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## Towards Land Return: Indigenous Environmental Justice and White Resistance in Minnesota

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# **Towards Land Return: Indigenous Environmental Justice and White Resistance in Minnesota**

**Grace Clark**

**Abstract:** *In the first part of this article, I examine elements of white identity in Minnesota through the concepts of private property, the possessive investment in whiteness, extractive narratives of place, and objectivity. Using these concepts, I explore white resistance to Indigenous land rights in the context of Fort Snelling and the Line 3 oil pipeline. In the first case, I cover the changes being made to the narratives at Fort Snelling, and the whiteness embedded in the Minnesota Historical Society, as well as the elements of whiteness embodied in the resistance to these changes. Turning towards an alternative, I use the theoretical frameworks of the commons and Indigenous radical resurgence to discuss the Stop Line 3 movement as an embodiment of anticapitalist practices that center Indigenous epistemologies and claim to land. I also return to the established elements of white Minnesotan identities to look at the resistance to the Stop Line 3 movement. Ultimately, I am placing Fort Snelling and Stop Line 3 as opposites, discussing the ways the Stop Line 3 centers Indigenous political and spiritual practices, whereas Fort Snelling subverts them.*

**Keywords:** *Indigenous radical resurgence, the commons, liberalism, whiteness, land return*

**Area of Study:** American Studies

Standing on the precipice of the social and ecological collapse that is the climate crisis, the ideological divisions that exist across the United States are just as present in Minnesota, a state facing political and demographic changes, as well as climatic ones. Minnesota is a state with a long history of white settlement and genocide against Indigenous peoples, a history which is present in dominant narratives here, although the violence is often obscured. Many white Minnesotans still identify strongly and take pride in this settler history, feeling it gives them a claim to this place that supersedes that of its Indigenous people. Because these narratives and their investments are so strong, there is a great deal of white resistance even to changes as small as replacing the name of a Minneapolis lake, or adding the Dakota word “Bdote” to signs at Fort Snelling, a military fort and Dakota sacred site at the confluence of the Mississippi and

Minnesota rivers. As a white Minnesotan myself, descended from generations of settlers in the Midwest, I have often observed this resistance to change, and wondered about its roots. In the first part of this essay, I explore the questions: What governs and influences white resistance to changing narratives on settler colonialism and histories of violence against Native people in Minnesota? How are those influences and epistemologies reflected in the resistance itself?

In this piece, I will analyze some of the elements of this resistance, focusing on private property, the possessive investment in whiteness, wastelanding/extractionist narratives of place, and focus on neutrality/balance/fairness/objectivity that have led to enduring definitions of Minnesota history and present that center white settler interests. I will analyze not only the vehement rejections, often by conservatives, of any type of change, but also the more insidious, liberal absorption of multiculturalism and diversity on the part of institutions like the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS) that ensure a lack of real change, in the form of land return, to Indigenous tribes. For example, there has been much white resistance to a more Dakota-centered telling of the history of the US-Dakota War of 1862 and a recognition of the genocide against Dakota people that the government perpetrated. This resistance has often responded, directly and indirectly, to arguments by Dakota people, such as the professor, activist, and author Waziyatawin, that Fort Snelling must be taken down, and that the land it rests on must be turned back into a site of Dakota collectivity and tradition that can serve as a template for other types of place-based reparation.<sup>1</sup> Although Waziyatawin's book *What Does Justice Look Like?* garnered support from Minnesotans of all races, its equal and opposite reaction on the part of indignant white settlers often took the form of a call to go "back to the sources" – the sources being accounts, firsthand and otherwise, of white people who suffered violence at the hands of Dakota people during the war.<sup>2</sup>

Waziyatawin's book is powerful for many reasons, one of them being that she actually calls for the dismantling of the fort. Too often, conversations about Indigenous land rights, and the genocide that has been perpetrated against Indigenous peoples, stop at what Indigenous Studies scholar Glen Coulthard and Nishnaabeg writer and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson refer to as the politics of recognition, failing to demand a radical restructuring of the way the settler colonial state relates to Native nations and the land itself.<sup>3</sup> Not only do public and private narratives of history need to change to reflect a more honest interpretation of the harm settler colonialism causes, but institutions like MNHS have to be divested of the power over those narratives. Indigenous people need to have that power.

In this paper, however, I don't want to fall into the politics of recognition, focusing only on the ways that narratives need to change and failing to address the necessity of large-scale land return, something that may also prove to be the only sustainable answer to climate change. In the second part of this essay, I will address this issue, the ways in which coalitions are being built to initiate radical Indigenous resurgence and combat capitalist settler colonial power structures, beginning to explore the question: if large-scale land return to Indigenous tribes is the goal, what will get us there? In looking closely at the Stop Line 3 movement in Minnesota, I will analyze it through the frameworks of the commons and Indigenous resurgence, also examining the roots and components of white resistance to this movement. Overall, I argue that the core elements of whiteness that I outline manifest themselves in resistance to changes (big and small) that move toward justice for Indigenous people. The movement to Stop Line 3 contains important elements that counter this white resistance, such as commoning and Indigenous resurgence, and this movement is also subject to white resistance. It is important to understand the ways that Stop Line 3 can be a blueprint for larger-scale action towards land return. To begin, I will address

some of the roots of white identities in Minnesota, and the ways they work to preclude decolonization.

