

Centering the Commons, Creating Space for the Collective:  
Ecofeminist #NoDAPL Praxis in Iowa

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This autoethnography shares our experiences as grassroots organizers helping to build a collaborative resistance to the Dakota Access pipeline in Iowa from 2014-2017. Large-scale, chemical-dependent agriculture dominates Iowa's landscape, prioritizing profit-driven production and maintaining historical power structures privileging farmland owners and men. Our identities as settler-descendants and women informed our praxis and continues to inform our analysis of power struggles and alliances within the resistance. As ecofeminists, we struggled to center the commons and create a non-hierarchical collaboration through our organizing against the pipeline. We use autoethnography analyze the emergence of commons-centering strategy within our coalition and hope this contributes to settler-descendants' ongoing decolonization efforts within other anti-extraction campaigns. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Web-site: http://www.transformativestudies.org ©2017 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]*

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Together, we are being good neighbors and standing with those in the pipeline’s path, those experiencing the escalation of violence in the Bakken region, and those everywhere whose livelihoods have been destroyed by the pollution and greed of oil companies. Our state’s motto reminds us of our responsibility: ‘Our liberties we prize*

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*and our rights we will maintain.’ Our water, our farmland, our community health: we know these are non-partisan values and we will work together, as Iowans have for generations, to protect them for the future.”* Angie Carter at Ames City Hall community meeting about the proposed pipeline, December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014

*“Growing up Iowan I learned that we care about our communities. We stand with our communities because we know how to be good neighbors, and that’s why we stand with Standing Rock. [...] From the hundreds in Iowa standing in solidarity with Standing Rock to the new Indigenous Iowa organization inspired by Standing Rock, to those of us here today, we say no more. Dakota Access, can you hear us? US Army Corps of Engineers can you hear us? No more pipeline! No more oil! Keep it in the soil!”* Ahna Kruzic, #NoDAPL rally in San Francisco, November 18, 2016

Oil began flowing through the Dakota Access pipeline on June 1, 2017, nearly three years after the public first learned of its proposal in Iowa’s statewide newspaper, the *Des Moines Register*, on July 10, 2014 (Petroski 2014). Shortly after learning of the plan we, as friends, collaborators in activism, and graduate students in a town along the pipeline’s path, began organizing against the pipeline.

We were in good company. Women, and specifically women of color, have been leading anti-extractive and environmental health movements for a long time (Bell 2013, Giacomini 2014, Gibbs and Levine 1982, Monet 2016, Redmond 2017, Taylor 1997) and this is not surprising; women are on the frontlines of these movements because they have the most to lose (Federici 2011). Our home—Iowa—presents unique challenges to centering the commons given its long and taken-for-granted history of extraction through industrial agriculture. Yet, from the summer of 2014 to the summer of 2017, women—both indigenous and descendants of Iowa’s settler-society—led much of the Dakota Access pipeline resistance in Iowa. The Iowa-based resistance prioritized unlikely alliances and elevated new voices in effort to stop the pipeline and to protect the commons. Participants in the grassroots resistance defined their care for and connections to the commons through diverse, and sometimes divergent, claims-making about landowners’ rights, indigenous sovereignty, soil health, corporate control, climate justice, and public health. From these efforts, the collective resistance began to foster an anti-capitalist commons, creating a base from which to disentangle our lives from the market and state by reclaiming control over the conditions of

reproduction and countering processes of enclosure (Caffentzis and Federici 2014: i101). Mies (2014) stresses, “no commons can exist without a community” (i106), and we struggled to put vision into practice through our organizing.

Capitalist exploitation of the environment poses threats to all life. However, the contamination and consumption of water, degradation of soil, potential of toxic spillage posing risk to public health, and the legacy left to future generations left in the wake of extractive energy projects are threats whose burdens has been disproportionately carried by women, and especially indigenous women and women of color (Giacomini 2014, Mies and Shiva 1993, Taylor 1997). Narratives from the broader anti-Dakota Access pipeline struggle elevated the importance of women’s and youth’s leadership (Cooper 2016, Elbein 2017). In Iowa, we experienced how hard it is to elevate the voices of women and to center the commons in organizing a campaign against extractive energy when historical power holders—farmland owners and those long established in the environmental movement—are viewed by media and our own organizing allies as the legitimate movement leaders. “It always astounds me when progressive people act as though it is somehow a naive moral position to believe that our lives must be a living example of our politics,” (48) writes hooks (1994), and the pipeline resistance struggled to put vision into practice as movement leaders and their organizations maintained entrenched, historical power hierarchies.

