

Maka Cokaya Kin (The Center of the Earth):
From the Clay We Rise

Waziyatawin, Ph.D.

Ehanna woyakapi (A very long time ago), *Wakantanka* (The Great Mystery) created many children. As he did so, he placed a part of himself into each being. For instance, he gave the quality of swiftness to the deer, perseverance to the turtle, strength to the buffalo, and majesty to the eagle. Every bird, plant, animal and tree was created so that each was unique and had a part of *Wakantanka*.

One day, *Wakantanka* was walking in the *Paha Sapa*, or the Black Hills, and he was looking sad. As he was walking he began to shed tears. They would fall from his eyes and would splash and dry into nuggets of gold. *Maka*, the Earth, also known as *Ina*, meaning Mother in our language, wondered why her husband was sad. She asked, "Have I offended you in some way? Have I been unfaithful to you? Have I not given you many children?" When he responded negatively to all those questions she asked, "Why then are you looking so sad? Why do I see tears fall?"

Wakantanka replied, "I have many children and they are all beautiful, but I have another piece of myself to give. When our children are frightened, they nestle in you for safety. When they are thirsty, they turn to your waters. And when they need sustenance, they receive food from your meadows. I want children who speak to me and call me by name." *Wakantanka* wanted a creature to look to him for help and to need him.

When *Maka Ina* heard this, she wanted to give a piece of herself to help create a being who would look like her husband. She called on the waters to help her. She instructed them to come at her in great magnitude and carve into her flesh. But the waters did not want to harm her. She reassured them that they would not harm her, that it was a gift she wished to give. So they came at her and began to carve into *Ina's* body, but the first attempt was unsuccessful. It didn't work. So she then called on the help of the winds from the four directions. They also refused at

first, saying they did not want to harm her. She told them, “You will not harm me. Blow into my body.” So the winds agreed. They blew a giant gash into her and exposed the red clay of her body. She called to *Wakantanka*, “My body is open to you. Reach into my body and make a body in the image of yourself.”

This was the creation of the first human being. *Ina* told *Wakantanka*, “You will recognize your children. They will be as red as the day. They will call to you, give thanks to you, and share with you your voice.” *Wakantanka* put everything into his two-legged children. He gave them love, and the ability to communicate that love. They have a special voice that *Wakantanka* wanted to hear. With that voice we can say, “Thank you for all the blessings,” or “On this day I give you thanks.” When we are scared, we go to our father and we say, “Look down upon me. Have pity on me. Have pity on my relatives. Help us.”

This story of Bdewakantunwan Dakota creation (Bdewakantunwan means Dwellers by Mystic Lake) is set in the place we call *Minisota Makoce* (Land Where the Waters Reflect the Skies). It marks what I believe to be the beginning of interaction between human beings, the river the Dakota refer to as *Hahawakpa* (The River of Falls), and *Minisota Makoce*. In the story I just told, *Ina Maka*, or Mother Earth, instructed the waters to come at her. That first time they were unable to complete their task without the help of the winds. But, in this first attempt, the waters were coming with such force that they created images in rock that could be found along the Mississippi River. Dakota people call the first of those *Caske Tanka* and he is located just south of Red Wing. He was given this name because *Caske* is the name we give to the first-born child in the Dakota family if the child is male, and because *Tanka* means large and this refers to the larger child. Non-Dakota people call this outcropping Barn’s Bluff. Dakota people could observe the profile of a Dakota face there until 1954 when settler society dynamited that portion so that they could construct a bridge across the Mississippi River from Minnesota to Wisconsin. Observers can still find another rock image, a little further down river from *Caske Tanka* and it is known as *Caske Cistinna*, *cistinna* meaning little or small in the Dakota language.¹

Bdewakantunwan Dakota elders tell of the actual creation of humans occurring in our homeland of *Minisota Makoce*, but specifically at the place called *Maka Cokaya Kin*, or the Center of the Earth. This place is at *Bdote*, which means the joining or juncture of two bodies of

water and in this instance refers to the area where the Minnesota River joins the Mississippi. Minnesotans have retained this word as *Mendota* and it is located in the midst of the Twin Cities metropolitan area, with Fort Snelling overlooking the sacred juncture of *Bdote*.



