

Who's On First: Paradigms of Dominance

AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT FROM STANDING ROCK

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On Thursday morning, 524 members of the clergy were praying along-side the Standing Rock camp set up in protest for the building of a pipeline bringing crude oil across sacred land. It is here the Standing Rock Sioux are using their bodies as a barrier to stop the army of trucks tearing through Mother Earth, poisoning the water and desecrating their burial grounds. I was standing with a colleague and friend when we realized that behind the platform truck we were using as a stage, people were beginning to gather and we could hear chanting. We quietly peeled away from the pre-planned program, thinking we might be able to get just a little closer to whatever was happening in the background. As we stepped toward the crowd, people said, "clergy," and then made room for us to move closer until we were directly behind a wall of Sioux men dressed entirely in black with their backs toward us. These were the Water Protectors. They have been there for months creating a human blockade.

One of them noticed us and again, said, "clergy" and the wall of men opened. We stepped between them and found ourselves on The Bridge. This is the bridge that goes over a branch of the Missouri River that twists and winds its way all through this land- the water in need of protection. This bridge has become the dividing line, the frontline, where you can see the water being protected, the land being violated, the Lakota/Dakota people occupying their territory, and the many police, federal and state shipped in from all over, armed and ready. When we cross the line and move in front of the Water Protectors, we see before us, on the opposite side of the bridge, two trucks set up across the road with a car crashed between them to ensure full blockage of this major North Dakota roadway. These vehicles were set on fire last week by the same militarized police who lined up behind the burned out blockade. They have closed this major thoroughfare, making travel to and from Standing Rock, very difficult. The burned out vehicles, the militarized police, the closed roads and bridges are all reminiscent of time I spent in Belfast in 1989.

My colleague and I walked across the bridge, closer to the obstruction where we saw others standing. The Chairman of the Sioux Tribal Council was talking with a police negotiator. He was asking for the helicopter they had circling the prayer service to land so those in prayer could hear each other. The helicopters provide a continually threatening menace, circling the camp day and night, lest the protestors forget their vulnerability. Members of the press were swarming and there were other observers like myself trying to be supportive with little idea of how to do that.

The Water Protectors decided it was too dangerous for so many to be on the bridge. The bridge had become the neutral zone, the space both Sioux and Police stayed out of. Our being there was a risk. The day before, the priest who called us together had crossed this bridge, stepped over all the broken glass and burned remnants of the vehicles covering the road. He walked with his hands up. The police yelled at him to stop halfway across. He did. They asked what he wanted. He said he needed to speak with them. 5 police came out, one holding an AK47 aimed at him. He walked closer. He explained that he invited members of the clergy from all over the country and we would be there to pray the next day. He was negotiating for our safety.

Having so many of us on the bridge that morning felt like they were pushing the limits of their temporary truce. The Water Protectors asked us to go back. A line of men in black, some with eagle feathers and painted faces, some in military garb in recognition of their service in the US armed forces, one carrying an upside down flag, formed before us and started to push us back. But they stopped before they reached the Protectors behind us. They stopped in the middle of the bridge. And they started to chant. These are the ancient Sioux chants, chants they know as well as their own names. A man was walking in that space between the crowd behind us, being kept back by the Protectors and the line of men before us and was clearing people out, moving them back behind the original line.

He looked at me, but didn't say anything. I asked, "Do you want us to move?" He said, "No. you stay."

My friend and I remained in this in-between space with a few others. And these men chanted. They faced us, just a few feet away, and called out in an ancient language, the songs of their ancestors. They were warrior cries, cries of history and family and pain and power.

We did nothing but witness. A man with war paint on his face wiped the tears from his eyes. A man holding the line with a pole of eagle feathers removed his sunglasses to do the same. And another. And another. These warriors chanted and they cried and we held the space in between.

The chanting continued until the helicopter landed. That small victory was won. People could continue to pray. They moved the line back to their side of the bridge.

The day hadn't started there. It started in the camp. The Standing Rock Sioux invited everyone to morning prayer, like they've been doing every morning since they left their homes to occupy this land. They began with a water ritual. They chant and bless the water. Everyone is smudged using smoke as a cleanser. Cedar is put in your shoes and cold water poured on your hands. Then the grandmothers take a sacred plant and walk to the river with other women behind them and the men in back and then go into the river to bless it as they protect it from harm.

The day before, they did this same ritual, but they were greeted by those same militarized police who sprayed them with pepper spray and tear gas. But, this morning, they were going again. They were frightened but powerful in their unwillingness to falter even in their fear.

We didn't follow them to the river because there was more they wanted us to do. Members of each of the religious traditions that have repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery were asked to read a portion of a statement by the World Council of Churches and together burned the Doctrine. The priest who organized it hoped we'd burn it in the Sacred Fire. The Fire was set the day they started their occupation in July. There is a fire keeper there 24 hours a day, tending the fire, ensuring it doesn't go out. It's the center of ritual and of gathering and conversation and the heart of this enormous camp a thousand people are calling home. The elders wouldn't let the fire be desecrated by the Doctrine, so it was burned in an alabaster shell.

We then lined up behind sacred images of our traditions and walked, slowly, by the hundreds, from the camp, up that closed road, to the bridge where speakers from each of the 20 traditions spoke in solidarity and support and memory.

