

# Healing the Earth

## Black and Native Women, Two Spirit, and Gender Expansive Folks in the Climate Justice Movement

by Miriam Magaña Lopez

### THE HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN

Native and Black people in the United States is complex and often untold. Since the colonization of what is now known as the United States, Black and Native people have had parallel experiences of violence and oppression, and have also been in each other's lives in different ways. Both groups were enslaved by white settlers at different points in history, experienced forced family separations, discriminatory policies, and have formed alliances to support each other. However, while some Native groups provided sanctuary to formerly enslaved Africans, others made a lucrative business returning runaway enslaved people or holding Africans in slavery themselves. While some Africans helped Natives, other Africans became "buffalo soldiers" and played a significant role in battles against Native Americans (Weaver, 2008). More recently, Freedmen, descendants of Black people who had been held in slavery by the Cherokee tribe, won a court case to gain equal status as members of the tribe (Walker, 2021).

Black and Native people were often pitted against each other under settler colonialism, and today a group of Black and Native women, Two Spirit and gender expansive folks are working to heal past wounds through bridging work. Bridging work is the

first crucial step to a larger movement. In the future, these Black and Native women, Two Spirit and gender expansive folks plan to lead together work on climate, environmental, and social justice.

In this case study we outline the breaking dynamic that brought Black and Native women, Two Spirit and gender expansive people to recognize the need to come together to heal, and their experience working to bridge toward belonging through the perspective of **The Wind & The Warrior**.

The Wind & The Warrior are a collective that creates and guides programs for artists, activists, spiritualists, and healer-practitioners to co-learn and integrate indigenous and ancestral traditions and cultural arts for greater impact of healing and justice work. The Wind & The Warrior is co-led by Karma Mayet, Nana Fofie, Nana Korantema, and Ife Afriye Kilimanjaro.

### ***Sacred Waters Pilgrimage***

In June 2020, The Wind & The Warrior partnered with the **Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy** to launch a **Sacred Waters Pilgrimage** in order to bridge Black and Native culture-bearers and advocacy leaders working to address the climate crisis. The purpose of the Sacred Waters Pilgrimage was to cultivate and

heal relationships between Black and Native peoples, and between humans and Mother Earth. We are living in an extractive state where resources from the earth are being depleted faster than they are being replaced. Karma Mayet explained that even if humans do not like each other, we need to realize that “we are all interconnected ... at this particular moment there is an opportunity ... to re-imagine what is right for us.”

This healing process is not without precedent. Throughout history Black and Native peoples have held ritual ceremonies honoring the waters, the land, and each other. Today, Black and Native culture-bearers continue to carry these traditions and lessons to heal.

The Sacred Waters Pilgrimage leaders, culture-bearers, and participants traveled to seven locations along the Mississippi River; some joined virtually in order to protect against the spread of COVID-19. The pilgrimage began at the headwaters of the Mississippi River where Ojibwe elder water and wisdom keepers, women of all ages, and children gathered in ceremony with The Wind & The Warrior. Their journey began at the headwaters because they hold that water is the source of all things — therefore *water is life*.

Six months later, the pilgrimage ended in December 2020 where the Mississippi River runs into the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana.

**“ We all must acknowledge our complicity and our role in this *extractive society* before beginning to engage in work to protect the earth. ”**



Members of The Wind & The Warrior collective, from left to right: Ife Afriye Kilimanjaro, Nana Fofie Amina Bashir, Nana Korantema Pierce Williams, Karma Mayet. Photo courtesy of the collective.

# Identifying a Breaking Dynamic

**T**HE WIND & THE WARRIOR believes that Black and Native women, Two Spirit and gender expansive people must take the lead in repairing generations of wrongdoings, so that they can heal and move together toward a shared greater goal of climate justice. The pilgrimage aimed to address two sites of *breaking*:

- 1) the relationship between Black and Native communities
- 2) the relationship between humans and Mother Earth

The first breaking dynamic is due to the lack of reconciliation among Black and Native communities for their ancestors' and their own complicity in injustice. Black and Native communities have been in each other's lives in different ways, some of which have been harmful. Their members have for generations been born into a society in which false competition has been normalized, leading one group to come into conflict with another. The Wind & The Warrior acknowledge that not all of the violence against each other has been by choice: racism, capitalism, genocide and settler colonialism are sources of the broken relationships. However, in order to move together

in a movement, Black and Native communities must acknowledge the intentional and unintentional wrongdoings to each other in the past and in the present. The second but equally important breaking dynamic being addressed in this work is found in the relationship that humans carry with Mother Earth. Ife Afriye of The Wind & The Water explained:

*[A]s humans ... directly or indirectly, we've helped perpetuate the pollution of water and air. We are born into a society where we are told that we need certain products to live, and the production of these products has been harmful to the earth.*

Our overconsumption and monetizing of natural resources have harmed our planet. The folks in this movement are not blaming individuals because they are not causing the majority of the harm, the root of the issue comes from extractive capitalism. However, they believe that we all must acknowledge our complicity and our role in this extractive society before beginning to engage in work to protect the earth. Karma Mayet further elaborated that "it is possible for humans to benefit from the design of the planet earth in a way that is not harmful" to ourselves, anyone else or the planet — and that we need to move toward those practices.

**BREAKING** between humans is a response driven by fear and isolation, when we turn inward only to what we know and who we know. A **breaking dynamic** exists when one group turns against an 'outsider' group; the '**otherness**' and threat of the out-group can build psychological or physical walls between the two groups. Here a breaking dynamic is illustrated between Black and Native peoples arising from the harmful ways that they've interacted with each other in the past which, in turn, impacts present relationships.

Second, The Wind & The Warrior and other climate justice advocates in this movement recognize **earth and water as living**. They believe that the **extractive relationship** that humans have with the earth and its natural resources has led to the pollution of the water and air. In order to engage in climate and environmental work, we must acknowledge our part in environmental wrongdoings and change the way we view and interact with the water and the lands.



# Action Toward Bridging

**T**HE WIND & THE WARRIOR led their bridging work through a Sacred Waters Pilgrimage that developed and strengthened relationships through ceremony and ritual with Black and Native women, Two Spirit and gender expansive people. The participants bridged across cultural and racial differences.

The Sacred Waters Pilgrimage was a six-month journey which consisted of seven stops along the Mississippi River. In each stop, The Wind & The Warrior coordinated with local groups of people who identified as Black and Native women, Two Spirit or gender expansive folks to join in ceremony and ritual. The pilgrimage was steeped in tradition and the ways of the elders of both communities. Each meeting brought together Black and local Native water keepers and culture-bearers to lead rituals and ceremonies. Coming together in ceremony and ritual is not as much about the actions as the intention behind it, which was being defined with the folks that The Wind & The Warrior met along the way. These ceremonies created a structure and a way of communicating to connect with each other.

The Sacred Waters Pilgrimage was initiated at the Mississippi River Headwaters with the Ojibwe Nation. There, coming together in ceremony looked like sharing in song, dance, prayer, food, and offerings made to the water and each other. This was a celebration to mark the beginning of the journey and commitment to each other. The Wind & The Warrior opened the space by singing a song. Next, Elder Rene and Elder Jan — both of the Ojibwe Nation — sang a traditional song with their people. Each group also shared a traditional dance. Both groups prayed together and made offerings to the water. One of these offerings came from Nana Fofie of The Wind & The Warrior who carried water from the Mississippi River where it meets the Gulf Coast to share it with the rest of the Mississippi River, symbolizing the interconnectedness of nature. Lastly, members of The Wind & The Warrior and the Ojibwe Nation exchanged gifts to symbolize their commitment to each other and this six-month journey.

Throughout the next stops, other rituals and ceremonies were practiced together. In each location they had a full moon ceremony that represented a

On the day of the summer solstice, The Wind & The Warrior joined in ceremony with with Anishinaabe water and wisdom keepers at the headwaters of the Mississippi River to mark the beginning of the Sacred Waters Pilgrimage. Photograph courtesy of the collective.