View of Mississippi River at Bdote Area of Minnesota, photo by Waziyatawin

The creation account I just shared is for Dakota people. I am not sharing it with the expectation that non-Dakota people will subscribe to it or that they will begin to conceive of *Bdote* as their place of origin. Our origin story does not dictate that because the *Bdewakantunwan* emerged at *Bdote*, that all human populations must have emerged there. That is not our way. Instead, the reason I am sharing this story is to demonstrate the ancient and sacred relations we have with this landscape. This is the same sacred and ancient relationship that Christians, Jews, and Muslims have with Middle Eastern sites such as Jerusalem, Mecca, or Nazareth. I am also sharing this story to demonstrate that we do not believe we emigrated from any other place. Rather, our stories assert that we were created here and that we have always lived here. We recognize that we traveled to and lived in other parts of North America over the centuries. We also recognize that our territorial boundaries have fluctuated during the thousands

of years we have inhabited this land.² And, we recognize that other Indigenous nations shared *Minisota Makoce* with us for periods of time.³ However, our historical record indicates that there is absolutely no ambiguity about *Minisota* as Dakota homeland.

Like other stories from our oral tradition, this story serves as a subversive reminder that the “truth” pedaled by settler society is not our truth. Yet, for much of the Dakota population, we have simply tucked this story and similar stories into the recesses of our minds, as echoes of a previous reality, a previous time when Dakota knowledge provided the answers to all of our ontological questions. In the minds of many of our people, the experience of colonization has largely transmuted our traditional knowledge into the miasma of irrelevancy.

We have been conditioned by settler society to devalue or forget the knowledge of our origins, as the only knowledge that mattered was that which served to invalidate our claims to our homeland and relegate us to a status of immigrants or even invaders of an earlier age. Settler society has slowly loosened each stake of our claim to our land base, while at the same time renaming and remaking *Minisota* in its Eurocentric and imperialist image. They have imposed a false identity on the landscape, dramatically changing it to reflect the values of a consumer-based, exploitative culture. They severely altered the natural environment through the elimination of biodiversity, the draining of wetlands, the stripping of forests, the desertification of the prairies, the extraction of natural resources, unrelenting “development,” and the continuous pollution of the waters, air, and land.

Beyond the Looking Glass

Many of our people have succumbed to the fantasy about the righteousness of this rape of the land. Settler society has indoctrinated us with a sense of inevitability and a belief in a notion of progress. In his exposé regarding the injustices of the modern world, Eduardo Galeano reminds us that “The looking-glass school teaches us to suffer reality, not change it; to forget the past, not learn from it; to accept the future, not invent it. In its halls of criminal learning, impotence, amnesia, and resignation are required courses.”⁴ The “looking-glass” lens of the United States is particularly potent, brandishing an image of American society as not only

superior to those of Indigenous Peoples, but indestructible and eternal. This requires a different kind of mythmaking, one that devours the humanity of Indigenous Peoples with the same ferocity that the physical actions of settler society devour our homelands.

When forced to see the world through the looking glass, it is often difficult for the viewer to remember that it too is a product of the minds of human beings, manufactured for the purpose of subjugating and manipulating the masses. Those who rely on the looking glass as their sole source of vision are particularly vulnerable to its influence. But, those who have envisioned the world through an alternative lens, even if only in glimpses, understand its distorted nature, even if only intuitively.

In today's context, I am working with a group of Dakota people to shatter the looking glass lens that has kept our people in bondage and disallowed us from even conceptualizing a future of freedom in our homeland. We are calling into question the narrative of our history that justifies the invasion and theft of our lands, the brutal colonization of our people, and the policies of genocide and ethnic cleansing perpetrated against us. We are struggling to illuminate the injustices that continue to permeate our daily lives, and we are fighting for a more just future for our grandchildren. We are revealing the master narrative as myth and we are struggling to blast the truth from the center of our crying souls.

It is in this space between myth and truth, between conscience and intuition, between subjugation and freedom, that I wish to dwell today. And, I would like to ground this discussion in place, the place Dakota people have called home for thousands of years, *Minisota Makoce*. I am living in these spaces as this is where my physical body is confined to a limited existence; it is also where my spirit and mind are traveling in the expansiveness of freedom.