We – the co-authors – identify as white, ciswomen and ecofeminist scholar activists who both grew up in rural Iowa, a state created by settlers’ quest for private property and where the agricultural economy privileges settler-society and the extraction and mining of soil through industrial agricultural production. These first white settlers plowed the prairie and drained the wetlands, replacing a rich, diverse ecosystem powered by sun and fire with a pollution-generating agricultural system powered by petroleum-based chemical products. Together and separately, we have engaged in grassroots organizing in resistance to these continued enclosures and extraction on many fronts. We were familiar with the sort of extraction that has been ongoing in Iowa for generations now—the erosion of soil, the contamination of waterways, the loss of community in rural spaces, the corporatization of the public land-grant university. Dakota Access, however, was a new player on this landscape, an outside threat that challenged well-established stories about Iowa and created opportunities for shifts in organizing.

We intentionally worked to construct a non-hierarchical and anti-capitalist activist community guided by an ecofeminist perspective, as

described by Karen Warren, that “makes visible important connections about how we think about and treat women and other oppressed groups and how we think about and treat nonhuman nature” (Wirth and Boddy 1991). Ecofeminism has been critiqued as lacking attention to intersectionality (see Agarwal 1992, Taylor 1997), yet a “commoning ecofeminism,” as defined by Giacomini (2014), provides one path to disrupt capitalist hierarchy and establish horizontal social relations as white women fight together with racialized women and all dispossessed men (96). Giacomini (2014) argues “systems change and ecofeminism are inseparable” and that this realization “calls for strategic action: the formation of alliances between women at the bottom of the capitalist hierarchy and other social groups to undermine capitalist relations (including sexism, racism, and colonialism) and to promote commoning” (99).

This autoethnography shares our experiences from 2014-2017 as active participants in the Dakota Access pipeline resistance and as co-founders of the Bakken Pipeline Resistance Coalition in Iowa<sup>2</sup>. We chose autoethnography to analyze our leadership and participation in the grassroots resistance to the Dakota Access pipeline in effort to, as DeVault (1996) argues, “talk back” to the sociology of social movements and to acknowledge and reflect upon our privileged position within our research and upon the landscape. Our exploration is shaped by the continued concern that our activism work to dismantle hierarchy while centering the commons in anti-extraction movements. We situate our exploration in the personal because our questions – as activists, as settler-descendants, and as ecofeminists – offer insight into the challenges of this praxis in landscapes long altered by extraction. Our analysis supports Giacomini’s (2014) call to action for women on the frontlines of anti-extractive movements to form alliances that dismantle hierarchies and promote commoning. We heed food activist LaDonna Redmond’s (2017) call to acknowledge “this land is contested” as we ally ourselves with protectors including women of color and all gender identities (xvii). We hope our experiences in Iowa might inform other settler-descendants’ ongoing work in the continued decolonization of both their organizations and landscapes as we align as allies with indigenous communities and communities of color in anti-extraction, anti-capitalist struggle. Additionally, our exploration generates questions about the need for evolving theories of

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<sup>2</sup> Before it became known as the Dakota Access pipeline, Dakota Access’ pipeline was originally called the Bakken pipeline in Iowa, because of its origin in the Bakken oilfields of North Dakota.

ecofeminist political economy. We invite other activists, settler-descendants, and ecofeminist allies to explore these questions with us.

This autoethnography is guided by the following questions: How did Iowa's agricultural history influence our organizing against the pipeline? How did ecofeminism inform our praxis within this context? What new framings of the commons have emerged from this work?

In the following section, we explain our positionality and the methodology guiding this autoethnography. We follow this with context about Iowa's extractive landscape and how this landscape inspired us to create the Bakken Pipeline Resistance Coalition in resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline, but also as an exercise in ecofeminist praxis. In our discussion section, we reflect on the ways ecofeminism shaped organizing strategies throughout the Coalition's evolution and navigation of ongoing challenges in maintaining new framings of the commons.

## **METHODOLOGY**

We were among several co-founders of the Bakken Pipeline Resistance Coalition and we each were active participants in the pipeline resistance in Iowa through our work with the Coalition. When news broke about the proposed pipeline in early July 2014, we were graduate students in Iowa State University's Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture and active in the Iowa State University Sustainable Agriculture Student Association, a founding partner of the Coalition. Both of us have also served on the board of the Women, Food and Agriculture Network, another of the Coalition's founding partners. Our experiences as students at Iowa State University and within the Women, Food and Agriculture Network helped us to learn the parallel story of corporatization of land and marginalization of people in Iowa. These experiences informed our participation within the Bakken Pipeline Resistance Coalition, specifically our mutual desire to consciously engage in non-patriarchal, non-hierarchical, and non-racist organizing.

