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Sonic colonizations, sound coalitions: analyzing the aural landscape of Standing Rock’s No-DAPL movement

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ABSTRACT
This essay examines the soundscape of Standing Rock’s No-DAPL movement by analyzing the aural sites of Sacred Stone and Oceti Sakowin Camps to comment on the dynamics of coalition building and the embedded politics therein. We delineate the ontological tensions between Native and non-Native peoples in approaches to being and dwelling within our larger environment, contextualizing how such metaphysical dissonances affect the perception and practice of protest. We consider these resultant frictions to be representative of a larger question that underscores the composition, translation, and function of activism – a tension that effectively challenges what resistance should, quite literally, sound like. Turning to a critical review of the ways in which sound has been framed as an affective, rhetorical, and symbolic resource, we encourage scholars and activists to look beyond a politic of representation and instead construct mutually respectful cross-cultural coalitions that attend to diverse sonic variances.

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A downpour of resistance can begin with a single droplet. On the morning of April 1 2016, Standing Rock’s Historic Preservation Officer, LaDonna Brave Bull Allard, founded Sacred Stone Camp – a site of cultural preservation and spiritual resistance to the proposed construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) – a 1172 mile, 3.78 billion-dollar project that carries 470,000 barrels of oil per day from western North Dakota to Illinois, then linking to other pipelines in the Midwest. Led by indigenous activists of the Sioux Nations, the No-DAPL movement at Standing Rock was orchestrated to protest the oil project as one that not only disregarded tribal sovereignty but also jeopardized ecological sustainability.

Protestors, who reframed themselves as water protectors, criticized the pipeline as a product of extractive capitalism and environmental racism, citing that Standing Rock was denied access to public forums and company meetings held by natural gas and propane conglomerate, Energy Transfer Partners. Such opportunities were previously afforded to Bismarck, North Dakota residents who demanded the pipeline’s route be changed to cross the Missouri River near the Standing Rock Indian

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Reservation, citing that the original location of Bismarck was a “high consequence area,” or one deemed to have significant adverse effects in the event of a pipeline spill (Dakota Access, L.L.C. 2014, 64). Over the following nine months, thousands of water protectors gathered at Sacred Stone Camp and the later Oceti Sakowin Camp to remind worldwide onlookers that “Standing Rock Does Not Stand Alone” (Engelfried 2016). The movement’s sustained momentum crescendod into one of the longest-running protests in modern history and, subsequently, an outpouring of media coverage surrounding clean water and climate change (Hult 2016; Fon 2016; Rossman 2016).

However, progress within the sphere of collective environmentalism obscured conversations surrounding tribal sovereignty and indigenous rights, contributing to an ongoing pattern of co-opting and exploiting the resistance efforts of marginalized populations. As White protestors began arriving at Standing Rock, many commented on expectations of “real cultural experiences” or “spiritual journeys,” in effect further colonizing the very space they came to protect (White 2016). O’Connor (2016) reports, “Concerns have been raised by protestors on social media, who claim that people are arriving at the Standing Rock demonstration … treating it like Burning Man festival.” Similarly, Petronzio (2016) argues, “You are not on vacation—This is not a camping trip … Realize you are not going to ‘save the day’ … White people need to take time to understand the traditions and Native ways before arrival.” A later Facebook post by Sacred Stone Camp (2016) reads, “Please look around yourself if you are at camp and consider the dynamic. Are you creating space that is dominantly non-indigenous? If so, please consider that this is a furthering of colonization, and take action to step back, and recenter indigenous sovereignty.” We consider this friction between indigenous and nonindigenous demonstrators to be representative of a larger ontological question that underscores the composition, translation, and function of protest—a tension that effectively challenges what resistance should, quite literally, sound like.

The logic of Western protest has often promoted an audibly loud and polarizing presence, encouraging activists to raise individual voices alongside social and moral concerns (Bowers et al. 2009; Eckstein Forthcoming). Yet, tribal elders at Standing Rock referenced the DAPL movement as one intended to be prayerful and ceremonial, reflective, and sacred, “illustrat[ing] the deep resolve that comes from a philosophy based on generosity of spirit” (Erdrich 2016). The reframing of “protester” to “protector” demonstrates such a commitment: Dallas Goldtooth of Indigenous Environmental Network explains, “The word ‘protester’ is negative. It makes Native people seem angry and violent for protecting their resources. This land is everything to us” (Herrera 2016). Sterlin Harjo of the Seminole Nation echoes, “Instead of hitting the streets, people have camped, prayed, and sang songs. America is not ready for that. We aren’t playing their game. We aren’t complying with their sanctioned methods of protest” (Herrera 2016).

Within the context of coalitional activism, such disparities between indigenous and nonindigenous demonstrators urge the critical analysis of the politics of protest, the volume of voices, and the soundscape of resistance, especially as future movements aim to blend rather than erase or “mask” (Eckstein 2017) cross-cultural sonic variances. As such, although our present essay is influenced by the Standing Rock Sioux, its
implications for indigenizing protest speak to a much larger issue of sonic infrastructure and the enduring imperative of crafting “sound arguments” (Eckstein 2017) in varying communicative arenas. Without such an intervention, coalitional efforts risk disrupting or eclipsing the literal sounds of marginalized groups and their resistant messages, resulting in a cacophony of turbulent noise of which White co-opters remain conductor.

