pipeline. WE ALL NEED TO STAND WITH THEM...as Native Nations, we're ready to protect our homelands from the pipeline, and we need to SHORE UP OUR SUPPORT of organizations...who are on the ground organizing in the Lakota Nation.

The response also included more specific points that the Lakota wanted recognized. The authors of this statement wanted President Obama to recognize the Lakota Nation's sovereignty and to honor the treaties the US extended to the Lakota throughout the past. The Lakota statement also pointed out that the State Department's Final Environmental Impact Statement on KXL was not conducted objectively. The patronage connections between the Impact Statement's authors and oil interests was also exposed by several media outlets. In light of these facts, the Lakota wrote that they sought a new report, "which reflects the true environmental impact" of the pipeline.

The response revealed a great amount of anxiety concerning the health and well-being of the environment and water sources, particularly "all who live in relationship with the Ogallala Aquifer." And finally, the joint statement concluded:

In recognition of our responsibilities to protect Mother Earth, Native peoples will not allow this pipeline to come across our treaty areas. We will defend our lives, and our mother Earth, and we need Barack Obama to do the same.

The Lakota made it clear that they were positioning themselves firmly against this project. As Idle No More affiliate Clayton Thomas-Muller said,

It's time to light the fire in your hearts and at your lodges...no one said this wouldn't end up being a ditch fight lets honor the trail blazers from Keystone XL south fight, time for some action and yes some of us may get arrested!

The Oglala Sioux Tribal Council told President Obama, "the result of allowing these pipelines to cross Indian Country will be an ecological and environmental disaster."

This particular fight against KXL has branched out to include non-native allies, environmentalists, and other tribes. Most recently Greg Grey Cloud, a Lakota, gained notoriety for singing an honor song as the US Senate thwarted legislation allowing the construction of KXL by one vote. Grey Cloud was arrested but continues to stand firm as a protector of Unci Maka.

Of course, there are many other parts to this story that have been left out. There are many more voices and many more aspects that complicate this narrative. However, as a Lakota, I can only provide an understanding from my own perspective. Structures like KXL and other pipelines do

represent a direct threat to my relatives. Pipelines fail, spewing toxic sludge into communities that are already marginalized and oppressed. Mancamps bring about the potential for sexual violence in places that are already more vulnerable to its occurrence. For Lakota and other indigenous activists, the exploitation of Unci Maka's resources is directly tied to the exploitation of our people. Because we consider familial relationships the most sacred, our warriors see this fight as a fight worth dying for. In addition to this core Lakota value, our history is loaded with acts of resistance and thus by resisting KXL, we believe we are honoring our ancestors who fought for us.