But, the day hadn't started there either. The day started in the 2nd half of the 15th century when the Holy Roman Empire was seeking to expand its jurisdiction, and a series of Papal Bulls called the Doctrine of Christian Discovery went into effect. The first was from Pope Nicholas V. It says:

“We grant to you (King of Portugal) full and free power, through the Apostolic authority by this edict, to invade, conquer, fight, subjugate the [Muslims] and pagans, and other infidels and enemies of Christ, and wherever established their Kingdoms... Royal Palaces, Principalities and other dominions, lands, places, estates, camps and any other possessions, mobile and immobile goods found in all these places and held in whatever name, ...and to lead their persons in perpetual servitude.”

This edict gave sanction for Portugal to invade Africa, take its resources, and begin what was to be called the African Slave Trade.

There were two more after that ultimately giving Christians right to lay claim to land if it had been previously unknown to Christians. It added a clause requiring the proselytizing of the inhabitants to Christianity. It is this Doctrine of Discovery that became the basis for the United States' claim to this land and to subjugate the one million people who lived here when Columbus arrived.

The US Supreme court in 1823, in *Johnson v McIntosh* used the doctrine to state that Johnson had no claim to the land he purchased directly from native peoples because the land rightfully belonged to the US government by virtue of the Doctrine of Discovery. In other words, he couldn't have bought it from them because they weren't allowed to own it. This ruling meant that the indigenous people only had the right of occupancy so long as the US government allowed it and could at any time revoke that right. This was upheld in the US Supreme Court ruling of 1831; *Cherokee Nation v Georgia*. Justice Marshall wrote that “the relationship of the tribes to the United States resembles that of a ‘ward to its guardian’.

This doctrine became the footprint of Manifest Destiny, the belief that the United States should expand from coast to coast, the belief that our expansion was destined by God. We see an uncritical acceptance of the

virtue of American institutions and culture, our mission to spread these institutions by way of redeeming and remaking the world in our image and our destiny as declared by God to do so.

I can tell you all about the Supreme Court citing the 1831 case in a 2005 ruling as proof of its continued influence, but I don't need to because you can see it playing out in North Dakota right now.

What's actually happening in North Dakota? Fossil fuel companies are building pipelines all over the country. They are tearing through land in the Midwest, the South, New England and right here in Westchester County. Instead of investing in renewable resources, they are doubling down on fossil fuels, putting water supplies and people's homes and entire towns in danger. So many of us are passively letting it happen, I suspect, because there's a way in which we can't believe it's true. Our government wouldn't really allow us to be in harm's way, couldn't possibly be so short-sited as to let our water supplies be permanently damaged.

We exist in a paradigm of dominance that values some life over others. At the top of this multi-dimensional pyramid are white, straight, cis-gender, wealthy, educated, Christian, American men. At the bottom is soil. Those of us who experience some form of privilege can find it difficult to imagine what it is to be invisible or irrelevant. But in our culture, that's what happens.

Remember when those 18 acres in Dobbs Ferry were being targeted for destruction to be replaced with retail shops and a movie theatre? When I spoke with the developer, he said, "Peggy, there's nothing there." We do that a lot. We look and see nothing. I told him there were 330 trees there. There's dozens of species living in generations of homes there. There's water there and soil and resting places for migrating birds there. He sighed because to him, all that equaled nothing. It wasn't turning a profit or in any way benefitting the dominant class, and therefore had no value. It's nothing.

It's the same reason police aren't indicted for killing innocent black men and women, boys and girls. Because nothing happened. Nothing was there. They are invisible, irrelevant.

And this is the fight of the Standing Rock Sioux. They are fighting to be seen. They are fighting not to be erased. The decision to tear through this land happened because Sioux history is irrelevant, because the needs of indigenous people don't matter. They are invisible. That's why the police can interrupt their prayer services with tear gas, shoot them with rubber bullets, tear up their homes, shoot their horses, keep search lights on all night and helicopters running perpetually as forms of mental torture.

In spite of all that, something magnificent is happening at Standing Rock. The clergy, mainstream people who are visible, were called to ensure the Lakota/Dakota people are being seen. So, we were invited because, as part of the dominant class, our watchful eyes will give the police pause. In that, we were successful, if only for a short time. But, more than that happened. Some of those people had the experience of being seen. Our first night there, they bore witness to their own pain, to depression and scars and suicide attempts because for the first time, someone had come to their aid. Someone could see them. Someone knew they needed help and deemed them worthy. Someone doesn't want them to disappear. In fact, 524 someones each representing hundreds more.

That's why those brave warriors were crying on the bridge. Because we could see them.

We could talk about the value of our waterways to everyone and the interconnectedness of all life and the short-sightedness of building fossil fuel infrastructure. Those things are true, but making those things the sole reason we think what's happening at Standing Rock matters is to reinforce the dominant paradigm. It's to say that this pipeline has to stop because it's better for people like me and for my cute, white New York kid. But the reason this story matters is so much bigger than that.

It matters because, if we are going to survive this climate crisis, we have to value life other than human. We have to see the trees and respect the soil and desire the water to be clean to support all life, including but not exclusively our own.

It matters because an ancient people on our shared land have found their voice. They organized and gathered and are occupying their land with great purpose. They lit their sacred fire and thank the water each morning and they are standing their ground, protecting the land and their ancestors and their history.

It matters because we have a chance to right too many wrongs, to live into the promise of what this nation could have been, to begin to shift the paradigm to one of profound communal connection rather than domination, thereby saving all of us and all of Earth.

May we live well into this moment.