In constructing a rhetorical soundscape of Standing Rock, we analyze the aural sites of Sacred Stone and Ocethi Sakowin Camps to comment on the dynamics of allyship within protest and the embedded racial politics therein. Specifically, we argue that ontological orientations to space, place, and environment may complicate our current understanding of resistance rhetorics, and, in particular, articulations of land-based claims. While the ontological turn in sound studies ushers in an understanding of sound as a fundamentally constitutive sensory resource, it strips away important dimensions of sound that enable us to hear how systems of meaning are coordinated within it. For example, Goodman’s (2012, 71) analysis of vibrational forces contends that an ontology of sound must “go beyond the opposition between a celebration of the jouissance of sonic physicality and the semiotic significance of its symbolic composition or content,” orienting the field of sound studies to the interplay between reductionist materialism and hyper-subjective feeling. As such, our approach to ontology embraces the culturally constructed currencies of sound and aims to inform the emergent gaps between affective and symbolic dimensions of sound studies.

We begin by delineating the ontological tensions between Native and non-Native peoples in approaches to being and dwelling within our larger ecosystem, further contextualizing how such metaphysical dissonances affect the perception and practice of surrounding soundscapes. We then turn to a critical review of the ways in which sound has been framed as an affective, rhetorical, and symbolic resource to frame our discussion of cross-cultural resistance rhetorics. In so doing, we examine the dynamics of coalition building, encouraging scholars and activists to look beyond a politic of representation and instead construct mutually respectful activist efforts that attend to sonic differences.

Further, in an effort to decolonize the theoretical space of Standing Rock, we orient ourselves to a more circular, indigenous ontology, positioning our initial critique of the aural field at the heart of Sacred Stone and Ocethi Sakowin Camps, then to a secondary ring of invited musical performances within the Camps’ centers. We next move outward to the peripheral circumference of the Camps’ perimeters, to, finally, spaces beyond the Camps’ borders in engagements with pro-DAPL opposition. This approach aims to not only indigenize our rhetorical critique but also reinforce our analysis of sonic infrastructure as one with reverberating effects.

Ways of being, listening, and intervening in the world

Coordinating action within mass environmentalist movements often underscores disparate sociocultural tensions, inhibiting attempts to form and maintain cross-cultural alliances (Lichterman 1995). Transnational theatres of protest frequently constitute a milieu of competing exigencies, messages, and ways of being (DellaPorta 2006) – a
phenomenon that has historically complicated the ongoing, awkward, and often contradictory relationship between eco-movements and Native cultures and, subsequently, warranted more nuanced analyses of specific instances of cultural insensitivity and appropriation (Booth and Jacobs 1990; Taylor 1997). We argue that dissonances occurring within Native and non-Native alliance-building efforts can often be detected on the aural level and traced to ontological differences and competing worldviews far beneath. Sound, as a modal resource, can productively inform our understanding of past interventions as well as shape future efforts by illustrating how coalitional movements to protect the environment are constrained by our historical relationship to it.

In many ways, Western civilization is founded on a notion of being that has separated humankind from one another and the natural world (Dillon 2000; Endres, Sprain, and Peterson 2009). Examples of this relationship span from biblical tropes to the modern rhetorical constructions of “wilderness” that perpetually romanticize, idealize, and even commodify our desire to “return” to the wild (Deluca 1999, 2005). As a result of this worldview, an ethos of individualism has settled into the psyche of the Westerner and set the stage for a relationship with the environment that is frequently one of estrangement, dominance, and exploitation (Cronan 2003) or one of soft stewardship, selective protection, and contingent charity (Deluca 2005).

The valorization of individualism, domination, and linear progress within Western ontological orientations to the environment has reconfigured the contours of our soundscapes and problematized the meaning of “environment,” as well as what it means to preserve it. Thompson (2012) notes that the din of industrialization in the early twentieth century—a coupled with the innovations in communication systems and amplified sound—contributed to these dramatic shifts and destabilized the place-making power of “natural” sound, adding that “as the new soundscape took shape, sound was gradually dissociated from space until the relationship ceased to exist” (118). In the process, the sound of machines became a sonic metonym for progress itself, and its volume, a measurement of the vitality of the free-market’s engine (Dyson 2014). The rise of ambient sound in cities gave birth to a new industry of sound-mitigation technologies and jumpstarted today’s billion-dollar-a-year personal electronics industry, which has enabled the individual to manage personal spheres of sound and drown out aural signifiers from the surrounding environment all together (Bull 2000). The achievement of impenetrable and customizable personal sound spaces represents a type of technological emancipation from the outside world and the triumph of immediate sonic gratification over broader environmental consciousness.