For the majority of the Coalition's events, we were involved in the production of communications including press advisories, releases, website content, emails to our database, and social media posts. In the beginning of the Coalition, we were the *de facto* note takers at all our meetings and facilitators on conference calls, though we initiated role-sharing of these duties as our work progressed. We have participated in hundreds of hours of rallies, conference calls, strategy sessions, and meetings. We worked most closely together in 2014-2016, when we were both still living in Iowa. Angie graduated in 2015 from Iowa State

University and moved to eastern Iowa, where she was in close proximity to ongoing efforts and maintained an active role in the Coalition. Ahna graduated in 2016 and moved to California for a new job; she continued to be active in the #NoDAPL movement in the Bay Area. She remained in close conversation with the Coalition members in Iowa, even returning in the fall of 2016 to do interviews with key players in the movement. Though we have both stepped into and out of the work at various times since July of 2014, we have engaged in ongoing analysis and reflection throughout, developing a shared analysis.

Throughout this paper, we do not attempt to speak for others. We use “we” throughout this autoethnography in reference to our perspectives and work as co-authors, and use “the Coalition” to refer to the Coalition’s collective perspectives and work. Since July 2014, we have, together and separately, engaged in processes of self-reflection, note-taking, participant-observation, and checked our memories and notes with news stories, meeting notes, and photographs of past events. Autoethnography allows us to analyze the intersections of our personal experiences and cultural forces: “Autoethnography by definition operates as a bridge, connecting autobiography and ethnography in order to study the intersection of self and others, self and culture” (Ellingson and Ellis 2008:446). We use autoethnography as a social constructionist exploration, generating connections and sharing questions originating in our active participation in the Dakota Access pipeline resistance in Iowa.

We are both insiders and outsiders in this work. The pipeline’s construction posed risk to our water sources and home state, and we already had histories working with many of the non-profit organizations that stepped forward as players in the resistance. While each of us had grown up in rural Iowan communities, we were each at the time living in a college town surrounded by others who, like us, were obtaining higher education and had access to resources and social networks through libraries and conferences unavailable to many in the struggle. Also, while neither of our families own farmland, we are both descendants of white-settlers who originally came to Iowa to farm after the government’s displacement and genocide of native people.

## **IOWA’S EXTRACTIVE LANDSCAPE**

In June 2017, the online news site *The Intercept* obtained leaked security reports detailing how TigerSwan, a contracted surveillance company hired by Dakota Access, had infiltrated and surveilled pipeline resisters in North Dakota, Iowa, and Illinois (Brown, Parrish, Speri 2017). The documents

also provided evidence of continued collusion between private security hired by Dakota Access and public law enforcement (Brown, Parrish, Speri 2017). This news of collaboration between private interests and the government in order to protect extractive industry at the cost of community livelihood and future generations is not new in settler-societies, Iowa included.

In the summer of 1835, the United States' first mounted infantry – the First Regiment of the Dragoons – patrolled the Des Moines River, scouting land newly acquired through the Black Hawk Purchase for possible industry and sites for settlement. The federal government had required the Sauk and Meskwaki to cede part of their land in eastern Iowa through the Black Hawk “purchase” as punishment for not vacating land in western Illinois in 1829. The Sauk and Meskwaki complied only after significant loss of life in the Black Hawk War (Harlan 1931:70). The industrialization of farmland began shortly after. John Deere invented the steel-tipped plow in 1837, making it possible for the white settlers to dig up the prairie that covered 70-80% of the state (UNI n.d.). By the 1880s, Iowa was the top corn producing state in the country.

Landscapes reflect the values of those in power (Greider and Garkovich 1994:2), and extraction continues to be the priority in Iowa. Over 90% of Iowa's land is used for agricultural production today, and the state ranks first in the United States for production of corn, soybeans, hogs, and eggs (IDALS 2014). Iowa also produces 30% of the country's ethanol and exported over \$11.3 billion in agricultural products in 2012 (IDALS 2014).

The Dragoon Trail, now marked as an Iowa scenic and historic byway, passes directly past Dakota Access' Des Moines River crossing in central Iowa and a farm belonging to LaVern Johnson near Pilot Mound, IA. Today, Johnson's farm grows corn and soybeans, but in the middle of a bean field stands a strange looking, well-secured, giant valve used to maintain and monitor pressure for the Dakota Access pipeline's Des Moines River crossing. Johnson's farm has been in his family since 1896 (Ames Tribune 2015), yet he was unable to prevent the condemnation of some of his land by the state to make way for the Dakota Access pipeline. In an interview with a local news agency in May 2017, Johnson shared that he felt his constitutional rights had been violated (KCRG 2017). Johnson and eight other Iowa landowners have filed a lawsuit against the Iowa Utilities Board for abuse of eminent domain that awaits review by the Iowa Supreme Court.

