

# Food First BACKGROUNDER

INSTITUTE FOR FOOD AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

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## Everyone is Downstream

By Hartman Deetz

I left California late at night, later than expected. My friend arrived outside along with another woman whom I was meeting for the first time. I jammed my duffel bag and camping supplies into a car that already seemed full to the brim, and we left for Standing Rock.

We drove Interstate 80 across Nevada, Utah, and into Wyoming. I was struck, once again, by the beauty of the land in this country – great salt plains, rocky mountain faces, multi-colored hillsides, pine forests. We are truly blessed to live in a land of such grand, diverse landscapes.

The weight of the earth and sky particularly impressed me in the great plains of Dakota prairie land – sparsely accented with small rolling hills, occasional trees along creeks, and streams that then feed into mighty rivers. The world is cut in half by a flat horizon, reflected by the scale of the nighttime sky with the stars, Milky Way, and the Northern Lights. Or in the day, under the shifting pillars of clouds. This is quintessential farm land of mythical Americana proportions. Of tornadoes and Dorothy, beef ranchers, wagon trains... and Indians. The shrieks, the panic, the disdain, the hatred instilled in that Hollywood line still lingers on for some in the Dakotas.

**“The Dakota Access Pipeline, also known as the Bakken Pipeline, is an oil infrastructure project planned to bring fracked oil from North Dakota through North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Illinois, where it will then connect with existing rail and pipeline networks, transporting highly volatile crude oil to the Gulf Coast.”**

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A “not in my back yard” group of concerned citizens in Bismark successfully moved the initial pipeline route in May 2014 from their region, citing concerns that the pipeline could potentially impact drinking water for the city, as well as other environmental concerns. These same issues did not seem to be a concern to regulators when a new route was approved in September of 2014 that cut across Standing Rock Reservation, which are treaty lands, without consultation or approval from the Standing Rock tribe.<sup>1</sup>

This is a violation of the sovereign standing of a tribal government; the Standing Rock tribe has not and will not give approval for this project. It is a threat to their ability to live on what they have left of their ancient homeland. *Mni wiconi*: water is life. In fact, the tribe has taken every measure to ensure that this project is

not approved - pursuing the case in federal court, seeking to redress their grievances through government, participating in negotiations, and more. However, the project approved by the state of North Dakota’s government has been actively moving forward with construction despite ongoing objections from the tribal government.

A group of 30 youth ran on foot from Standing Rock to Washington DC to communicate their resistance.<sup>2</sup> Sadly, President Obama has yet to respond. People set up an opposition camp in the path of the pipeline; many are using their bodies to block construction and halt operations. Tribal Council Chairperson David Archambault was among those arrested for trespassing when tribal citizens and supporters flooded into an active construction site.<sup>3</sup>

On September 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Friday before Labor Day, the tribe found a new method of resistance – the Native American Graves Protection Act. The tribe’s historic preservation officer submitted a stop work order, showing the presence of grave sites in the path of the proposed pipeline route. The following Saturday, Labor Day weekend, the situation came

to a head as tribal citizens and their supporters arrived to plant their tribal flags and lay down their tobacco ties, prayers, and offerings to mark grave sights – but a team of bulldozers had arrived before them, 20 miles away from any active work zone, in order to bulldoze any evidence of graves in the pipeline route.<sup>4,5</sup> Tribal members occupied the active construction zone while bulldozers plowed the graves of their ancestors. Private mercenary security forces hired by Dakota Access attacked unarmed tribal citizens with pepper spray and dogs. A pregnant woman and a child were among those who suffered dog bites; both went to the hospital. The attack dogs were so out of control, one of the mercenaries was even bitten by their own attack dog.

The video went out across the web, as did the call for support. Like many people, Native and otherwise, I answered.

“It’s an affront to our culture to bulldoze burials [*sic*] purposefully, women and children were at the forefront when the dogs attacked and they don’t care,” said Erin Strongheart Ford. “If there was [*sic*] crosses or headstones there do you think they would have done that?” Erin is a woman of mixed descent identifying herself as “from Chaktaw, Cherokee, African and Celtic lineage.” She is active in the food justice and organic farming movement in the Driftless region of Wisconsin where she now lives. She has travelled back and forth between Wisconsin and North Dakota, in all bringing between \$10-15,000 of food donations to the camp. As a farmer, she helps bring a broader perspective to the issue. The risk of contaminating the Missouri River could impact the water supply for

a significant portion of the nation's farm land. "If you are an organic farmer making a stand against GMOs [genetically modified crops] and pesticides, this is the same fight," she explains.

On the way to Standing Rock, I stopped in South Dakota where I spoke with farmer Jim Keller. Keller lives on a farm just a few short miles from the banks of the Missouri River. Just like the Standing Rock Sioux in North Dakota, the state of South Dakota would also bear great risk from a pipeline spill without reaping any of the meager economic benefits. Keller has been involved with social movements around water in the region since the 1980s when he worked with Families Against Radioactive Mining (FARM). He finds much in common with the pipeline fight of today. "This affects the entire Missouri from here to the Mississippi, and the whole Mississippi south of St. Louis." Keller told me, "The river feeds into the aquifer [Ogala Aquifer] and that's where we get the water when we turn on the tap." From Standing Rock to Keller's farm, to South Dakota, Iowa, St. Louis, and all the way down to New Orleans, Keller says, "everyone lives downstream."

