



LESSON PLAN

# Today's Native America



RELATED PHOTO ESSAY

## **We Are Still Here**

BY CAMILLE SEAMAN



**Class:** 60 minutes

## Key Idea

Native America exists beyond stereotypes and history books. Today, Native Americans are voicing concerns about environmental and human rights issues, shaping their own tribal communities and the future of the country.

## Background

“We Are Still Here,” a photo essay by Camille Seaman, presents portraits of contemporary Native Americans. The photographs depict Native Americans from a variety of tribes, both in traditional regalia and ordinary street clothes. Many of the photographs were taken at the Oceti Sakowin camp in Cannonball, North Dakota, near the Missouri River, one of the places of protest against the construction of the Dakota Access oil pipeline (DAPL). At the Oceti Sakowin camp, as well as other camps on and around the Standing Rock Sioux reservation, indigenous peoples from all over the world came together as “water protectors” in an effort to halt construction of the pipeline.

According to *The New York Times*, the pipeline travels under hundreds of waterways on its 1,172-mile route through North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Illinois. Ultimately, the protests failed to stop the pipeline, and in June 2017, oil began to flow.\* Protesters advocated for a shift in values and behaviors, from consumerism to reverence for the Earth; signs were raised with the phrase “Water is life.” While the protests failed to stop the pipeline, tribal and non-tribal individuals united and brought international attention specifically to Native American culture and a deep care and connection to the Earth, including the preservation of natural resources.

Seaman’s photo essay is a part of a long-term project, “We Are Still Here—All My Relations: A Native America Portrait Project.” The project aims to document Native American tribes throughout the United States; there are approximately 573 federally recognized tribes in the U.S. Seaman was raised within the Shinnecock Montaukett tribe of her father near the eastern end of Long Island, New York.

\*Gregor Aisch and K.K. Rebecca Lai, “[The Conflicts Along 1,172 Miles of the Dakota Access Pipeline](#).” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2017.

## SUBJECT AREAS

### HIGH SCHOOL

- Anthropology
- English Language Arts
- Environmental Science
- Geography
- Modern World Studies

### COLLEGE

- Cultural Anthropology
- Environmental Studies
- History
- Native American Studies
- Sociology

## THEMES

- Identity
- Conflict resolution
- Cultural displacement
- Resilience

## MATERIALS

- Access to the photo essay online (or printed copies of it)

## PREPARATION

- (Optional) Make copies of the photo essay



## Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. SL.11-12.1.c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies.

D2.Geo.9.9-12. Evaluate the influence of long-term climate variability on human migration and settlement patterns, resource use, and land uses at local-to-global scales.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies.

D2.Psy.2.9-12. Investigate human behavior from biological, cognitive, and sociocultural perspectives.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies.

D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

Next Generation Science Standards. HS-LS2-8. Evaluate the evidence for the role of group behavior and individual and species' chances to survive and reproduce.

## Lesson

### SETTING THE STAGE

Ask students if they have heard about the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) from the media or through social media. What information have they heard?

Explain to students that in the summer of 2016, the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in South Dakota was the site of months of protest. Explain that thousands of mostly indigenous people from North America and other countries gathered to oppose the creation of the oil pipeline that could threaten clean water sources across its almost 1,200-mile stretch through four states.



Camille Seaman, a Native American photographer, visited the protest site to document Native American voices and images. She recorded a series of images as part of a project called, “We are Still Here.” Seaman describes her perspective in her photographer’s statement:

*“As a child, I knew I was different from the other children at school, but I could not articulate what that difference was. I was troubled when the textbooks we read spoke about Natives in the past tense—always implying that we no longer existed. We are still here.”*

Ask students what they think of this quote. What do they think she means by “We are still here”?

### ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Tell students they will be viewing a series of photographic portraits taken in 2016 of Native Americans with a variety of tribal affiliations. Some were taken on specific reservations, others at the North Dakota protests of the North Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL)—an oil pipeline that travels through four states under many bodies of water, including the Missouri river.

In this photo essay, Seaman chose to take portraits for her series “We Are Still Here.” A portrait is a photograph of a person typically depicting only the face, head, and shoulders. Ask students to view the photos in small groups, taking note of their own observations about how the individuals are portrayed in the photographs and captions. Ask students to consider the following questions and share their group responses with the class: What are some ways in which portrait photography engages the viewer? Do you think portrait photography is an effective medium to share Seaman’s message that Natives are not just people of the past, but of the present and the future? Why or why not?

## Delving Deeper

After viewing the photographs, lead a discussion with such questions as:

- Make a list of the Native American tribes that are depicted in this photo essay. (Answers include Shinnecock, Oglala Lakota, Sicangu Lakota, Havasupai, Apsáalooke, Azteca, Hunkpapa Lakota, Northern Arapaho, Navajo, Cheyenne, and Nez Perce).