Johnson and other agricultural landowners like him may seem unlikely allies for indigenous and environmental groups. The landowners'

opposition to the pipeline originates in a familiar story in settler society – the right to own land. The Dragoons patrolled the area nearly 200 years before, after the forced displacement of indigenous people, scouting for resources for new settlers. Today, Johnson argues that his rights have been violated as the state works to make way for a private corporation’s pipeline. Similar to the Keystone XL resistance in Nebraska, the threat of an extractive energy company motivated Iowa landowners to partner with environmental and indigenous groups in order to protect farmland condemnation (Ordner 2017). What was different in Iowa was that, from the start, a coalition of non-profit and grassroots groups began intentionally prioritizing the commons in their collaboration with the landowners.

### **CREATING THE BAKKEN PIPELINE RESISTANCE COALITION**

In July 2014, we began conversations with a group of pipeline opponents who would later, in February 2015, become the Bakken Pipeline Resistance Coalition (Coalition). These early opponents included representatives from various progressive, environmental, and sustainable agriculture organizations in Iowa.

At its beginning, the Coalition asked that groups interested in joining the collaborative effort agree to a letter of opposition sent to the state’s governor; later, as the group grew, the Coalition drafted a guiding document (discussed in the following section) that lifted up elements of non-hierarchical and ecofeminist organizing. The Coalition initially consisted of a few key players in Iowa’s environmental and agricultural movements, but expanded to include a group of unlikely allies. The original group, consisting of long-standing Iowa-based statewide groups (Iowa Farmers Union, Women, Food and Agriculture Network, Iowa Sierra Club, Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Iowa State University Sustainable Agriculture Student Association) as well as a local organizer from the national non-profit Food & Water Watch, had worked together in different formations on other activist campaigns in the past. The Science & Environmental Health Network became the group’s fiscal sponsor within its early months and continued as an active partner throughout the resistance. We represented the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (Carter) and the Sustainable Agriculture Student Association (Kruzic) within the Coalition.

Early on, the Coalition expanded to include a landowners’ association focused on fighting the use of eminent domain to condemn property in the pipeline’s proposed path as well as members of the Meskwaki Nation / Sac

and Fox tribes of Iowa focused on future generations and the well-being of the Earth, new voices in Iowa's activist community (e.g., No Bakken Here!, a community-based organization in Fairfield, IA or a grassroots group of concerned residents of Boone County, IA) comprised of those from specific towns or counties engaged at more local levels, other long-standing civic groups including the League of Women Voters and Women's International League of Peace and Freedom, national climate justice non-profits including Citizens Climate Lobby and Climate Action Iowa, 1000 Friends of Iowa (a non-profit focused on responsible land use), and 100 Grannies for a Livable Future focused on climate and environmental justice. Additional groups joined throughout the evolution of the resistance, including the Des Moines Catholic Worker, Bold Iowa (a non-profit originally affiliated with the Bold Alliance emerging from the Keystone XL pipeline fight), and other student organizations on campuses across the state<sup>3</sup>.

The pipeline was an unfortunate event that made possible an overdue opportunity for intervention in the historical and contemporary narratives about Iowa's land and those who are viewed as legitimate claims-makers about its future. The Coalition, we hoped, might be a space to create alliances across gender, as well as between farmers and environmentalists, settler-descendants and indigenous people. Together with some fellow students in our graduate program, community members, and environmental and community organizations, we attempted something new to all of us. The Coalition's organizing was issue-focused (stop the pipeline!) but also motivated by a shared desire to elevate the commons and create space for a new narrative about land and community to emerge. Elevating the commons, we hoped, would help our work extend beyond the reactionary and begin to be transformative both on the ground and in practice (Zibechi 2012). It is this sort of transformative work that is necessary to plant "the seeds, the embryonic form of alternative mode of production in the make" (Caffentziz and Federici 2014:i95).

It is not only industrial agriculture or extractive energy companies that are actively continuing to colonize the landscape, but also the strategies of organizing and progressive groups of which we were a part. The ongoing colonization of Iowa – from the influx of white settlers after the Black Hawk Purchase to the continued alteration of the landscape from a perennial prairie and wetland to cornfields and now the Dakota Access Pipeline – reflects what Vandana Shiva calls a "monoculture of the mind"

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<sup>3</sup> Complete list of Coalition members is available on the Coalition's website: <http://nobakken.com/about/>

in which dominant knowledge destroys spaces in which alternatives exist (1993:12). We attempted to challenge this monoculture through ecofeminist praxis, creating space for alternatives narratives and practices regarding relationships to the Earth and our community to emerge.

Shutting down the pipeline was the explicit goal of the Coalition, though a few of us who were actively involved shared an implicit goal – engaging in ecofeminist praxis that centered experiences of those historically marginalized or ignored in decisions about land in Iowa. The privatization of the commons is an old story, but one we felt must be addressed if we were to create space for alternatives and paradigm shifts. Active Coalition members cycled in and out over time, but the Coalition successfully cultivated relationships with a diverse group of Iowans: community members, landowners, students, grassroots organizations, indigenous groups, and community groups, as well as state-wide and national non-profit organizations. Maintaining these relationships took a lot of work, particularly in terms of building trust among those whose organizing strategies were very different (for example, one group regularly engaged in direct action and endorsed political candidates, while another group was a non-partisan, long-standing national organization that focused on policy interventions). The Coalition attempted to use these challenges to its advantage, working to build grassroots opposition to the pipeline by creating various entry points, centering broader issues, such as climate and environmental justice, corporate power, indigenous sovereignty, and landowners’ rights, while welcoming a diverse array of organizing strategies.