The insulation of the modern Western being from the natural environment challenges activist efforts to gain attention and build momentum toward the address of environmental issues. Over time, “making-some-noise” has become a regular (and somewhat predictable) agitative device used to pop sonorous and self-contained bubbles of existence, disrupt the rhythms of the everyday, and jar the masses from their collective somnambulance (Bowers et al. 2009). Other strategies using sound have sought to inspire meaningful meditation on our alienated relationship with the environment by rhetorically re-contextualizing the sounds of nature within the social sphere (Comstock and Hocks 2016). These approaches attempt to leverage
meaningful action by disrupting or further abstracting our connections with the natural world, consequently reinforcing the subject–object relationship between the individual and the environment. From this perspective, the split of humans from nature, which persists as an ongoing hallmark of the Western ontological orientation to land, has problematized not only the individual’s relationship with the environment, but also society’s capacity to discern the viability or legitimacy of alternative ways of being in, listening to, and protecting the environment as well.

In contrast, American Indian societies of North America (while not a monolithic group in any sense) share some key understandings about the relationships between self, time, place, and the cosmos that differ significantly from Western tradition. The orientation of tribal society is often more circular, collectivistic, and spatially conscious, owing to an indigenous ontology based on valorizations of connectivity and oneness with the surrounding environment and the whirling cosmos writ large (Lake 1991). This matrix of existence is built upon a relationship to the land that both organizes and is organized by particular locations and features of the landscape designated as sacred, sentient, or imbued with spiritual significance (Deloria 1973). Tribal orientation to the environment, consequently, is one of near seamlessness – an attunement with the rhythm of migratory flows, seasonal cycles, and seethe of sentience that constitutes its very fabric. From this perspective, the “environment” is not a rhetorical construct found outside of the self; rather, it is inseparable from Native identity, and its protection, an existential imperative.

Within American Indian cultures, connection with the environment is constituted through sonically significant practices, including prayer, which is viewed not as representative of connection to the surroundings but in fact is the consummate act of con-substantiality with the environment. Prayerfulness, silence, and the practice of listening comprise a package of practices that marks ontological territory, and “helps constitute cultural spaces” (Carbaugh 1999, 250) through the invitation of sound and the experience of harmony and kinship with the rhythms and vibrations found in nature. For example, the use of prayer in proximity to sacred sites has historically served ontological and rhetorical functions for the Lakota by conjoining cultural unification and grounded resistances to settler colonialism within and across Native communities (Morris and Wander 1990).

In juxtaposing indigenous and Western ontological orientations to land, it is not our intention to establish a deterministic or incommensurate relationship between groups and their activist capacities or to gloss significant differences within groups. Rather, we seek to establish an understanding and appreciation for the influence that culturally embedded patterns exert on all social practices. A deeper listening to these soundscapes, and the vibrations that constitute their diverse architectural fabrics, enacts a form of perspective-taking that is critical to building effective and mindful cross-cultural coalitions.

**Listening for the affective, rhetorical, and symbolic dimensions of sound**

To best trace the ontological collisions and frictions within the aural landscape of Sacred Stone and Očhéthi Šakówiŋ Camps, we turn to the affective, rhetorical, and
symbolic capabilities of sound and its polarizing usage within protest contexts. We draw from relevant concepts found across sound studies literature focusing on the affective and rhetorical dimensions of sound, as well as key theoretical constructs from the semiotic tradition, in particular, Peirce’s (1955) models of “indexicality” and “semiotic realism” as well as Gibson’s (1979) notion of “affordances.” Taken together, these concepts enable a more holistic diagnosis of the sonic space that constitute and facilitate cross-cultural coalition building and activist practices.

The rise of sound studies in the last two decades underscores the increasing interest by scholars in interrogating and understanding the process of signification in modes beyond the ocular and has invited broader interpretations of what qualifies as meaningful symbolic “text.” Such generative understandings have shed light on the central role of the senses in our affective orientation to the world and the “constitutive roles of sensation in participatory, rhetorical acts” (Hawhee 2015, 13). To this end, sound can, and must, be summoned to generate, harness, and leverage emotional energy toward collective actions, as “there would be no social movements if we did not have emotional responses to developments near and far” (Jasper 1998, 405). In other words, social actors must feel an affective connection to the issue they are fighting for and to the people they are fighting alongside.

However, the challenges of tapping affective registers across a broad alliance are multiplied by the need to channel the energy of diverse affective orientations to the world into coordinated action. Sound, when understood as the “basic process of entities affecting other entities” (Goodman 2012, 70), is transformed into a rhetorical resource capable of actualizing coordinated action, because it “configures worlds ... at a visceral level, modulating how partisans feel about certain positions or standpoints” (Eckstein 2017, 170). Sounds can be persuasive to these ends by being traceable, perceived as credible by their audience, and containing or creating some shared significance with the receivers (Eckstein 2017). Some sounds may meet these criteria and succeed in establishing a clear and actionable argument across cultural boundaries. Yet, this equation for argumentative effectiveness becomes problematic when cultural orientations and (mis)interpretations of volumes and forms complicate the prerequisite of shared significance. Prayer, for example, can be problematic due to its absence of volume and culturally relative significance, which undermines its perceptibility and destabilizes its meaning across a spectrum of diverse ontologies. Conversely, the performance of Western norms of protest (i.e. the amplification of individual discontent, disruption of the peace, etc.) may obscure the possibilities for reasonable argumentation between and amongst parties in indigenous sites of activism by “masking” (Eckstein 2017) the ability of the natural and supernatural surroundings to speak.

