

**TRANSCENDING IDENTITY IN SETTLER COLONIAL STATES:
CONSIDERATIONS FOR DECOLONIAL SOLIDARITY**

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Transcending Identity in Settler Colonial States: Considerations for Decolonial Solidarity

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Abstract

In recent years, discourses in academic and activist circles increasingly emphasize the potential failures of identity politics, highlighting the tendency of political movements based in identity to prevent unity or become co-opted by elites. Because of this, many activist groups are reformulating or transcending the role of identity in their political movements. However, critics of identity politics often fail to account for the fact that the erasure of Indigenous people's identities is a deliberate tool of settler colonialism; challenging the role of identity in political movements thus risks furthering settler colonial processes. As such, this thesis engages with the question of how non-Indigenous people can reformulate the role of identity in their political movements without undermining a politics of solidarity with Indigenous nations and their resurgence movements. I begin by laying out the distinction between recursive and destructive power, which critically informs political movements' differing approaches to identity. By analyzing power as predominantly recursive, or creating the subjects it intends to marginalize, many theorists of identity politics ignore the ways in which power must critically destroy or disappear Indigenous identity in order to establish settler state sovereignty. Thus, moves to reformulate non-Indigenous identity in non-Indigenous political movements should not implicate the role of identity in Indigenous political movements, given that Indigenous political - movements respond to destructive, rather than recursive, power. Further, understanding the functioning of recursive and destructive power reveals the potentially intertwined nature of resistance to these differing forms of power. With this in mind, I look to the #NoDAPL protests to argue that non-Indigenous people can reformulate the role of identity in their political movements by engaging with identity subject to destructive power. Through exploring the recursive construction of the terrorist, the role of anti-capitalism, and the existence of

identity beyond destructive power at Standing Rock, it is apparent that identity can be reformulated in ways that fundamentally challenges the functioning of settler states, creating a broad-based politics of solidarity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous political movements.

Lay Summary

Academic and activist circles increasingly emphasize the failures of identity politics, and often advocate for the reformulation of identity in political movements. However, these critics often fail to account for the fact that erasing Indigenous people's identities is key to furthering settler colonial processes in Canada and the United States, and that critiquing identity in this way may negatively affect Indigenous people's political movements. This thesis engages with the question of how non-Indigenous people can reformulate the role of identity in their political movements without undermining a politics of solidarity with Indigenous people. To answer this question, I lay out the key distinction between the ways that power recursively constructs versus destroys identity groups. This distinction underscores the different relations to identity that Indigenous versus non-Indigenous political movements have and charts a way forward for non-Indigenous people to reformulate identity while standing in solidarity with Indigenous political movements.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Talia Devi Holy.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In May 2022, I attended a conference on settler colonialism at McGill University in Montréal, Canada. While there, I witnessed a significant interaction between Mahmood Mamdani, a well-respected postcolonial scholar, and Kenneth Atsenhaienton Deer, a Mohawk political activist and educator from Kahnawà:ke. Mamdani, who was presenting the keynote talk of the conference, reflected on his most recent book, *Neither Settler nor Native*, in which he argues that in order to create a unified political community that can reconcile the injustices of colonialism, we should transcend our respective identities of settler or native and adopt the identity of “survivor” instead.¹ Speaking directly to the position of Indigenous people in North America today, Mamdani suggested that Indigenous nations should transcend their identities and conceptions of exclusive nationhood in order to create a one-state solution in which multiple different people and nations could coexist and create politics within a singular state.²

Immediately after the keynote, Deer highlighted the problematic implications of this suggestion. “I don’t see a one-state solution as a survivable solution for Indigenous people,” he said.³ Indeed, given the historical and ongoing processes of settler colonialism that seek to destroy Indigenous people’s sovereign political identities and subsume them into the settler state, Mamdani’s suggestion seems little different than a repackaged form of settler colonialism. Regardless, Mamdani responded to Deer by stating that “political identity is created by the state; there was no native identity before [the context of settler colonialism].”⁴ Because of this, he

¹ Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making of Permanent Minorities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

² Mahmood Mamdani, “Keynote,” Talk at Transcending Settler Colonialism: Decolonization, Reconciliation, and Transformation, McGill University, May 26th, 2022.

³ Mahmood Mamdani and Kenneth Atsenhaienton Deer. “Interaction between Mamdani and Deer.” Conversation at Transcending Settler Colonialism: Decolonization, Reconciliation, and Transformation, McGill University, May 26th, 2022. Any errors in recounting this interaction are my own.

⁴ Mamdani and Deer, “Interaction.”

argued that we must move beyond the divisions of identity imposed by colonizers in the first place in order to create new political futures.⁵ He explained that without divisive identity, we can finally come together and create a political community where distinctions such as “settler” or “native” do not fundamentally divide or prevent us from achieving our political goals.⁶

This interaction exemplifies a critical point of tension in radical political movements in settler states. In recent years, discourses within leftist academic and activist circles highlight the potential failures of identity politics. Political movements based on identity are critiqued for preventing unity and solidarity, with critics arguing that the difference invoked by fundamental assertions of identity often divides political movements and prevents more broad-based material change.⁷ Further, political movements based on identity are critiqued for not being radical enough, as identity politics are often co-opted by those in powerful political and economic positions to further legitimize injustices, a phenomenon that Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò deems the “elite capture” of identity politics.⁸ Thus, many marginalized groups have moved towards reformulating their relationships to identity or diminishing the role of identity in their political movements. But, critics of identity politics often fail to recognize the significant role of Indigenous identity in decolonization movements. Diminishing Indigenous identity has always been part and parcel of settler colonialism, with genocidal policies like the Indian Residential

⁵ Mamdani and Deer, “Interaction.”

⁶ Mamdani and Deer, “Interaction.”

⁷ Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Mass Movements and Racial Identity* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2018), 38. (Apple Ebook version)

⁸ Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (and Everything Else)* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022). (Apple Ebook version)

Schools,⁹ the forcible establishment of reserves,¹⁰ and *The Indian Act*¹¹ seeking to erase Indigenous identity in order to establish settler colonial sovereignty. Thus, critics of identity politics that advocate for the diminishing role of identity in political movements may reproduce settler colonial formations, as exemplified by Deer's critique of Mamdani's suggestion that Indigenous people and settlers get over their respective identities and come together in a unified state.

This is a problem worthy of note because critics of identity politics highlight valid reasons that identity should be reformulated or transcended in political movements. At the same time, analyses that advocate for reformulating or transcending identity have the potential to further settler colonial processes and negatively implicate Indigenous people's decolonization movements, undermining a politics of solidarity with Indigenous nations and their decolonial movements. Even analyses that do not advocate for Indigenous people to specifically reformulate their relationships to identity can still call into question Indigenous people's political movements, as these critiques of identity politics emerge during a time in which many Indigenous scholars and activists are exploring a politics of resurgence,¹² which is oriented towards Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices in order to create "a flourishing of the

⁹ Douglas Quan, "Assault on residential school students' identities began the moment they stepped inside," National Post, last modified June 2nd, 2015, https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/assault-on-residential-school-students-identities-began-the-moment-they-stepped-inside_

¹⁰ "Removing Native Americans From Their Land," Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/native-american/removing-native-americans-from-their-land/>.

¹¹ "How the Indian Act continues to impact the lives of First Nation people," CBC Radio, posted June 19th, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/how-the-indian-act-continues-to-impact-the-lives-of-first-nation-people-1.5614187>.

¹² See: Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Resurgence* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2011); Glen Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2014); Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

Indigenous inside” critical to decolonization.¹³

This leads me to the major question explored within this thesis: how can non-Indigenous¹⁴ people reformulate the role of identity in their political movements without undermining a politics of solidarity with Indigenous nations? In answering this question, I narrow my focus to radical political movements, which I define as political movements that move away from preconceived conceptions and parameters of politics and instead seek to fundamentally challenge institutions and discourses that proliferate oppressive power. I choose not to focus on identity-based groups that seek recognition from the settler state or incorporation into mainstream society, as these groups act in opposition to the ways scholars of Indigenous resurgence articulate their political aims, as these scholars call non-Indigenous people to challenge settler states as legitimate arbiters of rights and account for their existence on stolen Indigenous land.¹⁵ Further, these groups tend to emphasize identity for the purpose of recognition and/or incorporation into the state, rather than transcend identity—as such, these groups are less relevant to the discussion at hand, which is more concerned with the orientation in political movements towards transcending identity.

¹³ Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, 17.

¹⁴ I use the term “non-Indigenous” throughout this thesis as an umbrella term to include white settlers, settlers of colour, and migrants. There is extensive literature on the differing benefits of using each of these terms, such as the applicability of the term “settler” to non-white individuals, or whether the term “settler” should be replaced with a more literal term, like “colonizer.” Given the wide-range of people I discuss in this thesis, I think using a broader term like “non-Indigenous” can better encompass this diversity. My hope is that the term “non-Indigenous” can highlight a wide range of people who are differentially situated in relation to settler colonial processes and power, but still are implicated within the functioning of settler colonialism.

¹⁵ Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity,” *American Quarterly* 68, no.2 (June 2016): 249-250; Audra Simpson, “Reconciliation and its Discontents: Settler Governance in an Age of Sorrow,” video of speech delivered at the University of Saskatchewan, March 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGI9HkzQsGg&ab_channel=UniversityofSaskatchewan; Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xvii.