The Iowa Utilities Board ultimately granted Dakota Access eminent domain for the pipeline in March of 2016 and the pipeline began carrying oil on June 1, 2017, but landowners’ legal challenges are ongoing as of January 2018. The continued grassroots movement built in Iowa by the Coalition offers a hopeful look at the transformative potential of ecofeminist framing and movement-building.

## **CENTERING THE COMMONS, ENGAGING ECOFEMINIST PRACTICE**

Prior to the pipeline fight, we had collaborated with fellow students in campus and community activism, and so had relationships already with many of the agricultural and environmental organizations in our state. Patricia Allen writes with respect to sustainable agriculture that active self-reflection is needed if we are to “resist ideologies, philosophies, epistemologies, and economic relations that set false limits on human possibilities or calcify ‘what is’ as the model for ‘what should be’”

(2004:210). Upon learning of the Dakota Access pipeline plans, we extended our work centering justice and the commons in sustainable agriculture to the larger production-oriented Iowa landscape. We met with a group of students from our sustainable agriculture program regularly throughout the fall of 2014, creating plans for a collaborative resistance group including the Coalition's name, website, social media platforms, and logo.

The Coalition regularly organized campaigns and actions that targeted key decision-makers, including Iowa's governor, county boards of supervisors, the Iowa Utilities Board, the United States Army Corps of Engineers, and President Obama. These efforts were well-supported by established state and national non-profit members of the Coalition. For example, they promoted the events via their social media platforms, sent out information to members, and provided technology needs such as loudspeakers and megaphones. What was frustrating though, for us as volunteers, was that the paid staff from these groups rarely did the heavy-lifting involved for the events to be successful, and at times took credit for the events themselves without acknowledging the collaborative work of the Coalition. Repeatedly, the less visible and less "fun" work of organizing fell to those volunteering their time to the group and, specifically, to the women—the folding and unfolding of t-shirts, the maintenance of the website, writing of press advisories, and the data entry from sign-in forms.

Holding space for non-hierarchical collaboration is exhausting but transformative work; it is easily erodible and must be constantly maintained. Even in our own conscious and repeated attempts to disrupt hierarchy within our group, we at times found ourselves falling back to methods of organizing or communicating that re-enforced the ongoing colonization of the land, our social interactions, and our own thinking. Sometimes we did this knowingly to avoid conflict. Other times we did this without realizing, and only upon looking back or processing the experience together did we understand what had happened.

Two different situations at an early Coalition strategy session validated our concerns and our continued commitment to disrupting power differentials in our organizing. In the first situation, a local videographer volunteered his time to create a short film for us. In addition to interviewing many of the Coalition's partners attending the meeting, he shot some background footage of the group setting up, conversing, and dispersing. The background of several of the shots showed those on the payroll of an organization, or who were "experts" in our group because of their specialized knowledge, standing at the back of the room, discussing

updates in the fight, while those of us volunteering our time were busily setting up chairs, moving tables, and re-arranging the room to accommodate the meeting. We quickly noticed something else, too— those standing at the back were all men and those of us setting up the chairs, moving the tables, and cleaning up the room were all women. We raised this concern on a conference call, but the repeated occurrence of similar patterns of behavior inspired us to take further action.

In the second situation, which occurred at the same meeting, we led a visioning session with approximately 25 people, many of whom were new to organizing and who did not know one another. The goal, as defined by the strategy session planning team, was to define not only why the coalition was fighting against the pipeline, but what we were fighting for together. The two of us led the session, but a member of the group who seemed to suggest he knew better than all of us what we must do in order to stop the pipeline frequently disrupted our facilitation. He refused to follow the collaborative visualization process, even after we repeatedly and –we thought – kindly redirected his comments. Upon the conclusion of the exercise, and discovering we had not ceded the facilitation of the space to him, he stormed out of the room and, while pointing his finger in Angie’s face, growled “You do not do that to me!” before leaving the session. Few others noticed the disruption, and the rest of the session went smoothly, but the same person continued to display consistent behavior throughout the years we organized together in the resistance.

