

# LAKOTA PERSPECTIVE ON INDIGENOUS DATA SOVEREIGNTY

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**T**he Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation envisions a liberated Lakota nation through our language, lifeways, and spirituality. From our homelands on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, we have been working persistently to create opportunities for our youth, dismantle systemic oppressive systems, foster an authentic Lakota regenerative community, and, most importantly, carry on our language and lifeways for future generations.

Our origin story began with our relatives challenging and empowering us with the questions: “How long are you going to sit back and let others decide the future of our children? Are you not warriors?” From inception, prayer has been the guiding force that has allowed us to grow and refine our effort of liberation. From inception, we have taken that challenge of not sitting back and letting others tell us what is best for us and our children.

Throughout our history of living on the Pine Ridge Reservation—also known as Prisoner of War Camp #334—our families, communities, and ancestors endured and continue to endure an all-out genocidal attack by the federal government and churches to remove our languages, land, history, and way of living. Yet we still are actively living through our language and lifeways in our homelands because our ancestors and families never swayed from them. As we continue in our journey toward liberation, we have to

challenge Western settler colonialism and work to control the narratives that surround our work—including issues, ideas, and practices around data sovereignty and data governance.

Why is it important we change the narrative of data collection, data acquisition, data storage, and data access? As this chapter is being written, our Indigenous nations across the world are at the brink of losing their languages and lifeways. Indigenous Data Sovereignty is directly tied to the Indigenous language and lifeway reclamation and revitalization efforts being carried forth by the very people it has been extracted from. It is important to understand, that as Indigenous nations revitalize and reclaim our languages and lifeways, we have to work in concert with reclaiming our data to ensure our language movements can sustain themselves far into the future. Access is an ongoing barrier for our children, families, and communities. Access to language, whether in person, via the internet, a book, or a recording, is limited. To sustain the efforts to create a movement where our language is normalized, we have to create sustainable efforts around protecting and safeguarding our data.

#### **WHAT IS INDIGENOUS DATA AND DATA SOVEREIGNTY?**

According to the University of Arizona Native Nations Institute, Indigenous sovereignty is the right of Native nations to govern themselves (Rainie and others 2017). The Te Mana Raraunga–Māori Data Sovereignty Network defines [Indigenous] data as “the digital or digitizable information or knowledge that is about or from [Indigenous] people, our language, lifeways, resources or environments”; [Indigenous] data sovereignty as referring to “the inherent rights and interests that [Indigenous people] have in relation to the collection, ownership, and application of [Indigenous] Data”; and [Indigenous] data sovereignty as referring to “the principles, structures, accountability mechanisms, legal instruments, and policies through which [Indigenous peoples] exercise control over [Indigenous] Data” (Te Mana Raraunga 2018). And as Stanford University professor Matthew Snipp put it, “Quite simply, data sovereignty means managing information in a way that is consistent with the laws, practices, and customs of the nation-state in which it is located” (Snipp 2016).

Furthermore, Indigenous data contain knowledge about our environments, cultures, and community members at both an individual and

collective level. The concrete boundaries between data, information, and knowledge are more fluid in an Indigenous context than in a traditional Western context, which also has implications for the governance of Indigenous data (Carroll and others 2019).

The United Nations in September 2007 developed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Within this international document, under Article 18, it reads: “Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions.” While the case law is limited with respect to Indigenous data sovereignty issues and rights, the Indigenous data sovereignty movement grew in 2015 at an international convening in Australia to determine Indigenous rights under the International Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It was determined at that time that Indigenous nations owned the rights to their citizens’ data and also had the ability to determine how that data would be used.

Here in South Dakota, specifically in Pine Ridge, Standing Rock, and other Indigenous reservations, we are facing a moment in history where we have to reclaim, revitalize, then sustain our language movements. Questions that must be answered or used as a guide toward creating sustainable Indigenous data sovereignty practices and systems include: Who owns the data? Whose data is it? Who controls it? Who benefits from it? Who benefits from it financially?

## INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

In our Lakota Language & Lifeways Initiative at Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation, we see language as our education. Everything radiates from our language; it contains our connection to the land, blueprints on how to live, and thousands of years of knowledge and teachings—but, more importantly, our language is our liberation. Anton Treuer writes in the *The Language Warrior’s Manifesto*, “Language revitalization is nothing short of a pathway to liberation. When we shake off the yoke of colonization, we no longer have to be defined by that history. We do not become decolonized. We become liberated—unconquered. That should be our goal for every one of our children and all the children

yet to be born over the next seven generations” (Treuer 2020, 168). Therefore, language and education are at the forefront of Indigenous data reclamation and data sovereignty.

Our Lakota Immersion Montessori (preschool to elementary), adult education programming, and elder philosophy and language preservation programming are front-line efforts creating safe environments free of oppression and grounded in our belief system. By centering our languages, our effort is radically shifting the narrative of what education for Indigenous peoples should be. Through our Indigenous education efforts, we are enacting data sovereignty at its purest form, because when we create anything from our language, we are not only reviving our language but positioning ourselves as stewards of that information moving forward.

