

## **Showing Up “in a Good Way”: Addressing Power Inequalities Between White and Indigenous Activists in the Movement to Stop Line 3**

### **ABSTRACT**

Alliances across difference confer significant benefits to social movements, including increased mobilization, visibility, and legitimacy. However, coalitions across differences are some of the most difficult to create and sustain over time. Social movement scholars have written much about the problems that difference poses for coalition success, as well as the importance of recognizing difference and inequality, yet relatively little about practices for doing so. Drawing on 24 interviews and a year of participant observation of frontline activism, my study examines the practices that the movement against the Line 3 pipeline employed during pipeline construction to address inequalities and sustain an alliance across Indigenous-white lines. My analysis suggests that the primary practice through which the movement attempted to address these power inequalities is the instruction to “follow Indigenous leadership.” This practice, implemented through movement discourse and reinforced in interactions, encouraged white activists to come to the frontlines to resist the pipeline; discouraged white domination of discussions, decision-making processes, and media coverage; increased white activists’ awareness of Indigenous perspectives and concerns; and created relationships lasting beyond the end of pipeline construction. However, in spite of these strong norms, activists were aware of some complexities, questions, and problems that remained, including overly deferential behavior from white activists, tokenization, appropriation, white saviorism, and complexities in following Indigenous leaders who have different perspectives. I argue that developing an instruction rooted in social justice principles that is implemented through discourse and reinforced in interactions to guide work across difference can help to address power inequalities and sustain an alliance, and that, over time, this instruction must develop additional nuance to account for unanticipated problems.

### **KEYWORDS**

Social movements, inequality, coalitions, alliances, solidarity, Indigenous-white/Indigenous-settler, climate justice

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## **LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

*\*I wrote this paper at the University of Colorado Boulder which sits upon land within the territories of the Ute, Cheyenne, and Arapaho peoples. Additionally, 48 contemporary tribal nations are historically tied to the lands that make up the state of Colorado (CU Boulder Land Acknowledgment). I encourage CU Boulder to fulfill the three commitments made in its land acknowledgement: (1) Recognizing and amplifying the voices of Indigenous CU Boulder students, staff and faculty and their work. (2) Educating, conducting research, supporting student success and integrating Indigenous knowledge. (3) Consulting, engaging and working collaboratively with tribal nations to enhance our ability to provide access and culturally sensitive support and to recruit, retain and graduate Native American students in a climate that is inclusive and respectful.*

*\*I conducted research for this paper on the homelands of Anishinaabe peoples. A group of activists in the movement against Line 3 now use the following “land acknowledgement”:  
While land acknowledgments are intended to be respectful, they oversimplify complex Indigenous histories and fail to recognize the ongoing impacts of colonization that Indigenous communities continue to live with to this day. In place of a land acknowledgment, we ask that you support Indigenous communities by taking action.*

*We ask that you:*

- 1. Give land back to Indigenous nations.*
- 2. Promote programs and initiatives that enable Indigenous peoples to enact reciprocal responsibilities and relationships with more-than-human relatives.*
- 3. Insist that the United States respects Indigenous sovereignty and upholds its trust responsibility to Indigenous nations, which includes appropriate levels of federal funding to support Indigenous needs. Many promises to Indigenous nations still need to be kept.*
- 4. Elect officials and judges that understand Indigenous governments, relationships, and law.*
- 5. Invest in Indigenous economies.*
- 6. Challenge and reject all stereotypes about Indigenous peoples.*
- 7. Insist that your children and grandchildren are taught accurate information about the histories, cultures, and contemporary lives of Indigenous peoples in your school system. And,*
- 8. Inform yourself about issues impacting Indigenous communities and speak up. The sovereignty, well-being, cultures, and languages of Indigenous peoples are borne of their homelands and that makes these lands and waters precious to Indigenous communities.*

*All of us have the responsibility to treat them with the respect and care they deserve, and to steward them carefully for the next generations. Please do your part. Thank you. (included with permission from MN350 policy action team)*

## INTRODUCTION

During the construction of the Line 3 tar sands pipeline in northern Minnesota, thousands of activists joined together on the frontlines, working across Indigenous-white lines to resist the pipeline. The construction of the pipeline through Anishinaabe territories without their consent, the threat of a spill on lands and ecosystems important to the Anishinaabe, the pollution of clean water, and the exacerbation of climate change from burning the oil carried by the pipeline motivated resistance to Line 3. The alliance of Indigenous and white activists in resistance to this pipeline may seem surprising given the power inequalities between them, resulting from the long history of settler colonialism – an ongoing process whereby settlers attempt to permanently remove original inhabitants from their land through dispossession, erasure, and genocide (see Wolfe 2006). In movements with Indigenous-white alliances, past and ongoing settler colonialism bears heavily on interactions (Mott 2016), creating inequalities and divisions, as well as significant knowledge gaps and emotional barriers to collaboration (Bacon 2017). Even when working in solidarity, “the systemic nature of racism manifests in even the most liberal and well-meaning activists” (Gilio-Whitaker 2019: 127). However, by implementing practices to address power inequalities, the movement against Line 3 was able to sustain a coalition across Indigenous-white lines.

The literature on coalition building across differences in identity focuses much more on conflict resulting from difference than possibilities for cooperation. Studies explain that groups with different identities are less likely to join together in coalition (Gawerc 2021; McCammon and Moon 2015; Walker and Stepick 2014) and differences in power are the most difficult for coalitions to address (Bandy and Smith 2005). When alliances across power differences do form, there is great risk that the more privileged group will dominate leadership and decision-making

processes, reproducing existing power inequalities (Marx and Useem 1971). Much coalition scholarship argues that differences can create barriers to the formation of a sense of “we-ness” (Staggenborg 2010) important to movement cohesion. Increasingly, scholars argue for the importance of recognizing difference, and following the leadership of those most affected by intersecting oppressions (Cole and Luna 2010), rather than downplaying difference in favor of a singular unified identity. However, few studies consider the implementation and effects of practices for recognizing and addressing inequality, despite their importance.

Drawing on 24 interviews, more than four years of activism with the movement, and one year of focused participant observation, this research examines how the movement against Line 3 worked to address power inequalities across Indigenous-white lines. The study adds to scholarly understanding of coalition building across difference and inequalities – a relatively understudied area – by exploring the implementation and effects of a movement practice for addressing inequalities. I focus on interactions *within* social movements because we know relatively little about the microdynamics of navigating coalition spaces (Enriquez 2014; Van Dyke and McCammon 2010), and because power inequalities are (re)produced and can also be challenged in interactions (Collins 1981; cited in Sumerau 2021). Studying practices for addressing inequalities in social movements is important for three main reasons: inequalities in social movements can perpetuate harm against participants; in prefigurative movements that aspire to model the world they want to see in internal movement dynamics, unaddressed inequalities can hinder the creation of more just relationships, norms, and cultures to disseminate more broadly in society, undermining their prefigurative goal; and unaddressed inequalities can impede the ability of coalitions across difference to sustain themselves over time.

## **SOCIAL MOVEMENT ALLIANCES ACROSS DIFFERENCE**

Coalition building across differences can be difficult (Gawerc 2021), because social position shapes understandings of a social problem, its framing (Magis 2010), and preferred tactics and strategies to address that problem (Maney 2012; Schock 2015). Inequalities pose additional challenges, as there is a danger that the more privileged group will co-opt leadership roles and decision-making processes, reproducing existing power inequalities within the movement (Marx and Useem 1971). However, building coalitions across differences can strengthen social movements (Gawerc 2021). Diverse alliances can mobilize a broader base of participants (Almeida 2008), increase the visibility and legitimacy of a cause (Brooker and Meyer 2019; Dixon et al. 2013), amplify pressure on a target (Lee 2011), create more effective strategy (Ganz 2000; Jasper 2006; Walker and Stepick 2014), and increase empathy from the public in the face of repression (Davenport et al. 2018; Galtung 1989; Thurber 2018). Despite the difficulty and importance of forming coalitions across difference, there has been relatively little research on how to sustain alliances across difference over time (Gawerc 2021; Dixon et al. 2013; Gawerc 2020).

In order to build a coalition across difference, coalition scholarship highlights the importance of emphasizing what is shared among actors (Van Dyke and McCammon 2010). The construction of a collective identity – “a trope that stirs people to action by arousing feelings of solidarity with their fellows and by defining moral boundaries against other categories” – is important to the ability of a coalition to form and sustain itself (McGarry and Jasper 2015, 1; Gawerc 2021; Flesher-Fominaya 2014; Gamson 1991). Scholars also point to developing a “collective action frame” – a shared understanding of social problems, solutions, and motivations to address those problems – as important to coalition success (Snow and Benford 2000; Croteau

and Hicks 2003). The literature largely emphasizes shared interests, ideologies, and commitments (Van Dyke and McCammon 2010) and often treats differences and inequalities as barriers (Staggenborg 2010) that render the construction of a collective sense of “we” challenging (Gamson 2011). Coalition studies increasingly demonstrate the importance of recognizing and addressing differences (Gawerc 2021; Bystydzienski and Schacht 2001; Cole and Luna 2010; Einwohner et al. 2019; Gawerc 2017; Steans 2007; Bandy and Smith 2005; Waterman 2001), since failing to do so can fracture coalitions and lead to their dissolution.