### **Private Property and Possessive Investment in Whiteness**

Leslie Thielen-Wilson, drawing on the work of Sherene Razack, posits the argument that notions of private property are central to settler colonial identity, and mark one of many points of crossing between colonial and capitalist power structures.<sup>4</sup> Settler understandings of private property also serve to legitimize and justify white violence over Native people, and white supremacy over historical narratives of settlement and removal of Native people from their land. Aggressive protection of private property often goes hand-in-hand with narratives of settler indigeneity (“We’ve been here for a very long time”) and inherent claim to the land, especially if their families have lived here for generations. Possession of property is thus constructed as a “racializing force,” separating propertied white settlers from Native people, who come to represent dispossession and lack of property in this framework of “settler common sense.”<sup>5</sup> The resulting dichotomy is key to the construction of a white settler subjectivity, based upon this “common sense” that naturalizes epistemologies based in European enlightenment ideologies and relegates Minnesota’s history of land degradation and genocide against Native peoples to a dubious, one-sided narrative, which I will discuss later.

As Thielen-Wilson identifies, there is a distinct spatiality to settler-centered discourses surrounding property ownership,<sup>6</sup> a concept entrenched in violence and enshrined in laws like “Stand Your Ground”<sup>7</sup> that provide legal protection to people who commit acts of violence against trespassers on their property. Although there is not a Stand Your Ground law in Minnesota per se, the Minnesota Supreme Court upheld in 2001 that there is “no duty to retreat from one’s own home when acting in self-defense.”<sup>8</sup> Although understandings of individual

private property, and the violence they legitimize, may seem disconnected from the question of ownership over Minnesotan land and identity more broadly, they are deeply connected to shared “settler common sense”<sup>9</sup> that dismisses Indigenous claims to land and self-determination as absurd, relying on imprecise definitions of objectivity and fairness in disputing calls for acknowledgement of dispossession, not to mention reparations.

In Minnesota history (as in many other histories), whiteness has been something tangible, affording white settlers land and freedom to exploit that land and its Indigenous people. There has always been resistance, much of it from the Indigenous nations themselves, but white identity has become a form of property, sensitive to perceived threats, as Cheryl Harris explains in her essay “Whiteness as Property.”<sup>10</sup> As Harris notes, race and property have been fused since the beginning of European settlement in America, when Europeans enslaved Black people, treating them as property, and removed Native people from their land, treating their claim to property as nonexistent.<sup>11</sup> This idea that only white people can truly own land carries on today, in the notion that oil companies can destroy Anishanaabe wild rice habitat, that Fort Snelling should be remembered only as it was after the military fort was built in 1819. White ownership of the land takes many forms.

George Lipsitz lays out a similar concept in his 1998 book *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, arguing that racial inequality has been developed with intentional and calculated methods, not only through the circulation of “cultural stories” but also the social institutions that create economic benefits for European Americans through the possessive investment in whiteness.<sup>12</sup> Through immigration controls, slavery, the expulsion of Indigenous peoples from their land, among other things, the possessive investment in whiteness has been established and maintained, adding value to whiteness in relation to other groups that were racialized as

nonwhite.<sup>13</sup> This possessive investment in whiteness has been strengthened through housing policy that granted opportunities to whites, urban renewal that wiped out communities of color, drug laws that disproportionately targeted people of color, and many more examples. This has all served to deepen dependence on whiteness, which in turn has led to white resistance when the wages of their whiteness are perceived to be depleting. One form of investment in whiteness is in the land itself, and the narratives surrounding ownership and usefulness of land and place.

### **Extractionist Narratives of Place**

Narratives of place play an important role in constructing certain areas or landscapes as belonging to different groups of people. For example, in the case of a region in Northern Minnesota often called the Iron Range, the history of iron mining in this region has contributed to public pedagogies identifying it as inherently connected to and useful because of mining.<sup>14</sup> In his article on public narratives around mining in the Iron Range, Joseph Whitson argues that the way the tourism industry in this region presents the history and present-day reality of mining creates a collective memory in which the shameful history of genocide and removal of Anishanaabe people from the land is erased. It also erases the ethnic working class and socialist roots of the area. Instead, mining takes center stage, and the land is presented as only fit for “industrial resource extraction,” thereby precluding any Indigenous claim to the land.<sup>15</sup> Although the Iron Range is only part of Minnesota and Minnesotan identities, it is an important example of the narratives that dominate settler-centered pedagogies. The focus on and celebration of activities that have done so much to harm this state and its original inhabitants, without addressing that harm sufficiently, have contributed to white Minnesotan identities that refuse to relinquish their grasp on the land, and the ways this place is understood.

In his article, Whitlock also brings up Traci Brynne Voyles' concept of wastelanding. The public pedagogies heroizing and centering the mining industry are communicated in the way the mines themselves are discussed and presented, as the only things that give the area value. Voyles explains that wastelanding is the process by which certain landscapes and the people who inhabit them are deemed pollutable and disposable. Then, settler degradation of land becomes seen as natural and normal, and the effect on the people who live there is but a casualty of progress.<sup>16</sup> Beyond the public pedagogies Whitlock analyzes, which naturalize the degradation of land in the Iron Range (even the region's name serves this purpose, reducing the region to its iron resources), wastelanding is present throughout Minnesota, making concrete the racist discourses predicated on white settler ownership of the land. It is this wastelanding that makes our current state of land rights seem inevitable, giving settlers a claim to Minnesota, even in the case of sacred spaces, such as Bdote for Dakota people, or wild rice habitat for Anishinaabe people. Wastelanding contributes to arguments for other harmful activity and developments such as the Line 3 oil pipeline, which I will discuss in the second part of this essay.