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- Why is photographer Camille Seaman concerned about Native America? How does she voice this concern in the first two paragraphs of her photographer's statement?
- Constance Ten Fingers, Oglala Lakota, a woman pictured in photograph #2, was hesitant to have her photograph taken until Seaman conveyed her intention about why she felt these portraits were important to be captured and shared with others. The world, Seaman said, needs to "be shown that we are not stereotypes to be romanticized or culturally appropriated. That we live in houses and are doctors and teachers and multi-dimensional individuals." What stereotypes do you think Seaman is referring to? Do you think this photo essay, and the sharing of it online, might act as a solution to break these stereotypes? If so, how?
- Individuals in the photo essay are seen protesting against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). A main reason for the protests is that an oil spill could impact the drinking water of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe whose reservation is downstream from where the pipeline crosses the Missouri river. Members of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe said, "In honor of our future generations, we fight this pipeline to protect our water, our sacred places, and all living beings." Do you think this perspective might challenge people to shift their behavior from consumerism to reverence and respect for the Earth? Why or why not?
- Many Native Americans at Standing Rock identify themselves as water "protectors" instead of "protesters."\* In the words of one participant in an interview with *The Guardian*: "We are not protesters. We are protectors. We are peacefully defending our land and our way of life." What do you think about this statement? How might this knowledge, and the view that humans are not separate from our environment, support efforts to protect the environment for the future?
- Photograph #7 depicts Colin Whirlwind Soldier, a young Native rap artist. His music, as Seaman describes, "speaks to life growing up on the reservation and of the challenges of living there." How might music act as a way to claim one's identity and culture?
- In an interview with *Forbes Magazine*, Seaman explains that many of the Native tribes who gathered at Standing Rock hadn't come together in over 100 years. This, Seaman said, was a strong mes-



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sage that gets to the heart of “understanding interconnectivity and heritage” as a “strong antidote to fear.” How might solidarity, or coming together, address fear? Describe an experience either in your own life or one depicted in the media where this statement rings true.

- How does Seaman answer her own question “Why portraiture?” in her photographer’s statement? What is her intention regarding the use of this medium? How might these portraits act as a “message to the future”?
- Camille Seaman said, “It’s time to for us to tell our own stories of who we are and what is important to us.” How might the power of one’s story have the potential to create change? What examples from history—from past to present—exemplify how a person’s story has impacted society?

\*Allison Herrera, “[Standing Rock activists: Don’t call us protesters. We’re water protectors.](#)”  
Public Radio International, October 31, 2016.

## Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story. (Note for teachers: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the photo essay to justify their reasoning.)

1. Camille Seaman’s photography projects are long term and, in many cases, last eight to ten years. Seaman is committed to documenting and preserving Native America for the future. She writes, “I ask, just before I press the shutter: What, through this image, would you like your descendants to know about you, your life—your experience?” Select a person to photograph—a family member, friend, teacher, or community member. While taking their photo, ask them the same question that Seaman asks: “What, through this image, would you like your descendants to know about you, your life—your experience?” Record the answer. In 2-3 paragraphs, describe your experience as well as the answer that was provided by the person you photographed. In your response, answer the following question: How might photography become a vehicle for the future to understand the past? Photographs and responses can be shared with the class.  
(CCSS.ELA.SL.11-12.1.c)



2. In an interview with *Forbes Magazine*, Seaman described the reason for going to Standing Rock. She said, “What was pulling me to Standing Rock was this perfect accumulation of symptoms. What’s going on there crosses over so many things that are in our discussions of income inequality, immigration, climate issues, environment, racial justice, women’s health issues...”. In 2-3 paragraphs, describe how access to clean water is a human rights issue. Conduct online research to find two other examples where lack of access to clean water has negatively impacted individuals and communities, nationally or globally. What were the negative consequences? Were there any solutions put in place? If so, what? (C3.D2.Geo.9.9-12)
3. Seaman mentions two growing social movements—the [Indigenous Rising](#) movement and the [Idle No More](#) movement—both of which are concerned about the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on Native lands. Research one of these movements by visiting the website. In 2-3 paragraphs, answer the following questions: What is the organization’s mission and goals? How is your selected organization raising awareness about the impacts of climate change on Native lands? Do you think this organization provides effective solutions? Why or why not? (C3.D2.His.3.9-12)
4. According to the Tate Art Gallery, a portrait is an old art form that dates back to ancient Egypt. Portraits, according to the Tate, have been used “to show the power, importance, virtue, beauty, wealth, taste, learning or other qualities of the sitter.” Select one of the portraits, or “sitters,” from Seaman’s photo essay. Describe two qualities—such as power or beauty—that you witness about this person in your selected photograph. What personal characteristics do you notice? How does the person reveal the two qualities that you selected? Describe in detail the physical characteristics or verbal statements that support your selected qualities. (C3.D2.Psy.2.9-12)

## Resources

Saul Elbein, “[These Are the Defiant ‘Water Protectors’ of Standing Rock.](#)” *National Geographic*, January 26, 2017.

(Organization Website) [Tate](#).



(Organization Website) [Stand With Standing Rock](#).

Trymaine Lee, "[No Man's Land: The Last Tribes of the Plains](#)." MSNBC.

(Organization Website) [UNM University Libraries](#).

(Podcast Interview) "[The Limit Does Not Exist: Camille Seaman On Following the Women](#)" *Forbes*.

Iyuskin American Horse, "[We are protectors, not protesters': why I'm fighting the North Dakota pipeline](#)." *The Guardian*, August 18, 2016.

Marina Astakhova, "[Native Americans: Inside The Camille Seaman's Documentary Projects](#)." Yonah, February 17, 2017.

Camille Seaman, "[We Are Still Here](#)." TED Fellows, May 2, 2016.

Mark Trahan, "[Water is Life: The Story of Standing Rock Won't Go Away](#)." *YES! Magazine*, February 24, 2017.

Justin Worland, "[What to Know About the Dakota Access Pipeline Protests](#)." *TIME*, October 28, 2016.

Allison Herrera, "[Standing Rock activists: Don't call us protesters. We're water protectors](#)." Public Radio International, October 31, 2016.

Steven Mufson and Chris Mooney, "[Keystone pipeline spills 210,000 gallons of oil on eve of permitting decision for TransCanada](#)." *The Washington Post*, November 16, 2017.