A growing body of research by intersectionality scholars reveals that tensions and conflict can arise when differences are glossed over or ignored through a universalized identity (e.g., Crenshaw 1989; Roth 2004; Gilio-Whitaker 2019; Juris 2012); for example, by universalizing gender experience, the first waves of the U.S. feminist movement mainly represented the interests of white middle-class heterosexual women (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Baca Zinn and Dill 1996; Spelman 1988), and by universalizing racial experience, the civil rights movement mainly represented the interests of Black men (Olson 2001; Collier-Thomas and Franklin 2001), both ignoring the concerns of women of color. Developing a singular unified identity can make internal differences difficult to address (Juris 2012), can reify identities created by oppressors (Jasper and McGarry 2015), and can be counterproductive if differences are invoked strategically to designate roles and responsibilities; for example, the DREAM Coalition strategically assigned citizen students the task of speaking with their representatives and undocumented students the task of mobilizing support through their stories (Enriquez 2014). Finally, a singular unified identity can obscure the power differences that a movement attempts to combat. For example, for white activists in race-based movements (McCorkel and Rodriguez 2009) and settler activists in Indigenous-led movements (Bacon 2021), developing a singular

unified identity with marginalized groups would obscure differences in power and privilege. The formation of a sense of togetherness, or collective identity, may occur differently for movements with alliances between dominant groups and marginalized groups (Russo 2014).

In movements with power differences, failing to address inequalities can result in several problems. In the civil rights, abolition, and Untouchables movements, white activists took over leadership positions; acted with “condescension, patronization, paternalism and stereotyping”; and reproduced inequalities from the broader society within the movement (Marx and Useem 1971, 94). Such patterns hold true in more recent movements; studies have shown that some who identify as “white allies” to movements led by marginalized communities can act in ways that avoid addressing oppression and privilege (McCorkel and Rodriguez 2009), assign responsibility for doing so to minorities, and suggest individualized solutions for structural inequalities (Sumerau et al. 2021). Ideologies of abstract liberalism present in the broader society permeate coalition-building efforts across racial lines; white people can assert their beliefs in equality, that they “don’t see color,” and view themselves as good people, without implementing these beliefs in practice, finding ways to defend their racial privilege and justify inequality (Sumerau et al. 2021; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Picca and Feagin 2007; Fields 2006; Wellman 1993; Frankenberg 1993).

While many studies explain the problems that result from a failure to address inequality and difference, fewer studies document practices to recognize and address these inequalities. Some argue that intersectionality – recognizing and resisting the intersection of multiple oppressions (Crenshaw 1989) – or “multiple identity” (Barvosa-Carter 1999) can act as a tool to both understand and bridge differences in social movements (Cole 2008; Walker and Stepick 2014). Some suggest that movements should follow the leadership of those most affected by

intersecting oppressions (Cole and Luna 2010; Juris 2008) and give additional weight to their demands (Beamish and Leubbers 2009; Eschle and Maiguashca 2010; Strolovitch 2008; Townsend-Bell 2011; Weldon 2006). Scholars also highlight the importance of organizing decision-making processes and discussions so that the marginalized are more likely to hold authority and speak, reflecting the input of the marginalized in discourse and organizational materials, ensuring diversity in leadership, and guaranteeing opportunities for dissent from marginalized groups (Einwohner et al. 2019). Creating democratic and participatory organizing structures (Bystydzienski and Schacht 2001) through practices like horizontal organizing, consensus-based decision making, protocols for conflict management such as “ouch-oops”<sup>1</sup> (Grosse 2019), and the progressive stack<sup>2</sup> (Juris et al. 2012), exemplify how movements can encode the value of diversity into practices.

However, inequality is not easily resolved through one or more practices, and contending with inequality is an ongoing process; implementing one practice in a coalition with the intention of increasing inclusivity can create new forms of exclusion requiring new practices (Einwohner et al. 2019). Building on the few but important studies documenting practices for addressing power inequalities, this study contributes to understanding of the processes through which movements negotiate and develop practices for addressing inequality over time, as well as the effects of these practices. Recognizing and addressing inequalities within social movements across difference is crucial to sustaining a coalition (Gawerc 2021; Kraemer 2007; Bystydzienski and Schacht 2001). While studies have documented practices to address

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<sup>1</sup> “Ouch-oops” is a practice where a member of a minority community can say “ouch” to indicate they have been harmed by something that a member of a dominant group says, explains, then the member of the dominant group says “oops” and apologizes.

<sup>2</sup> A stack is a list of those who want to speak in discussions and in a progressive stack, the facilitator organizes lists of those who wish to speak in discussions so that dominant group does not monopolize them.

inequalities, to my knowledge, no study has explicitly considered the processes through which these practices are implemented, or how they develop nuance over time. I consider this question through a case study of the movement against the Line 3 tar sands pipeline, which sustained a coalition between Indigenous and white activists across profound power inequalities.

### **THE MOVEMENT AGAINST LINE 3**

The Line 3 tar sands pipeline is the latest iteration of settler colonial injustice against Anishinaabe peoples. Because Line 3 cuts through Anishinaabe treaty territory, a spill would threaten *manoomin* (wild rice) lakes and other ecosystems with which the Anishinaabe have deep relationships and responsibilities. The pipeline enacts a unique form of violence against the Anishinaabe by tearing apart eco-social relationships vital to their identity, culture, politics, and survival (Bacon 2018; Reed 2020; Whyte 2016). Line 3 crosses 208 bodies of water, including the Mississippi headwaters where a spill would be devastating to downstream ecosystems and communities. The pipeline also worsens violence against Indigenous women, girls, and relatives, as construction brings camps of out-of-state male workers disconnected from their families with large amounts of disposable cash into Indigenous communities; during Line 3 construction in 2021, four Line 3 construction workers were arrested for human or sex trafficking (Pember 2021). Finally, tar sands extraction is particularly energy intensive and emits three times more carbon pollution than other forms of crude extraction (Toban et al. 2014), worsening the climate crisis. Wildcat (2009) argues that climate change is a “fourth removal” – after forced displacement, allotment, and assimilation – which again threatens Indigenous survival by disrupting access to, and relationship and reciprocity with, non-human relatives and important sources of food and medicine.

In order to understand intra-movement dynamics across Indigenous-white lines in the movement against Line 3, it is first important to understand the history and structures of oppression that condition these interactions. While common narratives suggest that Indigenous genocide, settler colonialism, white supremacy, and white privilege are things of the past, they directly influence interactions across Indigenous-white lines (Mott 2016). Settler colonialism, whose goal is to eliminate Indigenous peoples in order to gain access to land for the settler state, is ongoing and it takes a significant amount of work to maintain and justify this ongoing dispossession (Wolfe 2006). Settler colonial elimination projects take many forms: physical elimination (genocide) through massacres and forced sterilization, cultural elimination (assimilation) through boarding schools, political elimination (termination) through ending political status and ignoring treaties, and discursive elimination (erasure) through underrepresentation and misrepresentation (Bacon 2019). Discourses that make it seem as though white ownership is common sense coupled with the racialization of Indigenous peoples as inferior attempt to rationalize the continued ownership, control, and domination of Indigenous lands and peoples (Moreton-Robinson 2015).

The mainstream environmental movement has participated in the settler colonial project. The creation of the national parks to protect pristine, untouched nature, was predicated on Indigenous dispossession, removal, and erasure (Gilio-Whitaker 2019; Spence 2000). Additionally, while there have been generative Indigenous-white alliances through the modern environmental movement, stereotyping and appropriation pervade, reifying the racialization of Indigenous peoples and norm of white possession of Indigenous lands. The trope of the Ecological Indian, the idea that Indigenous peoples live perfectly in harmony with the environment, persists, relegating Indigenous peoples to the past, as primitive and unevolved, and

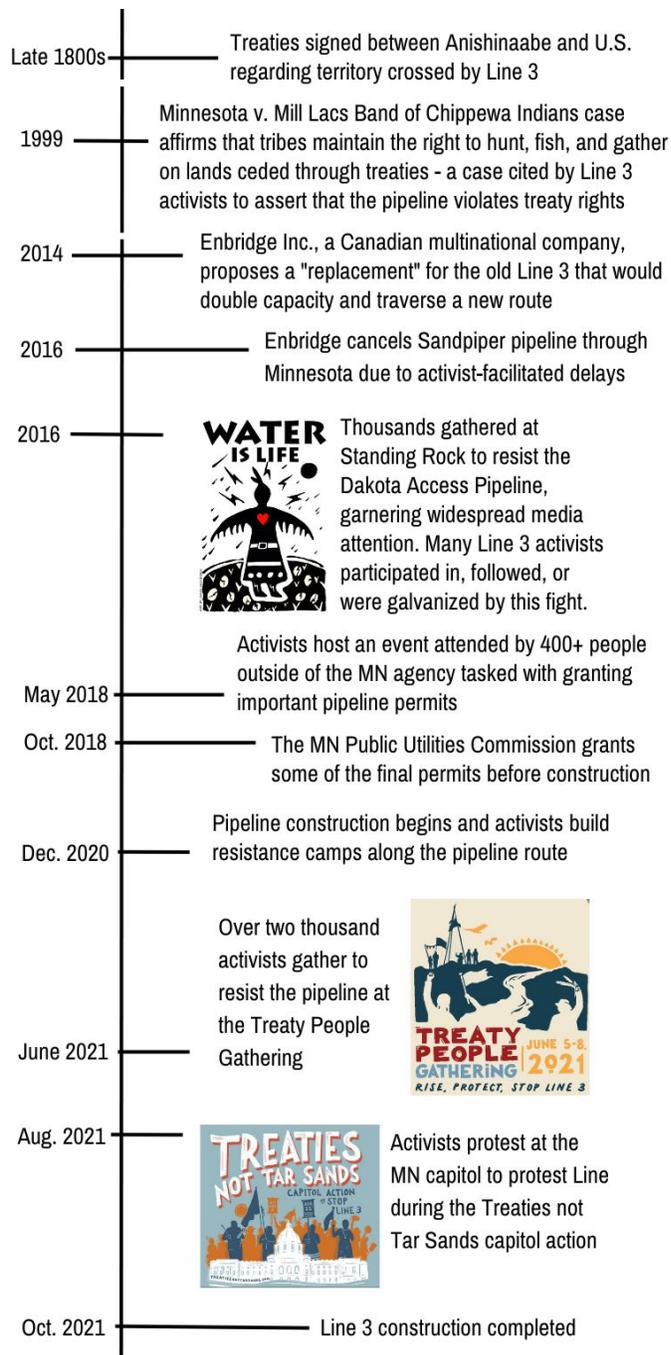
fetishizing and oversimplifying complex relationships with the land (Gilio-Whitaker 2019). Furthermore, the idea from the environmental movement that wilderness should be left untouched, which has never been the case and erases Indigenous relationship with the land, serves to justify actions to continue Indigenous dispossession. Operating under this logic, in 1983, the Nature Conservancy purchased 400 acres of land on the White Earth Reservation and donated it to the state of Minnesota rather than the White Earth Nation and in 2000, the Sierra Club opposed tribal co-management of Death Valley National Park (Gilio-Whitaker 2019).