A disentangling of the enmeshed cultural symbols and meanings within the aural landscape of cross-cultural alliances is aided through a semiotic approach. While it has been forcefully argued in the ontological turn of sound studies that sound precedes the act of signification, thus rendering semiotic analysis insufficient on its own (Goodman 2012), sound does not transcend semiosis or completely avoid the ecologies of culturally bound meaning systems (Kane 2015).Attributing the affective force of sound to its material dimensions also discounts the infinite number of ways that
symbolic meanings significantly contribute to the totality of our affective experience. We argue that a semiotic approach supplements an exclusively ontological one by considering a broader range of contributing forces behind aurally related affects and helps to regain the interpretivist footing that is lost when we distill sound to its purest affective, phenomenological, or material form.

Peirce’s (1955) concept of “indexicality” is productive to this end because it engenders an understanding of sound as a symbolic force that references or points to associations, memories, or events outside of, but contiguous to, itself. This referential power can be productively extended to understand the communication of meaning and affective states within the realm of music, sound, and noise. Augoyard and Torgue (2005) refer to the aurally affiliated triggers of history and embodied memory as “anamnesis,” noting their tendency to evoke stronger emotional experiences the more distant in time the triggered memory resides. Gibson’s (1979) notion of “affordances” also enables a deeper listening to the symbolic currency of sound by taking into consideration the sum of all factors within the context of a signifying event, including the relativity of possible interpretations amongst diverse positionalities. While efforts to map cultural systems of meaning will always be frustrated due to their contingent and permeable nature, Eco (1979) argues that culture “can be understood more thoroughly if it is seen from a semiotic point of view” (27).

Listening from semiotic and affective perspectives deepens our understanding of aural landscapes as areas of high traffic between ontological positionalities: as busy intersections of both signification and pre-signifying vibration (Goodman 2012). This approach also attends to the diversity of ways of being and listening in the world and to the reality that “there are many competing knowledges of sound in the world. They have their own politics, historicity, and cultural domains” (Sterne 2012, 8). Through mindful listening, we may proceed into a space of empathy and attunement to the ways in which sound and its meanings of “environmental activism” is politically constrained by and acted upon by the symbolic echoes of dissonant histories.

“Good morning everyone. Welcome to the prayer”: the centering sounds of Sacred Fire

The significance of Standing Rock’s protests resonated great distances and attracted supporters and representatives from hundreds of indigenous nations across North America and around the world, marking it as one of the largest protests in American Indian history and one of the longest-running protests in modern history (Elbein 2017). However, at the core of the DAPL uproar, there burned a hushed mix of quiet contemplation, prayerfulness, and musical meditation within Sacred Stone and Oceti Sakowin Camps around a centralized point known as Sacred Fire. This area served as an organizational hub for the water protectors wherein announcements were made, food and supplies were distributed, and meetings between elders, tribal members, and volunteers took place.

Petronzio (2017), in recounting the early morning wake-up call that sounded over the camp’s public-address system, states, “Every morning you would wake up to … ‘Good morning everybody. Welcome to the prayer,’ and then somebody would sing a
song you know, and that was the main thing, like, ‘stay in your prayer.’” He continues, “Every time you would see things getting really amped up, there was always somebody saying, ‘Stay in your prayer. Don’t lose it. Hold on to that.’” Tribal chairman David Archambault II echoes a similar refrain on the Standing Rock Sioux’s Facebook page, affirming, “We are forced to take a stand against the state of North Dakota, self-interested politicians, and the Federal Laws that allowed this to happen ... All we have is Unity, the kind that comes only from peace and prayer” (Standing Rock Sioux Tribe 2016). Incoming protectors were also reminded to re-center indigenous worldviews, practices, and leadership and to recall that “Many campfires are places of prayer. Speak quietly, and don’t bring discussions of violence, police repression, or other disturbing topics up at prayer sites” (Solidariteam 2016). A Sacred Stone Camp (2016) Facebook post reinforced this message with an itemized list of camp rules and considerations, stating, “This fire was lit in April and must be kept burning. This fire represents all the fire burning in all the Camps. Always put a log on the fire with prayer. Please put tobacco and prayer at the fire every day ... The fire is for prayer. Be mindful.” This call to maintain a sense of prayerfulness was consistently emphasized, passed from one to another around Sacred Fire and up to the edges of the protest on the front lines. In this way, prayer worked to ground the protectors to calmer states of mind and as a placeholder for the collective purpose at hand.