In chapter 2 of this thesis, I draw from the work of theorists of identity politics and Indigenous scholars to lay out the distinction between recursive and destructive power, which I see as critical to informing political movements' differing approaches to identity. While an analysis of recursive power common within theorization on identity politics highlights that power constructs the subjects it intends to dominate, an analysis of destructive power reveals that Indigenous identity is destroyed, rather than created, by oppressive state power. I argue throughout chapter 2 that moves to transcend or reformulate non-Indigenous identity in non-Indigenous political movements should not implicate the role of identity in Indigenous political movements, given that Indigenous political movements respond to the functioning of destructive, rather than recursive, power. My central argument, which I present in chapter 3 of my thesis, is that non-Indigenous people can reformulate the role of identity in their political movements by engaging with identity subject to destructive power. Doing so can avoid the pitfalls of identity politics, while remaining attentive to the functioning of both recursive and destructive power so as to create a politics of solidarity with Indigenous decolonization movements that can fundamentally challenge the functioning of settler states.

To illustrate this argument, I turn to the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, or the #NoDAPL protests, a widespread resistance movement that brought together over ninety Indigenous nations and many non-Indigenous allies to stop the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline half a mile away from the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. First, I look to the recursive construction of the terrorist at the #NoDAPL protests to argue that we can undermine state constructions of identity across time and place through standing against destructive power legitimized by recursive constructions. Second, I look to the role of anti-capitalism at the #NoDAPL protests to argue that we can reformulate recursive identities and challenge the

systems of power they support through situating ourselves in relation to identities subject to destructive power. Third and finally, I look to identity that exists despite being subject to destructive power at the #NoDAPL protests to argue that we can create a reformulated identity politics that challenges state power through orienting towards aspects of identity that were excluded or destroyed during the creation of recursive identity categories. Throughout this thesis, I present a way of analyzing the workings of Indigenous and non-Indigenous political movements that highlights both the fundamental differences between these movements' relationships to power and identity, and the resonances between these movements that are key to building solidarity.

Chapter 2: The distinction between recursive and destructive power

Before I consider how it is possible to reformulate identity while maintaining a politics of solidarity with Indigenous decolonization movements, we must first understand the relationship between power and identity and how this relationship informs different political movements' responses to state power. While there appear to be contradictions between many non-Indigenous people's reformulation of identity and many Indigenous decolonization movements' resurgence and reaffirmation of identity, I suggest that this apparent contradiction can largely be explained through analyzing the ways state power is deployed onto different identities, as encompassed by the distinction between recursive and destructive power. I argue in this chapter that critiques of non-Indigenous identity in non-Indigenous political movements should not implicate the role of identity in Indigenous political movements, given the ways in which Indigenous political movements combat destructive, rather than recursive, power.

2.1 Recursive power

While theorization on identity politics is expansive and highly diverse, Elena Gambino argues that theories of intersectionality, queer theory, feminist theorization, Black feminist theorization, and Critical Theory are all marked by a distinct focus on *recursive* power, an analysis of power which highlights that “power operates by generating [the] marginal subjects” it intends to rule over.¹⁶ Indeed, analyses that conceptualize identity as created by recursive power stretch across multiple schools of thought. Michel Foucault's discussion of sexuality in *The History of Sexuality* is one of the most recognizable examples of an analysis of recursive power:

¹⁶ Elena Gambino, ““A More Thorough Resistance”? Coalition, Critique, and the Intersectional Promise of Queer Theory,” *Political Theory* 48, no.2 (2020): 221.

here, Foucault traces the genealogical construction of the homosexual subject, a subject constructed in order to regulate the body politic at both the level of the individual and the level of the population.¹⁷ Foucault argues that homosexual identity is neither natural nor essential, and is instead created by state power to be marginalized through legal constructions, medical institutions, and other discursive apparatuses.¹⁸

Other analyses of recursive power are present throughout theorization on identity politics: many feminist and queer theorists state that gender is a constructed concept reflecting dominant power relations under heteropatriarchy and capitalism, with Judith Butler challenging the naturalness of gender and sexuality by highlighting the ways gender and sexuality are constructed through dominant power relations,¹⁹ and Nancy Fraser critiquing identity politics for enshrining and essentializing identities such as woman or gay/lesbian in ways that do not take into account the constructed nature of these categories.²⁰ Similarly, Black feminist theorization traces the ways in which Black women are constructed in order to legitimize violence inflicted upon Black women and communities, with Hortense J. Spillers arguing that the construction of Black women as sexually deviant is necessary in order to secure the supremacy of the white nuclear family and white sexuality.²¹ Further, Critical Theorists demarcate the ways in which subjects are the product of the power relations they exist within, with Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno discussing the flattening effects of “the culture industry” on individuals

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 146.

¹⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 24.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, “Merely Cultural,” *Social Text* 52/53 (Autumn-Winter 1997): 271; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

²⁰ Nancy Fraser, “Recognition without Ethics?” *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, no.21 (2001): 24.

²¹ Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no.2 (1987): 65.

within society.²² Even Karl Marx, whose work generally stands contrary to this kind of theorization on identity politics in favour of a focus on materialism, notes in *The German Ideology* that the ruling economic class generates social relations that secure its own power.²³

Importantly, understanding identity as recursively constructed allows one to come to the conclusion that identity should be transcended, or at least reformulated, in political movements. If identity is created through recursive power, then making identity and difference the basis of political resistance will only reaffirm the very identity created by the state in order to be marginalized. Michel Foucault is especially attentive to this in *The History of Sexuality*, as he states that “resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power”—resistance does not exist untouched by power and is always in relation to and at least somewhat produced by dominant power relations.²⁴ To Foucault, this means that the subject must be very careful of deploying the state discourses and constructions applied onto them when they refuse or contest power; for example, he states that “by saying yes to sex...one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of sexuality,” warning that the embrace of sexuality and homosexual difference is not necessarily emancipatory.²⁵

Since Foucault, theorists of identity politics have charted new ways of navigating identity despite its construction by dominant power relations: Judith Butler argues that identity deployed onto oneself can be resignified,²⁶ and Seyla Benhabib argues that one can construct new identities through weaving together multiple imposed narratives.²⁷ Yet to Butler, the subject

²² Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94.

²³ *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York, Norton, 1978), 157.

²⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 95.

²⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 157.

²⁶ Judith Butler, “For a Careful Reading,” in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Milton Park: Routledge, 1994): 128.

²⁷ Seyla Benhabib, “Sexual Difference and Collective Identities,” *Sings* 24, no.2 (Winter 1999).

should not be “the starting point for an emancipatory theory”²⁸—while political movements should certainly be informed by people’s experiences of power, these movements should not deploy specific identities in order to resist power, given the ways in which the self does not exist autonomously and is instead situated within multiple power dynamics.²⁹ Moreover, political movements that assert identity at their bases often prevent unity or solidarity, given the ways in which recursively constructed identities are made to fit into particular logics of state control and marginalization, rather than providing a broad-based critique of state power or demanding material change. Further, political movements that assert identity at their bases are susceptible to “elite capture,”³⁰ given the ways in which recursively created identity categories often have critical intergroup hierarchies that diminish these groups’ material critiques and encourage the incorporation of identities into power structures with little challenge to their functioning.³¹ For example, the lesbian and gay rights movement’s struggles for inclusion into dominant institutions has resulted in the “rainbowification”³² of highly oppressive institutions, such as the US military, in which institutions incorporate certain lesbian and gay people in ways that do not challenge these institutions’ oppressive functioning, and may even increase these institutions’ legitimacy.³³ An analysis of recursive power thus suggests that identity and the subject should not form the basis of political action; instead, one should turn towards expansive analyses of power in order to create politics that effectively challenges oppressive state power.³⁴ Thus, an

²⁸ Judith Butler, “For a Careful Reading,” in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Milton Park: Routledge, 1994): 135.

²⁹ Butler, “For a Careful Reading,” 135.

³⁰ Táiwò, *Elite Capture*. (Apple Ebook version)

³¹ Táiwò, *Elite Capture*, 45-46. (Apple Ebook version)

³² Myrl Beam, “Against the Rainbow,” *The Abusable Past*, last modified July 25th, 2019, <https://www.radicalhistoryreview.org/abusablepast/against-the-rainbow/>.

³³ Beam, “Against the Rainbow.”

³⁴ See: David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, Jose Esteban Munoz, “Introduction,” *Social Text* 23, no.3-4 (2005): 3.

analysis of recursive power prompts many critics of identity politics to suggest that identity in political movements should be reformulated or transcended.

2.2 Destructive power

However, I argue that critiques of identity politics based upon an analysis of recursive power should not extend to Indigenous people's assertions of identity in their political movements, given that an analysis of recursive power does not encompass the specific and different ways in which settler colonial power is deployed against Indigenous people and nations. It is true that there are some elements of settler colonial power that are constructive; for example, Patrick Wolfe analyzes settler colonialism as an ongoing formation that creates and consolidates settler states, sovereignty, and settler subjects on Indigenous land.³⁵ Similarly, Ann Laura Stoler analyzes the recursive power needed to ensure the ongoing existence of colonial hierarchies and domination.³⁶ Yet, recursive power functions differently in these theorists' work when compared to the recursive construction of marginalized subjects. While recursive power may be responsible for creating settler subjects or settler state formations, it does not create the subjects that settler colonial power primarily oppresses: Indigenous people.

