

Wounded Knee: A Moment of Cross-Racial Intersectionality or Cross-Racial Co-option?

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Historians Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior's book *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* published in 1997, is a pillar in the field of research on the Red Power movement in general and AIM in particular. Smith and Warrior's intentions was to show that the Red Power Movement was "as significant as the counterculture was for young whites, or civil rights movements for blacks"¹ Since the publication of *Like a Hurricane*, research has grown on the Red Power Movement and its role in other Social Justice groups and wider currents of the 1970s with a strong interest in the Wounded Knee standoff of 1973. Within the growing historiography on Non-Native American activists during the standoff, the discussion over the importance of Non-Native American activists on a tactical and political level ranges from criticism to praise. Native American historian and activist Vine Deloria Jr, who was present at Wounded Knee, for example, described Non-Native solidarity at the standoff as "a valiant effort to turn the confrontation into the last rock festival and clan gathering of the New Left."²

For Deloria, Non-Native American support was detrimental to AIM's goals at Wounded Knee and if left unchecked could lead to the whitewashing of the standoff. Deloria's reflections on Wounded Knee is not unique when placed in the context of maintaining a sense of Native American agency, however, this is not an accurate portrayal of Wounded Knee and the intersectionality that occurred during the standoff. If anything it takes away from the strategies of AIM, which was very tactical in their approach to Non-Native American activists. By looking at a

¹ Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: New Press, 1997), viii.

² Vine Deloria Jr., "High Tragedy & Grotesque Comedy," Akwesasne Notes, Early Summer 1973, 9.

diverse range of sources and perspectives from Native Americans and not, we see how intersectionality was strong at Wounded Knee on a strategic and tactical level, void of whitewashing or tactical conflict.

The “Red Power Movement” refers to the political, social, and cultural actions by Native American led organizations and activists that advocated for treaty rights and Indigenous self-determination within the United States and Canada. The scale of the Red Power Movement cannot be understated, it was a nationwide project that forged solidarity among urban and rural Native American people and ranged from non-violent protest to the stunning occupation and armed confrontations in the Pine ridge. Much of the demands of Red Power was tied to treaty enforcement, Indigenous sovereignty, and the improvement of Indigenous political and social conditions. These demands were stated clearly, such as the Occupation of Alcatraz in 1969-1971, that evoked the treaty of Fort Laramie and called for Alcatraz Island to fall under Indigenous control. Where Native American activists hoped that Alcatraz would be used as a space similar to the San Francisco Indian Center which burned down in 1969, and had provided job outreach, legal protection, and healthcare programs. Likewise, the Trail of Broken Treaties caravan in 1972 presented 20 demands to the United States government, where 7 demands explicitly point out treaty enforcement or re-negotiations, and all 20 call for the Native American control of reservations and improvement of Native American economic and political conditions.³

The American Indian Movement (AIM) was formed in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1968 by poor and urban Indigenous youth, who wanted to change the conditions of crime and over policing of the “Red Ghettos” of the Twin Cities. From these conditions a “Pan-Indian” identity that relied on Native American self-determination, inspired by the Counterculture was created by

³ American Indian Movement. “Trail of Broken Treaties — 20-Point Position Paper.”

Ojibwe(s) Dennis Banks, George Mitchell, and Clyde Bellecourt and Lakotan Russel Means embodied by AIM in 1968. Prior to the creation of AIM, one of the co-founders, Dennis Banks viewed Red Power as a part of a wider campaign of social justice and felt the need of a Native American political organization. “I began to see that the greatest war was going to go on right here in the United States,” Banks recalled, “all these different kinds of people trying so hard to straighten this country out.”⁴ In this context, we can acknowledge that elements within AIM’s founding saw Native American activism as a part of the wider political counterculture in the 1960s and 70s.

By the time AIM began its occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973, it was a household name within Native American communities, especially on the Pine Ridge reservation, where people had noticed AIM’s activism and organization skills. The reservation at this time was split over the presidency of Dick Wilson, as much of his opposition viewed him as a highly corrupt and authoritarian leader, especially when Wilson placed family members in positions of power and formed the Guardians of the Oglala Nation (GOON Squad), that was described as “auxiliary police force acting as political enforcers”⁵ and later on faced accusations of sexual assault and rape.⁶ Dick Wilson on his part, viewed AIM as an organization that undermined Pine Ridge stability, going as far as to call Russel Means a “criminal outsider”, promised to cut off Means braids, and sent henchmen to attack and beat up Means when he arrived onto the Pine Ridge in 1973, prior to the takeover.⁷

After a chaotic day of fist fights, speeches, and meetings, AIM leaders, local Oglala activists, and Oglala elders decided to give AIM tactical control to remove Dick Wilson and

⁴ Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 129.

⁵ Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 196.

⁶ Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 197.