Beyond the practical benefits of remaining calm in the face of violent and oppressive forces, prayer serves a deeper ontological function for Native cultures as well. This is largely because prayer is viewed (and heard) as an extension of being in, with, and of the surrounding environment. Carbaugh (1999) notes that “the link between sacredness, place, and the ‘listening’ form can be a strong one” (258). Maintaining a space of prayerfulness, then, re-centers Native practices and reaffirms the struggle for peaceful coexistence with the natural and supernatural world, as well as the survival of cultural ways of being. As a method of communication that transcends materiality, prayer – along with the use of tobacco and the formation of unity circles – has been historically employed by the Sioux “to elevate [themselves] from this world to another” (Morris and Wander 1990, 179) and to facilitate the process of negotiation with and between perceived oppressors and the Great Spirit.

In this sense, prayer (somewhat paradoxically) produces an ecology of sound that amplifies the oppression of Native peoples and the exigency of environmental destruction while enabling the embodiment of shared essence between American Indians and their sacred lands. Goodale (2011) describes the intimate relationship we develop with the sound ecologies that surround us as sonorous envelopes, which support our systems of meaning, orient us to our world, and function as vital yet ephemeral buffers from external threats like a “protective cocoon” (220). Within Standing Rock, prayerful insulators also served as connective tissues to the surrounding sacred landscape while buffering traditional Native practices from the external threats posed by hostile forces outside of the camp and internal threats posed by an influx of White protestors. At the heart of Sacred Fire, a consolidation of symbolic-laden sounds – representative of the resolve to preserve Native identity and its connection to place – burned continuously on a combustible mix of deep ancestral distrust and the tentative tremolo of hope.
A sonic analysis of Sacred Fire at the core of Sacred Stone and Očhéthi Šakówiŋ Camps advances an argument for the centrality of prayer as an ontological resource that constitutes and preserves cultural space. Yet, despite the understated imperative of self-preservation that was (in)audible within Standing Rock, Native music and ritual sporadically punctuated the aural landscapes, and even non-Native voices, songs, and rituals were acceptable under particular conditions. In the next section, we pulsate outward from Sacred Fire to the spaces carved out for the sounding of solidarity, resistance, and creative collaboration by a wide swath of cultural identities.

“*It’s important to be the voice of the earth*”: the sounds of solidarity

Within the sonorous envelope of prayer at Standing Rock, the more audibly resonant sound of drums, music, and song reverberated intermittently. Many people came to Standing Rock to express solidarity with the Lakota Sioux, including several famous musicians and members of neighboring tribes and indigenous groups from around the world. As the number of demonstrators increased at Standing Rock, the nature, variety, and volumes of sounds diversified, and artistic, cultural expressions of support were invited into the sacred circle that encompassed the Camps’ centers. The #noDAPLarchive (n.d.) features hundreds of hours of footage taken in and around Standing Rock that provides a listening of the many sonorous textures that passed through the sacred space that comprised a vibrant, if contingent, global community. Attali (2012) notes that music, as an organization of sound, vibration, and feeling, can communicate deeply embedded personal and cultural meanings, and in the process, bring new communities into being as an ontological resource of sorts. A heightened listening across the archival footage reveals several salient patterns of sound.

As a prominent feature in many of the videos, the powwow drum can be heard throbbing across a variety of different contexts, from the heart of the camp at Sacred Fire, up to the frontlines of conflict with security forces. As a mighty vehicle for prayer, healing, political resistance, and the summoning of Power, the drum occupies a prominent space across Native cultures (Lake 1983; Conlon and McKenzie-Jones 2013) and is viewed by many as an important member of familial and tribal networks (Zotigh 1991). The sound of the drum has been increasingly linked to the modern indigenous resistance movement through the development of pan-tribal songs of protest, such as the American Indian Movement (AIM) song, which was heard and felt throughout and beyond the Standing Rock Camps’ perimeters. The development of the AIM song in the 1970s represents an important political transition in the history of Native music, when the traditional powwow song form was adapted for the specific use in protest contexts (Conlon and McKenzie-Jones 2013). The performance of the AIM song symbolically indexes a long history of political resistance and conjures the *anamnesis* of enduring indignities and oppression of Native peoples.

While soundscapes bursting with the pulse of the drum can communicate a message of resistance and solidarity outward, they also transmit a message of self-preservation and solidarity inward. The drum’s vibrations ripple centrifugally, yet its semiotic momentum gathers meaning centripetally, consolidating the affective currency of Native identity within a ritual’s concentric and cosmologically drawn
boundaries and awakening “Supernatural Power” – the great mediator of communication between all living things (Lake 1983). In this way, the sound of the drum acts as an index for tribal member interconnectedness, or one that “fill(s) a specific sonic and emotional void … [and] create(s) a kind of portable Indian space” (Browner 2009, 139). Through the conjuring, consolidation, and reanimation of collective history and identity, music can be a source of great power, a phenomenon that resounds in concert with Attali’s (2012) observation that music “is what links a power center to its subjects, and thus, more generally, it is an attribute of power in all of its forms” (32).