I argue that the recursive power of settler colonial states does not create Indigenous identity. Instead, it creates the elements of settler statehood and settler society required to disappear Indigenous identity. Settler colonial states thus *destroy*, rather than *create* Indigenous identity. Consider Deborah A. Miranda's critical piece "Extermination of the Joyas: Gendercide in Spanish California."³⁷ In it, she describes how Spanish colonizers deliberately targeted the

³⁵ Patrick Wolfe, "Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no.4 (2006).

³⁶ Ann Laura Stoler, *Imperial Durabilities In Our Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

³⁷ Deborah A. Miranda, "Extermination of the Joyas: Gendercide in Spanish California," *GLQ* 16 (2010).

Joyas, “third-gender” Indigenous people, for destruction, brutally murdering them with dogs of war.³⁸ Miranda argues that this destruction was distinct from the homophobia faced by sexually and gender-deviant people in Spain; instead, it was a “gendercide,” a process in which a specific gender is targeted for extermination.³⁹ Joyas were targeted by Spanish colonizers due to their integral roles within their nations, as they were responsible for rituals of death.⁴⁰ The attempted destruction of the Joyas was therefore critical to the success of colonial conquest, weakening Indigenous nations and their ability to resist the colonization of their land. Further, given the gender diversity of the Joyas, their destruction was key to the implementation of colonial heterosexualism⁴¹/heteropatriarchy, a colonial gender system imposed through the destruction of alternate gender systems key to the maintenance of capitalism and white supremacy today.⁴²

Since colonization, the state’s attempts to disappear and eliminate Indigenous people have continued unabated—indeed, these processes are constitutive of how the state defines citizenship from its inception. This is observed through the use of political acts such as *The Indian Act* to erase Indigenous identity,⁴³ the creation of ‘Residential Schools,’⁴⁴ the lack of safe drinking water on certain Indigenous reservations today,⁴⁵ the forced sterilization of Indigenous

³⁸ Miranda, “Extermination of the Joyas.”

³⁹ Miranda, “Extermination of the Joyas,” 259.

⁴⁰ Miranda, “Extermination of the Joyas,” 266.

⁴¹ Maria Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” *Hypatia* 22, no.1 (Winter 2007).

⁴² Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System.”

⁴³ “How the Indian Act continues to impact the lives of First Nation people,” CBC Radio.”

⁴⁴ Michael Lee, “Where searches for remains are happening at former residential school sites,” CTV News, last modified January 25th, 2022, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/where-searches-for-remains-are-happening-at-former-residential-school-sites-1.5754222>.

⁴⁵ Manuela Vega, “6 years after TRC report, Canada is failing to “rectify ongoing harms” against Indigenous communities, new report charges,” Toronto Star, last modified March 1st, 2022, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2022/02/03/6-years-after-trc-report-canada-is-failing-to-rectify-ongoing-harms-against-indigenous-communities-new-report-charges.html>

women,⁴⁶ the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls crisis,⁴⁷ the disproportionate levels of incarceration of Indigenous people,⁴⁸ and the recent discoveries of thousands of Indigenous children's bodies buried on the grounds of residential schools.⁴⁹ As deemed by Canada's National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, Indigenous women and girls, Two-Spirit people, and LGBTQ+ people in Canada have been subject to a specifically gendered and "race-based genocide."⁵⁰ This pattern of destruction continues across other settler states, and is theoretically defined as a fundamental component of settler colonialism, with the "elimination" of Indigenous people key to the successful establishment of settler colonial states.⁵¹ Thus, destructive, rather than recursive, power is the critical mode of power deployed by settler states against Indigenous people.

However, it does appear that recursive power affects Indigenous identity, through the construction of Indigenous subjects who are easily incorporated into the settler state. In *Red Skin, White Masks: The Colonial Politics of Recognition*, Glen Coulthard argues that Frantz Fanon's extension of G.W.F. Hegel's master-slave dialectic to the colonial context is highly applicable to the colonial relationship between Indigenous people and the Canadian settler state.⁵² He explains that not only do Indigenous people exist within hierarchal relations of domination in which they are non-reciprocally recognized by the Canadian settler state, but that Indigenous people are

⁴⁶ "Forced sterilization of Indigenous women in Canada," International Justice Resource Center, <https://ijrcenter.org/forced-sterilization-of-indigenous-women-in-canada/>.

⁴⁷ *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/>.

⁴⁸ "Overrepresentation of Indigenous People in the Canadian Criminal Justice System: Causes and Responses," Government of Canada: Department of Justice, last modified April 9th, 2020, <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/oip-cjs/p3.html>.

⁴⁹ Lee, "Where searches for remains are happening at former residential school sites."

⁵⁰ *Reclaiming Power and Place*, 1.

⁵¹ Wolfe, "Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native."

⁵² Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks*.

often compelled to identify with these forms of misrecognition, developing “psycho-affective attachments” to “master-sanctioned forms of recognition” that result in Indigenous people perceiving their colonial domination as to some extent legitimate.⁵³ In this way, it could be said that recursive power creates the Indigenous subjects it intends to dominate: Indigenous subjects who are willing to be dominated by settler colonial power and accept their position as marginal subjects within a unilaterally sovereign state.

Yet, this is still different from the way that marginalized identity is recursively created for non-Indigenous subjects. While identity construction does occur in the colonial relationship, this identity is not *Indigenous*; this construction removes Indigeneity and Indigenous sovereignty from the equation of identity. This is the identity of a colonized minority, the “Indian” or “Native American/Canadian” person constructed through settler perceptions for the purpose of solidifying settler state sovereignty. As Jodi Byrd puts it, “Indian” is “an empty referent,”⁵⁴ continually “empt[ied] and reinscri[bed],” with the only constant across these constructed identities being the foreclosure of Indigenous nations’ self-determination and sovereignty.⁵⁵ Coulthard’s theorization supports this conclusion, as he sees the *reaffirmation* of Indigenous identity beyond the master-slave dialectic as necessary for Indigenous resurgence;⁵⁶ resurgence of Indigenous identity requires Indigenous people to reject identification with Indigenous identities constructed by settler colonial states. Thus, recursive power in this instance fundamentally operates to further destructive power, as it erases Indigenous people’s sovereign assertions of their identities from settler political and social spheres. This is quite different from the way that recursive power constructs non-Indigenous identity. Michel Foucault, for example,

⁵³ Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 26.

⁵⁴ Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*, 73.

⁵⁵ Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*, 69

⁵⁶ Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 43.

argues that homosexual identity did not *exist* prior to the eighteenth century, as before this time, people had homosexual sex, but were not homosexual *selves*. Here, identity was constructed from scratch, with those who participated in homosexual acts now embodying homosexual identities. Thus, the way many theorists of identity politics understand the recursive construction of identity is distinct from the ways that Indigenous identity is destroyed by settler colonial power in order to secure settlement and settler state sovereignty.

Critically, destructive power and recursive power cannot be combatted in the same ways. If settler colonial power destroys and disappears Indigenous identity so as to legitimize settler state sovereignty and obscure the blatant injustices of colonialism, then a suggestion, like Mahmood Mamdani's, to reject assertions of Indigenous identity, furthers settler colonial power. Moreover, politics that assert Indigenous identity are not replaceable by politics that critique colonialism more generally—in the way that analyses of recursive power would suggest—due to the specificity of Indigenous identity that the state attempts to destroy. Indeed, destructive power is applied onto Indigenous identity because Indigenous identity represents the ongoing existence of nations and people supposedly conquered by colonialism; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson states that “Indigenous bodies are best understood as political orders.”⁵⁷ These political orders are different from settler state political orders or political orders conceptualized by mainstream political understandings, instead “represent[ing] alternative Indigenous political systems that refuse to replicate capitalism, heteropatriarchy and whiteness.”⁵⁸ Thus, the deployment of Indigenous identity is more than a general critique of colonialism; it signals the failures of settler colonialism to diminish and destroy Indigenous political, social, and economic orders, calling

⁵⁷ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 20.

⁵⁸ Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 20.

into question the very legitimacy and solidity of the settler colonial state. When destructive power fails—and it often fails, given the long history of Indigenous resistance to and resurgence despite this power—alternate ways of existing, doing politics, and arranging economies are revealed, fundamentally threatening the normative orderings of settler colonial statehood that are based upon Indigenous people’s disappearance and destruction.

Importantly, identity that stems from Indigenous political orders is not unchanging or essential. Scholars from Queer Indigenous Studies complicate ideas of Indigenous gender and sexuality, acknowledge Two-Spirit people and their critical role in Indigenous nations, and challenge the ways in which the terms of Indigenous resistance are often modelled upon heteronormative conceptions of Indigeneity.⁵⁹ Similarly, Indigenous feminist scholars highlight the ways in which settler heteropatriarchy has affected Indigenous communities.⁶⁰ These are all examples of Indigenous communities navigating identity through “the fluidity of...traditions, not the rigidity of colonialism,” as stated by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson;⁶¹ what it means to be Indigenous is not a static or essentialized concept, and is continually being reworked through Indigenous resurgence, away from settler society and on Indigenous people’s own terms. The key here is that Indigenous nations, rather than settler states, create and rework Indigenous identity, in ways that fundamentally trigger the deployment of destructive power key to the maintenance of settler state sovereignty, given that settler state sovereignty requires the

⁵⁹ See: Jodi Byrd, “What’s Normative Got to Do with It? Towards Indigenous Queer Relationality,” in *Social Text* 38, no.4 (2020); Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*; Qwo-Li Driskill, Daniel Heath Justice, Deborah Miranda, and Lisa Tatonetti, *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).