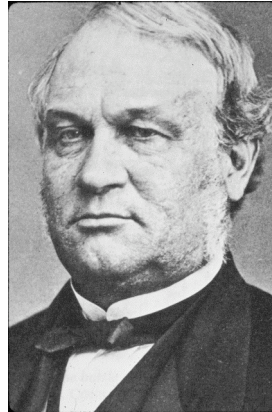
I come from a people who have been mesmerized by the looking glass, which is a testament to the extent of crimes perpetrated against us. In the last two centuries, Dakota people have experienced such extreme atrocities that fear continues to rule our lives and compel our complacency. To understand how far we must go to reclaim our humanity, I must also tell the story of our subjugation.

Subjugating the People, Stealing the Land

While intrusions into Dakota life began in the seventeenth century with fur traders intent on exploiting Dakota people and resources, it was not until 1805 that the American government began its assault on Dakota lands in earnest. That year Zebulon Pike traveled up the Mississippi River to negotiate the first land cession with Dakota people so that the U.S. could build a fort at the juncture of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers. That was the same juncture our people called *Maka Cokaya Kin* (The Center of the Earth) from the creation story I shared with you at the beginning. That fraudulent treaty, signed by only two Dakota leaders, opened the floodgates for EuroAmerican invasion of Dakota lands.

Within the next half century, the United States effectively stole from Dakota people everything but a ten-mile wide strip of land bordering the Minnesota River. Every one of the treaty negotiations (in 1830, 1837, 1851, and 1858) between Dakota people and the United States government were immoral and fraught with corruption. Dakota people were threatened, blackmailed, coerced, and bribed into signing treaties, and in some cases even imprisoned for opposing the terms of the treaties. In the end, even the ridiculous terms of the treaties were moot because the government violated every one.

By 1862, Dakota people were in a state of desperation. In addition to facing treaty violations by the federal government, Dakota people confronted a flood of white invasion, the destruction of Dakota homeland including depletion of animals and plants, and attacks on every aspect of Dakota way of life. In that context, Dakota people went to war against the United States government and its citizens, as a last attempt to defend Dakota people, lands and way of life.



Alexander Ramsey, Governor of Minnesota at the time of the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. Ramsey is considered the architect of Minnesota's policies of genocide and ethnic cleansing.

A few weeks into the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862, Governor Alexander Ramsey declared, "The Sioux Indians of Minnesota must be exterminated or driven forever beyond the borders of the State." Outnumbered and outgunned, Dakota people were defeated within six weeks. Many Dakota people fled

into Dakota Territory or Canada while others surrendered. The government hunted down other Dakota people, imprisoning all those they could find. This opened the way for Minnesotans to implement Ramsey's plan and they wasted no time. One of the most heinous but spectacular outcomes of the plan for extermination occurred on December 26, 1862, when white Minnesotans lynched thirty-eight Dakota warriors in the largest simultaneous mass hanging from one gallows in world history. White soldiers imprisoned the remaining men, women and children in concentration camps in Mankato, Minnesota and at Fort Snelling, the site of *Bdote*. Though Dakota people suffered nearly a 20% population loss in the concentration camps and their removal to the concentration camps, this was not enough to fulfill Ramsey's plan.



Drawing depicting the 1862 state-sponsored lynching of 38 Dakota warriors (above).

Fort Snelling concentration camp, Winter 1862-63 (below).



The following spring, in May 1863, Dakota people were expelled from Minnesota, most of the men sent to a prison in Davenport, Iowa, and the women and children sent to the Crow Creek Reservation in South Dakota. Bounties were then placed on the scalps of Dakota people, eventually reaching the amount of \$200 (enough to buy a 160-acre homestead in the 1860s) and

punitive expeditions were sent into Dakota Territory to terrorize the fleeing Dakota, either killing them or destroying the food and material supplies they needed to survive the winter.

In 1863, the federal government also unilaterally abrogated all of the treaties negotiated with the Eastern Dakota (which excluded the 1805 treaty negotiated with the entire “Sioux Nation”), simultaneously paying our 1858 treaty annuity money to white settlers for “depredations” committed by Dakota people. In the end, the U.S. government and its citizens kept the land and the money, leaving the Dakota destitute and without a reservation in our *Minnesota* homeland. After 1863, only small handfuls of Dakota people stayed in Minnesota, a few families who lived in the shadows for decades and those who disavowed their Dakota identity and swore allegiance to the United States.