In an effort to establish new social relations within our group, we worked with several others within the Coalition to write a guiding document that outlined our processes and expectations for our work together. Agreeing to the principles outlined in this document was a prerequisite for joining the Coalition. The document outlined the rotation of meeting facilitation and note-taking, at first consensus-based decision making and then, as our group grew, majority-based decision making. Additionally, the group agreed upon teams of people to work together on planning events and creating messaging. Finally, our group agreed that as partners within the Coalition, each group member could still maintain autonomy for themselves or their group, and act as they saw fit when acting on their own or as their own organization. For example, some groups were well established as non-partisan groups (e.g., League of Women Voters or 1000 Friends of Iowa), others focused primarily on policy or legal process (e.g., Science and Environmental Health Network or Iowa Sierra Club), while others had a long history of direct action and confrontation (e.g., Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement and 100 Grannies for a Livable Future). Even as groups worked individually, we

agreed to always lift up our collective efforts of the Coalition. We developed a communications plan and messaging guidelines for the Coalition as a whole, and unified our identity online and in the media around these points. The guiding document stated that the common mission of the Coalition – to stop the Dakota Access pipeline – should be lifted up in different ways depending upon each person or group’s main concern or strength, be it eminent domain, climate justice, indigenous sovereignty, soil health, corporate control, or concern for drinking water. Finally, we included language that emphasized the need for mutual respect and inclusivity in our work. We hoped that drafting this together and having it on paper for reference as we continued to grow and new members came on board might help to shift the organizing culture within our group. We amended the document as we continued to grow and many found it helpful to the collaboration, but still the known public personalities and well-established players within the group ignored it when convenient for them to do so. This led to a fracturing within the Coalition—those who held others accountable and worked hard to respect the shared work it took to keep the Coalition going, and those who seemed to benefit from their alliance with the Coalition but offered little in return.

Growing and continued tension emerged among those who were paid staff members for established non-profit organizations and those who, like us, volunteered our time and skills to engage at a grassroots level. In addition to being hierarchical in terms of paid or non-paid expertise, these tensions were also gendered and classed. We were used to the media going to those within our group who were public figures and were men for quotes and statements, but were surprised when members of the group continued to expect women, and especially women volunteers, to do the data entry, note taking, and meal preparation or to handle logistical details or promotion of Coalition events. Member organizations of the coalition had various tactics for organizing, all of which were welcomed in the Coalition’s guiding document. Oftentimes, though, the organizations with a longer history of formalized structures, funding, and staff silenced Coalition members who had informal structures and tactics informed by personal expertise rather than organizational ideology or professional reputation. This power dynamic often translated to paid, male staffers silencing unpaid, women volunteers. Women in higher positions of authority also perpetuated this underestimation, devaluing the contributions of volunteers in favor of those on the payroll of a member organization. Both men and women who identified as “expert” knowledge keepers or who had positions of power within their organizations contributed to the maintenance of continued marginalization of others by

insisting Coalition calls take place during “regular work hours,” dominating meetings, policing messaging, and referring to those on payroll as “real” organizers.

Out of frustration at the devaluation of the work of women and volunteers, we co-wrote an essay entitled “A Feminist’s Guide to Fighting Pipelines,” (Kruzic and Carter 2016). We hoped the essay might be used as a tool in sparking conversation and re-orientations around how and why we organize as we do, and how we might organize differently. To this end, we used the essay in three different ecofeminist workshops—two at Women, Food and Agriculture conferences and one with students at Grinnell College in Grinnell, IA. Additionally, Angie read the essay at Coalition events in conjunction with two flotillas organized in the summer of 2016 along pipeline river crossings in Oskaloosa, IA and Boone, IA, as well as at a public event in Iowa City, IA. The response to this essay was always emotional—people approached us afterwards thanking us for expressing what they, too, felt in many progressive spaces. This feedback inspired us to continue with our insistence on non-hierarchical collaboration and continued to push for our group to prioritize new voices and perspectives. We tried to confront the internal power hierarchies and accept conflict as a sign of progress rather than failure.

Even as we struggled internally, the Coalition made progress with external shifts in the narrative surrounding the pipeline. The cultural identity associated with farming in Iowa privileges white, male landowners as legitimate claims-makers when it comes to discussions about agricultural land, but we intentionally created space for new leaders throughout the pipeline resistance struggle to speak to the importance of public health and participation in determining the future land use of our state. The Coalition invited people to connect the pipeline resistance to their own causes, and in doing so, participants made visible how the pipeline fight created intersections across many previously disparate causes such as water quality, climate justice, and land rights (Carter and Kruzic, in press).