⁶⁰ See: Luana Ross, “From the “F” Word to Indigenous/Feminisms,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no.2 (Fall 2009); Joanne Barker, “Indigenous Feminisms,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous People’s Politics*, ed. Jose Antonio Lucero, Dale Turner, and Donna Lee VanCott (Oxford, Oxford Handbooks, 2013).

⁶¹ Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, 51.

disappearance of alternate sovereignties and the identities of those who belong to them.

Returning to our original problem at hand, we can see that tension arises between the goals of Indigenous and non-Indigenous political movements when non-Indigenous people apply critiques of identity politics to Indigenous people's political movements. This application misunderstands the different ways that power is deployed onto identities, as assuming that Indigenous people should reject identity altogether is premised upon the belief that identity is created solely by recursive power and Indigenous people respond to recursive power in their political movements. Indeed, Mahmood Mamdani argues in *Neither Settler nor Native* that Indigenous identity was recursively constructed by the state, with Indigenous people only becoming "Native" when they were colonized and not strongly identifying as Indigenous beforehand;⁶² because of this, decolonization involves the transcendence of Indigenous identity.⁶³⁶⁴

Though it is true that there is an oppositional element to Indigenous identity—as Indigeneity articulates an alternate way of living opposed to settler statehood—to say that Indigenous identity does not exist on its own terms and is purely oppositional is to erase long histories and ways of being that exist prior to and throughout colonization, with Indigenous identity both responding to settler colonialism and speaking to what exists beyond it. As Robert Nichols puts it, "*Indigenous*...speaks to a shared experience of colonization but also to a family

⁶² Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native*, 11.

⁶³ Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native*, 17.

⁶⁴ Interestingly, this is a similar argument to that made by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*—identification with Black negritude should eventually be transcended, as this identity was constructed by white colonizers. Glen Coulthard rejects this conclusion's applicability to Indigenous resurgence in North America, seeing Indigenous social, political, and economic practices as existing prior to colonization and therefore guiding the way forward for decolonization. I see this different conclusion as stemming from Coulthard's analysis of Indigenous identity as something that stands apart from the state's recursive construction of Indigeneity and that is instead subject to destructive power.

resemblance of spiritual, cultural, and political commitments.”⁶⁵ It is “a common political project that consists both in opposing colonization in all of its forms and fostering alternatives to it grounded in plural visions of other worlds and other forms of life.”⁶⁶

Critically, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains that Indigenous people are also “land-based people,” who hold “deep, reciprocal, consensual *attachment[s]*” to land.⁶⁷ Glen Coulthard argues that these relations form a “place-based foundation of Indigenous decolonial thought and practice” called “grounded normativity,” which critically guides Indigenous resurgence and decolonization.⁶⁸ These alternate lifeways and ethical frameworks are continually subject to the destructive power of settler colonial states, which seek to erase alternate ways of being that threaten settler state sovereignty and sever Indigenous people’s relationships to the land. Realizing that Indigenous identities and the alternate lifeways they encompass are subject to destructive power creates a very different understanding of the role of identity in decolonial politics, as challenging settler colonialism requires engagement with, rather than transcendence of, Indigenous identity. It is therefore clear that critiques of the role of identity in political movements that respond to recursive power should not apply unilaterally to Indigenous political movements, given that these movements respond to destructive, rather than recursive power.

Finally, in drawing this distinction between recursive and destructive power, I do not intend to create a binary in the ways that power is deployed, with non-Indigenous people’s identities only affected by recursive power and Indigenous people’s identities only affected by destructive power. In fact, many groups navigate recursive and destructive power

⁶⁵ Robert Nichols, *Theft is Property! Dispossession and Critical Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 113.

⁶⁶ Nichols, *Theft is Property!* 113.

⁶⁷ Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 43-44.

⁶⁸ Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 13.

simultaneously. For example, political movements responding to systemic anti-Black racism such as the Movement for Black Lives seek to challenge and undo recursive constructions of Black people key to the proliferation of white supremacy and racial capitalism, such as constructions of Black people as criminals that legitimize police brutality and mass incarceration—only the most recent manifestations of the destructive power of white supremacy.⁶⁹ In order to challenge these constructions, the Movement for Black Lives advocates for investment in Black communities, community control or defunding of the police, and an end to the surveillance of Black communities.⁷⁰

Yet, the movement Black Lives Matter was created primarily in response to the brutal murders of Black people, which exemplify the ways in which the police and prison systems in North America systematically discriminate against and brutalize Black people in a way that shows a blatant disregard for life and the mobilization of destructive state power.⁷¹ Even the slogan “Black Lives Matter” highlights that *living* and *livelihood* are critical demands made by Black Lives Matter, a movement that aims to combat the destructive effects of violence on Black people’s lives. Tiffany Lethabo King explains that constructions of Black people created to maintain a racialized labour force rely on an inherent *dehumanization* of Black people, with Frank Wilderson arguing that “the Black must be rendered nonhuman for White subjects to know their own humanity.”⁷² Thus, movements for Black lives navigate both recursive constructions of

⁶⁹ “Vision for Black Lives: Policy Platform,” Movement for Black Lives, 2022, <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/>.

⁷⁰ “Vision for Black Lives.”

⁷¹ “Black Lives Matter Movement,” Howard University Law Library, 2018, <https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/BLM>.

⁷² Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 17-18.

Black people necessary to further racial capitalism and other “after-lives of slavery,”⁷³ in addition to the inherent dehumanization and destructive power faced by Black people that aims to legitimize these recursions. Recursive and destructive power thus work on a spectrum rather than within a binary, with recursive and destructive power deployed in differing formulations and with differing goals depending on the group that is being subjugated.

⁷³ Alexis Okeowo, “How Saidiya Hartman Retells the History of Black Life,” *The New Yorker*, last modified October 26th, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/26/how-saidiya-hartman-retells-the-history-of-black-life#:~:text=Hartman%20was%20illuminating%20what%20she,freedom%20that%20comes%20with%20them>.

Chapter 3: Reformulating identity in political movements

I have established that critiques of the role of identity in political movements that respond to recursive power should not apply to the role of Indigenous identity in Indigenous political movements, given that these movements respond to destructive, rather than recursive, power. From this, it may seem that the appropriate political response is to further differentiate Indigenous vs non-Indigenous political movements, with Indigenous political movements responding to destructive power and non-Indigenous political movements responding to recursive power, using different strategies and forms of resistance. However, I argue in this thesis that rather than turning solely to challenge recursive power through the reformulation or rejection of identity, non-Indigenous people can rework the role of identity in their political movements through engaging with identity subject to destructive power. Doing so can avoid the pitfalls of identity politics previously discussed in this thesis, while remaining attentive to the functioning of both recursive *and* destructive power so as to fundamentally challenge the functioning of the settler state. I suggest this approach for two key reasons, which I exemplify throughout chapter 3. First, the functioning of recursive and destructive power is not mutually exclusive, with recursive and destructive power often affecting groups simultaneously, as exemplified by my discussion of the Movement for Black Lives and Black Lives Matter. Transcending or reformulating identity based solely upon an analysis of recursive power thus leaves unchallenged the functioning of destructive power, which may negatively implicate the success of these political movements. Second, recursive and destructive power often work hand-in-hand, with the functioning of one affecting the functioning of another. It is therefore prudent to account for the interrelations between both forms of power in order to create more effective political movements, especially when considering the imperatives of solidarity across different

political movements.

As such, in chapter 3 of this thesis I consider how non-Indigenous people can reformulate identity in their political movements while remaining accountable to the workings of destructive power and the imperative of solidarity with Indigenous decolonization movements. To answer this question, I look to the case-study of the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, or the #NoDAPL protests. While the #NoDAPL protests were a broad-based radical political movement that demanded material change and combatted state power, they were also a political movement based in large part upon Indigenous identity and the opposition between Indigenous nationhood and destructive power. This context illuminates how politics can be created that is aware of the differing operations of power, given that the protests were made up by over ninety Indigenous nations and a wide variety of non-Indigenous allies.⁷⁴

3.1 The recursive construction of the terrorist

The #NoDAPL protests emerged in response to the proposed building of the Dakota Access Pipeline by Energy Transfers Partners (ETP).⁷⁵ While the pipeline was originally planned to be built near the town of Bismarck, North Dakota, widespread opposition from the non-Indigenous inhabitants of Bismarck prompted the pipeline to be rerouted half a mile away from the Standing Rock Reservation, rendering its inhabitants at severe risk of water poisoning.⁷⁶ Not only did this choice reveal blatant environmental racism on the part of ETP, but it violated Article II of the Fort Laramie Treaty, which guaranteed the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe access to

⁷⁴ Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2019), 102. (Apple Ebook version)

⁷⁵ Joanne Barker, *Red Scare: The State's Indigenous Terrorist* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2021), 50.

⁷⁶ Barker, *Red Scare*, 50.

and use of the land surrounding their reservation.⁷⁷ As the pipeline significantly threatened the environment, including the drinking water supply of the reservation, it posed “a serious risk to the very survival of [the Standing Rock Sioux]” and clearly violated the Fort Laramie Treaty.⁷⁸ In response to these violations and ETP’s continued failure to consult with them prior to building the pipeline, citizens of Standing Rock began to set up camp at the proposed site of the pipeline, beginning an almost year-long blockade. Further, members of Standing Rock alerted a federal court to twenty-seven burial sites they discovered in the direct path of the pipeline.⁷⁹ Regardless, the next morning, Standing Rock was invaded; attack dogs and private security brutalized protestors in an attempt to clear the way for bulldozers to excavate the land.⁸⁰ So began the next months of brutal violence unleashed against protestors at Standing Rock, and the historical display of resistance to this destructive power.