Today, Minnesota is one of the whitest states in the union. The vast majority of Dakota people still live in exile, and Dakota populations reside on approximately .006% of our original land base. Minnesota’s policies of ethnic cleansing were so successful, Dakota people remain virtually invisible. Meanwhile, populations in Canada continue to live in fear of being homeless. Lacking treaty status within Canada, they are treated as second-class Indigenous Peoples. Populations in the state remain mostly complacent, afraid to make waves out of fear and acting as though we should be grateful the government did not exterminate us completely. There is an overwhelming sense in our communities that we are a defeated people. We still have families attempting to curry favor with white society by celebrating how their ancestors saved white people from death during the war, or how they disavowed Dakota identity.

In the meantime, all four of the tiny Dakota communities remaining in Minnesota survive by gaming revenues, which have meant an increasing influence of America’s consumerist, materialist values and a further erosion of Dakota values. Settler society taught us that the outcome of the 1862 U.S.-Dakota War is a direct result of our violence against innocent white settlers. Thus, they have served to justify policies of genocide and ethnic cleansing by blaming the victims. In their minds, we are to blame for their violent policies. According to this perverted logic, white Minnesotans were simply responding to our declaration of war. In this narrow perspective of history, they do not recognize their invasion of Dakota lands as a crime, just as they do not recognize the theft of our lands as a crime. Instead, our removal was an

inevitable outcome, and they see their colonization of our lands and minds as necessary and even benevolent.

Minnesota's Sesquicentennial Celebration

In 2008, Minnesotans celebrated their sesquicentennial, that is, 150 years of statehood. In 2007 a group of Dakota people met with the Sesquicentennial Commission with the hope that after learning the truth regarding the history of the state, that they would elect to use the 150th commemoration to address the painful legacy of this history. Armed with an educational agenda, we addressed the commission, offered our services and expertise if they agreed to launch the campaign “Minnesota: 150 Years of Lies, The First Year of Truth Telling.” While we were not optimistic about the outcome when we first met with the commissioners, we wanted to exhaust the educational measures usually endorsed by settler society. As it turns out, the Commission, composed primarily of senators and legislators, was not educable. Even after learning of this history, they wanted to continue with their celebration, sending the message to Dakota people once again that we are still the expendable population, that genocide is acceptable as long as white people benefit, and that ethnic cleansing is acceptable as long as white people benefit from it. Though Dakota people paid the cost of Minnesota statehood, Minnesotans wanted to proceed with their birthday bash. Thus, in 2008 we knew we had to challenge their mythical narrative of benign settlement of Dakota homeland.

It was in this Sesquicentennial year that the interplay of truth and myth surrounded us. The executive director of the Sesquicentennial Commission, Jane Leonard, faced a moral quandary. She was selected to lead Minnesota's birthday celebration (a reward for her devotion to the state), yet she also declared to us that because of her own experiences with oppression, she wanted to do the right thing. Yet, it is impossible to condemn genocide on the one hand, and celebrate what was gained through genocide on another. That simply is not a sustainable position either intellectually, ethically, or spiritually.

We saw the contradiction put into practice when, during the first week of the festivities, Leonard publicly relayed a whitewashed version of the “darker side” of Minnesota, as she liked

to call it. She listed the mass hanging, forced removals, and treaty violations, but still refrained from employing accurate terminology such as “genocide,” “ethnic cleansing,” and “concentration camps” to discuss the history. Thus, on the state capitol grounds she was relaying aspects of the “dark history,” amidst other celebratory acts including an orchestra and choir, a recitation of the state’s accomplishments, a salute to Minnesota’s birthday by fighter jets flying over the capitol, and, finally, a display of fireworks. In that larger celebratory and imperialistic context, the story of the suffering of Dakota people became inconsequential. Leonard even rallied Indigenous participation, not from a single Dakota leader, but from two Anishinabe tribal leaders (Anishinabe are newcomers to Minnesota, not Indigenous to the land base) and brought in one of their drum groups to sing for the celebrating crowd. They needed Indian endorsement for their event and any endorsement would do.

The sesquicentennial discussions prompted Dakota people to contemplate the meaning of Minnesota’s celebration as well as the contestation over interpretations of the past. It is clear that the struggle over story is directly linked to the contemporary state of injustices for Dakota people. The sesquicentennial year, then, also prompted me to consider more deeply a Dakota vision of a just future, especially given the legacy of genocide and the violent way in which we were wrenched from our homeland.