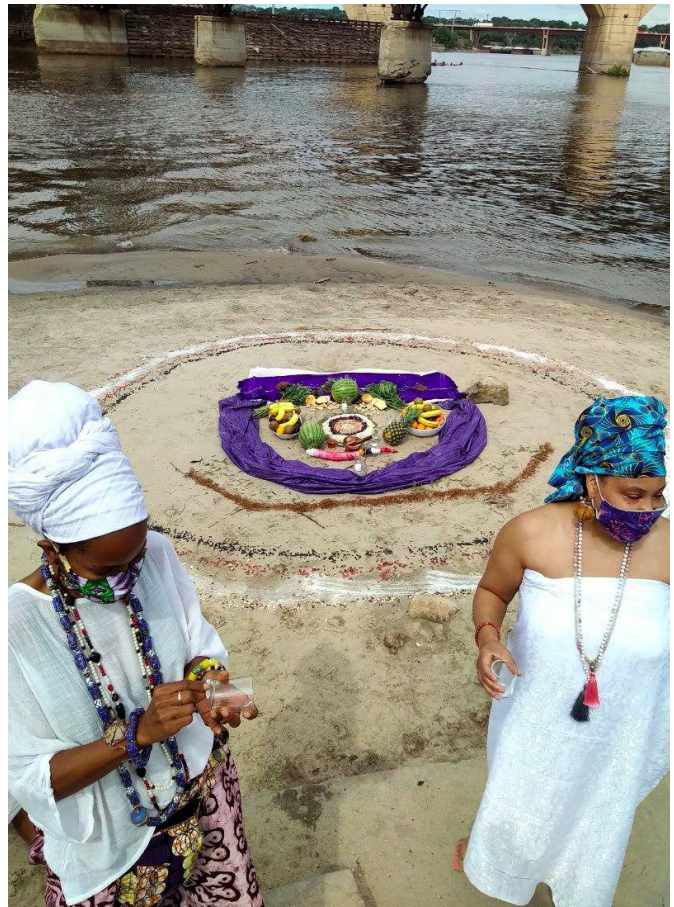




different chakra, color, herb, intention, and direction. The group led a ceremonial water pour at each stop using water carried from the Gulf Coast and from the Mississippi River at previous stops along the journey. They also created sacred stations, or altar spaces, to honor ancestors and the earth. The pilgrimage participants utilized earth elements to create the space, such as arranging sweet flowers to attract spirits who like sweetness to guide them in their work. They utilized water as a symbol of life force, flowers that carry medicinal value to symbolize healing, and other items that folks were moved to bring forward.

In addition to the ceremonies conducted in a physical space, The Wind & The Warrior and Colette Battle of the Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy, organized virtual spaces where folks were able to come together in virtual ceremonies honoring the land and water in their own home. Even in these virtual spaces, community was built using conversation, prayer, and ceremony.

Coming together in ceremony and ritual created opportunities for participants to feel others' spirits, share history and joys through traditional practices, and acknowledge similarities. This process had a healing element that encouraged participants to release shame, fear, stereotypes, oppressive thought systems, and negative energies.



Nana Fofie & Karma Mayet engage in a ceremony on Raspberry Island, St. Paul, Minnesota during the first stop of the pilgrimage. Photo courtesy of the [Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy](#).

**BRIDGING** is a project aimed at crossing identity-based lines. It addresses a breaking dynamic in order to develop a ***cohesive, more inclusive, durable, and more expansive “we”*** that can be identified and recognized to bring about belonging and greater social justice.

To “bridge” involves two or more people or groups coming together across acknowledged lines (such as race and/or power dynamics inherent within those social structures) of difference in a way that both affirms their distinct identities and creates a new inclusive “we” identity.

The new “we” that results need not agree on everything, or even very much; but its members should have a ***shared empathy*** and ***lasting stake in one another***. All its members should also experience an authentic sense of belonging. Bridging rejects all strict “us versus them” framings, but without erasing what is different and unique in each party.

# Outcome — Moving Towards Belonging

**W**HILE ONE SACRED WATERS JOURNEY did not heal everything — and The Wind & The Warrior believe more bridging gatherings will happen — it created a path towards relationship-building and forgiveness. The pilgrimage served as a vessel to “heal the generational and historical wounds of Black and Native peoples on these lands under settler colonialism, and heal the historical relationships of Black and Native peoples with each other.” Furthermore, this work allowed them to, “co-create practices and conversations toward a stronger solidarity and shared vision for liberation of and on these lands.”