In this section, I argue that activists at Standing Rock undermined the state’s ability to construct identity across time and place by standing against destructive power legitimized by recursive constructions. Almost immediately after the violence began, the state, police, and security forces began to depict protestors at Standing Rock as terrorists; government records on the protests characterized Indigenous people as “ideologically driven”⁸¹ and warned of potential terrorist threats,⁸² even comparing them to radical Jihadist forces.⁸³ Further, police and security forces responded to the protests with violent anti-terrorism tactics,⁸⁴ despite the non-violent

⁷⁷ “Treaties Still Matter,” National Museum of the American Indian, <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/plains-treaties/dapl>.

⁷⁸ “Treaties Still Matter,” National Museum of the American Indian.

⁷⁹ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 86. (Apple Ebook version)

⁸⁰ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 87. (Apple Ebook version)

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 59. (Apple Ebook version)

⁸² *Ibid*, 59. (Apple Ebook version)

⁸³ *Ibid*, 59. (Apple Ebook version)

⁸⁴ Will Parrish and Sam Levin, “Treating protest as terrorism: US plans crackdown on Keystone XL activists,” *The Guardian*, last modified September 20th, 2018,

nature of the protests. Critically, the terrorist is a recursive construction that allowed the state to deploy destructive power in this context. Joanne Barker argues that the state consistently marks Indigenous people as terrorists when it wishes to justify violence against Indigenous people and further the goals of state imperialism; she explains that “when the state or a powerful corporation identifies an individual as a terrorist, they can act with impunity against even [their] most basic human rights.”⁸⁵

Recursively constructing someone as a terrorist is a particularly effective way to legitimize violence against them, as the threat of terrorism heightens non-Indigenous people’s anxieties about national insecurity and the need to protect their communities, in ways that legitimizes violence which far exceeds procedural norms. Thus, the recursive construction of the Indigenous person as a terrorist legitimized the destructive power used at the #NoDAPL camps—this included water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets, violent dogs, Long Range Acoustic Devices, and mace deployed against protestors;⁸⁶ physical brutality from police and security forces;⁸⁷ and bulldozers that destroyed grave-sites and other areas to clear the way for construction.⁸⁸

This destructive power wasn’t just deployed to subdue protestors and ensure the building of the pipeline—it also aimed to punish and silence people participating in the alternate political orders and ways of living embodied by the #NoDAPL camps. Indeed, the #NoDAPL camps did not exist solely in opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline project. The camps also created what Nick Estes deems “an Indian City,” an Indigenous-led space based upon the resurgence of

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/sep/20/keystone-pipeline-protest-activism-crackdown-standing-rock>.

⁸⁵ Barker, *Red Scare*, x.

⁸⁶ Barker, *Red Scare*, 53.

⁸⁷ Saul Elbein, “The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at Standing Rock,” *The New York Times*, last modified January 31st, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/31/magazine/the-youth-group-that-launched-a-movement-at-standing-rock.html>.

⁸⁸ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 91. (Apple Ebook version)

Indigenous lifeways that survived destructive power, forming the basis of a prefigurative politics of decolonization that contrasted sharply with settler colonialism and capitalism.⁸⁹ Further, Estes explains that the #NoDAPL protests rebirthed the Oceti Sakowin, “the long-awaited reunification of all seven nations of Dakota-, Nakota- and Lakota-speaking peoples” into one great nation.⁹⁰ Moreover, aspects of Indigeneity subject to destructive power were on full display at Standing Rock, such as the leadership role taken by many Two-Spirit people in the #NoDAPL movement and the development of a Two-Spirit camp at Standing Rock,⁹¹ with Two-Spirit people described by Deborah A. Miranda as the modern descendants of Joyas who survived genocide.⁹²

We see here how recursive and destructive power often work hand-in-hand, as recursive constructions of Indigenous people as terrorists need to be believed in order to legitimize the destructive power deployed by the state and its corporations at Standing Rock. Notably, the recursive construction of Indigenous people as terrorists at the #NoDAPL camps partly failed; though gratuitous violence was deployed against Indigenous people and legitimized by this construction, violence against Indigenous people was also widely condemned, even by mainstream groups and political figures.⁹³ In fact, images of police brutality at Standing Rock prompted significant numbers of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to travel to Standing Rock to stand against the violence experienced by Indigenous people and align themselves with alternate ways of relating to the earth that Indigenous people were asserting.⁹⁴ Indigenous people

⁸⁹ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 22. (Apple Ebook version)

⁹⁰ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 21. (Apple Ebook version)

⁹¹ Kim TallBear, “Badass Indigenous Women Caretaker Relations,” in *Standing with Standing Rock*, ed. Nick Estes, Jaskiran Dhillon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 15.

⁹² Miranda, “Extermination of the Joyas,” 276.

⁹³ Ariel Bogle, “Amnesty condemns “excessive” violence at Standing Rock, calls for Obama to act,” Mashable, last modified December 3rd, 2016, <https://mashable.com/article/amnesty-condemns-violence-standing-rock>; Jenni Monet, “What Standing Rock Gave the World,” Yes Magazine, last modified Spring 2018, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/decolonize/2018/03/16/what-standing-rock-gave-the-world>.

⁹⁴ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 102. (Apple Ebook version)

at Standing Rock defined themselves as Water Protectors, an identity that rejected the construction of the terrorist in favour of what Nick Estes deems “the continuation of life on a planet ravaged by capitalism.”⁹⁵

This conflict between state attempts to define Indigenous people as terrorists versus Indigenous people’s own self-identifications reveals a critical component of destructive power—the state’s power to dictate, legitimize, and institutionalize certain discourses and recursions, or its definitional power, per say. Though Indigenous peoples consistently articulate identities that exist beyond the reach of destructive and recursive power, destructive power also works through the legitimization of the settler state and settlers as holding rational and authoritative knowledge at the expense of all other people and their knowledge. As such, perceptions of Indigenous people as terrorists, which are recursively constructed to further settler colonialism, gain legitimacy and authority in ways that Indigenous people’s understandings of themselves often do not. This reinforces the destructive power of the settler state through legitimizing recursive constructions of Indigenous identity as authoritative. As Kelly Aguirre puts it, when Indigenous people assert their understandings of themselves, they “are positioned within a deeply unequal sense of articulation” that often undercuts what they are trying to say—if Indigenous people articulate their identities as sovereign and political, they are perceived by settlers as non-sovereign, for example.⁹⁶ This phenomenon is further explored in the work of Kim TallBear, who highlights the ways that the scientific community and its genomic perceptions of Indigeneity maintain an “institutional, legal and intellectual authority to determine who or what

⁹⁵ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 40. (Apple Ebook version)

⁹⁶ Kelly Aguirre, “Apprehending Indigenous Decolonial Movements: Questions on Recursivity in Critical Theory Scholarship,” *Journal of World Philosophies* 6 (Winter 2021), 194.

counts as Indigenous” at the expense of Indigenous people’s self-determination.⁹⁷

But, the state’s definitional power is not fool-proof, as evidenced at Standing Rock. To the many people who joined the camps, Indigenous people were Water Protectors, not terrorists—at its height, thousands of people gathered at the camps and nearly eight-hundred people were arrested alongside Indigenous Water Protectors.⁹⁸ Recursion, then, isn’t always a successful way of constructing subjects and legitimizing destructive power. Further, challenging recursion and the definitional power of the settler state to legitimize and mainstream its recursions is an effective way of combatting destructive power, given the intimacy between recursive constructions and the legitimization of destructive power. At Standing Rock, rejecting the recursive construction of Indigenous people as terrorists was a key way that people stood in solidarity with Indigenous Water Protectors, prompting them to both join the #NoDAPL protests in support of the alternate politics that Water Protectors were asserting, and question the legitimacy of the settler state. Indeed, when recursion fails, it can have detrimental effects on the state; Joanne Barker explains that during the United States’ deployment of destructive power during the #NoDAPL protests, people began to realize the illegitimate and fascist nature and foundation of the United States, as “in the absence of... a threat” like the recursive construction of the terrorist, “the state is a sham, a mockery of democracy, its violence nothing but fascism.”⁹⁹

In addition to Indigenous Water Protectors, Water Protectors of Middle Eastern descent were also constructed as terrorists at Standing Rock.¹⁰⁰ Of course, many non-Indigenous groups

⁹⁷ Kim TallBear, “Genomic Articulations of Indigeneity,” in *Native Studies Keywords*, ed. Michelle Raheja, Andrea Smith, and Stephanie Nohelani Teves (Tuscan: University of Arizona Press, 2015), 138-139.

⁹⁸ Sue Skalicky, “Tension Between Police and Standing Rock Protestors Reaches Boiling Point,” *The New York Times*, last modified February 23rd, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/29/us/dakota-access-pipeline-protest.html>.

⁹⁹ Barker, *Red Scare*, 60.