Landowners, too, emphasized the commons in their opposition to the pipeline. Kathy Holdefer, a landowner in Jasper County who lived near the pipeline’s path, became a vocal opponent in the pipeline fight and valuable member of the Coalition, regularly lifting up the importance of the commons and the collective struggle in letters-to-the editor and in statements at public events:

*This pipeline in our ground and waterways would be a giant step backward for a state that prides itself in smart economic and*

*environmental investments. As an Iowa landowner—but more so as an Iowan—I urge everyone to learn more about how this pipeline would affect our land, our communities, and our overall health. (Holdefer, 2015)*

Similarly, a year after the Coalition’s official launch, landowner Dick Lamb reported in an interview with *ThinkProgress*:

*I’ve publicly and loudly stated I would never, ever, willingly for any amount of money [allow] that pipeline cross my land. We don’t think it’s the right thing to be doing. We are against fracking, against fossil fuels, want to do what we can to avoid global warming, and this of course is contrary to all of that. (Fragoso 2016)*

The Coalition recognized lessons learned in other extractive energy campaigns and the need to move beyond the NIMBY (not in my backyard) framing of extractive energy projects. It could not be enough to move the pipeline’s path off someone’s farm or even out of the state’s borders – the Coalition’s repeated message was that this pipeline, and exploitation and extraction more broadly, needed to be shut down in its entirety. In this framing, many more people in addition to landowners are credible claim-makers, including those concerned about climate, ecological, and public health effects of the pipeline. We were conscious, as organizers, about the historical power of settler-culture in Iowa and worked hard to maintain the Coalition as a space in which all participants – landowners or not – were heard and valued. The resistance that began at Standing Rock in spring of 2016 inspired landowners and others in the Coalition to connect their settler-heritage to the indigenous struggle for sovereignty.

In the summer of 2016, the Coalition launched a “Summer of Resistance” along the pipeline’s proposed path training pipeline construction observers to be watchdogs for the public’s interest and including rallies at the Iowa Utilities Board offices, petition drops to the US Army Corps of Engineers, press conferences at farms, and two flotillas along then-proposed pipeline river crossings. The first flotilla was hosted by Sylvia Rodgers Spalding, the 7th generation of her family to own farmland along the South Skunk River near Oskaloosa, Iowa. At the event’s press conference, Sylvia stood with Donnielle Wanatee, from Iowa’s Sac and Fox Tribes/Meskwaki Nation, and both shared stories of their families’ histories on this land and their connection to the health of the river (Carter and Kruzic, in press). In an essay that appeared also in shorter form in the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, Sylvia connected her own

positionality within the pipeline struggle to larger climate justice and indigenous struggles beyond the Dakota Access pipeline:

*A great law of the Iroquois Confederacy is to live and work for the benefit of the seventh generation into the future. I am the 7<sup>th</sup> generation to descend from the white settlers on this Iowa land along the South Skunk River, and I am working now to protect not only that land and the river for my daughter and the six generations after her but also the many other lands and waters that are threatened by the fracking, transporting and burning of oil. My nightmare is the pipeline bursting and crude oil engulfing the floodplain forest of our family land. But I also fear for those already being impacted by climate change and what millions of barrels of additional oil and their greenhouse gasses will do to those I have met who inhabit the coastlines of Alaska, the Pacific Islands, the Pacific Northwest and the mouth of the Mississippi River; to the crop lands on low lying islands being encroached by saltwater intrusion; to the traditional salt gathering sites in Hawaii being inundated; the coral reefs that are bleaching; the native communities that are already having to relocate and migrate and the social and cultural upheaval this is causing. (Spalding 2016)*

The second flotilla took place at the Des Moines River crossing in Boone County, IA. Over eighty people gathered at a press conference along the banks of the Des Moines River. Leda Burton, mayor of Pilot Mound—one of the communities near the river crossing—shared her concern for people’s well water, landowner Dick Lamb detailed his family’s struggle to stop the condemnation of their farmland, and Mark Edwards, a member of a neighboring community, gave voice to the river’s history as a corridor for native people. He concluded the press conference with a call to action: “We have a duty, a right to protect the public trust we share in common—the climate, the air, the land, this river” (BPRC 2016). Participants then disembarked by canoe and kayak along the stretch of river that Dakota Access’ contractors were attempting to bore beneath. Following the flotilla, the Coalition hosted a community gathering at the Pilot Mound Community Center featuring music, public testimonies, banner making, and a shared meal.

Later in the summer of 2016, Meskwaki tribal member Donnielle Wanatee stood by Dick and Judy Lamb on their farm in Boone County at a Bakken Pipeline Resistance Coalition press conference calling upon the US Army Corps of Engineers to deny the Dakota Access pipeline permit.

The Lambs, like LaVern Johnson, later sued the state of Iowa for abuse of eminent domain in the condemnation of their multi-generational family farm. While the focus of the press conference was on landowners' rights, Wanatee tied landowners' concerns to the commons: "The Army Corps of Engineers needs to deny this permit because of the damage and threats to our ecosystem, our drinking water and our Iowa landowner's farmland" (Harrington 2016).

