

Medicines at Standing Rock: Stories of Native Healing through Survivance

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In 2016, a historically large gathering of Indigenous peoples, tribal nations, and allies took place at the Standing Rock reservation, North Dakota, in response to the proposed construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). Under the assertion of Mni Wičoni (Water Is Life), a social movement emerged with the purpose of protecting clean drinking water and Indigenous lands. Drawing on Gerald Vizenor's theoretical framework that emphasizes storytelling and active presence over settler resistance, this study argues that Indigenous water protectors' collective action in the movement, as well as their stories and remembrance of Standing Rock, are acts of survivance, in which they are able to denounce othering and challenge the colonizer's gaze. While water is often described as a first medicine by Indigenous peoples, the water protectors' stories in this essay suggest that the movement itself represented another remedy as well. Specifically, this movement represents a pivotal moment of cultural revitalization and community across what participants refer to as "Indian country," in which individuals are able to engage in large scale grassroots decolonizing praxis rooted in spirituality and ceremony, and suspend genocidal traps of victimry that they have long battled.