¹⁰⁰ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 102. (Apple Ebook version)

are consistently subject to recursive constructions of terrorism—post 9/11, the construction of brown and particularly Muslim people as terrorists has become highly pervasive and has detrimental effects on people’s bodily security and human rights, in addition to furthering the War on Terror. Moreover, any non-white person who acts in opposition to the state or mainstream society is likely to be constructed as a terrorist, given the effectiveness of the terrorist construction for legitimizing violence, ensuring an end to resistance or alterity, and reinstating the state as a benevolent protector of its people. The recursive construction of the terrorist is thus employed to support destructive power necessary to maintain many systems of oppression that implicate countless people, such as settler colonialism, capitalism, white supremacy, and global imperialism.

Interestingly, the destructive power that the recursive construction of the terrorist supports is often replicated across time and space. The images of bulldozers used to clear the land for the pipeline’s construction at Standing Rock captured by Democracy Now!¹⁰¹ invoked images of bulldozers clearing land for settlement in Palestine, where bulldozers were used to “[demolish] houses and cities; [uproot] olive trees (...) [and dig] up roads,”¹⁰² supporting an “infrastructural warfare” that solidifies Israeli settlement.¹⁰³ The use of dogs to attack protestors at Standing Rock furthers a long history of dogs used to proliferate colonialism and white supremacy in the United States, with attack dogs used to destroy Joyas and other third-gender Indigenous people,¹⁰⁴ capture runaway slaves,¹⁰⁵ and assist police in brutalizing racialized

¹⁰¹ “Standing Rock Special: Unlicensed #DAPL Guards Attacked Water Protectors with Dogs and Pepper Spray,” Democracy Now! last modified November 24th, 2016,

https://www.democracynow.org/2016/11/24/standing_rock_special_unlicensed_dapl_guardes.

¹⁰² J.A. Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no.1 (Winter 2003): 31.

¹⁰³ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 29.

¹⁰⁴ Miranda, “Extermination of the Joyas.”

¹⁰⁵ Tyler Parry, “Attack Dogs and the History of Racial Violence,” *Black Perspectives*, last modified February 5th, 2019, <https://www.aaihs.org/attack-dogs-and-the-history-of-racial-violence/>

populations.¹⁰⁶ Use of these same violent tactics across time and space is of course not accidental—it speaks to a greater system of imperialism in which Western colonial and capitalist states share mechanisms of violence and tactics to subdue deviant populations, such as weapons being shipped from the United States to Israel,¹⁰⁷ Israeli crowd-control tactics used by police and security forces at Standing Rock,¹⁰⁸ and private security firms deployed at Standing Rock that were also used against civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁰⁹

Thus, shared experiences of recursive construction and destructive power across time and space were easily identified by many Water Protectors and allies to the movement, many of whom also identified as Water Protectors.¹¹⁰ Activists from marginalized groups came to Standing Rock, recognizing that the processes of recursive and destructive power faced by Indigenous people were aligned with the experiences of their own political movements. Israa Suliman, a Palestinian activist, writes to Indigenous people at Standing Rock, stating, “when I was young, I saw how the media portrays negative images of you, especially in Hollywood films—depicting you as uncivilized, savage, racist and drug abusers. Likewise, my people are portrayed as terrorists, “backward,” misogynists and anti-Semitic.”¹¹¹ Here, Suliman identifies the shared recursive construction of the terrorist and other recursive constructions key to supporting the ongoing functioning of destructive power in North America and Palestine.

Further, Vienna Rye, an organizer with Millions March NYC, a movement for Black lives in

¹⁰⁶ Parry, “Attack Dogs and the History of Racial Violence.”

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Security Cooperation with Israel, U.S. Department of State, last modified July 30th, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-israel/#:~:text=Since%202010%2C%20the%20United%20States,parts%2C%20weapons%2C%20and%20simulators.>

¹⁰⁸ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 386. (Apple Ebook version)

¹⁰⁹ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 388. (Apple Ebook version)

¹¹⁰ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 28. (Apple Ebook version)

¹¹¹ Israa Suliman, “Dear Native Americans,” Code Pink, [https://www.codepink.org/dear_native_americans.](https://www.codepink.org/dear_native_americans)

New York City, comments on the shared experiences of Indigenous people at Standing Rock and Black people, stating that “the entire system is made possible by the police institution, by the prison system, which functions as the enforcement arm of this violent system.”¹¹² In saying so, she recognizes the ways in which the power faced by Indigenous people is deployed with the same mechanisms of enforcement and brutality faced by Black and racialized communities.

Importantly, activists recognized that these shared experiences of recursive and destructive power were critical opportunities for solidarity and political change, creating a broad-based politics of solidarity that fundamentally challenged the functioning of settler states. Kim Ortiz, an organizer from anti-police brutality group NYC Shut It Down, writes, “we decided that we really need to stand in solidarity with the tribes out in Standing Rock because we know very well that all of our struggles are connected, and until we unite, we’re never going to win.” Here, Ortiz articulates a political analysis which recognizes that interconnected struggles against state violence by Indigenous, Black, and racialized people necessitates a politics of solidarity.¹¹³ Further, a Palestinian Water Protector named Samia states that Water Protectors are “intifada on the plains,” rejecting the shared recursive construction of Palestinian and Indigenous people as terrorists in favour of the identity of a rebel fighting against destructive power for the possibility of another life for her people.¹¹⁴

When experiences of oppressive power are shared by marginalized groups, these groups’ experiences cease to be localized. Instead, widespread solidarity can be built across difference, despite the nuances in experiences or political strategies that may exist between movements.

¹¹² Ashoka Jegroo, “Why Black Lives Matter is fighting alongside Dakota Access Pipeline protestors,” Splinter, last modified September 13th, 2016, <https://splinternews.com/why-black-lives-matter-is-fighting-alongside-dakota-acc-1793861838>.

¹¹³ Jegroo, “Why Black Lives Matter.”

¹¹⁴ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 27. (Apple Ebook version)

Uahikea Maile argues that shared experiences of violence can create solidarity centered on “specific refusals to similar structures of violence,”¹¹⁵ citing the resonances between Kanaka Maoli Mountain Protectors at Mauna Kea and Water Protectors at Standing Rock as providing a basis for a relationship that can “work in concert toward unseating settler states.”¹¹⁶ Moreover, realization of a shared political struggle can prompt the sharing of teachings from one context to another, as the particularities of one context and struggle are broadened through the acknowledgement of resistance to shared structures of power. For example, Kevin Bruyneel argues that in the United States, recognition of the shared histories of Black and Indigenous resistance to “settler colonialism, enslavement, and the rippling consequences of both” reveals that these movements do not exist on distinct paths, and have always struggled against the same oppressive forces.¹¹⁷ Revelation of this shared path produces “mutual understanding, collaborations, [and] resistance” critical to the success of both movements.¹¹⁸

The multiplicitous and intertwined nature of power explored here through the recursive construction of the terrorist illuminates how identity can be reformulated while remaining accountable to the imperative of solidarity with Indigenous decolonization movements. First, standing against destructive power results in combatting the recursions that legitimize it, as evidenced through allies who joined Water Protectors at Standing Rock, rejecting their designation as terrorists. In doing so, the entire apparatus of the state’s definitional power is called into question: if the state is willing to demarcate Indigenous people as terrorists when they

¹¹⁵ David Uahikeaikalei‘ohu Maile, “Threats of Violence: Refusing the Thirty Meter Telescope and Dakota Access Pipeline,” in *Standing with Standing Rock*, ed. Nick Estes, Jaskiran Dhillon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 329.

¹¹⁶ Maile, “Threats of Violence,” 340.

¹¹⁷ Kevin Bruyneel, “Wake Work Versus Work of Settler Memory: Modes of Solidarity in #NoDAPL, Black Lives Matter, and Anti-Trumpism,” in *Standing with Standing Rock*, ed. Nick Estes, Jaskiran Dhillon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 315.

¹¹⁸ Bruyneel, “Wake Work Versus Work of Settler Memory,” 315.

are not, then why would they not do the same with Middle Eastern people, for example? Second, given the interrelated nature of recursive and destructive power that supports multiple systems of violence, challenging destructive power at Standing Rock means challenging the legitimacy and effectiveness of an entire system of power that affects people across multiple contexts. For example, if the American state is challenged at Standing Rock and revealed to be fascist, this has significant implications for the ways America can treat its other populations, or for the ways American allies are perceived around the world. Because of this, we need not see political movements based on the assertion of particular identities as divisive—rather, they can speak to ways of combatting state power that will benefit other people in different contexts. This is a key reason that such widespread solidarity began to build at Standing Rock, especially among other groups who were marginalized by recursive and destructive power. This politics of solidarity has significant potential to undermine the functioning of settler states, given that it challenges the functioning of both recursive and destructive power necessary to maintain various logics of state control and solidification.

3.2 Anti-capitalism at Standing Rock

Second, activists reformulated recursive identities and challenged the systems of power they support through situating themselves in relation to identities subject to destructive power. Standing Rock was a distinctly anti-capitalist space—the camps were created with the knowledge that the drive for capitalist accumulation represented by the Dakota Access Pipeline was fundamentally contrary to the survival of people and the maintenance of good relationships with the earth. Importantly, this resistance to capitalism was based primarily on Oceti Sakowin teachings, with Indigenous people's relations to water, land, and non-human life, or grounded

normativity,¹¹⁹ underscoring the need for resistance to the inevitably destructive effects of the Dakota Access Pipeline project.¹²⁰ For example, a Lakota prophecy told of Zuzeca Sapa, a black snake that would lead to death; many Indigenous people came to Standing Rock to resist the Dakota Access Pipeline because they believed the pipeline was Zuzeca Sapa.¹²¹ While anti-capitalist resistance based upon identity may seem paradoxical to certain Marxist movements, given the ways that these movements advocate for the *transcendence* of identity in order to effectively challenge capitalism,¹²² Indigenous anti-capitalist practices and ways of being—which precede Marxism¹²³—were deliberately targeted for destruction by the settler state so as to establish settler colonial capitalism.¹²⁴ As such, the *reaffirmation* of anti-capitalist Indigenous identities on the land, rather than the transcendence of identity, is key for challenging these systems of oppression.