Increasing recognition of the role of mainstream environmentalism in perpetuating injustice has co-developed with the rise of the environmental justice and climate justice movements which define themselves in contradistinction to the mainstream environmental and climate movements. The movement against Line 3 positions itself as part of the climate justice movement, which, as opposed to mainstream climate action which proposes reform-oriented solutions, “prioritizes leadership from those impacted first and worst by climate crisis, advances accountability toward those impacted first and worst by climate crisis, and addresses the root causes of climate crisis” (Dayaneni 2009:83; Gray et al. 2021). One of the first articulations of climate justice principles, the Bali Principles of Climate Justice, emphasizes the right of Indigenous peoples to speak for themselves, exercise self determination and control their own lands, and to participate at every level of decision-making (CorpWatch 2002).

New Indigenous-white alliances have increasingly formed under the umbrella of climate justice. One of the most famous of these alliances occurred during the 2016 movement at Standing Rock against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), where thousands of white and Indigenous activists stood together in the face of counterinsurgency tactics executed by militarized police and private security forces paid to defend the pipeline (see Gilio-Whitaker

2019). The movement against Line 3 was greatly influenced by the 2016 movement at Standing Rock against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL); many of the same people participated in both struggles, and that learnings from #NoDAPL greatly informed the movement against Line 3. Even the pipeline corporation is the same; Enbridge owns Line 3, and purchased DAPL in a joint venture in 2016. Law enforcement in Minnesota sought guidance from law enforcement responsible for the military response at Standing Rock before pipeline construction began (Parrish and Brown 2019). In my analysis, I consider the movement against Line 3 to be, in some ways, a continuation of the #NoDAPL movement.

From 2014 to 2020, a coalition of climate justice, faith-based, Indigenous, and environmental groups were trying to prevent Line 3 from acquiring necessary permits through the regulatory process. After receiving the necessary permits, construction began on Line 3 in the winter of 2020. While court battles and final permitting contests continued, much of the movement's focus shifted to non-violent direct action and holding space against the construction of the pipeline on Anishinaabe treaty territory. This tactical and spatial shift from regulatory interventions in Saint Paul and Minneapolis, the largest cities in Minnesota, to frontline resistance in rural Northern Minnesota marked a new chapter in the movement (see Figure 1). White activists from the Twin Cities and across Turtle Island united to join Anishinaabe and Indigenous activists on the frontlines in resistance camps to assert treaty rights. The urgency of their fight and their spatial proximity intensified and rendered visible power inequalities affecting their capacity to work together. I apply my research questions here, considering practices for addressing Indigenous-white inequalities during frontline activism on Anishinaabe lands.



**Figure 1.** Brief timeline on resistance to the Line 3 pipeline. Art by Isaac Murdoch and Dio Cramer included with their permission.

## METHODS AND POSITIONALITY

The design and thinking for this paper are rooted in my long-term relationships within and accountability to this movement. From 2018-2022, I volunteered my time to organize efforts with the Pipeline Resistance Team of Minnesota 350, a primarily white climate justice nonprofit. My observations at meetings, protests, and events, as well as regulatory hearings and public comment periods, gave me a deep understanding of the movement to stop Line 3, and informed the development of my research questions. Namely, I noticed the importance that MN350 placed on white activists “showing up in a good way” to work with Indigenous activists, and wished to learn more. This question seemed to be of interest not only to me personally, but also to other white individuals engaged in climate justice and social justice activism, as well as to movements interested in strengthening Indigenous-white alliances against environmental injustices.

During the construction of the pipeline, I continued to work closely with activists to plan and carry out events to resist the pipeline and support resistance camps. At this time, I also engaged in participant observation, informal conversations, analysis of movement media and coverage, and interviews (IRB protocol 21-0265) at frontline resistance camps and events to answer the following research questions: (1) What practices does the movement against Line 3 employ to address power inequalities across Indigenous-white lines in this context? (2) How are these practices implemented? (3) What are the effects of these practices? What complexities and questions remain? (4) How are these practices negotiated and renegotiated?

Although there are many forms of difference in any given movement, I choose to focus on Indigenous-white lines. During my initial participation in the movement in 2018, I noticed that compared to other lines of difference like age, gender, sexual orientation, or ability, the movement paid the most attention to working across Indigenous-white lines, although there was an intention to be intersectionally inclusive. The climate justice nonprofit I volunteered with was

aware of settler colonialism, and wished to differentiate itself from white environmentalism and its role in Indigenous dispossession. The major organizations involved in the movement either self-identified as Native or Indigenous, or tended to be majority white – another reason to focus on coalition building across Indigenous-white lines.

As I will explore in my analysis section, particularly during the frontline resistance during pipeline construction, the movement identified as “Indigenous-led,” leading activists to evaluate and be evaluated upon their identity according to whiteness and Indigeneity to determine their roles. This framing of the movement as “Indigenous-led” helped me to decide to use the category of “Indigenous” to identify activists. Finally, I choose to use “white activists” over “white settler activists.” Some activists in the movement identified as “settlers,” but “white” tended to be more broadly used, and the activists I interviewed identified as white. Also, I choose to use “white activists” for brevity’s sake.

During the summer of 2021, I observed five of six resistance camps (see Figure 2), virtual and in person meetings, community events, protests, and gatherings. At any given time there could be between ten and hundreds people at a camp – ten if actions, events, or construction was happening elsewhere on the pipeline route and hundreds if construction was nearby or events were being hosted by the camp. Many people moved between camps and traveled back and forth from camp to home quite frequently, with varying levels of time in camp; some only participated for a weekend, others lived in camp the whole summer, and still others participated somewhere in between. Observations of the behaviors, actions, interactions, and reactions of white and Indigenous activists as they worked together, coupled with my own experience building relationships, helped me understand what practices to address inequalities were in place, how white activists learned these practices, the effects of these practices, and how

they changed over time. I also collected newspaper articles, emails, social media posts and other resources circulated by the movement, to help me better understand how the movement represented itself and was represented regarding practices to address inequality.

While a systematic survey of every white activists' journey to participate in frontline resistance was not feasible, my participant observations allow me to speak to some patterns. White activists present *throughout* construction most often joined the movement from peer organizing in colleges; climate justice, democratic socialist, and left-leaning faith organizations and networks of leftist affinity groups connected with Line 3 for some time; and from Standing Rock. Many college students and those who joined through organizations were from the Twin Cities, and traveled up to the frontlines and back to the Twin Cities with some flexibility. Finally, some white activists from out of state who had been at Standing Rock traveled to Line 3 and took up residence at camps for the duration of construction. Throughout the summer, some out-of-state activists traveled in for a week or a weekend. A large pipeline resistance event during the summer brought the aforementioned groups but also a greater diversity of activists, some drawn by Winona LaDuke, a well-known Indigenous environmental activist, some national climate and climate justice organizers, and some who were part of organizations and affinity groups outside of Minnesota.

Indigenous activists present throughout construction included the founders of the six resistance camps who were Anishinaabe, some who lived on one of the reservations in Northern Minnesota, and Indigenous activists from outside Anishinaabe territory who also participated in Standing Rock or in Indigenous organizations or movements. Most of these individuals lived at camp for much of the summer, except for people who went back and forth between camp and the reservation.

Using purposive sampling to select for activists with more experience working across difference, activists who were there for most of the summer, I conducted 24 interviews, averaging 64 minutes in length, to better understand what activists were thinking, feeling, and learning about working across inequalities. The interviews represent a diversity of perspectives, strategy and tactical preferences, age, and places they call home. Fifteen interviewees self-identified as white, and nine checked yes to identifying as Indigenous/Native/American Indian, and in self-describing their race wrote Native American, Native, Anishinaabe, Indigenous mixed, or First Nations. Of these nine, five were Anishinaabe resistance camp leaders (founders of one of the six resistance camps) and four were non-Anishinaabe Indigenous activists. Four total interviewees identified as non-binary or two-spirit, eight as men, ten as women, and two left their gender identification blank.