A Four-Step Approach to Justice for Dakota People

To address the legacy of injustice in Dakota homeland, and to conceptualize a plan for achieving justice, I began articulating a four-step approach, detailed at length in my recently published book, *What Does Justice Look Like? The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland*. The four steps are truth telling, taking down the fort, reparations, and decolonization. The final vision would be one in which Dakota people and non-Dakota people had achieved a state of peaceful co-existence in *Minisota*, with one another and with the land and animals. Not incidentally, it is a future in which the mythic narrative of benign settlement is exposed as false and the truth about the injustices is acknowledged by society as a whole.

To understand our efforts to reclaim Dakota humanity, it is necessary to first explain this four-step process. A truth-telling forum would allow us to bring the pain of our history and current injustices to the forefront of the consciousness of the settler society in the state of Minnesota. Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred tells us, “If colonial authority is an artifice built on lies, then the way to confront and defeat it is with truths.”⁵ Because the truth of the violence with which settler society wrested control of our homeland has been suppressed so successfully with an alternative myth crafted so carefully, most Minnesotans have accepted it unquestioningly. They have learned to uphold the master narrative, and why not? There is no cause for remorse or regret when a story of benign pioneer settlement is coupled with the economic success of Indian gaming operations in Minnesota. There is no need to talk of justice when the populace is blind to injustice. Truth telling about injustices, then, is the first necessary step in striving for justice.

Awareness of truth, however, compels some kind of action. Once settler society acknowledges injustices and demonstrates some sort of contrition, they will create a moral imperative for restorative justice. The process of restorative justice is perhaps more easily conceived in stages. Once we initiate a phase of truth telling, it will necessarily cause us to rethink the foundations upon which the state of Minnesota was created. One of those foundations is that the “settlement” of Indigenous land is benign or even benevolent. When the violence and nastiness of the imperial business is unmasked, we must question the morality of continuing to celebrate Minnesota’s imperial and colonial icons. Our understanding of our historical past directly impacts our actions. Thus, when we unmask the face of imperialism, not only do we realize that we cannot celebrate imperial icons, we must challenge the icons that exist. Thus, I advocate a campaign to “Take Down the Fort,” both literally and metaphorically. While this phrase applies most tangibly to historic Fort Snelling, the site of the Dakota concentration camp during the winter of 1862–63, it also applies to all monuments, institutions, place names, and texts that continue to celebrate the perpetrators of genocide or the institutions and systems that facilitated the implementation of genocidal and unjust policies.

The truthful narrative of our history necessitates further action as well. If Minnesotans continue to benefit from injustice, that narrative is only modified if actions are taken to create a moral society today. To break from the trajectory, Minnesotans and Americans must engage the

next step in the movement toward reparative justice: land restoration and reparations. While this usually invokes tremendous fear within settler society, there are ways to conceive of land return in *Minnesota* that do not require current settlers to relinquish their individual property rights, unless they wish to do so in the name of justice. We can identify more than eleven million acres within the state of Minnesota currently designated as federal, state, tax-forfeited, or metro-commissioned lands. Settler society could immediately return those millions of acres to Dakota People without touching a single acre of privately held land.

In addition, non-land-based reparations will also be a necessary element of restoring justice in Dakota homeland. Once settler society guarantees a land base to Dakota People, for example, we can then negotiate a system to cover relocation expenses for populations in exile. I would argue that monetary compensation should not be the end goal, but what we need instead is essential support for the creation and development of an Indigenous infrastructure that will allow Dakota People to live according to our values and worldviews within our homeland.

In the end, however, none of this makes sense if institutions and systems of colonization remain in place. Ultimately, if settler society is interested in creating a peaceful and just society, all oppression must cease. Colonization, by its very nature, is antithetical to justice. Therefore, complete decolonization is a necessary end goal in a peaceful and just society. This would entail overturning the institutions, systems, and ideologies of colonialism that continue to affect every aspect of Indigenous life. In a nutshell, we all must rethink our ways of being and interacting in this world to create a sustainable, healthy, and peaceful co-existence with one another and with the natural world. This will likely mean an end to the entity known as the United States of America.