In the same way that recursive power sometimes functions to legitimize destructive power—as explained through the construction of the terrorist—destructive power sometimes functions to maintain recursive constructions. Indeed, the constructions of the settler subject and the capitalist labourer are key to the ongoing functioning of settler colonialism and capitalism, and are maintained through the destruction and disappearance of Indigenous nationhood. The construction of the settler subject requires the disappearance of Indigenous nationhood through conquest and colonization in order to establish the political and economic systems required to

¹¹⁹ Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 43-44; Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 13.

¹²⁰ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 40. (Apple Ebook version).

¹²¹ Edwin Lopez, “Race, Culture and Resistance at Standing Rock: an Analysis of Racialized Dispossession and Indigenous Resistance,” *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 18 (2019); Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 37. (Apple Ebook version)

¹²² Raju Das, “Identity Politics: A Marxist View,” *Class, Race and Corporate Power* 8, no.1 (2020).

¹²³ The Red Nation Editorial Council, “Revolutionary Socialism is the Primary Political Ideology of the Red Nation,” The Red Nation, last modified September 7th, 2019, <https://therednation.org/revolutionary-socialism-is-the-primary-political-ideology-of-the-red-nation-2/>.

¹²⁴ Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 7.

create and legitimize the settler, with colonialism “structurally committed to maintain[ing]...access to the land and resources that...provide the material and spiritual sustenance of Indigenous societies on the one hand, and the foundation of colonial state-formation, settlement, and capitalist development on the other.”¹²⁵ The ongoing disappearance of Indigenous nationhood further maintains assumptions of settler legitimacy and white supremacy and obscures the contested nature of sovereignty and territory in settler colonial states.¹²⁶

Similarly, the construction of the capitalist labourer also depends on the disappearance of Indigenous nations’ alternate economies, the undermining of Indigenous people’s frameworks of grounded normativity, and Indigenous people’s removal from the land, so as to maintain the ideological justification that capitalism is the only legitimate economic system and to clear the land for primitive accumulation necessary to the establishment of settler colonial capitalism.¹²⁷

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson further argues that the need to remove Indigenous people from their land also stems from the fact that Indigenous people’s political and economic systems have sustained Indigenous people for thousands of years pre-colonialism and capitalism, and therefore provide significant alternatives to our current political and economic systems.¹²⁸ Thus, engagement with Indigenous nations and their political and economic systems that are supposedly destroyed by destructive power would be highly unsettling to the recursive constructions of settler and capitalist labourer.

This engagement occurred at Standing Rock, unsettling the recursive constructions of settler and capitalist labourer and speaking to the centrality of non-human life and relationality in Indigenous nationhood. At Standing Rock, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Water Protectors

¹²⁵ Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 7.

¹²⁶ Wolfe, “Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native,” 393.

¹²⁷ Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 8-15.

¹²⁸ Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, vii.

rallied around the statement “Mni Wiconi” or “Water is Life,” a Lakota phrase that Nick Estes explains articulates a way of relating to others that recognizes the intimate reciprocity of existing;¹²⁹ water is constitutive of all life and is alive itself.¹³⁰ Engagement with this aspect of Indigenous identity challenged the recursive construction of the settler and the capitalist labourer at Standing Rock. First, Estes explains that the very meaning of Lakota/Nakota/Dakota is “ally,” prompting a cultural identity that is aware of the necessity of forging solidarity and creating good relations with others.¹³¹ Because of this understanding and the relational ethics articulated by “Water is Life,” the #NoDAPL camps welcomed non-Indigenous allies as guests,¹³² building relationality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and creating a space based upon respect and communal obligation. Thus, not only did non-Indigenous guests at the #NoDAPL camps experience firsthand the resurgence of Indigenous nations that were supposedly destroyed by settler colonialism, thereby calling into question the legitimacy of their own settlement, but they also began to forge a relationship of respect and obligation with Indigenous people based upon an orientation towards Indigenous nationhood and identity, rather than its destruction.

Similarly, Water is Life articulates an understanding that is antithetical to capitalism and the recursions required to maintain it; Estes states that Water is Life and other Indigenous ways of relating to the earth “exist in opposition to capitalism, which transforms both humans and nonhumans into labor and commodities.”¹³³ Indeed, Water is Life underscores the living embodiment of water, the antithesis to a commodified version of water desired by settler colonial capitalism. Water Protectors recognized that water was an entity subject to destructive power,

¹²⁹ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 55. (Apple Ebook version)

¹³⁰ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 55. (Apple Ebook version)

¹³¹ Ibid, 58. (Apple Ebook version)

¹³² Ibid, 105.

¹³³ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 41. (Apple Ebook version)

needing to be protected in order to combat the destructive power of settler colonialism that is deployed not just against Indigenous people, but also against non-human entities and the grounded normativity that connects the two. Water Protectors thus responded to destructive power on two levels: first, by blocking state and corporate forces that attempted to destroy water, land, and its relations for the purpose of capitalist accumulation, and second, by asserting an ongoing Indigenous identity that intervened into the functioning of destructive power by highlighting alternate ways of being that call into question the legitimacy of settler colonial capitalism. Critically, non-Indigenous people at Standing Rock participated in these alternate ways of being—at Standing Rock, people worked, but no one worked for money; instead, people worked to create a society based upon the key Lakota virtue of generosity, in which everyone had the means to flourish beyond the injustices of capitalism and the constraints of commodification.¹³⁴ Through living at Standing Rock, non-Indigenous allies thus experienced the possibility of an alternate economy and way of being, fundamentally unsettling many key presumptions needed to maintain the recursive construction of the capitalist labourer.

In sum, activists reformulated and challenged recursive identity at Standing Rock through situating themselves in relation to Indigenous identity and the alternate political and economic formations that encompass it. In doing so, non-Indigenous people began to forge a politics of solidarity with Indigenous people, given the ways in which the recursive construction of the settler and the capitalist labourer are key to the ongoing functioning of settler colonialism and capitalism. Though of course unsettling these recursive constructions does not undo settlers' and capitalist labourers' structural positions within systems of power, undermining the supposed naturalness of these positions is a critical first step to creating a world beyond the constraints of

¹³⁴ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 110. (Apple Ebook version)

recursive identity and working towards the material politics needed to undo settler colonial capitalism. Further, the work of activists at Standing Rock underscores that we need not see political movements based on the assertion of particular identities as preventing significant political change or enshrining and essentializing difference¹³⁵—rather, these political movements can assert alternate identities that prompt different ways of being, fundamentally altering the ways we conceptualize identity and politics based upon identity. Refusing the essentializing and divisive nature of certain forms of identity politics does not necessarily mean transcending identity in political movements altogether—in fact, identity categories are often essentializing and divisive *because* they are recursively constructed. Thus, identity beyond recursive power, whether this be Indigenous identity or reformulated recursive identity, does not inevitably fall into these same traps.

3.3 Identity beyond destructive power

The multiplicitous and intertwined nature of power revealed through the recursive constructions of the terrorist, settler, and capitalist labourer emphasizes that identities are not separate from each other, but instead interrelated and subject to the same mechanisms of power. This is a major insight of intersectional theory,¹³⁶ which I argue in this section reveals a third way that activists reformulated identity at Standing Rock: through orienting towards aspects of identity that are excluded or destroyed during the creation of recursive identity categories, thereby rendering identity the basis of a radical critique of state power. Kimberle Crenshaw originally proposed a theory of intersectionality in her essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of

¹³⁵ Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native*, 32.

¹³⁶ Rita Kaur Dhamoon, “Considerations on Mainstreaming Intersectionality,” *Political research quarterly* 64, no.1 (2011): 232.

Race and Sex,”¹³⁷ which she initially establishes as a concept that “denote[s] the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences.”¹³⁸ Since, intersectionality has been taken up extensively in academia, activist circles, and even mainstream spaces to identify the ways in which subjects exist at the intersections of different categories—for example, the queer person of colour who does not fit seamlessly into either the category of queer, which is construed as white, or the category of person of colour, which is construed as straight. Interestingly, Crenshaw argues that “the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference...but rather...that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup difference.”¹³⁹ Thus, political movements consider transcending identity without accounting for the ways in which identity categories are constructed to exclude certain people, thereby perpetuating the invisibility of these people within movements and erasing the ways in which excluded people’s experiences of identity may be greatly different from their own and could prompt different political analyses.

Importantly, an intersectional analysis can be used to reveal aspects of identity that are destroyed during the recursive construction of identity categories. Though intersectionality as a methodology has been taken up in a variety of ways, and is even used at times to argue for the transcendence of identity categories all together,¹⁴⁰ Crenshaw’s original formulation of intersectionality speaks directly to the functioning of recursive power. Indeed, Crenshaw analyzes the specific experiences of Black women in the labour force, who are disappeared

¹³⁷ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no.8 (1989).

¹³⁸ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no.6 (July 1991): 1244.