The interviews, conducted as “conversation[s] with a purpose” (Burgess 1984), focused on several themes: activists’ understandings of what it means for white people and groups to show up “in a good way,” an expression widely used in the movement; whether internal movement processes and dynamics reflected activists’ visions for the future (prefiguration); how colonialism interacts with the story of Line 3; as well as how activists became part of the movement and their suggestion on the most important thing everyone should know about the movement. Answers to these questions, particularly about how to show up “in a good way,” allowed me to understand what and how white activists learned and understood the meaning of best practices for working across inequality, as well as both white and Indigenous insights into what behaviors were problematic. For my analysis, using grounded theory and triangulating between my interviews, observations, media, and the literature, I identified emergent themes on practices for working across inequality. I also explored whether these themes were patterned on

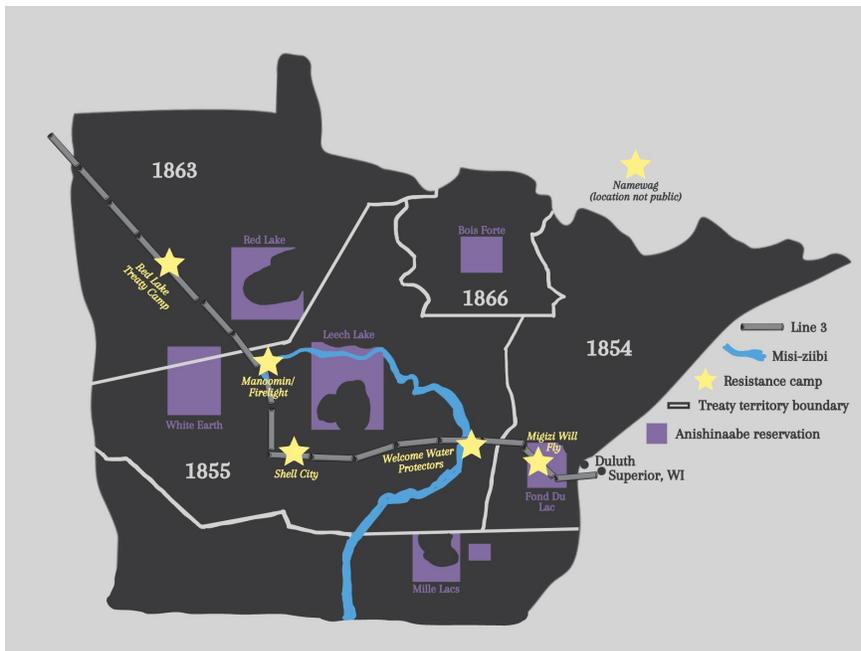
the basis of activists' gender, but my data did not indicate substantial gender differences in behavior; a more systematic consideration of gender in future research might reveal patterns I missed.

My position as an activist helped me gain access and trust with other activists and understand movement meanings with the depth an outsider would not have. It also allowed me to enact reciprocity, giving back to the movement through volunteering. Due to closeness to the movement, I aimed, as much as possible, to reexamine what is familiar, to repeatedly examine the data for different perspectives and insights, and to gather from the literature what I might have overlooked.

My positionality as a white settler bears heavily on all aspects of this research. Because the formation of knowledge occurs within and through relationships (Simpson 2014), I position myself as a learner, and this paper as a synthesis and analysis of my and others' teachings and learnings. I have been working to learn more about the history of the extractive research which has taken Indigenous knowledge and used it out of context (Kovach 2021) and I take very seriously the trust from activists I interviewed and worked with. I attempt to write a paper that both furthers the movement's interests and advances scholarship. Orienting my research and personal activities toward action in the movement for Indigenous self-determination is necessary to conduct ethical research with Indigenous communities (Kovach 2021), to counteract the long history of exploitation perpetrated by settler research (Smith 2012). Finally, because consent is an ongoing process in Indigenous research methodologies (Pidgeon 2019), I have sent outlines of my paper to the interviewees who responded, and incorporated their feedback as additional data. Before publication, I will check to ensure that interviewees consent to how their quotes are used, and will make modifications if needed, and receive additional feedback from Indigenous activists

on the argument of the paper. Finally, I intend to work with activists to develop a poster summary or workshop highlighting some of the key takeaways from my analysis.

My positionality as a white person also means I might not be as attuned to the intricacies of the effects of white behaviors on Indigenous peoples and how inequalities reproduce themselves. In interviews, Indigenous activists likely did not speak to me about harmful white behaviors in the same way as they would with another Indigenous person. As such, I focus on practices geared toward white activists for working across differences, how white activists respond to those instructions, what tensions result, and how activists work to resolve those tensions. When Indigenous activists describe certain white behaviors as harmful, I use this as evidence that power inequalities are being reproduced by white activists. Finally, I carry the assumption that it *is* possible for white activists to work together with Native activists in “a good way”; some scholars agree (Bacon 2017) and others believe collaboration is only possible for short-term projects (Trask 1999).



**Figure 2.** Approximate location of the Line 3 route through what some call Minnesota; the Misi-ziibi (Mississippi); 1863, 1866, 1854, and 1855 treaty territory; Anishinaabe reservations; and six resistance camps: Red Lake Treaty Camp, Camp Manoomin Genawendang-Endazhigabeshing/Camp Firelight, Shell City Campground, Welcome Water Protectors Camp, and Camp Migizi. Camp Namewag’s location is not public.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

My analysis suggests that during pipeline construction, the primary practice through which the movement attempts to address power inequalities across Indigenous-white lines is the instruction to “follow Indigenous leadership.” White activists learn early on that the movement is Indigenous-led and that they should “follow Indigenous leadership” through movement discourse, emails, social media, websites and flyers. The practice of “following Indigenous leadership” gains additional meaning through interactions between activists participating in frontline actions. When white activists break norms around “following Indigenous leadership,” by taking up too much space, for example, Indigenous activists or other more experienced white activists correct these actions, either directly, through an explanation or indirectly, through a cold shoulder.

The effects of this practice include bringing thousands of white activists to the frontlines to resist the pipeline; discouraging white domination of discussions, decision-making processes, and media coverage; increasing white activists’ awareness of Indigenous perspectives; and creating relationships lasting beyond the end of pipeline construction. These effects were in line with the movement against Line 3’s goals and laid the foundation for the alliance across Indigenous-white lines. However, some complexities, questions, and problems remained,

including overly deferential behavior from white activists, tokenization, appropriation, white saviorism, and complexities in following Indigenous leaders who are not homogenous. Activists were aware of these problems, but norms have not yet developed to fully discourage these behaviors. In light of this, activists are actively negotiating and defining the meaning of “following Indigenous leadership” to give additional nuance.

In the following sections, I describe in greater detail first, movement goals and their relationship to “following Indigenous leadership”; second, the origins of the practice, how it was conveyed through movement media, and how white activists learned this practice through interactions; third, the effects of this movement practice; fourth, complexities, questions and remaining problems; and fifth, common themes arising as activists added nuance to the meaning of “following Indigenous leadership.”

## MOVEMENT GOALS TO RESIST AND BUILD

*As the sun began to dip behind the treeline, its warmth lingered on our skin. We danced and sang on the bridge over the headwaters of Misi-ziibi (Mississippi) to an amalgamation of music that might seem strange to an outside observer – Thomas X, the Cha Cha Slide, and songs about rivers. Music mingled with the joyful shouts of children splashing in the river, traveling across the bridge, over the cooking area tent, through the ditch on the side of the road where we camped, then fading into the distance. The landscape had changed since I first arrived. Large fences with forbidding barbed wire now guarded the pipeline and blue plastic pipe snaked down the hill, ready to drill under the river. Later, we would cry, amidst machines clanging and earth shaking, as one of the final pieces of the pipeline was shoved underneath the river. But today we*

*were content. With exhausted smiles, skin dirty with dust, we slid into inner-tubes and floated, our joy an act of resistance.*



**Figure 3.** Art by Ray Gorlin, included with artist’s permission

The best word I can use to describe life in camps resisting Line 3 is “raw.” Much of everyday life was focused on basic needs – retrieving water, acquiring heat, cooking, sleeping, and even going to the bathroom is much more difficult and uncomfortable than many are used to. Police surveillance makes paranoia and fear prevalent. Relationship-building with others in camp, some strangers, can be both extremely fun – involving eating good food, dancing, inner tubing, swimming – but also extremely difficult. The rawness of this context provides excellent world building conditions. Shanai, a white activist, explains that she and other activists describe resistance camps and gatherings as a portal, a gateway between this world and the next (drawing on Roy 2020). Shanai explains how you feel as though you lose your sense of time at resistance camps, and how when you leave, “it feels like we’ve been in this vortex... like you’ve gone

through something that has so transformed your consciousness, but not in any kind of way that you can easily explain it.” It feels strange to go home and re-enter the “regular world.”

Indigenous activists also find the movement culture transformational. Nancy, an Indigenous woman, explains that at Standing Rock she learned a lot of her cultural ways because colonization “took a lot of my way of life from me.” Sam, an Indigenous activist, describes how after the movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline when people went home, “they [didn't] know what to do.” He explains further:

they just lived in these beautiful communities that we're building together as activists, that want to save the world. And then you go home and none of that's there, you're just under all the weight of capitalism again. Your family's asking you why you act funny, telling you it's time to get a job again, like stop doing whatever. When I got home from Standing Rock, and I hung out with my brother and I brought up that somebody at the next table was being racist. He told me, ‘oh, you don't have to act like that anymore. This isn't Standing Rock.’

In Line 3 resistance camps, there is an intentional focus on addressing racism, and creating new norms, cultures, and communities different from what activists consider most harmful about mainstream society. White activists, and lighter-skinned Indigenous activists, describe coming face to face with their privilege in camp. Sandra, a white woman, understands that the goal of resistance camps is not just to stop the pipeline, but also to learn how to live in cooperative communities and to build bridges between Indigenous and white activists. In these spaces, the movement holds the potential to confront, work on, and propose new social relations.

An outside observer might argue that the movement against Line 3 was not successful because it ultimately failed to stop the construction of Line 3. However, this instrumental focus

ignores the cultural and meaning-making functions of social movements well-documented by new social movement scholars. Social movements are not only agonistic, but also develop new ideas, norms, and practices as important components of their political activity (Melucci 1996). Many new social movements strive to contest cultural representations and to celebrate alternative identities (Polletta and Jasper 2001), promoting feelings of solidarity and emotional benefits such as pride within the movement (Schrock et al. 2004). These efforts are also geared towards changing conceptions and relationships beyond the movement (Lichterman 1999; Epstein 1991). The creation of a new culture, a “political culture of creation” (Foran Gray and Grosse 2017), involving new meanings and relationships, to disseminate more broadly, is an important political project of social movements.

In this case, not only was the movement fighting against Line 3, but it was also engaged in building a new world with new norms uplifting Indigenous voices, values, and knowledge as well as healthier relationships between humans and non-human relatives. In this way, Line 3 is similar to the resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline, which defined “freedom not as the absence of settler colonialism, but as the amplified presence of Indigenous life and just relations” (Estes 2019: 248). Frontline resistance to Line 3 is a blockade that, like a beaver dam, both blocks but also builds new ecosystems and habitats, amplifying “Indigenous forms of governance, economy, production, and exchange” (Simpson 2021: 10).