### **Objectivity**

As Rick Lybeck identifies in his work examining white settlers' public pedagogies surrounding the US-Dakota War of 1862, narratives of white victimhood center around four dominant values: objectivity, fairness, equality, and balance.<sup>17</sup> In response to the 150-year anniversary of the war in 2012, much was written, by both Dakota and white people, regarding how we should remember and teach the war, and how to move forward. As I mentioned earlier, Waziyatawin called for Fort Snelling's destruction, and the return of that land to Dakota tribes, a call that was met with arguments to go back to primary sources of that time, which are supposedly more objective, even though they were written by whites with a direct investment in



being remembered as innocent victims, rather than perpetrators of genocide. There is nothing objective about that.

Discourses relying on so-called objectivity to interpret the history of this war and its violent aftermath function in different ways. In some cases, as discussed in Lybeck's article, this objectivity is derived from primary or other contemporary sources depicting the events from the perspective of white settlers. These narratives center around white captivity, especially focusing on the victimhood of white women and the innocence of the civilians who were killed by these Dakota people (approximately 400 settlers were killed in total).<sup>18</sup> In the years immediately following the war, at least three books were written with the express purpose of controlling narratives about the war, purportedly allowing these white firsthand sources to speak for themselves, primarily as a way to head off any whites who might have been sympathetic to the Dakota's motivations, and justify the execution, imprisonment, and removal of hundreds of Dakota people after the war.<sup>19</sup> Even today, people rely upon sources like these to explain the war and argue for the existing order to be maintained in Minnesota. In fact, even when searching for sources about the war in Macalester's library, many of the first ones that come up are in this vein.

In response to Waziyatawin and others critical of Fort Snelling, around the sesquicentennial of the US-Dakota War of 1862 in 2012, a group of historians published a journal called *Minnesota's Heritage: Back to the Sources*, which presented just such a perspective on the war, claiming objectivity and neutrality by sticking closely to the "facts," which in turn were subjectively produced by people who had an immense personal stake in the way the war would be remembered. In a reflection on the journal, its managing editor Mary Bakeman wrote, "[i]t has never been easier for scholars and the public alike to consider 150-

year-old resources in order to cut through the veil of opinion and politics and seek a balanced view of the past.”<sup>20</sup> In connoting age with objectivity, in presuming that naming the government’s actions towards Dakota people as genocide is a manifestation of contemporary opinions and political leanings, Bakeman is revealing that she values only white perspectives of the war. More specifically, she only values white perspectives on the war that center white victimhood and portray Dakota people as savages.

Redefining the war in collective memory would threaten the very foundations of white Minnesotan identity, as it manifests in these people. Lybeck describes these historians as a “discourse community” sharing similar values and identities, and makes the point that the “facts” they present are inseparable from the white supremacist understandings of the war and definitions of Dakota people as uncivilized and even inhuman.<sup>21</sup> Although the discourse community that created *Minnesota’s Heritage* is but one example, we can see similar rhetoric and white indignation in connection with name-changing and addressing Minnesota’s violent colonizing history elsewhere, such as at Fort Snelling, where hundreds of Dakota women, children, and elders were imprisoned after the US-Dakota War of 1862. This resistance also has much in common with the resistance to upholding Native treaty and land rights, which are violated by mining, nuclear plants, and pipelines across Minnesota.

Although these concepts – private property, whiteness as property, the possessive investment in whiteness, wastelanding, and objectivity – that I have described so far all define whiteness in different ways, they work together and reinforce each other. The extractive narratives of place that have taken hold in Minnesota also depend on neutrality and objectivity to function. The entitlement so many white Minnesotans feel to ownership over the way Minnesota’s history is told is rooted in the possessive investment in whiteness that has been

reinforced for centuries. From here, I will discuss the role Fort Snelling plays in these conflicts, and how these foundations of whiteness come into play.

### **Fort Snelling**

As I have alluded to, Fort Snelling has become a site of white resistance to change in Minnesota. For many white Minnesotans, especially those whose families have been here for several generations, Fort Snelling is the epitome of the Twin Cities, as a symbolic historical landmark of westward expansion, and Minnesota's roots (in the context of settlement). As one of the first constructions built by settlers in the area during the 1820s, it was a visible marker of the American frontier. At the time of its establishment, it was the westernmost structure built by white settlers in the country, and was designed to be not only a military fortification for wars against Indigenous nations, but also a sign of European dominance over the land and its Indigenous people.<sup>22</sup> Its hulking military architecture is both an aesthetic symbol of dominance and a reminder of who it was built to dominate – both the Native people who were living there, and the land itself.