Between the potent expressions of Native identity and resistance, some found themselves invited into the sacred space to share their own musical expressions of solidarity and cultural empowerment. This most often occurred within Sacred Fire, which Petronzio (2017) identifies as “essentially the heartbeat of the camp;” a location where “Dave Matthews came to play his guitar … It was sort of like the center stage.” Other performances summoned the metaphysical power of sound with more urgency. One member of New Zealand’s indigenous Maori group, Kereama Te Ua, reflects on camera after performing the menacingly theatrical haka warrior dance in close proximity to the front line, stating, “It was really about my ancestors acknowledging their ancestors and letting them know that we’re here to support them” (Clarke 2016).

The resonance of Standing Rock spurred numerous indigenous groups around the globe to travel to the site of resistance and conjoin with the Lakota Sioux the affective and allegorical powers of their own cultural sounds. Sofi Jannok, a member of the nomadic, Nordic Sami tribe, asked those gathered to sing along with her in a traditional Sami song entitled, “Speak Earth,” adding, “It is important to be the voice of the Earth … . Your voice is not so important how it sounds like, it is the feeling you give and the healing of the song that is important, so, don’t be afraid to use your voice” (#noDAPLarchives n.d.). For Barthes (1986), musical signification resonates closer to a true affective experience than linguistic signification, as its route to the senses is more direct and its vibrational trajectories “steeped in desire” (312). In the context of Standing Rock’s polyphonic musical offerings, the affordances of meaning intersect a place of deep desire; a desire for environmental justice, healing, and solidarity with those whose threatened lands and ways of being have brought them all together.

While the soundscape of Standing Rock was at times marked with cultural fingerprints not belonging to the Lakota Sioux, it was those who came in the spirit of respect and solidarity that gained trust and were invited into the sacred space and into a deeper communion with tribal members. The polyphonous and polyglot sounds that spangled the affective fabric of Sacred Fire comprised a sonic hermeneutic swirl, an awakening of intersubjective understandings and traumas. On both symbolic and affective levels, it is what the cultivation of cultural competency sounds like. However, not all that answered the call to Standing Rock entered into the Camp mindful of the ways their actions and noise ostensibly recolonized Native spaces.

“This is not a music festival”: peripheral cacophonies along the Camps’ perimeters

While the centrality of Sacred Fire organized the primary layer of Sacred Stone and Očéthi Šakówiŋ Camps, the peripheral perimeters were largely self-sustained, as
protectors maintained their personal living quarters, contributed to the sites’ upkeep and volunteer efforts, and intermingled amongst the Camps’ common areas. Beyond the prayerful center and pockets of invited performances, however, non-Natives were often accused of disrupting peaceful, reflective spaces by instead capitalizing on the prospect of an “authentic” indigenous experience. As protester Alicia Smith writes, “[White people] were waiting with big smiles expectantly for us to give them a necklace and an ‘Indian’ name while our camp leader was speaking. They are literally subsisting off of the generosity of the Native people who are fighting to protect their water” (O’Connor 2016).

Engrained in the psyche of the Western cultural imagination, the perversion of indigeneity within Standing Rock was repeatedly tied to festival culture—a space that often normalizes the theft of Native traditions, decorations, images, histories, and language, such that “indigenous people are reinforced as the playthings of white supremacy” (Germain 2017). Of course, ornate tribal headdresses and fluorescent war-paint are pervasive in music festival venues like Coachella, Lollapalooza, and Bonnaroo. In fact, such events are built upon the exploitation of Native rituals as attendees strive for an affective state of oneness or wholeness with self, other, and nature. Consider the neo-pagan esthetic of Burning Man:

Put people in a field for a weekend, sleeping under canvas (and, in some cases, teepees), possibly on drugs, and some are bound to explore fantasies of escaping modern society and embracing their “natural” selves via the otherness of older cultures. Headdresses slot comfortably into the amorphous array of “tribal” knickknacks that have been keeping festival stall-holders in business for years. (Lynskey 2014)

This Western fascination with indigeneity reflects the ongoing, complicated dynamics between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples characterized by a fascination with racial and cultural otherness wherein White populations fantasize and fetishize over alternative ways of being, formulating imaginary ethnic identities and cultural lifestyles. Hundorf (2001) explains that the act of “going Native” is the most frequent culprit of cultural (mis)appropriation, wherein colonizers invoke a condition of reverse-mimicry—an inverted script that impersonates the colonized in a process of “passing down,” aiming to benefit from the exploitation of indigenous cultures while still reinforcing structural power relations that position the “other” as the muted static in an otherwise resounding chorus of colonial control. As a result, the refrain of weekend warrior activism was one that echoed throughout the Camps. Pike (2017) briefly outlines the term to encompass part-time activists or those who do not immerse themselves fully into radical resistance efforts, but for Standing Rock, the weekend warrior is also one who superficially engages with the movement by neglecting Native worldviews and contributing to the persistent, violent destruction of indigeneity. The recurring trope of cultural misappropriation not only disrupts spaces of mindful reflection but also positions the weekend warrior as a superficial ally whose presence is only validated in reiterations of colonial control.