Truth telling, however, is the essential first step. That is why a group of Dakota people in *Minnesota* chose to use the 2008 sesquicentennial year to launch a truth-telling campaign. Our campaign challenged the mythic narrative promoted by the Sesquicentennial Commission and their associated activities. As with other sites of contestation, these two narratives have clashed and we have repeatedly witnessed how colonial law invokes colonial force to suppress the truth and silence opposition to the state-sanctioned story. We have witnessed the power of the truth to

disrupt and threaten the established order. We have seen the desperation with which settler society clutches its icons and mythic stories to its breast for protection and security.



Dakota Truth Telling in 2008

We began our truth-telling campaign the weekend Minnesota began celebrating its 150th year of statehood. Minnesotans chose to commence the year-long celebration with the initiation of a wagon train ride from Cannon Falls, Minnesota to the Twin Cities metro area. Replete with settlers dressed in nineteenth

century pioneer garb, riding horses and wagons, this event completely fabricated a story of wagon-train pioneer arrival to Minnesota in an attempt to fit into America's master narrative of triumphant westward expansion, that is, travel by wagon train across the rugged terrain and dangerous wilderness to fulfill God's divine plan of white settlement of the land. In actuality, almost all white invaders to Minnesota came by boat up the Mississippi River. Yet, even that accurate story of arrival is not as compelling to settler society as the pioneer fantasies of childhood dreams. Truth has no place within that fantasy.

Mounted Police at "Historic" Fort Snelling (actually the Fort Snelling Replica) protecting wagon train reenactors during sesquicentennial celebrations, May 10, 2008.

Photo courtesy of Allies: media/art



May 10, 2008 Wagon Train Re-enactors upon arrival at Fort Snelling, St. Paul, MN.

Photo courtesy of Craig Marsden

A group of Dakota people met the wagon train at Historic Fort Snelling (which itself is not the historic fort but a twentieth-century replica of the original 1820s fort) to challenge their myths and remind Minnesotans that Dakota people paid the price of Minnesota statehood. It was as if Dakota people had stepped into an old western, facing nineteenth century white pioneers at the fort, with everyone playing their scripted roles. Mounted police assisted the wagon train and prepared to defend them against Indian attack. When we blocked the entrance to the fort, they attempted to intimidate the protesters and push their horses through. The police arrested seven people for interfering in this procession promoting the triumph of manifest destiny over Indigenous Peoples. They ensured the pageant could proceed into the protection of the Fort Snelling grounds where the pioneer re-enactors camped for the night.



As Albert Memmi has written in reference to the colonizer, “Having found this new moral order where he is by definition master and innocent, the colonialist would at last have given himself absolution. It is still essential that this order not be questioned by others, and especially not by the colonized.”⁶ When we began challenging the master narrative, we called into question the existing social and moral order. This was perceived as a threat to be subdued with police force.

*Ernie Whiteman and youth
at the Fort Snelling Wagon
Train Protest, May 10, 2008.*

*Photo courtesy of Allies:
media/art*

*First Minnesota Regiment
Re-enactors at the
Minnesota State Capitol, May
11, 2008. This was the first
appearance of many
throughout the
sesquicentennial year.
They were also present at
the “A Day at the Upper
Sioux Agency in 1858”
celebration in August 2008.*

*White Minnesotans
celebrating pioneer
settlement of Minnesota,
Minnesota State Capitol, May
11, 2008.*

*Photos courtesy of Allies:
media/art*



From that first weekend, it was apparent that the contest over interpretation of the past, mythic or not, could not be simply an intellectual tournament,

rather it is a contest over the future of the colonial order. As many intellectuals have pointed out, by nature, colonialism is fundamentally unstable. Each new generation of colonizers must continue to defend the status quo to ensure their ongoing privilege as well as the continuing exploitation of the lands and resources of the colonized. This is true in the Dakota homeland of *Minisota Makoce*, just as it is true in Hawai'i and wherever Indigenous Peoples have lost their lands and resources to colonial interests. When the truth exposes the extreme and inherent injustices of colonial occupation of Indigenous lands, we are provoking settler society into

making a choice. Either colonizers can choose to uphold the existing unjust system, using whatever force is necessary to silence the truth-tellers, or they can acknowledge the injustice and commit themselves to the goal of social justice. In this context, truth becomes the weapon of righteousness, and it becomes a very dangerous weapon wielded against settler society.