To walk around the fort today, this masculine, military, conquering imagery is very present. The stone and brick buildings are meant to look exactly as they did nearly 200 years ago when the fort was built, although most of the buildings are re-creations. Fort Snelling is a greatly contested place, as it is not only the site of this historic fort, but also the site of the birth of the Dakota people. They call it Bdote, and it is considered sacred, because it is the site of their origins, at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers. However, the concentration camp and executions that happened there in the aftermath of the US-Dakota War of 1862 make the site one of trauma and violence, in addition to the fort's symbolism as an outpost of settler colonialism. As Waziyatawin writes, Fort Snelling is a place of both genesis and genocide for the

Dakota people, and many Dakota here in Minnesota have protested the fort, arguing that it should be demolished and remade as a place for Dakota community and tradition.<sup>23</sup>

In 2010, Dakota activists protested at Fort Snelling as part of the “Take Down the Fort” movement, which was active during that period. To date, there have been no moves on the part of MNHS or the state government to dismantle the fort or return the land to the Dakota people. However, partially as a result of these ongoing protests, MNHS created a Native American Initiatives department in 2016, which precipitated the changing of the sign to read “Fort Snelling at Bdote,” the publication of the book *Fort Snelling at Bdote* by MNHS press, and changes to the site’s interpretative materials to include the Dakota creation story and more honest discussion of the war.<sup>24</sup> Although each of the historic sites are run somewhat separately, these changes at Fort Snelling have been indicative of larger shifts in the way MNHS approaches these topics. For example, in December 2019, an exhibit opened at the MN History Center called “Our Home: Native Minnesota,” that includes “stories of survival, resistance, and resilience that offer hope for the future.”<sup>25</sup>

In May 2018, former Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton signed a bonding bill allocating \$15 million for the “revitalization of Fort Snelling” and \$8 million for preserving the assets of other historic sites in the state. This \$15 million is half of what MNHS needs for their plan to fully “revitalize” the fort, which would include the creation of a new visitor center, new exhibits and programs, and rehabilitation of some of the facilities already there.<sup>26</sup> The fact that this “revitalization” is going ahead, despite the protests and the changes that have been made, is indicative of the fact that MNHS is committed to including perspectives in line with a more liberal version of truth, but is disinclined to make larger, sweeping changes that would fundamentally alter the site’s approach to Dakota healing, let alone dismantle the fort. In failing

to address the continuing trauma that the site causes, and the violent legacy of the war, MNHS is not meeting the demands that many Dakota activists have collectively made.

Despite their inadequacy, even the seemingly small, incremental changes MNHS has made have received enormous backlash from white settlers across the state, with the signage change even prompting Minnesota State Senators to threaten MNHS with the withholding of \$4 million from their budget during the 2019 legislative session.<sup>27</sup> Although the budget cut didn't end up happening, it was proposed and supported mainly by Republican State Senators such as Scott Newman and Mary Kiffmeyer, both from greater Minnesota, who considered MNHS's changes to be "revisionist history" and wanted to focus entirely on the military history of the fort.<sup>28</sup> In situations like these, when people feel like their white identity is threatened, or their whiteness isn't going to be associated with ownership of the land and its narratives anymore, the boundaries of whiteness become more visible. People's possessive investment in whiteness becomes a liability, because they have come to depend on it, and they cling to these narratives of fairness and objectivity, saying, "this is the way it's always been." In calling acknowledgment of Dakota existence "revisionist history," it becomes clear the history that these senators and their supporters have come to rely on whiteness, because it legitimates their Minnesotan-ness and their claim to power.

The changes that MNHS, as a liberal institution, has made, are in line with a secular history rather than a sacred one. According to John Peacock, a Dakota linguist and writer, sacred history is the "moral, ethical, and spiritual implications of a people's past experience—including why, in the greater scheme, terrible things happened to them and what they must do to recover from such losses."<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, secular history isn't concerned with healing or spirituality, only with another form of objectivity and honesty, one that gives greater weight to Dakota history, but

does not advocate for radical changes to settler colonial society. This distinction between sacred and secular history is crucial to understanding the failings of MNHS to interrogate settler perceptions of place and history, and provide interpretive information that centers Dakota experiences and needs.

The fort and its meaning are continuously made and remade, often without sufficient input from Native communities. Interpretation materials, such as the panels and orientation video in the visitor center, make an effort to represent Dakota voices, noting that the treaties leading up to the US-Dakota War of 1862 were unfair, that Dakota leaders were tricked and coerced into signing them, and that the promises the government made were not honored. Despite MNHS's efforts to tell a more balanced story and address the violence that occurred at the fort, according to their promotional brochures, programming still includes summer camps like "Little House in the Big Fort" and "Engineers and Grenadiers," which highlight and glamorize pioneer and military life. Thus, they are still aligning themselves with settler colonial epistemologies that associate history with white settlers, ignoring the impact of settlement on Native people. Additionally, many of the fort's events are military-related, and some of their biggest summertime attractions are military band performances, where the musicians are in period uniforms. These narratives cannot coexist effectively, as any recognition of Dakota claim to the place and the violence that was perpetrated against them is diminished by the fort's continuing glamorization of the military and pioneer life of settlers. Waziyatawin would say that the structure of the fort itself, and MNHS's fixation with detailing the facts of the war and violence, precludes any true reparation.

According to Gardner Seawright's camps of place-based education, Fort Snelling would fall into the category of liberal place-based education, attempting to highlight connections

between a historic site and the people who visit it today. Sites in this camp focus on making connections between humans and their environments and communities but do “little to challenge the taken-for-granted knowledge at the foundation of their perception of reality,” especially in the context of settler colonialism.<sup>30</sup> In the case of Fort Snelling, the acknowledgment that it is situated at Bdote, and that its existence is only possible because of settler colonialism and the theft of Indigenous lands, is a step towards the remaking of these settler traditions of place, but it is not truly disruptive, because the settler self-reflection essentially ends there.