Within the broader soundscape of Standing Rock, White protestors co-opted the Camps’ unity circles in similar fashion. After only two months of Sacred Stone’s founding, smaller music venues popped up along the Camp’s perimeter, with White demonstrators exchanging song lyrics and chord progressions, repeatedly referencing
the authenticity of guitar strums and drumbeats. Petronzio (2017) urged protestors to thoughtfully and consciously follow indigenous leadership and resist cultural appropriation, stating, “Nobody wants to hear your songs … [U]nless you are asked to perform, don’t do it.” In October of 2016, both Sacred Stone and Očhéthi Šakówiŋ Camps released official requests for White activists to “refrain from playing guitars around campfires” (O’Connor 2016) and the “Standing Rock Allies Resource Packet” affirms:

Remember, you are not here to ‘access’ indigenous culture or knowledge; you are here to support a struggle for Indigenous peoples … Never attend a ceremony without being expressly invited … It is up to you to show that you know you are a guest and not an owner of indigenous tradition. (Solidariteam 2016)

Such blatant disregard of Native peoples and practices directs us to a conversation of (quite literal) White noise, wherein sound pollution is both symbolically and physically contaminated by White demonstrators whose negligence of differing ontological orientations arrogated the Camps as theatrical arenas to “play Indian.” Schafer (1993) describes sonic environments in a similar capacity, contending that certain soundscapes entail the potential to pollute and blunt our capacity to discern meaningful relationships between silence and existence, self and other. Thus, when we speak of the preservation of the environment, we must consider how such spaces are defined and what metrics are being used to measure its health. Increasing sonic incursions by White colonizers contaminates the sonic atmosphere when soundscapes are marketed as mere aural commodities, subsequently fulfilling the fantasy of an “authentic” Native experience and providing an unsolicited platform for the cacophonous reverberations of White noise.

“Bleeding from the ears”: sonic weaponry within and beyond the Camps

While the din of weekend warrior activism and the pollutants of White noise may have done some inadvertent damage to cross-cultural activist relations, a more intentional form of sonic disturbance was trained directly at the gathering of water protectors. Though not the primary intention of this paper, we find it imperative to note the ways in which sonic weaponry was utilized at Standing Rock as a method of corporeal and psychological control. Within the arena of activism, the deployment of sonic bullets or sound cannons can be used as a crowd-control tactic, aiming to incapacitate and disperse protestors or rioters. Petronzio (2017) describes:

We are up against LRADs, these sound cannons and such, and they got all the toys … Sonically, they were running airplanes and helicopters over us all day and night as a form of intimidation. They did a lot of things that were, sort of, you know, sonically invasive … I know that for a fact that there were elders that were bleeding from the ears when they launched the LRADs on us.

LRADs, or “Long Range Acoustic Devices,” are instruments capable of emitting powerful and narrowly focused sound waves at great distances and are commonly used by law enforcement agencies and defense contractors for crowd control due to their ability to disrupt the senses, disorient individuals, and broadcast messages great distances. Black Lives Matter protesters reported similar devices being used in
metropolitan rallies – the use of the device “no different than other tools in a law enforcement’s arsenal” (Moynihan 2017). However, this overt militarization of police personnel engages a larger question of corporeal autonomy and colonial power, extending our understanding of physical senses as targets of discipline, vulnerable to becoming physically marked, marginalized, and malleated.

Beside the practical application of crowd control, the decision to develop and deploy these types of weapons and tactics prompts us to critically consider what affordances of cultural meaning are available, if not inherent, in their usage. Following Deleuze’s metaphysical distinctions between the “actual” and the “virtual,” Goodman (2012) proposes an ontological relationship between vibration and affect that helps us to understand both the affectivity of sonic weaponry and the culturally differentiated commitments to the production of “bad vibes” which are more often than not, aimed toward the goal of material dominance, control, and profiteering by White, hegemonic systems. Put another way, the physiological effectivity of sonic weaponry is augmented by its capacity to index the traumatic memory of subjugation, violence, and physical discomfort of marginalized communities and, consequently, trigger the imagination regarding its imminent repetition. In the process, social relations become arranged around the perceived and actual threats surrounding compli-

The clashes between water protectors and the security forces at Standing Rock marked the location where the violent extension of networks of capital were occurring in real time. The deployment of sonic weaponry to these locations, we argue, indexes a longer history of deep ontological rifts between Native peoples’ largely harmonious modes of existence with nature and the violent, environmentally exploitative practices of U.S. Western expansionism. In this sense, the Standing Rock protest is not remarkable at all; it is merely the militarized strategy of extractive capitalism come home to roost and a reminder that (in the Americas at least) “the Indian is the original enemy combatant” (Byrd 2011, xviii). Therefore, if we seriously consider Attali’s (2012) observation that “The noises of a society are in advance of its images and material conflicts” (36), then we can begin to imagine how the din of transcontinental pipeline construction, the wail of sonic weaponry, and the cries for social and environmental justice that attend to disparate campaigns of extractive capitalism and environmental terrorism are just a musical prelude to a complex, intensifying, and protracted war on the environment and lands immediately beneath our feet.