⁷ Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 194.

attempt to restart treaty negotiation with the US government, which can be summarized when Oglala tribal and religious leader Frank Fools Crow told the group of young activists to “Go ahead and do it, go to Wounded Knee”...”You can’t get in the BIA office and tribal office, so take your brothers from the American Indian Movement and go to Wounded Knee and make your stand there.”⁸ Minutes after the meeting concluded a caravan of AIM and local Native American activists rode out to Wounded Knee and seized the area overnight, looting a local store, seizing guns and ammunition before firing at responding BIA police officers. By the morning of February 28th, Wounded Knee was under AIM control and surrounded by government checkpoints. In the following days, the activist demands included treaty negotiations and the removal of Dick Wilson.⁹

Considering the diversity of Native American and Non-Native activist groups during the Wounded Knee standoff especially with AIM’s goals in mind, we see how Deloria’s view of the standoff as Native Americans versus Non-Native Americans co-option is an incomplete view. Likewise, looking beyond Smith and Warrior’s work *Like a Hurricane*, which is not void of intersectionality at Wounded Knee, as summarized by Smith and Warrior “The showdown had captivated White Leftist... members of the counterculture...also arriving were contingents from the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Chicanos, and a sprinkling of Asians and Blacks.”¹⁰ While this summary is an acknowledgment of intersectionality during the standoff, the scale of these groups is not fully grasped by Smith and Warrior’s work. As their work is centered on Native American and Red Power Activism and oversimplifies Non-Native groups and goals. Thus we have to understand how and what Non-Native American groups planned, did, and collaborated on. As such, this paper examines contributions by the New Left and Black, Asian, and Chicano

⁸ Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 200.

⁹ Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 204.

¹⁰ Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 226.

activists to the Wounded Knee standoff. Within current historiography, research examining the scale of each group's participation in the occupation is still not fully represented and subject to evolving perspectives.

The “New Left” is a cross racial term used to describe the rise of Leftist and Social Justice movements that formed in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, Canada, and Europe. For the purposes of this paper, the “New Left” refers to activists and organizations that were not centered on issues that disproportionately affected or solely organized in non-White communities and were dominated by what we can describe as “White America.” Hence, groups such as the Students for Democratic Society (SDS), Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), and multiple individual “backpackers” are included in this category. When investigating the role of the White dominated New Left in Wounded Knee, *Hippies, Indians, and the fight for Red Power* by historian Sherry Lynn Smith shows the scale of work related to direct action in the occupation by the New Left, such as tactical advantages and propaganda support during the Wounded Knee standoff. From a tactical point of view, since the start of the occupation, the role of New Leftist “backpackers,” where to run past crossfire, gunfire, and face arrest to resupply the besieged occupants of Wounded Knee and prevent surrender. With the deadly routes gaining the term “The Ho Chi Minh Trail” by activists,¹¹ These backpackers are seen as important to the occupation by AIM, that these backpackers are acknowledged as heroes and saviors by Native American activists on the ground,¹² who saw the supplies smuggled in as vital to the occupations’ survival and prevented starvation.

Two weeks into the siege on April 17th, as supplies, and the “Ho Chi Minh Trail” weakened, an airlift by 3 Cessna plane organized by New Leftist Bill Zimmerman flew over

¹¹ Sherry L. Smith, *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 190.

¹² Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 249.

Wounded Knee and dropped over 1,000 pounds of food, at a moment where, Russel Means said “they[AIM] had been on the verge of surrender, but the ten parachutes convinced him and the others... they should not give up.”¹³ The role of the White dominated New Left, on a tactical level during the day to day operations of the Wounded Knee standoff, shows examples of pragmatism and consent by both Native American and White activists. Smith points out that FBI documents went as far as to state that White Leftist were asked to leave, and only a small contingent of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) members were allowed to remain for their tactical knowledge gained overseas.¹⁴

Looking at the scale of support from the New Left, the approval of Native American planners, and joy by Native American activists shows a strong moment of intersectionality between White and Native American activists during Wounded Knee. None of the narratives show any political dispute between these White activist groups and AIM, and at most FBI documents, which were filled with paranoia and fixation of feared armed militant solidarity, show White and Indigenous cooperation. The solidarity between the New Left did not end at Wounded Knee, VVAW and AIM continued work for the Wounded Knee Legal Defense Committee with the VVAW releasing press statements calling for solidarity with Black activists at Attica during the prison uprising against anti-Black racism and solidarity with Native American activists in the legal courts after Wounded Knee.¹⁵

Black Power is the term used to describe social and political actions for Black independence, Black agency, and anti-racism from White supremacy, especially in the United States. The Black Power Movement by 1973 faced multiple factions that ranged from the armed

¹³ Smith, *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power*, 195.

¹⁴ Smith, *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power*, 190.

¹⁵ Veterans for Peace, “Wounded Knee,” Veterans for Peace, June 1973.

and underground Black Liberation Army (BLA), the Black Panther Party (BPP) that was consolidating under Newton, and the established Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Within this section of this paper, multiple Black centered organizations and activists will be defined in this term, which includes Black Nationalist, Black Communist, and Black Liberals who were at or supported AIM during the Wounded Knee standoff.