Some scholars call this prefiguration, when movement actors aspire to embody the world they wish to see within internal movement dynamics. For the movement against Line 3, it might be seen as hypocritical to reproduce the same settler colonial oppressions within the movement that the movement is fighting against. Thus, I conceive of the movement against Line 3’s goals as to stop the pipeline and resist settler colonialism, to sustain alliances, *and* to build a new

world. In this paper, I focus on one world-building project: creating new relationships across Indigenous-white lines.

## PLANTING THE PRACTICE TO WORK ACROSS LINES

During the construction of the pipeline, the primary practice implemented by the movement against Line 3 to confront inequalities across Indigenous-white lines was the instruction to “follow Indigenous leadership.” The movement against Line 3 framed their struggle as “Indigenous led” and encouraged white activists to “follow Indigenous leadership.” To frame a movement as “Indigenous led” rather than “white led” set the goal to center Indigenous voices in from the outset of discussions, decision-making, public events, and in media, while decentering white voices. The movement adopted this practice to deliberately contrast mainstream environmentalism, which places white voices and concerns at the center. “Following Indigenous leadership” also aspired to address power inequalities and hierarchies to prefigure Indigenous governance on Indigenous land. In this movement, “following Indigenous leadership” had an intersectional connotation, as it implied following the Indigenous women and two-spirit activists who lead resistance camps; in Anishinaabe communities, it’s recognized as part of women’s role and responsibility to take care of the water.

### The Intellectual and Historical Roots: Where did “Following Indigenous Leadership” come from?

To “follow Indigenous leadership” is a common approach in movements of settlers standing in solidarity with Indigenous peoples on Indigenous land (Helferty 2020; Kraemer 2000). Helferty (2020) defines this type of action – which suggests that a more privileged group should support

struggles of a frontline group, or the group most impacted by the issue, while de-emphasizing their privilege – as “frontline solidarity.” While McCarthy and Zald’s (1973) definition of “conscience constituents” – actors participating in social movements from which they do not directly benefit – applies to some degree here, the movement against Line 3 and other anti-pipeline movements suggest that all social movement participants benefit, since they fight climate crisis and water pollution, but that white activists benefit secondarily compared to Indigenous peoples who are most affected. White activists tend to articulate their opposition as rooted in the ways that Line 3 harms them, yet harms Indigenous peoples more.

Grossman (2017), in a study of unlikely alliances between white rural communities and Indigenous peoples against threats to the environment, argues that these movements have articulated Indigenous self-determination as a way to protect the land and water for all, creatively negotiating tensions between universalism and particularity. Some social movements suggest that the particularistic experiences of people with certain identities make it so that their struggle for emancipation is a struggle for emancipation for everyone. For example, the black feminist movement, exemplified in writings from the Combahee River Collective (1977), argues that “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of Oppression.” In the movement against Line 3, it is Indigenous women who are seen to occupy a unique standpoint which generates knowledge and experiences that can inform struggles for liberation (Moreton-Robinson 2013).

The strength of movement norms around “following Indigenous leadership” is likely because these norms have had the chance to deepen and develop over time and space. Norms to center Indigenous culture, knowledge, and protocols were well established and reinforced at

Standing Rock (Gilio-Whitaker 2019) and many Line 3 activists attended or closely followed this struggle. Additionally, the land some now call Minnesota has been home to strong Indigenous movements, organizations, and leaders since before the creation of the United States. The movement was influenced by the American Indian Movement (founded in 1968), and involved the Indigenous Environmental Network (founded in 1990) and Honor the Earth (founded in 1993), all born and headquartered in Minnesota. Several Native-led organizations – Migizi Will Fly, Giniw Collective, RISE coalition – shaped the Stop Line 3 movement. Finally, several of the primarily white-led organizations involved in the movement have a strong commitment to social justice and many of the white settler activists participated in the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests against the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. These movements and organizations likely contributed to the strength of the practice of “following Indigenous leadership.”

### Planting the Practice: “Following Indigenous Leadership” in Discourse and Media

In this section, I describe the ways the movement articulated the instruction to “follow Indigenous leadership” in discourse. During pipeline construction, the instruction to follow Indigenous leadership, and the assertion the movement was “Indigenous-led” was common sense to activists. When I joined the climate justice organization MN350 in 2018, more experienced activists and leaders of the group taught me the norms around centering Indigenous voices and concerns and decentering white voices and concerns in decision-making, at events, and in the movement framing. This learning mostly occurred indirectly; for example, I noticed that during planning meetings for an event I helped organize, white organizers deferred to Indigenous organizers to select speakers, and a white activist asked to speak had to be convinced that he was

not taking an Indigenous activist's place and that he was the best to speak to this particular issue. Additionally, I noted the importance given and care taken by white organizers around Indigenous grandmothers who prepared a meal for the event, a desire expressed to make sure that they had everything they needed, as well as in ensuring there were culturally appropriate gifts to thank the Indigenous speakers and grandmothers. It is likely that other white activists joining frontline activists through organizations were also socialized into the practice of "following Indigenous leadership" by those organizations.

Movement materials – flyers, Instagram posts, emails – framed the movement as "Indigenous-led" and taught new white activists the language and understandings to "follow Indigenous leadership." When construction first began, one document, titled "On Ramps to the Movement to Stop Line 3" was circulated to white activists and began "Want to Be More Involved in the Movement to Stop Line? Support the Frontlines, continue to follow Indigenous-led organizations and frontline camps for ways to support them, in person, financially, or digitally."

In addition, emails, Instagram posts, and websites advertising events often tend to follow a template, first explaining how that Indigenous leaders have been resisting the pipeline for some time, and second that they have issued a call inviting others to join them. For example, one email for an event invitation states: "Since construction began over a month ago, Anishinaabe leaders have held peaceful, prayerful action by the river, and now Honor the Earth and RISE Coalition have asked us to join them for an urgent action." Additionally, @Resist\_Line\_3, one of the main Instagram accounts providing centralized coverage of the movement, with 52,000 followers, often called on others to "support Indigenous-led pipeline resistance" and to "stand in solidarity

with Native/Indigenous water protectors.” The website for the largest pipeline resistance event in 2021 called the “Treaty People Gathering,” attended by 2,000 activists, echoes this language:

An Indigenous-led movement has been leading the charge for years, resisting this pipeline through legal advocacy, organizing and direct action. Indigenous leadership has put out a call for people in all parts of the country to converge on Minnesota and engage in direct resistance. We invite you to heed this call in June.

White activists receive additional socialization when they arrive on the frontlines. For example, the “Treaty People Gathering” (see figure 4) hosted trainings on treaties, encouraging white activists to uphold Indigenous treaty rights. Throughout this event, speakers repeated that Article VI of the U.S. constitutions states that treaties are the supreme law of the land. Through this event, white activists came to learn that to follow Indigenous leadership means to fight for treaty rights.



**Figure 4.** Poster for the “Treaty People Gathering” in June 2021 and poster for the “Treaties not Tar Sands Capitol Action to Stop Line 3” event in August 2021. Permission to use art from artist Dio Cramer.

### Growing the Practice: Learning through Interactions

#### *Overview of learning through interactions*

The movement framing of “follow Indigenous leadership” takes on additional meaning for white activists in interactions on the frontlines. Here, activists evaluate and are evaluated on the basis of their whiteness or indigeneity to determine the roles and behaviors they should be playing given the instruction to “follow Indigenous leadership.” White activists are told, in different ways, when they have overstepped this norm. White activists learn what not to do from interactions with Indigenous and experienced white activists, and other white activists who witness these interactions may also learn which behaviors are acceptable.

In frontline movement spaces, the movement framing of “follow Indigenous leadership” is accompanied by the practice of “make space, take space,” which encourages those with marginalized identities to “take space” and those with privileged identities to “make space” in decision-making, discussions, and movement messaging. When those with privileged identities join the movement and dominate discussions, decision-making, or take up too much space, Indigenous activists or experienced white activists correct this behavior, either directly or indirectly, explaining or indicating through actions or body language that they had violated the rule to follow Indigenous leadership.

If a white activist continues harmful behaviors even after experienced white activists or Indigenous activists correct their behavior, camp leaders come together to discuss the person's

actions, and this white activist can be asked to leave. Excluding some from the movement can reaffirm expectations around participation, and can be important for maintaining alliances across power differences. For example, Beamish and Leubbers (2009), in their study of a coalition between predominantly white middle class anti-weapons proliferation group and Black poor environmental justice group, argue that expelling several participants for acting without the approval of the alliance helped assuage the fears of the Black activists that their work would be co-opted by the white activists, and reaffirmed expectations around participation (Beamish and Leubbers 2009).

Indigenous leaders and experienced white activists represent the primary sources of socialization for new white activists. Indigenous activists report that correcting the behavior of white activists is emotionally draining; it is a double burden to experience harmful behaviors and to be responsible for correcting them. Because of this, Indigenous leaders often select a few white activists who have demonstrated their ability to collaborate with Indigenous activists over time to correct the behavior of new white activists. Shanai, a white woman, remembers when an Indigenous leader told her “Shanai, you’re going to be the one that has to deal with all the difficult white women... and [a male activist] is going to have to deal with the white men.”

Through the practice of “make space, take space,” and correction by Indigenous and experienced white activists, white activists learn to align their behaviors with the norm of “following Indigenous leadership.” In this way, interactions both help prevent white co-optation, and encourage white activists to adopt effective behaviors for forming healthier relationships with Indigenous activists.

*Example of learning through interactions*

When Eoin, a white man, first joined the movement, he offered a lot of ideas and suggestions to those who had already been there for several months. He admitted, “I probably did show up thinking I had answers and solutions to this.” Over and over again, he received dismissive answers from an Indigenous man. Being rebuffed in this way signaled to Eoin that these behaviors, which dominated discussions and failed to consider work that had already been done, were not wanted. In this way, interactions helped to establish the meanings around following Indigenous leadership.