The act of truth telling has the potential to peel away the pretense of just relations and a just society when it can expose colonizer efforts to suppress truthful accounts that challenge the master narrative. As Dakota scholar, Chris Mato Nunpa, has written, “They [the colonizers] are protected as they tell their myths, lies, and distorted history while we are arrested for telling the TRUTH about land theft, broken treaties, genocide, and bounties!”⁷ This truth becomes undeniable as witnesses observe how the state institutions and citizens respond to truth telling by Indigenous Peoples (both witnesses who were physically present at the time of the protests and those who later witnessed the protests through news sources and digital communication networks: see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9ait0L50yA>). In 2008, we engaged these truth-telling activities on the Mendota Bridge heading into Minneapolis, at Fort Snelling, on the state capitol grounds, and at the Upper Sioux Agency State Park, located on state lands adjacent to my home reservation. Every time we gather for truth telling, law enforcement is present, perpetrating varying degrees of harassment and repression.

Just as police arrested protesters during the approach of the wagon train to Fort Snelling, several more were arrested during the protest at the Minnesota State Capitol in St. Paul the following weekend. Our intent every time we went to the capitol was to serve as living reminders of the pain caused by Minnesota Statehood, to give testimony to the horrors perpetrated so that invaders could claim our land and resources, and to question what it means for Minnesotans to celebrate what they gained at our expense. These reminders are unacceptable to settlers in American society as they intuitively, if not consciously, sense the inherent threat to the existing social order when the justness of their occupation of Indigenous lands is called into question. It is dangerous for them to contemplate these truths.

Recognition of genocide, for example, demands action. Moral positioning is completely lost if one acknowledges genocide, but refuses to accompany this acknowledgement with a commitment to work toward justice. Thus, if one is committed to maintaining the status quo,

one must be vigilant about suppressing information about genocide, and deal swiftly and powerfully with those who attempt to voice the truth.

Even on the steps of the state capitol, we were not allowed to speak these truths while the state of Minnesota was reflecting on its 150 years of history. As a long-time Indigenous rights activist, Steve Blake, with his hand drum, began to sing an honor song for the thirty-eight Dakota men hanged in Mankato, four officers attacked him, wrestled him to the ground, arrested him, and hauled him away. That was one of his last protest efforts. Steve was sickly at the time of the attack and arrest and he passed away just four months later, in early September 2008. The police arrested me that day for disrupting their celebratory event. I was armed with nothing but the truth, but publicly telling that truth is criminalized in Dakota homeland, especially if we attempt to truth tell outside of our prescribed strictures.

In August 2008, the repression of truth telling arrived in my home community. As the park manager at the Upper Sioux Agency State Park, Terri Dinesen, organized a sesquicentennial event she called “Yellow Medicine Agency in 1858,” she was hoping to celebrate the 1850s as a time of friendship between Dakota people and white settlers. To promote such a stunning delusion, Dinesen had to ignore the fact that the 1850s were a time of brutal colonization when every facet of our way of life was under attack, when the bulk of our homelands were stolen from us, and when invading whites were attempting to totally subjugate our population. When our tribal leaders demanded she cancel the event because of its offensiveness, she dug in her heels and with alleged support all the way from the governor’s office, she proceeded with the event. Rather than addressing the concerns of Dakota people, she dealt with the issue by simply shoring up law enforcement. Using the police to enforce an educational mission is never a good idea. Protecting the narrative by force only illuminates its inherent weakness. Two of us were arrested for truth telling that day, once again under the catch-all charge of disorderly conduct.



Arrest of Autumn Cavender-Wilson at the Upper Sioux State Park, August 16, 2008. Photo Courtesy of Sage Cavender-Wilson.

In spite of these intimidation tactics, we have become strengthened in our cause. Every time one of us is arrested, the power of truth becomes more real to us. Our stories are powerful. Our narrative is strong. They are afraid of us.

Reclaiming Minisota

It is in this context that we are preparing to begin the reclamation of our homeland with our bodies. We began our reclamation at *Maka Cokaya Kin*, the place of Bdewakantunwan creation. In that area is a sacred spring where our people collected water as far back as our memories take us. We planned our initial reclamation during the time of the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, to help bring attention and awareness to the injustices still faced by Dakota people within our homeland. We engaged this effort to send a message to settler

society that while they continue to benefit from the occupation of our homeland, most of our people live in exile; that while they are busy engaging in celebratory events, we are seeking justice for the centuries of injustices including the crimes of genocide, land theft, ethnic cleansing, and desecration to our land base.