In order to disrupt settler colonial epistemologies, the histories and facts that are presented must align with the truth, and work towards clarifying some of the harmful narratives that have been perpetuated in the past. However, the *way* they are presented must align with traditions and epistemologies that eschew notions of ownership and private property, industry as progress and settlement as civilization. As Seawright notes, “Not exposing the foundational Western beliefs in ownership and private property in critical place-based education is akin to not correlating anti-racism with white-privilege.”<sup>31</sup> The interpretive information supplied by MNHS at Fort Snelling acknowledges that the treaties that provided the land the fort is situated on were unfair, and that the land was essentially stolen from the Dakota people, but they do little to account for that violence and theft. They acknowledge that the hundreds of Dakota people imprisoned there after the war were mistreated and victimized, but beyond remembering those people, they do little to facilitate deeper critical discussions of the legacy of the war in Minnesota, and its impact on Dakota people. This acknowledgment is important, but in order to work towards an understanding of this history that centers Dakota communities and their needs, the fort cannot go on as it is.

We have seen, in these examples, two different types of resistance to reparations for Indigenous people – the conservative and the liberal. In the case of conservative resistance, we see accusations of “revisionist history” as the most prominent argument against making changes to Fort Snelling. Spokespeople for this resistance have made comments saying that Fort Snelling “was a crucial player in the settlement of Minnesota,” which is why we ought not to tell the stories of the Dakota people who were imprisoned and died there.<sup>32</sup> In a Star Tribune article on the debates over MNHS’s telling of the site’s history, Curtis Dahlin (an “independent historian”) is quoted saying, “They are trying to rewrite history to make it sound as if everything the white man did was wrong and everything the Indians did was right.”<sup>33</sup> According to settler common sense,<sup>34</sup> white settlers in Minnesota have ownership over the land and its history, and even a recognition that Dakota people are the original inhabitants of this area is enough to destabilize that.

In addition to the glaring refusal to so much as acknowledge Minnesota’s genocide of Indigenous people, or even their original claim to this land, we see a more under-the-surface, insidious form of white resistance that finds a home in the politics of recognition.<sup>35</sup> For example, by adding “Bdote” to the signage at Fort Snelling, MNHS is acknowledging the existence of the site on Dakota sacred land, but beyond that, they are doing nothing to contribute to reparations or reclamation of land for Dakota or other Indigenous peoples. In emphasizing the existence of “many voices, many stories,” (as they do in big letters on the Fort Snelling website’s homepage) they are further relying on the values of objectivity and balance that treat each side of the “conflict” equally and thereby maintain the status quo. “This is not about addition and subtraction. This is really about addition” to the fort’s story, said MNHS’ CEO Ken Whitworth of the signage controversy.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, his insistence on multiplicity rather than dominance



still obscures the Dakota claim to that land and that story, and certainly wouldn't be compatible with land return. It's not a coincidence that adding some measure of recognition of settler land theft and genocide against Dakota people helps MNHS stay in step with the times. By proclaiming itself on board with social justice (quite literally in name only, in some cases), MNHS makes itself more permanent in the long-run, even in the face of budget cuts proposed by conservative lawmakers.

It is this liberalism that renders resistance to change invisible, hiding it within calls for the kind of small, incremental change that, far from restructuring power relations between Native tribes and settler institutions, further positions these institutions as arbiters of truth. This doesn't mean that name changes are bad, in fact, as it is, I think it's important for MNHS to emphasize Fort Snelling's presence on sacred Dakota land and of course I am in support of the sign change, if the only alternative is no change at all. However, it is also important to understand there *are* alternatives, and changes like these in many ways insulate institutions like MNHS from calls to bring about more substantive change – like taking down the fort and giving its land back to Dakota people. However, even taking down Fort Snelling wouldn't be enough.

The theories of the Commons and Indigenous resurgence that I will go on to detail would back a more radical kind of change. This is the step beyond the politics of recognition, and the Stop Line 3 movement puts these theories into practice. In that way, it is the opposite of the changes MNHS has made to Fort Snelling. It is grounded in Indigenous practices and epistemologies that are incompatible with extractive capitalism, whereas MNHS exists *within* extractive capitalism.

## The Commons

I will now turn my attention away from Fort Snelling and out into the broader world. In the face of both conservative and liberal resistance to a huge change like land return, we are left with the question: how do we get there? The Commons is an important concept in the analysis of white resistance to social change and the political feasibility of land return, because it exists outside of the political structures as we know them, and ideally, outside of the confines of private property and exclusionary regulations. In her book of essays, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, Silvia Federici defines the commons not as a thing or even a physical space necessarily, but as a network of social relationships that is fundamentally anti-capitalist.<sup>37</sup> This is not to say that everything deemed to be commons is anti-capitalist. In fact, Federici points to the challenge of determining what is a version of commons that eschews gate-keeping and ownership. Even the university, she notes, is a form of gated commons, compatible with the forces of capitalism because it is open only to people who are accepted inside, while fiercely protected from outsiders. She also connects these “gated commons” to the Indigenous land universities sit on. “Are the indigenous people whose land we are on somehow without knowledge?” she asks. “Is that supposed to justify our presence here?”<sup>38</sup> The struggle, then, is to envision a commons that is truly democratic, that is based in authentic relationships, that functions not as an alternative to capitalism but positions itself outside the consumerist currents that run across the globe, redistributing and sharing wealth, in its many forms.