Scott Russell, a white man and retired reporter, recalls feeling deeply embarrassed when he violated norms around centering Indigenous voices. He remembers that in the middle of interviewing a Native woman for an article, he started asking questions to some young white men who were nearby. The Native woman he was interviewing got up and left. Scott “felt like a heel” and realized that he was centering white voices rather than giving Indigenous voices the proper authority. Another time, an Indigenous person told Scott he was talking too loud during a prayer, and Scott describes his emotional reaction to “freak out, and shut down.” In both cases, Scott’s deeply emotional reaction to the violation of social norms around centering Indigenous voices evidences the power of these norms. This aligns with Fields et al. (2006)’s assertion that “experiences of embarrassment signal not only that one has violated social norms but also, and perhaps more important, that one recognizes the legitimacy of those norms” (158).

For Scott and Eoin, these interactions led them to feel negatively, especially in light of the well-established norm to follow Indigenous leadership. Scott realized that he should center Indigenous voices in his reporting in the future and Eoin realized that he should listen and watch to see what is already being done, then help quietly, rather than “looking for accolades.” Eoin

explains that if you listen and watch, you might, for example, see someone hauling firewood, and then ask to grab the next load.

However, when white activists are confronted for their behaviors, they often feel like they “should just go home,” and want to “run away” or “give up.” Some do end up leaving the movement when they succumb to these emotions. However, some white activists learn to work on their emotions to remain in the movement. It helps white activists to view their mistakes as behaviors that need to be corrected rather than evidence that the essence of their character is bad. Genna, a white activist with experience working with Indigenous activists, explains that instead of taking conflict or criticism as evidence that “I’ve ruined everything,” white activists should just take it as feedback, incorporate that feedback, and move on.

Additionally, it helps white activists to understand how historical forces condition Indigenous response to their presence. Many white activists come to understand that their presence is “triggering” to Indigenous peoples, and that Indigenous activists may not assume good intentions or trust white activists immediately, because of a long history of exploitation. White activists learn that settler colonialism is very much alive for Indigenous activists, and that their whiteness often acts as a representation of oppression, dispossession, and even genocide. Eoin realized that “the only experience the majority of Native people have had with white people is genocide, is the trauma, is the rape, is the killing, is smallpox blankets, is extraction” and this history produces distrust that is very much alive today. Understanding this colonial history helped Eoin understand why Indigenous activists did not immediately trust him. Through this perspective, Eoin was able to work through his desire to quit.

This emotion work performed by activists to confront their desire to quit was present among activists of a variety of identities and exemplified how socialization into coalitions across differences must be realized on an emotional and perceptual level (Barta-Smith 2001).

## EFFECTS OF THE PRACTICE OF FOLLOWING INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP

My participant observation and interviews pointed to several effects resulting from or attributed to the practice of “following Indigenous leadership” that seemed to be in alignment with movement goals to challenge inequalities across Indigenous-white lines unchallenged in mainstream environmentalism, and to build a new world valuing Indigenous life, practices, and knowledges. My analysis indicates that the practice of “following Indigenous leadership” (1) brought thousands of white activists to the frontlines to resist the pipeline, (2) discouraged white domination of discussions, decision-making processes, and media coverage, (3) increased white activists’ awareness of Indigenous perspectives on settler colonialism and relationships with more-than-human relatives, and (4) resulted in relationships lasting beyond the end of pipeline construction.

### Encouraging frontline action

The instruction to “follow Indigenous leadership” was often associated with an invitation to travel to northern Minnesota and take action to resist the pipeline. Thousands of white activists accepted this invitation and came to the frontlines, and over 900 people received citations from law enforcement as they engaged in frontline actions (Marohn 2021). Some activists call this a success even though they would have liked to have seen even greater numbers.

Both white and Indigenous activists I interviewed saw frontline solidarity from white activists as beneficial because white activists helped to draw attention to the cause and increased the total number of participants mobilized against the pipeline. Additionally, activists' whiteness was seen as a way to lessen the violence faced by Indigenous activists from law enforcement. Nancy, an Indigenous activist, puts it this way, "if it was just Native people out there, we could have been cuffed and stuffed in a matter of a couple hours." Zach, a white man, explained that he recognizes how different groups of people are harmed by the pipeline and by law enforcement, and tries to "conduct [himself] accordingly to protect those who are the most at risk." Other studies have revealed that white participation in minority-led movements can increase empathy from observers (Davenport et al. 2018), and reduce police repression (Davenport et al. 2011).

### Discouraging white domination

When they arrive in northern Minnesota, some white activists behave in ways that reify power inequalities across Indigenous-white lines. They dominate discussions and decision-making processes or draw the spotlight away from Indigenous activists at public events or in media coverage. Taysha Martineau, two-spirit Anishinaabe activist and camp leader, notices that when white activists first show up:

They immediately attempt to start making decisions. They start planning actions, planning groups, and speaking over Indigenous people, and not being cognizant of the space that they're taking. This causes Indigenous people to feel kind of pushed out, shoved aside, dismissed and negated as Indigenous people... and pushed out and separated from an area that they've been sacrificing and fighting for for generations.

These behaviors, if left unchecked, could lead to co-optation of the movement by white activists. However, as explained in the section on learning through interactions, when this behavior did occur, activists were informed directly or indirectly that they had broken a social norm. Most white activists I spoke with recognized the importance of avoiding dominating spaces and all 24 of my interviewees mentioned in some way their understanding that the movement is Indigenous-led or that it was important to follow Indigenous leadership.

Additionally, for the most part, Indigenous activists held the spotlight at and led the development of the content at public events and held the most authority throughout decision-making processes. For example, during the planning process of the Treaty People Gathering, when some Indigenous organizers voiced concerns about the location of the gathering, white activists deferred to them to make the ultimate decision. Similarly, the night before a large sit-in at the Minnesota capitol building, thousands of white activists canceled the action they planned at the behest of Indigenous elders who voiced concerns about doing an action while they were holding ceremony.

Finally, the media coverage of the movement largely included Indigenous concerns in the framing of the issue, likely a direct effect of how the movement chose to represent itself in press releases, websites, and social media. From my analysis, during pipeline construction, 64 percent of the total 168 articles from a google news search of “Line 3” pipeline included the words “treaties” or “treaty rights” at least once. Connecting treaties and treaty rights with Line 3 is a framing that recognizes impacts to Indigenous communities; activists suggest that mainstream environmental movements would likely not frame the issue in this way.

Ultimately, my data suggest that the practice of “following Indigenous leadership” prevented the white dominance of discussions, decisions, and overall messaging.

### Increasing awareness of Indigenous perspectives

In addition to preventing white domination of the movement, the practice of “following Indigenous leadership” increased white activists’ awareness of Indigenous perspectives. White activists and organizations increasingly adopted language and understandings that connected the pipeline with settler colonialism, focusing on the issue of treaty rights, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives, and damage to *manoomin* (wild rice). Frame alignment, creating shared understandings of the problem and the solution, is important to sustaining a coalition over time (White 1999; Croteau and Hicks 2003; Beamish and Leubbers 2009). In the Line 3 case, the frame foregrounded Indigenous understandings of the problem around settler colonialism and the threat to treaty rights, *manoomin*, and the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives. This other frames, such as white environmentalist frames, from becoming dominant, important given how mainstream conservation and preservation movements operating from Western framings of environmental problems have often acted counter to the interests of Indigenous movements (Gilio-Whitaker 2019).

White activists participating in frontline solidarity over time also came to have a greater awareness of settler colonialism and treaties, and learned more about some Indigenous epistemologies, cultural practices, and knowledges. Particularly striking was the increase in white activists’ understandings of treaties and treaty rights during pipeline construction. Many white activists, like Genna, have learned that “Article VI of the Constitution says that treaties are the supreme law of the land. There is no treaty that has been honored.” Additionally, a group of white activists cited for misdemeanor trespass during pipeline construction are taking their case

to trial “to add to the body of litigation that is pushing settler courts to honor treaties made more than a century ago” ([Firelight Treaty Case Website](#)).

Through engagement in the movement over time, white activists come to better understand Indigenous epistemologies about relationship and reciprocity with the land and more-than humans. Miranda, a non-binary white activist, explains that, over time, they came to see non-humans as relatives rather than objects, learning from Indigenous epistemologies. This echoes Bacon’s (2021) finding that joining in solidarity with Indigenous-led movements can shift settlers’ understandings of land, place, and environmentalism to be more in line with anti-colonialism, strengthening alliances (Bacon 2021). New white activists can join the movement motivated primarily for environmental and climate reasons, or for primarily anti-capitalist reasons, but over time, settler colonialism, treaty rights, and Indigenous perspectives become articulated with their understanding of the problem.

When I asked Greer, a nonbinary white activist, how they were feeling knowing the pipeline was almost complete, they replied, choked up:

I mean it's just really, really sad to see you know, you know, a multinational company, really abusing people and the world and yeah like a lot of ecosystems being irreparably harmed... knowing that *manoomin* will not survive in those areas... knowing that that's like so connected to in particular, like an Anishinaabe worldviews and creation stories, that it's like also like yeah it's a cultural genocide and so um yeah just feeling very heavy.

That Greer felt “heavy” in response to the potential destruction of wild rice and Indigenous relationships with the land demonstrates an emotional understanding Indigenous perspectives.

Spending time in resistance camps affects white activists’ orientation toward place. Shanai, living at camp since the beginning of pipeline construction, notes that “it’s really

difficult and painful to see a place you love destroyed up close. I think I really didn't understand what that would do to me, to my spirit... It's just, it went so fast and was so, just, careless."

Sandra, a white woman, echoes this sentiment: "it's also really hard to watch them constructing and putting the drill, and making the drill pad, and pumping the water out of the rivers. It's like devastating and traumatic, especially for people who are from here...But even just for me, I've lived here half a year ...it's traumatic because it's a place I've been going every day and driving by and praying at." Both Shanai and Sandra had spent some time living in camp, watching the changes to the land as construction occurred.