Like with our language, our data is not owned by a specific Lakota person or persons but is guarded and protected by all Lakota people. As Te Reo Irirangi o Te Hiku o Te Ika (Te Hiku Media), an organization dedicated to language preservation and learning, explains via their website: “Indigenous people do not have a concept of private ownership of land and resources, that’s a Western construct by which many of us are required to abide by. We see ourselves as the caretakers of our environment and society. Likewise, when we gather data to improve our services, we’re taking care of the data given to us, and we follow tikanga (cultural protocols) when we need to make decisions around using data or providing access to data” (Te Reo Irirangi o Te Hiku o Te Ika 2017).

### THE NEAR FUTURE

Liz La quen náay Kat Saas Medicine Crow writes: “Information, data, and research about our peoples—collected about us, with us, or by us—belong to us and must be cared for by us” (United States Indigenous Data Sovereignty Network). This is still a new and emerging idea to all the Indigenous communities around the world and specifically in the United States. Indigenous nations are still grappling with the effects and aftermath of the federal governments’ and church systems’ effort to take their languages and lifeways.

Indigenous peoples across the world have been collecting, analyzing, and aggregating data for thousands of years. The National Congress of American Indians (2018) writes that we, Indigenous peoples, “have always been data creators, users, and stewards.” Pre-reservation days, the wild wild west

was considered untamed and open for all in terms of acquiring land and conquering peoples. Today, the wild wild west is still present—but the free-for-all is taking place with our language, our education, and our data.

“As the Indian Wars concluded and American Indians were relocated to reservations, much of the data gathering on which they depended for generations was also forcibly seized,” UCLA professor Desi Rodriguez-Lonebear writes. “Removal from their ancestral homelands, coupled with the decimation of wild game, population decline, and the boarding school system, stripped Indians of their traditional sources of knowledge and survival” (Rodriguez-Lonebear 2016, 258).

Indigenous people have not been in a position to be able to control the data and information that has been collected from them since European contact. From the moment the camera was introduced in the mid-1800s to today’s advanced technology, we as Indigenous nations have been studied, recorded, photographed, sterilized, measured, and displayed by the colonizer and the non-Indigenous people who are infatuated with a romanticized misrepresentation of our living cultures. We have continuously been portrayed as savages, and the plains Titunwan people have served as an image for pan-Indianism in mainstream media. Movies, documentaries, studies, books, and dictionaries have been made about us, for us, and in the name of allyship. The narrative shift begins with actively working toward understanding that our data is just that: ours.

Understandably, our grandparents and great-grandparents were well aware of the significance of losing our language and ways, so they took to recording (audio/video) to ensure future generations would have access. With good intentions, our grandparents openly gave of their knowledge, history, and language to anthropologists, linguists, scientists, authors, etc. This created a large database of information that spans universities, colleges, private libraries, nonprofits, and other digital and hard storage platforms. We now are facing the issue of access, control, and guardianship. Non-Indian white institutions are actively working against this effort of language and data reclamation and data sovereignty (Niyake Yuza 2021).

The very reason this is an issue is because of the genocide, the taking, the termination, the relocation, the boarding schools, the mining, and the broken treaties. This is violence. Make no mistake, however it is said—whether it be through eloquent think pieces, intellectual terminology, or adding a linguistic spin to it—it is violence. The calls to toxic positivity, the

calls to spirituality and being a good relative, whatever presents itself as a guard to the ongoing excavation of our elders' knowledge, life experiences, and the paradigm of being Lakota is still, at the end of the day, violence. We will not hold hands and sing in brotherly harmony the songs you took from us and recorded with your foreign voices. Taking our data—our language, our sacred songs, stories, words—whitewashing it and then selling it back to the very people to whom it belongs is a violent act, especially to our people who have experienced multitudes of loss and genocide throughout recent history.

The answer to colonization is not better colonization or a diet version of colonization. Indigenous data sovereignty is the final frontier in which we find ourselves in a vulnerable position once again, defending our natural resources from exploitation. Data collection is an unchecked process in which linguists and researchers freely take, analyze, and form solutions that fit their narratives. "In the indigenous world, data has a contentious history tied to the survival of native peoples on one hand, and to the instruments of the colonizer on the other," Rodriguez-Lonebear writes. "Indigenous data engagement in the United States is inextricably tied to the subjugation of American Indians and federal policies of Indian extermination and assimilation" (Rodriguez-Lonebear 2016, 257). We must take a stand and construct safeguards as Indigenous language and education activists and spiritual beings who are on a mission to ensure our traditional lifeways and connection to our identity remains authentic for generations to come.

It is our hope that, within our homelands, we can continue to advocate for our inherent sovereign right to protect and honor our data, create systems founded in the philosophy of guardianship, and, ultimately, reclaim our grandmothers' words and history so our children in the future have access to sustain the movement.

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