The events of the summer of 2016 elevated a new narrative about Iowans' relationality with the land, the rivers, and one another that emerged following nearly two years of collective organizing. Each event promoted a positive and proactive message—protecting our shared home—while calling for the pipeline's permit to be revoked and the project shut down in its entirety. Kathy Holdefer, Dick and Judy Lamb, Sylvia Rodgers Spalding, Donnielle Wanatee, Leda Burton, and Mark Edwards centered the commons in their public testimony, but this was not coincidental. All had been in conversation on the Coalition's weekly planning calls, discussing ideas over email, and meeting frequently at pipeline opposition events. These events complimented more confrontational actions taken at the Iowa Utilities Board or state capitol by creating inviting spaces for the public to join in and learn more not only about the pipeline, but about the story of Iowa's land and rivers on the Coalition's own terms. Together, the Coalition's members worked to build a narrative that aligned many around a common cause. In organizing events and creating narratives that elevated the stories of these pipeline opponents, the Coalition collectively held a much-needed space for a re-articulation of the public good in contrast to the state's long history of privatization and extraction.

The collaborative re-orientation of cultural hierarchy in voicing concerns or opinions about land in Iowa—from extraction to the commons—came through the grassroots. The group today struggles to define the next steps and focus for their work now that the pipeline is in the ground and operational. Will the Coalition continue to exist as a monitoring group and wait for the eventual spill? Will the Coalition evolve to focus efforts on the continued protection of the commons? Having united initially because of a common threat – the pipeline – the Coalition now must define its next phase. The structures we helped set-up to facilitate meetings and ensure everyone had an equal voice are quickly dissolving as different established groups take control of meetings or propose to hire staff to do what volunteers had carried forward the past three years. Decolonization is not the explicit focus of any of the Coalition's original founding partners, though a new group –Indigenous

Iowa – was formed through the pipeline resistance work with an explicit emphasis on decolonization, even going as far as establishing the Little Creek Camp near Williamsburg, Iowa, after the Standing Rock Camps were cleared out. It is yet to be seen how the shift in narrative and new methods of organizing will evolve within the ongoing work.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Dakota Access pipeline became operational on June 1, 2017, and the Coalition continues to evolve. We write these reflections now as a snapshot at a point in time, looking back at three years of collaborative work. In our efforts to center the commons, we also attempted to actively engage in organizing strategies that disrupted the hierarchy of the landscape and the progressive, environmental organizations with whom we often partnered. These efforts led to internal and external power struggles and occasional successes in messaging and actions as we worked to align seemingly disparate or opposing framings of resistance to the pipeline, including eminent domain abuse, indigenous sovereignty, and environmental justice.

As we look back at our own journeys – both the journey in the pipeline resistance work and the journey to actively resist colonized social relations within our own Coalition’s collaboration – we reflect on the importance of the continued centering of the commons by those not often valued or included in conversations about land in Iowa. While these people may not identify as ecofeminist themselves or identify, as we do, with the need for continued decolonization, these voices have much to teach us in our work. Despite the lack of recognition from the dominant players on the landscape or even within our own grassroots group, the hard work of holding space for these voices is what kept the collective growing.

We learned that in the absence of a well-established language or framework for disrupting power differentials in this work, we must continue to struggle to make our own. This is the ongoing work we, as settler-descendants, must engage in, if we are to be allies in what LaDuke (2016) describes as the process of “making a new path” toward a future that sustains both earth and people (234-237). Resistance to specific, localized extractive energy projects, such as the Dakota Access pipeline in Iowa or Keystone XL in Nebraska or the Bayou Bridge Pipeline in Louisiana, will continue to be the focus of campaigns well into the future. While fighting extraction we must also elevate the dismantling of gendered, racialized, and hierarchical social relations within our own grassroots collectives. This requires us to strong together as protectors in

solidarity together in resistance to oligarchy and imperialism (Redmond 2017:xvii) even as we work to dismantle the hierarchies and acknowledge the contested histories within our movements.

The emergence of an ecofeminist framing of the Dakota Access pipeline resistance in Iowa offers a starting point for a decolonizing movement in a landscape dominated by settler-colonialism and industrial agriculture. We are not naïve: three years is a small amount of time compared to the long legacy of colonization on this landscape. How do we—as activists and as a public—ensure this work continues, especially knowing how undervalued it is within the existing progressive infrastructure?

Ecofeminism, too, needs to be decolonized, and we hope that experimenting with its praxis in unlikely landscapes and through unlikely alliances helps to further this ongoing process. Iowa’s landscape is one of ongoing and long-standing extraction; centering the commons here is challenging, but needed work. Creating and maintaining coalitions as non-hierarchical spaces facilitates new voices and collaborations. We are unsure how this work evolves now that the pipeline is in the ground and oil is flowing, but we know that the future holds plans for many more pipelines, and the important and difficult work of developing relationships across interests, histories, and shared cause must continue.

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