The grief white activists felt about the place with which they had been interacting indicates a step towards developing relationships and responsibility with more-than-human relatives. Existing scholarship demonstrates that embodied experience and accompanying emotions can help allies deepen solidarity (Russo 2014) and that a common sense of place can strengthen alliances across Indigenous-white lines (Grossman 2017; Grosse 2022). However, as opposed to white rural communities who joined with Indigenous communities to protect their common place in Grossman's (2017) book, the white activists participating in frontline solidarity in the movement against Line 3 were largely not local to the area, limiting their sense of common place.

### Long-term Relationships

As I write this paper, almost three years after the completion of pipeline construction, networks of communication built during the Line 3 resistance still keep white activists and Indigenous activists connected. In one group chat I am part of, composed primarily of white activists, there are regularly calls for mutual aid to send to Indigenous camp leaders or communities, as well as

posts about events hosted by Indigenous activists. Additionally, in 2023, the connections made during Line 3 resistance were mobilized to invite white activists to stand with Indigenous activists against the demolition of the East Phillips Roof Depot. Activists are against the demolition because they wish to build an urban farm in the warehouse on this site, and are also concerned that the demolition would release arsenic beneath the site into the surrounding predominantly low-income BIPOC community. Many activists remain in contact and continue to organize together even beyond Minnesota.

### QUESTIONS, COMPLEXITIES, AND LINGERING PROBLEMS

The instruction to “follow Indigenous leadership,” and the strong social norms around it had several effects aligning with the movement’s goals. However, in spite of these strong norms and positive effects, some questions, complexities, and problems remained. These problems included overly deferential behavior from white activists afraid to make a mistake; tokenization, appropriation, white saviorism; and white activists’ difficulties in implementing the instruction to “follow Indigenous leadership” when Indigenous leaders had different perspectives and strategies. Many of the more experienced white activists and Indigenous activists are aware of these problems, but the movement had not yet developed robust instructions and norms to address them. I argue that these problems resulted from enduring stereotypes and assumptions about Indigenous peoples into which white activists are socialized by settler society, as well as the inability of a frame like “follow Indigenous leadership,” whose application may seem obvious in theory, to entirely capture the complexities of social life when implemented in practice. Frames like “follow Indigenous leadership” however, can develop additional nuance and meaning to account for questions and problems, which I discuss in the next section.

### *Overly deferential behavior*

Some white activists interpreted “following Indigenous leadership” to mean they should listen to Indigenous peoples and wait for them to instruct them on what to do. As Shanai explains, “there’s this sense by some people who show up here, and it’s mostly privileged White folks, who believe that Indigenous-led means that there’s like a circle of these Indigenous leaders who are just there to lead them, to answer their questions or tell them what to do.” White activists often waited for Indigenous activists to develop and assign tasks to them, and to reassure them that they were doing a good job.

The tendency to be overly deferential comes, in part, from an awareness of the role of white people and groups in perpetrating harm against people of color and Indigenous peoples. Emotions such as guilt and shame that accompany this awareness are logical and appropriate responses to understanding white complicity in settler colonialism (Bacon 2021) and motivated movement participation. As Sandra, a white woman, explains: “white people or people of settler and colonizer ancestry really need deeply to be like broken-hearted, like to have their hearts cracked wide open and to feel that pain and sadness of what has happened.”

However, these emotions can also be paralyzing, making white activists so afraid of making mistakes that they will avoid taking any action at all. Randall, a white male-presenting leader of an organization which trains white activists before they join the movement, provides a caricature of the thoughts and emotions leading to this behavior:

“I am a white person, [and] that means I literally can't have a single thought that isn't completely white supremacist racist... every single thing I could possibly do is permeated with that violence, therefore, I have to do nothing but listen... I am a sacrifice... to the

movement gods who have transcended those violent internalized oppressive systems, because of the mere nature of having an identity.” And I’m exaggerating, right, like nobody says it this way (laughs).

A pattern many activists noticed was that because of their fear of perpetuating additional harm against Indigenous peoples, white activists took little initiative, seeing their role as “foot soldiers behind someone who’s a person of color” as Joe, a white man, put it. This created additional work for Indigenous activists, requiring them to perform labor in service of white activists. Sam, an Indigenous activist, explains: “even when you think you're being helpful... by asking somebody to give you tasks, by asking someone to oversee your tasks, by asking people to constantly reassure you that you're here and doing good things, is really emotionally exhausting.”

In summary, the movement’s norms successfully prevented white activists from dominating behaviors, a necessary step before collaboration can occur. The next step, however, is to create some balance, keeping white activists from going too far in the other direction, waiting for an Indigenous person, any Indigenous person, to tell them what to do and to reassure them that they are doing the right thing. Because few movements successfully confront dominating behaviors of privileged groups, few existing studies have considered the problem of overly deferential behavior in the context of frontline solidarity and how to address it (see however Tochluk and Levin 2010; Thurber et al. 2015).

### *Tokenization*

Relatedly, some white activists’ interpretations of “follow Indigenous leadership” led to tokenization. Here, the desire to receive approval from some Indigenous person, any Indigenous person, flattened Indigenous peoples into a homogenous group, and became extractive. Some

white activists used Indigenous peoples as symbols, to validate themselves, rather than meaningfully engaging in collaboration. For example, inviting an Indigenous person to speak at an event to check the box of inclusivity rather than inviting them to be engaged throughout the planning and decision-making process for the event is an example of tokenization. Tara, an Indigenous woman leader, explains “the tokenizing thing and the fetishizing thing, and also this pedestal culture is not helpful. It’s not a genuine relationship.”

### *Appropriation*

Assumptions of homogeneity coupled with socialization of white activists by settler society into stereotypes about Indigenous peoples, led some white activists to interpret “follow Indigenous leadership” as permission to appropriate Indigenous culture. Both at Standing Rock, and at Line 3, some white activists sought to extract the wisdom of the “sage Indigenous person” to inform their own personal healing or extract knowledges and cultural practices to use them to their benefit outside of the context in which they were intended (see Gilio-Whitaker 2019).

Appropriation is part of the white possessive logic that encourages ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land: “the problem with white people is they think and behave like they own everything,” both Indigenous land and Indigenous cultures and knowledges (Dennis Moreton quoted in Moreton-Robinson 2015: xi).

Some white activists were aware of the problem of appropriation. As Kaylee, a white woman, puts it “there's always that fine line of being an ally and appropriation. I, personally, I have to be mindful of it. We all have to be mindful of it...” However, an Indigenous woman leader, Dawn, explains that cultural appropriation was “something we weren’t able to tackle during Line 3.” Determining how to “follow Indigenous leadership” without appropriating is an important task for alliances across Indigenous-white lines that must be addressed.

### *White tears and white saviors*

The frontline solidarity model frames actions taken by white activists to resist the pipeline as primarily benefiting Indigenous peoples. This framing leads to, or at least fails to prevent, some problematic tendencies. For example, white activists often approached Simone, an Anishinaabe woman, apologizing for being white. Simone explains that these apologies made her have to attend to them, and focused the attention onto the white activist and away from the work that needed to be done. Similarly, Taysha, a two spirit Indigenous activist, remembered a white woman coming up to her and crying, apologizing for everything that white people had done to Indigenous people; Taysha explains that “white white tears are violence,” seeking forgiveness after “discovering” for the first time the violence experienced by Indigenous peoples, while reminding Indigenous peoples of that violence.

In overly guilt-ridden or deferential behaviors, white activists are focused on being absolved of their guilt. They gain positive emotions from being reassured by Indigenous activists, while Indigenous peoples lose energy through this labor. This reifies power hierarchies between white and Indigenous activists and corroborates research demonstrating that the people of color must often “attend to the feelings, moods, and behaviors of dominants” (Fields et al. 2006, 170, summarizing hooks 1992), leading to burnout of activists of color in racial justice movements (Gorski and Erakat 2019).

Additionally, some activists criticize other activists for the tendency to focus on appearing to be a good white person, over stopping the pipeline. Concerns with appearances – appearing to be smart or helpful – underlie both overly deferential behaviors and the tendency to take up too much space. Goffman (1959) notes that people are often rewarded more for

impressions – how they appear to others – than for what they actually do. Many white activists are heavily influenced by the individualistic culture in the U.S. which rewards volunteering to boost one’s image as a good person. However, when a white activist’s desire to participate in a social movement is rooted solely in upholding or constructing an image of “goodness” or morality, the activist is vulnerable to disengagement when admonishment from Indigenous activists threatens this image, and, as described above, can also reproduce power inequalities through reassurance-seeking and overly deferential behaviors. Randall challenges the new white activists they mentors to think about:

Am I doing social change work to feel good about myself? Because I want to pat myself on the back at the end of the day and say, ‘well, I did my best, I tried, I did something...’ so I can at least feel that much better about myself? That’s a really different approach to social change than, here’s the problem, now, how do we be the most effective and efficient at changing it.

Such image-focused work can lean dangerously towards white saviorism, where white people feel it is their moral duty to rescue non-white people, a patronizing and offensive attitude that only reproduces the subordination of Indigenous groups while granting dominant groups psychological rewards (Sumerau et al. 2021).

### *Difficulties following Indigenous leaders who are not homogenous*

While all activists seemed to agree upon the importance of “following Indigenous leadership,” a single clear definition of what constitutes “following Indigenous leadership” was elusive in practice. Because Indigenous peoples (and white organizers) had different strategy preferences, following one Indigenous leader might directly contradict the directions of another Indigenous

leader, making it difficult for white activists to know their role. For example, Joe, a white man, recalled how one Indigenous leader told him that an action he was planning with another Indigenous leader was a bad idea. Joe realized that he could not just follow the orders of “Indigenous leaders” because their perspectives are not all the same, and attempted to resolve this tension by deciding to think about how the action aligned with his own analysis and perspective.