¹³⁹ Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1242.

¹⁴⁰ Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no.3 (2005): 1773.

within recursive legal constructions of either Blackness or womanhood.¹⁴¹ In labour laws, constructions of Black labourers are presumed to be men, with Black women disappeared from this legal construction,¹⁴² and constructions of female labourers are presumed to be white, with Black women once again disappeared from this legal construction.¹⁴³ Intersectionality, then, reveals the destructive power within recursive power—it orients us to consider that which is sidelined and disappeared during the state’s recursive construction of identities. This disappearance is a form of destructive power enmeshed within recursive power, as the perspectives of and potential for politics oriented around Black women are systematically removed from political movements based upon the identity of either women or Black people.

By orienting us towards that which is destroyed during the recursive construction of identities, intersectionality prompts us to consider the normative functioning of recursive power. In the context of Black women, *why* is it that Black women are excluded from recursive constructions of womanhood and Blackness? What state logic does this illuminate and what was silenced here that is worthy of note? Returning to Standing Rock, we can perceive the #NoDAPL camps as a space intentionally nurturing that which was excluded from recursive constructions of Indigenous people as terrorists or non-sovereign. At Standing Rock, Indigenous sovereignty and politics were on full display, offering “a brief vision of what a future premised on Indigenous justice would look like.”¹⁴⁴ Given that there are critical reasons these aspects of Indigenous identity are excluded from recursive constructions of Indigeneity, the resurgence of these aspects of Indigenous identity threaten dominant logics of control and marginalization: in this case, the existence of sovereign nations with greatly different approaches to the earth and their people

¹⁴¹ Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” 142.

¹⁴² Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” 142.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 142.

¹⁴⁴ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 389. (Apple Ebook version)

fundamentally threatens the existence of settler colonial capitalism, as discussed in the prior section of this thesis.

But, we can also consider the otherwise ways of life and understandings that are excluded during the recursive construction of other, non-Indigenous identities. At Standing Rock, an intersectional critique of recursive power highlights the ways of life that exist beyond recursive constructions: reflecting on her experience of solidarity with Indigenous nations at Standing Rock, Nitasha Dhillon, a founder of MTL Collective, states that Indigenous resurgence at Standing Rock highlighted the need for an engagement with and construction of “a new “we”” —a new understanding of self and politics that is in solidarity with Indigenous nations, rather than solely aligning one’s pre-existing self with Indigenous decolonization movements.¹⁴⁵ Dhillon explains that she is creating “new formations” of identity that are “not limited by boundaries and borders” or “even...taken up” and understood by mainstream populations.¹⁴⁶ I see this as important work to explore what exists beyond conceptions of identity that are recursively created by the state, and reformulate an understanding of self and politics that is not limited by recursive constructions.

Importantly, politics based upon these alternate identities can be fundamentally threatening to settler state power—once again, if recursive constructions are based upon the exclusion of certain components of identity, then the assertion of these excluded identities highlights aspects of being that the state would rather obscure, and provides the basis of a radical critique of state power. Because of this, these political movements are often in solidarity with Indigenous decolonization movements, given the ways in which many oppressive state

¹⁴⁵ Jaskiran Dhillon, “Decolonize This Place and Radical Solidarity: An Interview with Nitasha Dhillon and Amin Husain,” in *Standing With Standing Rock: Voices From the #NoDAPL Movement*, ed. Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 347.

¹⁴⁶ Dhillon, “Decolonize This Place and Radical Solidarity,” 347.

formations marginalize Indigenous people and solidify settler state sovereignty as well. Further, an orientation away from the normative constructions of identity and towards that which has been excluded from these constructions may reveal significant teachings for the future that are beneficial to both non-Indigenous and Indigenous political movements, such as queer, trans, and disabled communities' practices of community care and mutual aid that were developed in the face of destructive power manifested as state neglect and exclusion from the means of life and livelihood.¹⁴⁷

Rather than discarding identity, then, this political approach is intimately interested in difference, and the revelations that difference may bring us about the functioning of destructive power during the recursive construction of identities. Despite this deep engagement with difference, I speculate that excluded voices will still be harmonious, given the overarching power structures that position subjects or actions as different and necessarily excluded. Thus, this reformulation of identity politics will not necessarily divide or overly individualize politics in the ways that critics of identity politics fear,¹⁴⁸ as it can highlight overarching forms of power that systematically exclude difference in perhaps similar and certainly interrelated ways. In sum, politics based upon identity that is destroyed during the recursive construction of identity categories is one way that identity can be reformulated, providing a radical critique of state power. Yet, this reformulation is still attentive to the imperative of solidarity with Indigenous decolonization movements, given the ways that a radical critique of state power brings these movements into closer synchronicity with Indigenous critiques of state power, and attacks formations of power that are harmful to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups.

¹⁴⁷ Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (And the Next)* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2020).

¹⁴⁸ Haider, *Mistaken Identity*, 67. (Apple Ebook version)

Chapter 4: Conclusion

To conclude, I have demonstrated in this thesis that it is possible for non-Indigenous people engaged in radical politics to reformulate the role of identity in their political movements without undermining a politics of solidarity with Indigenous nations. I argued that rather than transcending identity altogether, non-Indigenous people can reformulate the role of identity in their political movements through engaging with identity destroyed by the state, in order to foster widespread resistance that is also in solidarity with Indigenous decolonization movements. I began by laying out the distinction between recursive and destructive power, which reveals that many critiques of identity politics should not be applied to Indigenous political movements, given that these movements respond to destructive, rather than recursive power.

I then went on to explore the ways non-Indigenous people can relate to identity in their political movements. Taking into account the recursive/destructive power distinction, I argued that non-Indigenous people can reformulate the role of identity in their political movements through engaging with identity that is subject to destructive power. This approach to political resistance avoids many of the common pitfalls of identity politics, such as creating politics that is divisive, essentializing, or easily incorporated into the state. Instead, it remains attentive to the functioning of both recursive *and* destructive power so as to create a politics of solidarity with Indigenous decolonization movements that has the potential to fundamentally challenge the settler state. This is evidenced through the ways Water Protectors and other activists at Standing Rock reformulated the role of identity in political movements through undermining the state's recursive constructions of identity, engaging with identity subject to destructive power, and orienting towards aspects of identity destroyed during the recursive construction of identity categories. Political tactics such as these—which are attentive to the dual functioning of

recursive and destructive power—have the potential to significantly challenge the functioning of settler states, by undermining major apparatuses of settler state power and control.

Of course, the #NoDAPL movement did not last forever—ultimately, the pipeline was built in 2017, after the process was expedited by President Donald Trump. But, I do not think that the end of the #NoDAPL movement signals the failure of this sort of politics to challenge recursive and destructive state power for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Testimony after Standing Rock highlights the significant effects the camps had on Water Protectors’ identities, senses of self, and political practices. Participants reflected on the teachings of the camps, which altered the ways they thought about the world and spurred them to further political action; a non-Indigenous doctor who worked at the Standing Rock Reservation reflected on his time at the camps as teaching him the lessons of “community and solidarity, built on principled commitment.”¹⁴⁹ Further, a *New York Times* article covers the stories of Indigenous Water Protectors who struggled with their mental health and exhibited suicidal ideation, but found strength and a will to live during the aftermath of their experiences at Standing Rock. Other Indigenous Water Protectors talked about the ways their strained relationships with Indigenous identity changed after Standing Rock: Daniel Grassrope, from the Lower Brule band, stated that “he had been praying for something like [Standing Rock].”¹⁵⁰ On a broader level, Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon state that the #NoDAPL movement “reignited the fire of Indigenous liberation and reminded us that it is a fire that cannot be quelled.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ David Goldberg, “Lessons from Standing Rock—Of Water, Racism, and Solidarity,” *The New England Journal of Medicine*, last modified April 13th, 2017, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/10.1056/NEJMp1701248>.

¹⁵⁰ Elbein, “The Youth Group That Launched a Movement at Standing Rock.”

¹⁵¹ Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon, “Introduction: The Black Snake, #NoDAPL, and the Rise of a People’s Movement,” in *Standing With Standing Rock: Voices From the #NoDAPL Movement*, ed. Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 5.

Testimony like this highlights the significance of engaging with identity that is destroyed by state power; for Indigenous Water Protectors, engaging with Indigenous identity at Standing Rock allowed for the reaffirmation of culture, nationhood, community, and resistance. Further, combatting destructive power emphasized the need to keep living, a phenomenon that Frantz Fanon understands as the colonized coming to “realize [their] humanity” in the face of brutal violence and dehumanization.¹⁵² For non-Indigenous Water Protectors, engagement with Indigenous identity and other ways of life beyond recursive power provided new possibilities for life and politics. Importantly, these significant effects on participants in the movement evidence that politics like Standing Rock will continue, regardless of the end of the #NoDAPL protests. After all, “the #NoDAPL camps didn’t just imagine a future without settler colonialism and the oppressive institution of the state, but created that future in the here and now.”¹⁵³ Prefigurative politics like those at Standing Rock—which create politics in the present, based upon the future they envision—are self-replicating. Once they are created, they exist to be reworked and reborn, as new political possibility is realized. It is through realizing the ongoing possibility that state power can be effectively challenged that we can continue to create political movements that are attentive to the functioning of recursive and destructive power, and that come together in solidarity to fundamentally challenge the functioning of settler states

¹⁵² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 42.

¹⁵³ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 390. (Apple Ebook version)

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