We began our reclamation with four days of ceremonies and were prepared to go to jail to challenge the denial of our rights as Dakota people, both inherent rights and Treaty of 1805 rights. While it initially appeared that we would get shut down by police authorities on our first day of occupation, as the time drew nearer to the three o'clock deadline when access to the Bureau of Mines property was closed, to avoid a confrontation, the United States Department of the Interior issued us a four-day permit for our ceremonies, a permit we never requested. Further, when we planned on staying past the four days and expected a full raid on our campsite, authorities backed off and local politicians intervened, attempting to assure us that they would support Dakota claims on the site.



Pool at the base of Coldwater Spring, a sacred site to Dakota people located in the Bdote area of Minisota. Photo was taken during the 2008 Coldwater Occupation by Waziyatawin.

The first occupation was an experiment and a learning opportunity. Dakota traditionalists left the site on the fifth day, agreeing to proceed with a better-organized occupation at some future date. The youth present at the site are now fully inspired to launch a Dakota youth movement dedicated to the restoration of Dakota lands. We are all committed to a re-occupation of *Bdote* until Dakota claims to the site are fully reinstated and the federal government conducts a clean-up of the site, removing toxic structures and restoring it to a pristine condition. Stay tuned for further developments on this front.⁸



Tipis erected on the first day of the 2008 Coldwater Occupation.

Photo in author's collection.

Even according to colonial law Dakota people have the right to live, hunt, pray and anything else we would have formerly done on that land base as those rights were delineated in the Pike Treaty of 1805. In the past, however, the government has disallowed us from exerting those rights and we anticipate the police will intervene in this reclamation as well. Yet, our claim to the area goes beyond treaties and U.S. law. Our claim is in the stories.



Banner at 2008 Coldwater Occupation, photo in author's collection.

The last time Dakota people attempted to reclaim land in *Minisota* was when our ancestors went to war in 1862. Now, nearly 150 years later, we are prepared to reclaim our lands again. Something is astir; something is awakening in our people. The land is calling us home. Just as our ancestors were formed from the red clay that was exposed when *Maka Ina* opened her body to *Wakantanka*, that clay resides in us. From the clay, our humanity is rising once again.

¹ Sections of this paper, including the beginning discussion of the Bdewakantunwan Dakota creation story, are excerpted from my 2008 volume *What Does Justice Look Like? The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland* (St. Paul: Living Justice Press, 2008).

² Dakota lands at one time would have at least included parts of what are now Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Manitoba, Canada. Other scholars and tribal historians have argued that Dakota territory extended as far as Saskatchewan, Alberta, Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, and Illinois. Leo Omani from the Wahpeton Reserve near Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, for example, cites the work of James Morrison and oral tradition of Robert Good Voice. See Leo Omani, "The Dakota Diaspora from Minnesota into Canada After 1862: Dispelling North American Colonial History in the Movement to Revive the Oral Dakota History, Language, and Culture of the Tiyospayes that Belong to Bdewakantunwan, Sisitowan, Wahpetonwan, and Wahpekute," a paper delivered at the "Remembering, Retracing & Retelling: The Diaspora of the Dakota People from Minnesota into Canada and the Dakotas after 1862" Conference, Southwest Minnesota State University, Marshall, Minnesota, April 2001; and, J. Morrison, *Dakota/Lakota Joint Treaty Adhesion Project, Phase Two: Historical Land Use and Occupancy and Dakota/Lakota Crown Relations*, Legal Historical Research, Ancaster, Ontario, 2000.

³ For example, the Iowa, Oto, and Ho-Chunk all made their homes in Minnesota at various points.

⁴ Eduardo Galeano, *Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World* (New York: Picador, 2000), 8.

⁵ Taiaiake Alfred, *Wasase: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom* (Orchard Park: Broadview, 2005), 149.

⁶ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 76.

⁷ Chris Mato Nunpa, e-mail to author, quoted with permission, August 18, 2008.

⁸ Since the writing of this paper, the disposition of this federal property has yet to be determined since the controlling entity, the Bureau of Mines, is now defunct. The Department of the Interior currently “owns” the property and though Dakota people have been vocal about wanting the land returned to us, it appears that the government will instead place it under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. This would be a perfect opportunity for the federal government to begin to make amends to the Dakota Oyate through a small, symbolic land return, but it looks as though they will instead continue to deny even this small bit of justice to our people.