While many Native people stand in opposition to this pipeline at Standing Rock, the resistance reaches far beyond Standing Rock tribal members alone. Many people have seen the opposition, and have recognized parts of themselves in the people who have travelled to Standing Rock. Bill Hill of Tuscon, Arizona said, "If we don't band together as human beings then why are we here?" Hill brought a 30 foot bus from Tuscon full of people and supplies. Some had money, some had material donations, others had only

themselves. Hill said, "It's important to get people out of their comfort zones, because most Americans... we are too comfortable. Indigenous people have nothing; we have taken everything from them and now we want to put an oil pipeline through their water?" Hill reminds us of the importance of water and life, "Separation is what destroys people. We are all here together to stop the pipeline."

Michael Tinter traveled from Putnam Valley, New York, where he does permaculture education at Eden Village Summer Camp, saying, "I knew there was some way I could help." Taking the teaching of permaculture that states 'the problem is the solution,' Tinter was put in charge of dealing with food waste, and started the camp's composting program. He went on to describe how the camp is about more than stopping the pipeline, "This is the fight to stop something bad and hurtful, but it has taken the bad and turned it into something good by bringing the people together."

Taking the problem of food waste and turning it into compost seemed like a no-brainer. However, the state trumped the rights of the Standing Rock Tribe once again – the North Dakota Environmental Protection Agency insisted that composting amounted to burying waste and would be considered illegal dumping. "If we have to compost above the ground we will have to shut down," said Leigh Salway, one of the two women leading cooking at the Wild Oglala Kitchen. Every day, this camp kitchen starts the morning by cooking breakfast. After breakfast Leigh and the rest of the team starts cooking lunch, and after lunch they start cooking dinner. As the sign says, everyone is

welcome - to food that flows all day, but also for a sense of home. Leigh is a quiet, soft-spoken classic Native matriarch whose hospitality has gathered a whole camp around her kitchen. "These people are out here to help us. I come from Oglala, but we have a lot of family up here," she told me. "We want people to know we appreciate them being here, so we feed them and invite them to visit with us by our fire."

I helped dig the compost pit with her partner, a man alternately introducing himself as John, Frank, Billy, and Richard. He is a man full of jokes. When he was told to remove the compost from the pit, he used the old Indian weapon of humor to strike back. "They say we can't dig up the ground for compost, so we should just tell them that it's for a pipeline... What could go wrong? Thirty inches of crude oil?" He continues on, shovel in hand, working the soil out of the pit. "What if we told them we found some graves eh? They would send the bulldozers over and dig it for us." Like the others digging the compost out of their pits, Richard is using his shovel to work; however, I notice in classic trickster fashion he is digging a new compost pit right next to the old one.

That spirit of resistance is fed and supported by women like Salway. The morning of the Labor Day action, many of those flooding into construction sites first came through the wild Oglala kitchen, or the Hoopa or Navajo camp, picking up fry bread, bananas, peanut butter and jelly, or other travel food along with bottles of water. The camp rallies, and a caravan heads to the construction site. This happened three times during the week I was at Standing Rock: 300 or 400 tribal citizens and their allies rush through

corn and soybean fields, and each of them are supported from coast to coast and around the world by donations of food, clothing, money, and skills. The camp is alive with volunteers at the medical clinic, the legal aid tent, and media hill. People splitting wood, working, and serving as security. There is a constant procession of speakers, singers, and poets coming through the main circle. These people go to the work zones and stop the construction that continues in spite of mounting opposition from federal agencies such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Department of Justice, Department of the Interior, and the Army Corps of Engineers.<sup>6</sup>

Numerous tribal nations have issued support and solidarity statements, as have cities and states across the country and the world. The UN has even weighed in, saying the tribe has been treated unfairly.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this support, pipeline construction has continued – and so have the direct actions. A recent action resulted, once again, in turmoil as witnesses came back reporting that police had thrown an elder woman to the ground, guns with live ammo were pointed at crowds of unarmed tribal citizens with children and elders present, armored vehicles blocked both ends of the road, and a crop duster

sprayed the crowd with unknown chemicals.<sup>8</sup> The determination of the water protectors reads clear in a social media post from Amber Knudson, “There were military tanks, guns possibly loaded with projectiles or tear gas, and guns loaded with bullets brought by the police. Many water protectors are arrested weekly, and yet... we are still here.

[...]We will still stay, we will still fight for our water, because oil is a privilege and water is life.”

## Notes:

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## About the Author and Photographer:

**Hartman Deetz** is a Wampanoag of the Mashpee community. Born in Massachusetts, he moved to Berkeley, California at age 2. Beginning at age 12, Deetz became a bicoastal child after his father's return to Mashpee. Deetz spent ten years living and working within the community for tribal cultural education programs. Deetz returned to college and in 2016 earned his BA in cultural education and sustaining marginalized communities from Goddard College in Vermont. Deetz currently lives in Richmond, California where he continues to be active in native environmental rights with the San Francisco chapter of Idle No More.

## About the Dismantling Racism in the Food System Series:

This Backgrounder is the fifth installment in a multi-authored series on “Dismantling Racism in the Food System.” In this series we seek to uncover the structural foundations of racism in the food system and highlight the ways people, communities, organizations and social movements are dismantling the attitudes, institutions and structures that hold racism in place. Food First is convinced that to end hunger and malnutrition we must end injustices in the food system. Dismantling the injustices of racism in the food system, in the food movement, in our organizations and among ourselves is fundamental to transforming the food system and our society.

Food First invites contributions on this topic from authors engaged in research and community action to dismantle racism in the food system. Different aspects of the topic can include land, labor, finance, food access, nutrition, food justice and food sovereignty organizations.



# Dismantling Racism in the Food System

Special multi-authored series on racism and liberation in the food system



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Food First is a "people's think tank" dedicated to ending the injustices that cause hunger and helping communities to take back control of their food systems. We advance our mission through three interrelated work areas—research, education, and action—designed to promote informed citizen engagement with the institutions and policies that control our food.

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