I have chosen to write about commons in this essay, because it addresses the relationship between Indigenous resurgence and socialist schools of thought that are perceived to be European. In Federici’s understanding of the commons, its focus on the redistribution of wealth

and rejection of capitalism in general make it very connected to socialism, but it is communalism, rather than communism. Public (something “owned and governed by the state”) is better than private, but it is a stepping stone on the way to the commons.<sup>39</sup> In other words, it is more about collective ownership and control over land and resources than putting that power in the hands of the state. Federici even lists Standing Rock as an example of a great common, largely led by Indigenous women and active in all areas of the movement under very distressing conditions.<sup>40</sup> I want to use this concept of the commons, and its connections to Indigenous resurgence, to discuss the Stop Line 3 movement in Minnesota, sometimes known as Minnesota’s Standing Rock, which has centered Indigenous people and their land rights. First, though, I would like to discuss Indigenous resurgence in more detail.

### Indigenous Resurgence

In her 2017 book *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, Nishnaabeg writer and scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson lays out her case for Indigenous radical resurgence – a kind of return for Indigenous communities to their cultural and political roots, as she puts it, a “reengagement with the things we have left behind, a reemergence, an unfolding from the inside out.”<sup>41</sup> This resurgence, she argues, has to come from within traditional Indigenous epistemologies, value systems, and relationships to their homeland. She also talks about resurgence in the context of grounded normativity – ethical structures created by these Indigenous place-based traditions, knowledges, and practices.<sup>42</sup> Indigenous radical resurgence is necessarily an anti-capitalist process because, as Simpson notes, capitalism requires the killing of Indigenous people in order to function, and consistently dispossesses them not only from their land but also from their grounded normativities.<sup>43</sup> I want to bring Simpson’s work into this conversation because she presents a framework for solving ecological and social

crises that is outside of capitalism and politics as the U.S. government practices it. Simpson has critiqued legislation like the Green New Deal because it does not radically rethink the structures that govern our society, instead leaving capitalism alive, if not intact. “Real solutions require a rethinking of our global relationship to the land, water, and to each other,” she says. “They require critical thinking about our economic and political systems. They require radical systemic change.”<sup>44</sup>

When I began this project, I wanted to say something about how we can move towards reparations for Indigenous tribes, in the form of land return. I planned to analyze the political context in Minnesota that has given rise to white resistance to changes like those the MNHS has made at Fort Snelling. In my research, and particularly after reading *As We Have Always Done*, I have come to see that the answer does not come from within our political structures. It is much greater than that, and involves, as Simpson says, a deeper level of change. However, there are instances of Indigenous land return happening through local government. One of the most prominent recent examples is the affordable housing development being built by the Squamish First Nation in Vancouver. In November 2019, the Squamish nation proposed building 6,000 new (mostly) rental units on 500 acres of land in Vancouver’s Kitsilano neighborhood.<sup>45</sup> Although again, this is a small example, it does set a precedent for Indigenous nations using urban land to meet a need in the community. Although that is a long-term goal and may not be accomplished all at once, movements like Stop Line 3 can be taken as examples of Indigenous radical resurgence, rooted in grounded normativity and centering Indigenous land rights in their struggle against corporate power and ecological disaster. I will begin discussing this movement by explaining some of its background and history.

## **Stop Line 3 Movement**

The movement to Stop Line 3 is largely led by Indigenous activists and organizations, including Winona Laduke and Honor the Earth. Laduke is an environmentalist and Indigenous rights activist, writer, two-time vice presidential candidate, and economist based out of the White Earth Anishinaabe reservation in Northern Minnesota. She established the organization Honor the Earth in 1993, along with the members of the band Indigo Girls. On their website, they say, “Honor the Earth uses indigenous wisdom, music, art, and the media to raise awareness and support for Indigenous Environmental Issues. We leverage this awareness and support to develop financial and political capital for Indigenous struggles for land and life.”<sup>46</sup> This is an example of Indigenous resurgence, because it is environmental activism that centers Indigenous land rights and cultural/political practices.

Line 3 is an old, corroding oil pipeline running through Minnesota. Instead of fixing it, Enbridge, a Canadian energy transport company, is instead proposing to put in a whole new corridor and double the size of the line in a different place. The new corridor runs through Anishinaabe lakes and wild rice watersheds, as well as treaty territories. One of the terrifying things about this is that there are no regulations on pipeline abandonment. Enbridge is allowed to simply abandon their old pipeline and create a new one, with a new, expanded route that endangers the wellbeing of Indigenous people (as well as white property owners) who have been very clear that this is not all right with them.<sup>47</sup>

In many of the resources disseminated and events put on by the Stop Line 3 campaign and its advocates, there is a strong focus on the treaty violations involved in the Line 3 project, and the danger to Native communities that will result from the pipeline. They also emphasize that the path of Line 3 would cut through sacred wild rice habitat, which would threaten an

essential part of Anishinaabe culture and life.<sup>48 49</sup> For example, in a video of Winona Laduke speaking about the situation that is prominently featured on the Stop Line 3 website, she mentions that Line 3 would also go through Sandy Lake, the site of the Sandy Lake Tragedy in 1850 in which around 400 Anishinaabe people died as a result of delayed annuities from their treaties and insufficient supplies from the government.<sup>50 51</sup> Laduke referred to the tragedy as “our Wounded Knee.”<sup>52</sup> The fact that these atrocities took place in the same area that Line 3 will now endanger is further evidence of the spatiality of white supremacy. History is repeating itself in a different form, and the Stop Line 3 movement is aware of that, referring to the pipeline as a form of cultural genocide. Its perpetrators are the people from Enbridge and the public officials who have allowed its permits and construction to go as it already has. Their willingness to destroy sacred wild rice is indicative of their shameless pursuit of land and capital, and their willingness to plough down the people who stand in their way.