Coalitional reverberations

Analyzing the soundscape of Standing Rock challenges our understanding of constructing cross-cultural and coalitional movements, giving way to a more refined understanding of activist practices. For Native peoples, there has yet to be a consensus within and across indigenous protests as to what degree “outsiders” should be involved with their movements, or what constitutes the acceptable nature of their involvement in the struggle for land, sovereignty, and social justice (Smith and Warrior 1996). As discussed, both Native and non-Native ways of being, listening, and intervening in the world profoundly affect the methods in which environmental
activism is viewed and approached, implicating how cross-cultural alliances with Native populations purport to function. Here, the struggle for environmental justice is synonymous with the fight for American Indian sovereignty and the preservation of indigeneity, such that environmental issues are inherently existential issues as well.

We thus encourage protestors to better engage the ever-fluctuating rhetorical frameworks of ontological worldviews and the aural landscapes that help to constitute them. Frictions within the four layers of the Sacred Stone and Ocêthi Šakówiŋ Camps suggest that White demonstrators did not thoughtfully engage with the Native politics of protest but instead mapped a Western worldview onto the framework of the movement. The White noise of weekend warriors polluted the aural environment as sonic bombs exploded overhead, rendering many non-Native demonstrators a disruptive static better left muted.

In fact, we contend that the in/actions of White weekend warriors can be mapped onto a broader conversation regarding alliances, accomplices, and the marked differences therein. White allyship is a rhetorical term well-documented in scholarship on activism, most notably from Malcom, Haley, and Shabazz (1965), who was warily skeptical of coalition building at the height of the Civil Rights Era. Byrd (2011) also speaks directly to this entanglement, challenging the effectiveness of what she terms a contemporary, liberal, multicultural, settler colonialism: “a cacophony of moral claims that help to deflect progressive and transformative activism from dismantling the ongoing conditions of colonialism” (xvii). Indeed, for many indigenous networks, the notion of an ally is superficial, wherein if resistance is a commodity, allyship is a currency. To be an ally is to be a co-opter or exploiter of culture, romanticizing a savior complex to defend victims-as-tokens. The evolution of the term has become an identity “disembodied from any real mutual understanding of support … Allyship is the corruption of radical spirit and imagination, it’s the dead end of decolonization” (Editorial Board 2014).

Instead, Native peoples, alongside other communities of color, propose a deliberate shift to accompliceship in which White activists become complicit in the mutual struggle for liberation, unafraid to engage in uncomfortable confrontations of privilege. The work of an accomplice is to attack colonial structures and ideas by first “articulat[ing] your relationship to Indigenous Peoples whose lands you are occupying” (Editorial Board 2014). As Native groups continue to engage in conversations of ecological sustainability, White protesters need to embrace critiques of environmental racism, settler colonialism, and extractive capitalism. In other words, dismantling a legacy of colonial structures should also include the repair of solidarity, moving away from Euro-centric alliances into anti-colonial accomplices.

This position continues to reinforce Butler and Athanasiou’s (2013) contention that in order to negotiate division amongst coalitional members, protestors must recognize their collective condition of being both affected by injustice as well as being prompted to act in unified alignment. In so doing, resistance movements establish a political and affective economy of bodies who stand communally in defiance. Chávez (2014) builds upon a similar theory of coalitional
exchanges to elaborate on performative conditions within a broader politic of intersectionality, as activists locate themselves in diverse communicative spaces beyond their own. Effective coalition building thus encourages a vital understanding of self in relation to other(s), layering intersectional linkages in acts of informed resistance.

In continuing to engage the rhetorical soundscape of Standing Rock, we encourage accomplices to be quieter, establishing lines of communication with indigenous communities by “listen[ing] with respect for the range of cultural practices and dynamics that exist” (Editorial Board 2014). Accomplices’ actions should be informed, directed, and coordinated alongside Native leaders, recognizing protest is not a monolithic event and thereby acting accountably through communicated consent. As Petronzio (2017) reminds, White activists needed to enter Sacred Stone and Očhéthi Šakówiŋ Camps “with a good heart and good intention in a prayerful way,” with “respect for the elder and the ability to shut up and be quiet.” Learning and respecting the role that prayer, quiet reflection, and active listening plays within Native cultures is a key responsibility that members of eco-movements (and beyond) need to accept if cross-cultural alliances are to be viable, and to not inflict an entirely inadvertent and avoidable form of ontological violence in the process of coordinated coalitional actions. To build upon the efforts of No-DAPL’s water protectors in future coalitional engagements, we argue that it would be wise for critical accomplices to better understand the affordances of meaning found within diverse communicative frameworks of resistance and recognize the varying soundscapes of dis/engagement therein. Doing so will help to collect and channel the full force of cross-cultural activism the next time a downpour of resistance begins.

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