

RADICAL TEACHER

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Review
Awake, A Dream From Standing Rock

by Erica Cardwell



AWAKE, A DREAM FROM STANDING ROCK. (2017). BULLFROG FILMS.

In January of 2017, just after Donald Trump officially became our forty-fifth president of the United States, drilling resumed on the Dakota Access Pipeline in Standing Rock, North Dakota. Just one month prior, the Standing Rock resistance camp of water protectors, indigenous families, and spiritual leaders were celebrating a victory after nearly a year of holding space at Standing Rock. In protection of the sacred land of the Oceti Sakowin people of the Great Sioux Nations, the drilling had ceased and an executive ruling from President Obama and the Army Corps of Engineers denied the permit for the pipeline. This moment of victory represents the power in collective action and peaceful strategies for world building underneath a capitalist regime, despite Trump's undoing of this historic motion. The ripple effect left an impact on the global movement for environmental justice.

Awake, A Dream From Standing Rock is a moving overview of the year-long fight for justice at the Standing Rock resistance camp. The film is a collaboration between indigenous filmmakers and activists Myron Dewey and Doug Good Feather, and environmental filmmakers Josh Fox and James Spione. *Awake* serves as an historical chronicle of the #NODAPL movement for environmental justice and the protection of ancient land. It calls into question the meanings of "ownership" and "development" as we examine a steadily evolving relationship to our shifting climate.

The film is useful to teachers with a "radical" commitment to addressing the present, and facing mainstream inequities head on. The question of "ownership" can be dissected in a range of teaching contexts, for instance, composition and literature classes looking at imperialist themes, as in Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" and other frequently-used texts. "Development," particularly as it relates to urban education setting, offers us a striking landscape of gentrification. As one of my students said in such plain and unaffected brilliance, "There's always construction." Those of us that consider ourselves "radical educators" take these particular terms to task quite often in our classrooms.

Awake demonstrates this in the form of lived/learned practicum--from the dedicated prayers and presence of the individuals at the resistance camp to the worldwide impact it caused. The global movement reached from Oklahoma to Australia, and from Florida to the South Pacific--indigenous communities were joined by non-indigenous and secular supporters organized against this fascist nightmare in a veritable attack on our foundations. Therefore, *Awake, A Dream for Standing Rock*, is not only a fantastic pedagogical tool but also teaches the significance of process in our collective liberation.

Presumably for its narrative construction of facts and memoir, *Awake* has been billed as a fiction film and not a documentary. It is framed around a dream, lending a non-

linear chronology to the format. The film is organized in two parts and is available on Netflix, which presents educators with the opportunity to assign out-of-class viewings of the film. Part One introduces a dream as the film's premise--recounted by Floris White Bull, member of the Oceti Sakowin tribe, water protector, mother of five. Floris describes her vision of the "black snake," the pipeline that will run beneath the Missouri river, threatening oil spills and widespread water contamination. Some educators could utilize the statistical frequency of oil spills and the long-term effects of water contamination (e.g., lead contamination in Flint, Michigan) as a learning tool in science and biochemical student research projects. And, likewise, in composition classes "limited clean water access" and "water contamination patterns" could be a generative research topic.

Also in Part One, viewers are introduced to key #NODAPL organizers such as Tara Houska, indigenous lawyer from Washington D.C., who outlined specific divestment strategies for meaningful acts of resistance against the pipeline. This framing offers context for social justice resources for banking, as we guide students and community to differentiate between capital and wealth. As we continue, the significance of the Standing Rock soil is instilled in the viewer, along with the psychic peacefulness of the community of youth and elders who refuse to fight despite rightful ownership of the land. As Floris's dream - - a consistent theme of the film -- can attest, these acts of resistance not only respect sacred land, but also act as a bridge in acknowledging our humanity.

On Thanksgiving Day -- Survivor's Day, according to the Great Sioux Tribes, in acknowledgement of their massacred ancestors -- members of the resistance camp constructed a bridge to cross the Missouri River. The youth offered a calm request for historical acknowledgement, clarifying the legacy of Thanksgiving in the context of their native lives. Part One ends as Floris realizes that she is not dreaming. She is awake. Her dream provides a difficult omen of conflict-- the November 20th incident where North Dakota police use water hoses, rubber bullets and direct force to overtake the resistance camp. Floris warns, "We are all guests on Mother Earth."

Part Two opens with a more somber tone as we enter the resistance camp at Standing Rock, hovering above heads bowed in prayer. "Church isn't over," someone cries out as the police attempt to interrupt. One leader stands up and greets the police, organizing the praying group in a chorus of "Thank you," continuing forward with the precedent of peace and sacred protection. The conditions have noticeably changed as winter sets in. Young activists handle and organize heaping trash bags of donated clothes and resources from all over the country--bringing into context the boxes set up in schools and community centers, with "Standing Rock Donations" scribed in permanent marker.

Along with winter, the press has also arrived, demonstrating the amplified visibility of the #NODAPL movement. In this section, the harsh realities of the front lines of Standing Rock certainly increase their potency, as

well as the complications of resistance work in our current technology-saturated age. Thus, surveillance rears into question, as drone cameras capture helicopters swarming in their persistent rounds. The police presence has also increased, as law enforcement officials not only “supervise” any entrances and exits from the camp, but also follow the filmmakers and greet them by name. Despite increased policing and surveillance, the overall energy of the community remains dedicated and even, as intergenerational circles form and sing Lakota hymns of faith and gratitude.

Awake, A Dream for Standing Rock is truthful context for capital-driven “development” on sacred land. For our students, it provides a powerful framing for the local and national issue of clean water access, bringing it from a headline to a reality. Above all, this film represents the heart of movement building -- deep and sustainable connections with community. *Awake* is a film to share with our students across learning modalities as an inspiring example of contemporary resistance work.



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