Additionally, different Indigenous leaders preferred different levels of checking in and autonomy from white activists; some welcomed anyone to take action with little accountability, others preferred high levels of accountability and a high frequency of checking in. This also varied for the type and location of the action. For white activists who traveled between camps, spaces with different norms and meanings of “following Indigenous leadership,” it was difficult to know their role. Even within camps, Indigenous leaders did not always agree on what constituted a violation of the instruction to “follow Indigenous leadership.” For example, in my observations at one camp, one Indigenous leader felt that a white woman was being too pushy in providing ideas about actions, dominating space, while another Indigenous leader welcomed these ideas as helpful. These complexities represent the difficulties of an abstract frame, to account for complexities that arise in practice.

#### ADDING NUANCE TO THE MEANING OF “FOLLOWING INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP”

Activists recognized and articulated some of the problems outlined in the previous section.

However, the understandings of problems seemed to be more fully developed than movement norms that discourage this behavior at the point in time I conducted research. In interviews and also in conversations, more experienced white activists and Indigenous activists were actively

developing nuance around the meaning of “following Indigenous leadership,” in light of some of the problems that arose. Table 1 outlines some themes across these conversations. This is an ongoing and iterative process.

**Table 1.** Themes from conversations and interviews around how Line 3 activists are negotiating the meaning of “following Indigenous leadership.”

<b>Theme:</b> Indigenous leadership is not hierarchical or homogenous.	
<b>Quotes:</b> “Indigenous leadership is not hierarchical... like it is in white society... It's always informed by the elders because as elders, we have the ability to take a breath and step back and say, how is this going to impact the kids?” – Carrie, Indigenous activist	“It's not like a one-to-one correspondence where you just swap out the white person for the Indigenous person and then they lead you. The role of ceremony and prayer, how language matters, the way that people live, and make decisions together, it's just different. I think to be Indigenous-led is really to let the place, and the land, and the water lead in a sense. It's being in relationship and understanding those foundational teachings about kinship.” – Shanai, white activist
<b>Theme:</b> Indigenous leadership and culture should not be tokenized, fetishized, or appropriated.	
<b>Quotes:</b> “The tokenizing thing and the fetishizing thing, and also this pedestal culture is not helpful.” – Tara, Indigenous activist	“Don't show up to an action to take a picture with Winona LaDuke and then leave. Stand with her.” – Joe, Indigenous activist
<b>Theme:</b> White people should listen and not take up too much space.	
<b>Quotes:</b> “We come from a society that's all about individuality, right? It's so important to have this individual perspective, and to get their input out there. When entering these communities, and in these spaces with Indigenous people who have had their voices muted for so long, it's really important to give that space and to listen.” – Kaylee, white activist	“not showing up feeling like you have all the answers, feeling you know the best.” – Andy, white activist  “A lot of questions don't need to be asked if you just pay attention to how people are operating. This is all stuff that's hard for me. I'm a really loud, obnoxious, talkative white person, for real.” – Sandy, white activist
<b>Theme:</b> White people should form their own analysis of what is useful to the movement.	
<b>Quotes:</b> “[white liberals] have been tricked that the key to all of our problems lies in the wisdom of women of color so therefore, all that needs to be done is listening... but the step after listening is analysis... an understanding for themselves of what they believe a path to change is.” – Genna, white activist	“Offer useful stuff. And part of what that means is actually having your own autonomous analysis, to the point where you can assess what is and isn't useful, based on real trusting relationships and conversations with the indigenous leaders.” – Randall, white activist
<b>Theme:</b> White activists should not sacrifice agency or self worth, and are not bad people for making a mistake.	

<p><b>Quotes:</b> “So when you say or do the wrong thing, or so they think you have, it’s just to acknowledge it, apologize for it, and just try to move forward in a better way.” – Mark John, white activist</p>	<p>“When a white person is always apologizing, or not feeling good about themselves, it makes me have to stop my work and attend to them... we show up the strongest when we are a coalition of people who are secure in who we are.” – Simone, Indigenous activist</p>
<p><b>Theme:</b> White activists should not be white saviors. Resisting Line 3 benefits everyone.</p>	
<p><b>Quotes:</b> “I think to oppose Line 3 has to be rooted in a sense of actually recognizing the ways that colonialism harms all of us and other people. It harms Indigenous people more.” – Genna, white activist</p>	<p>“I think any good approach is going to recognize that you have a mutual self-interest in working together towards something bigger” – Andy, white activist</p> <p>“We don’t need white saviors, thank you go home.” – Carrie, Indigenous activist</p>
<p><b>Theme:</b> Trying to prove who is most oppressed is not productive</p>	
<p><b>Quotes:</b> “I don’t want to play the Oppression Olympics... if I grew up poor and experiencing racism like the person next to me doesn’t have to have that same experience, or have it worse than me for me to be able to interact with them.” – Simone, Indigenous activist</p>	<p>“In my group, most of us were white and I feel like you had to be either trans/non-binary or queer for your opinions or requests to be considered by the group.” – Anonymous white activist</p>
<p><b>Theme:</b> White people have an obligation to uphold the treaties</p>	
<p><b>Quotes:</b> “We are all treaty people.” – Nancy, Indigenous activist</p> <p>“every time I hear [we’re treaty neighbors], it deepens the understanding a little bit, and it cuts through the Western mind thinking.” – Michelle, white activist</p> <p>“treaties are made so that people can live like this: [holds two index fingers together]. – Joe, Indigenous activist</p>	<p>“I am here by invitation of the Sovereign Anishinaabe Nation to stand and support their efforts to uphold their inherent responsibility to the future generations and protect Lands, Waters, Manoomin, and the Anishinaabe way of life. This is being done in peace and prayer, supporting the defense of Indigenous Sovereignty, treaty-reserved rights, and the free prior and informed consent of the Anishinaabe nation for anything impacting them.” – Fire Light Solidarity Statement</p>

Some of the themes in the above table – that Indigenous peoples are not homogenous and should not be tokenized, for example – reflect the stickiness of using an identity category constructed by systems of oppression to attempt to confront that oppression; a strategy critiqued by anti-essentialist scholars. They note that identities are constructed and thus there are no stable, fixed identities that exist outside of relations of power from which to critique them, and rallying around these categories can reify them (see Hokowhitu 2016; Butler 1990).

However, while there are complexities and imperfections in its implementation, the practice of “following Indigenous leadership” resulted in concrete benefits to build new relationships across Indigenous-white lines, as outlined in the previous section. Its concrete benefits mean that “following Indigenous leadership” is a practice that should not be discarded but rather expanded; the proliferation and negotiation of meanings represented in Table 1 reveals how activists are working to determine how to best help white activists to “show up in a good way” and to “follow Indigenous leadership” in a nuanced way.

## **CONCLUSION**

In an effort to confront power inequalities between white and Indigenous activists, the movement against Line 3 instructed white activists to “follow Indigenous leadership” when resisting pipeline construction. This instruction endeavored to encourage the centering of Indigenous voices and concerns in leadership, decision-making, and media coverage, while decentering white voices. The movement implemented this practice through discourse and media that framed the movement as “Indigenous led” and the practice was reinforced through interactions within the movement, where activists who broke the norm to “follow Indigenous leadership” through dominating behaviors were corrected either through an explanation or through more indirect avenues such as giving a cold shoulder.

The instruction to “follow Indigenous leadership” discouraged white domination of discussions, decision-making processes, and media coverage – a great achievement in distinguishing the movement from white mainstream environmentalism which is dominated by white voices, leadership, and white framings in media coverage (Gilio-Whitaker 2019). “Following Indigenous leadership” also encouraged white awareness of Indigenous perspectives,

knowledges, and concerns. White activists' increased awareness and value for Indigenous worldviews and epistemologies coupled with the prevention of white domination began to actualize the movement's goal to prefigure a future with just and healthy relationships across Indigenous-white lines, in contrast to the extraction that often defines the relationship. Finally, "following Indigenous leadership" helped to sustain the movement and to create lasting relationships and connections that can be mobilized in resistance to other climate and environmental injustices in the future. These findings contribute to intersectionality scholarship by outlining the concrete effects as well as some remaining complexities of implementing the instruction to follow the leadership of those who are intersectionality oppressed in practice (Cole and Luna 2010; Juris 2008), especially given the persistence of white assumptions and stereotypes into which they have been socialized by settler society.

Additionally, sociology, and sociological scholarship on social movements, has long been concerned with understanding inequality – documenting the size, types, and consequences of inequalities, as well as how these inequalities are created and reproduced – which is incredibly important work. However, there is less sociological scholarship explicitly focused on how to address inequalities in practice. This study points to some possibilities; I argue that when movements develop an instruction to guide work across difference rooted in social justice principles, when implemented through movement framing and reinforced in interactions, it can help to address power inequalities, create new cultural norms that can be disseminated more broadly across society, and sustain an alliance across difference. However, this work is an iterative process; complexities, questions, and problems remain, as abstract movement frames cannot completely account for complexities that will arise in practice and assumptions and stereotypes from broader dominant cultures are quite persistent. Thus, over time, instructions for

working across power inequalities must develop additional meaning and nuance to account for unanticipated questions and problems.

Throughout my analysis, I focus mostly on the meanings activists attribute to “following Indigenous leadership.” Future research might consider, in a more systematic fashion, the behaviors of white activists in engaging in frontline action on Indigenous land, and especially how these behaviors might be patterned according to gender, class, age, sexuality, or other aspects of social position. Such research becomes increasingly important in the context of interconnected social and climate crises which will depend on broad-based diverse coalitions to challenge injustices, as well as new norms, relationships, and cultures challenging systemic oppression. Social movements, and particularly prefigurative Indigenous movements, are excellent world-building spaces for practicing anti-extractive relationships built on reciprocity, respect, responsibility, and care that can be disseminated more broadly: “A new world at first inhabits the shell of the old” (Estes and Dhillon 2019: 1).

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