I attended a gathering in Duluth put on by the Stop Line 3 movement in September 2019, the purpose of which was to march and protest the pipeline. There was also a strong focus on Anishinaabe spiritual traditions, and many Anishinaabe people spoke about the harm this pipeline would do to their land and their communities. The movement for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) was also prominent in the gathering, and we all participated in a healing circle for the families of MMIW who were at the march, and whose presence was centered. These families wore red and were leading the march, highlighting the fact that Line 3 and the issue of MMIW both profoundly impact Indigenous communities. Although they may seem like different struggles, they are connected, through a commitment to justice for Indigenous tribes, and through a worldview that seeks relationships among people, and between people and their ecosystems. It is a grounded response to counter the capitalist epistemology that works to

extract and dominate. This gathering is an example of Indigenous resurgence in action. The movement is a multiracial coalition, and although many of the gathering's attendees, and other participants in the movement, were not Indigenous, the impact of the pipeline on Indigenous, particularly Anishinaabe, communities and land was very central to the gathering. Although white landowners whose land will be affected by Line 3 were also given space to speak and share their thoughts, the use of the Anishinaabe language, songs, prayers, and dances throughout placed the emphasis on Indigeneity, and these communities' land rights.

The Stop Line 3 movement also relies heavily on grassroots direct action, rather than limiting itself to working only on passing legislation or convincing the Public Utilities Commission or other departments to block the pipeline's permits. Water protectors and other pipeline protestors have participated in many forms of direct action, often at great personal risk, such as holding a rally and die-in at the grand opening of a Chase Bank location in St. Paul (a large funder of Enbridge), and flyering customers at Chase Bank to inform them of the Line 3 issue and encourage them to divest. Giniw, a frontline resistance group led by Indigenous women,<sup>53</sup> organized an action camp in Clearbrook, MN in November 2019, at the site of the pipeline construction, in which one protester was put in mortal danger when law enforcement started sawing off the leg of a tripod she was suspending herself from in protest of the pipeline's construction.<sup>54</sup> This is an unfortunate example of the role of law enforcement in protecting white property and corporate interests, even when white bodies are on the line, protesting. It's indicative of the role that police forces have always played in keeping property in the hands of white people and interests. Their violence, their power and impunity are deeply troubling, and are also deeply invested in the narratives of neutrality and objectivity that make up white resistance to social and environmental justice.

In the grand scheme of things, Stop Line 3 is on a small scale, but it is this kind of environmental activism that interrogates the constructed dichotomy Whitson describes, where labor and environmentalism are put in opposition to one another, with Indigenous ownership of land all but erased. In centering Indigenous land ownership, treaty rights, MMIW, and (particularly) Anishanaabe cultural and political practices in the movement, groups like Honor the Earth and Giniw are practicing Indigenous resurgence. Although the movement is not perfect, of course, it is an important local example of these theories, and its use of grounded normativity is powerful. Although it is oppositional, and primarily focused on stopping things that are bad (like the pipeline and the murder of Indigenous women), it is much more than that, and its use of Indigenous resurgence and commoning is indicative of the further radical possibilities of such practices.

The Stop Line 3 movement elicits its own reaction of resistance by supporters of the pipeline, many of whom argue that it's the safest way to transport oil, despite the fact that the new Line 3 will be able to transport substantially more oil than the old one, expanding the fossil fuel industry just as we should be trying to eliminate it. Groups such as "Minnesotans for Line 3" focus on the usefulness and safety of the pipeline, calling it the #SafestWay (never mind the fact that Enbridge's pipelines spill about once every 20 days<sup>55</sup>) and highlighting the economic stimulation it will bring to the Minnesota economy.<sup>56</sup> This is a form of wastelanding, because it doesn't imagine alternatives for Northern Minnesota. The way they see it, degradation of the land doesn't matter. Anishanaabe wild rice habitat is disposable. The land is benefiting the community, they say, neglecting to mention how temporary those benefits will be, and how permanent their consequences. After the November 2019 action camp led by Giniw, the city of Clearbrook released a statement condemning the protests for the inconvenience they caused to



Clearbrook residents, calling for safety, freedom of speech, and respect, for a united Minnesota.<sup>57</sup>

In centering the residents of Clearbrook (a town that is almost 100% white) and the inconvenience the protests caused to their day-to-day activities, they are speaking to a settler common sense, one that values the convenience of life in settler society more than the longstanding harm this pipeline will do, ultimately to everyone, not only Indigenous tribes (although they are the frontline communities, in this situation and many others).

In addition to groups like Minnesotans for Line 3, a substantial amount of resistance to Indigenous land rights in this situation comes from law enforcement and Enbridge's power over public officials, like those on the Public Utilities Commission, who unanimously approved the pipeline.<sup>58</sup> This isn't just an issue of prejudiced individuals, it is a problem with roots in corporate power, the police state, and the grip of the fossil fuel industry on our governments. Although there are examples of Indigenous land return happening through local government, it is quite rare, and as shown by the issues happening in Minnesota, there are many forms of resistance to that type of change present in this state. Much of this resistance centers around white ownership of land, both literally and figuratively.