The Wind & The Warrior reported that this six-month journey allowed participants to develop trust in each other and see their futures intertwined together as folks who can stand together in fights and against oppression. Though there are some “fights that you can just show up for,” Ife Afriye explained, durable relationships are necessary for longer struggles and for systems change. “Taking the time to know one another is so critical,” she stated. If the bridging work to form deep relationships does not happen first, climate, environmental, and social-justice movements become fragile. Nana Korantema expanded on this:

*Folks [are] now life-long connected in ceremony, recognizing that we are all vessels to do this work. In each stop we engaged in a water ceremony ... to hear the water speak, and to see nature respond by its very presence and to see things that you normally don't see through the representation of totems and spirits ... The language that they [water and land] speak is far more ancient than the words we [humans] are using. The energy that was cultivated by honoring our ancestry through prayer and song ... We will always remember one another in ceremony that way.*

On several occasions there was genuine surprise by the Native folks because The Wind & The Warrior wanted to learn from them. The Wind & The Warrior found that traditions and practices of their African ancestors were familiar and often paralleled the traditions of their Native siblings. By honoring the

**BELONGING** describes values and practices where no person is left out of **our circle of concern**. Belonging means more than having just access, being seen or feeling included. It means that every member has a **meaningful voice**, that their **well-being is considered**, and that they have the **opportunity to participate** in the design of political, social, and cultural structures.

Belonging includes the right to both **contribute** and **make demands** upon society and political institutions.



space and each others' practices and ritual, they had moments of connection, Nana Korantema recalls thinking, "Oh wow, you do that? We do that too. It [is] beautiful to see that this is much larger than us."

Through this process the pilgrimage participants learned to truly begin "to see" each other. Nana Korantema states, "we ate their cooking, [and to] have someone host you and feed you food that they prepared" — that is how bonds are formed. Ife Afriye elaborated:

*It was like meeting family that you did not know that you had. Ceremony is a language that we share through our traditions and we are able to come and sit together and move with real intentionality and respect, that both of our spiritual traditions stand, where we recognize them [the Native participants] as the original inhabitants of this land, that we come and we greet, and we follow a set of protocols [ceremony] that we understand and we share and engage in shared experience that we both recognize.*

They were able to dispel myths, stereotypes, and grow with one another through the simplicity of creating a space. This experience and bond created the appropriate space to engage in tough conversations about stereotypes. In the course of intentional conversation those stereotypes fall away. When asked how they know that bridges of connection are being formed Karma Mayet explained:

*Pauses, pauses are excellent signs ... when in communication or in decision-making ... when the pause becomes second nature as opposed to jumping into an assumption of right, of judgment or ill intention ... [that is when trust is formed and when change happens].*

The Sacred Waters Pilgrimage is seen as the healing and relationship-building phase to a longer journey with other Black and Native women, Two Spirit and gender expansive folks. The people involved in the journey continue to connect through phone calls and text messages. Even though their next step in the environmental, climate and social justice movement is still in the works, this journey created a foundation for a long-term struggle ■



The locations of the 2020 Sacred Waters Pilgrimage are pictured above. The pilgrimage took The Wind & The Warrior along the Mississippi River, from its headwaters at Lake Itasca to the mouth of the river at the Gulf of Mexico.

## Further readings and resources

- For a brief overview of the complicated history of slave ownership among Indigenous people in the United States, read **Ryan Smith's** review of the "Finding Common Ground" exhibit at the National Museum of the American Indian, "[How Native American Slaveholders Complicate the Trail of Tears Narrative](#)" in *Smithsonian Magazine* (March 2018).
- For recent efforts to recognize descendants of enslaved Black people as part of the Cherokee Nation, read **Mark Walker's** article, "[Cherokee Nation Addresses Bias Against Descendants of Enslaved People](#)" in *the New York Times* (February 2021).
- In "[The History of the Black Seminoles](#)," **Livia Gershon** recalls the interconnected history of 'Black Seminoles' — free Black people who built settlements near Indigenous communities — and Seminole Native people in colonial Florida (November 2020).
- For an account of historical intersections and contemporary interactions among Native Americans and African Americans, read **Hilary N. Weaver's** "[A Boiling Pot of Animosity or an Alliance of Kindred Spirits?: Exploring Connections Between Native Americans and African Americans](#)" in the *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 35, no. 4 (December 2008).
- To learn more about the work of **The Wind & The Warrior**, as well as their ongoing activities, please visit their website at [windandwarrior.com](http://windandwarrior.com).

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## Credits

### Author

Miriam Magaña Lopez

### Project Team

Miriam Magaña Lopez, *Research and Policy Analyst*

Olivia E. Araiza, *Program Director*

Joshua Clark, *Political Participant Analyst*

Gerald Lenoir, *Identity and Politics Strategy Analyst*

Tanya P. Díaz, *Special Projects Coordinator*

### Layout & Design

Erfan Moradi