## **Conclusion**

Despite their differences, opposition to Stop Line 3 and changes at MNHS both appeal to a settler common sense that racializes Minnesota land and history as white, and refuses to account for the disastrous effects that colonization has had on this place. Although in the future, I hope to see a great deal more engagement of labor interests in the environmental movement, Stop Line 3 is a powerful example of protest through Indigenous resurgence. In that way, it is the opposite of the changes happening at MNHS. Within the system and institutions that we have, it's not a bad thing for a site like Fort Snelling to focus more on Dakota people and the violence

that was committed against them there and across Minnesota by settlers and the United States government. However, the changes made at Fort Snelling are compatible with capitalism and extractive narratives of place, where the Indigenous resurgence central to the Stop Line 3 movement is not. Now is the time to disentangle ourselves and our institutions, where applicable, from the possessive investment in whiteness and corporate interests. Now is the time to consider large-scale land return as a real possibility, and to fight for it.

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1. Waziyatawin, *What Does Justice Look Like?: The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland*, 13.
2. Lybeck, "A Public Pedagogy of White Victimhood: (Im)Moral Facts, Settler Identity, and Genocide Denial in Dakota Homeland," 548.
3. Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*.
4. Thielen-Wilson, "Feeling Property: Settler Violence in the Time of Reconciliation." 496.
5. Thielen-Wilson, 499.
6. Thielen-Wilson, 498.
7. There is a distinct spatiality to violence enshrined in laws like Stand Your Ground, which has been given a great deal of attention in recent years, following the murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager, in 2012. George Zimmerman, the man who killed Martin, was initially protected from arrest and criminal charges on the basis of self-defense and Stand Your Ground. He was eventually charged and tried for second-degree murder and manslaughter, but was acquitted of all charges (Coates, "How Stand Your Ground Relates to George Zimmerman").
8. State v. Glowacki.
9. Thielen-Wilson, "Feeling Property: Settler Violence in the Time of Reconciliation," 517.
10. Harris, "Whiteness as Property."
11. Harris, 1716.
12. Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 2.
13. Lipsitz, 5.
14. Whitson, "Monumental Mines: Mine Tourism, Settler Colonialism, and the Creation of an Extractive Landscape on Minnesota's Iron Range," 49.
15. Whitson, 50.

16. Voyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country*, 7-8.
17. Lybeck, "A Public Pedagogy of White Victimhood: (Im)Moral Facts, Settler Identity, and Genocide Denial in Dakota Homeland," 545.
18. Lybeck, 545.
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20. Bakeman, "Thanks for Your Help!" 2.
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22. Minnesota Historical Society, *Where the Waters Meet*.
23. Waziyatawin, *What Does Justice Look Like?: The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland*, 12.
24. DeCarlo, *Fort Snelling at Bdote: A Brief History*.
25. Minnesota Historical Society, "'Our Home: Native Minnesota' Exhibit Opening."
26. "Historic Fort Snelling Revitalization Update."
27. Brooks, "State Senators Try to Slash Minnesota Historical Society's Budget over Sign at Fort Snelling."
28. Brooks.
29. Peacock, "An Account of the Dakota-US War of 1862 as Sacred Text: Why My Dakota Elders Value Spiritual Closure over Scholarly 'Balance.'" 200.
30. Seawright, "Settler Traditions of Place: Making Explicit the Epistemological Legacy of White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism for Place-Based Education," 561.
31. Seawright, 569.
32. Prather, "Minnesota Historical Society Broadens How It Tells the State's History."
33. Prather.
34. Thielen-Wilson, "Feeling Property: Settler Violence in the Time of Reconciliation," 499.
35. Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, 176.
36. Salisbury, "'Fort Snelling at Bdote'? Senate Passes GOP Measure Cutting Historical Society Funds over 'Revisionist History.'"
37. Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, 94.
38. Federici, 99.
39. Federici, 95.
40. Federici, 4.
41. Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, 17.
42. Betasamosake Simpson, 22-23.
43. Betasamosake Simpson, 67.
44. Harris, "Indigenous Knowledge Has Been Warning Us about Climate Change for Centuries."
45. Simmons, "Squamish First Nation Development Could Bring 11 Towers to Vancouver."
46. "About Us," *Honor the Earth*.
47. Honor the Earth, *What Is Line 3?*
48. Honor the Earth, *What Is Line 3?*
49. Unicorn Riot, *Winona LaDuke Speaks After Line 3 Pipeline Approval*.
50. Unicorn Riot, *Winona LaDuke Speaks After Line 3 Pipeline Approval*.
51. Clifton, "Wisconsin Death March: Explaining the Extremes in Old Northwest Indian Removal."

52. Unicorn Riot, *Winona LaDuke Speaks After Line 3 Pipeline Approval*.
53. "Giniw Frontline Resistance."
54. Germanos, "Law Enforcement Crushing Pipeline Dissent in Minnesota at Water Protectors' Blockade of Enbridge Terminal."
55. "Dangerous Pipelines: Enbridge's History of Spills Threatens Minnesota Waters."
56. "Minnesotans for Line 3," Facebook page.
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58. Kraker, "State Regulators Issue Final Approval for Line 3 Oil Pipeline Project."

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