Looking at the role of the Black Power Movement in Wounded Knee, we witness cross-racial solidarity centered on a political level and less on a tactical level, attempts by individual Black activists to enter Wounded Knee such as by Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) and Angela Davis to give support, were stopped at government checkpoints. However, Ralph Abernathy, successor to Martin Luther King JR in the presidency of SCLS appears to be the most noticeable figure for Black activists directly involved in the standoff. Abernathy was invited by AIM to help in the negotiation as an emissary in the negotiations between AIM and the Federal Government.¹⁶ Clearly Abernathy's position and role was vital to the strategies of AIM in facing the federal government in negotiations and raising awareness of the standoff.

Abernathy's arrival is also a calculated attempt of showing Black-Native political and operational solidarity, when facing the government repression. Abernathy's role in the negotiations was a visible and public event, one picture even shows Abernathy sitting next to Russell Means and Dennis Banks flanked by armed AIM members while commenting on negotiations, being the embodiment of solidarity and absorption into AIM's structure by Black activists. Abernathy's role is clearly an active move by AIM's request and the SCLC's approval, especially when Abernathy proclaimed once he entered Wounded Knee at the request of AIM, "It ought to express to the

¹⁶ Smith, *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power*, 199.

American people that two great peoples who have suffered separately in the past are connected to seeking justice in the future!”¹⁷

Black activism beyond Abernathy is expanded by Historian Louise Siddon in her article *Red Power in the Black Panther: Radical Imagination and Intersectional Resistance at Wounded Knee*¹⁸ which shows the evolution of narratives on the Wounded Knee standoff and cross-racial solidarity. Much of Siddon’s work is centered on the role of the Black Panther Party (BPP) publicly supporting the Standoff, pulling statements from the BPP’s newspaper *The Black Panther* which gave support to the Wounded Knee Legal Committee, and published updates on activist on trial for Wounded Knee all the way up to the court cases, and lastly Black entertainer Sammy Davis donating to the legal defense of Wounded Knee.

One of the most controversial topics on Black and Native American activists in Wounded Knee is the missing and presumed murder of Perry Ray Robinson, a Black activist at Wounded Knee. Perry Ray Robinson, a staunch non-violent Black activist spent much of his activism in the Washington DC area, working and interacting with the United States Pacifist Party, Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), and lastly AIM. The role of Robinson within Wounded Knee, seems limited and filled with conflict with fellow AIM members over tactical and practical matters, lastly the historical narratives of his death and responsibility over the killing of Robinson is highly disputed, and is split between AIM, Dennis Banks, and the Guardians of the Oglala Nation (GOON).

The Chicano Movement is a term for the political organizing, social activism, and cultural revolution by Mexican-Americans directed against White supremacy and anti-Latino racism in the

¹⁷ Smith, *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power*, 199.

¹⁸ Louise Siddons, “Red Power in the Black Panther: Radical Imagination and Intersectional Resistance at Wounded Knee,” *American Art* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 9.

United States from the 1940s to 1970s. Chicano is a diverse term that can encompass Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Mexican Americans, however in this paper the Chicano Movement will be used to describe Mexican-American descendant organizations that were populated by Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Mexican Americans. The role of the Chicano Power Movement is addressed in a single paragraph within *Like a Hurricane*, which talks about a Chicano field medic named Rocky Madrid being shot and wounded by National Guard soldiers during armed clashes between the National Guard and AIM. This does not cover the scale and number of Chicano activists during the standoff, however *Like a Hurricane* separates Chicanos from the “sprinkling” of Asians and Black activists when talking about the Wounded Knee contingency. Insinuating that the scale of Chicano activism was big enough to be separated from other Non-Native American activist groups, yet the question about the effectiveness of Chicano activists is not addressed within *Like a Hurricane*.

The story of Rocky Madrid opens the discussion on his role within the standoff and how the Chicano Power Movement made its way to the Wounded Knee standoff, Madrid within an interview on the Colombian Broadcasting Services, (CBS) reveals how he entered the standoff and interestingly the role of CBS in the standoff. As CBS Denver provided Rocky Madrid with an airplane to supply Wounded Knee and break the Federal siege on the condition that he would provide them a firsthand interview of the occupation.¹⁹ On March 18th, Rocky Madrid was able to land in Wounded Knee providing 650 pounds of food and medicine, physically created the Wounded Knee clinic, and was immediately sent “straight to the clinic” due to his Vietnam War medic experience. Rocky Madrid was then wounded by Federal gunfire later that day trying to help activists caught in a crossfire between AIM and the National guard, before being sent to a

¹⁹ Kate Perdoni, “Colorado Medic Recalls Wounded Knee Occupation,” Rocky Mountain PBS, 2021.

hospital in Denver after a ceasefire deal was reached between the warring parties. Rocky Madrid, as per his deal, gave an interview to CBS raising awareness on the condition of the occupation in the middle of winter season, causing a public uproar about the siege's effects on the besieged occupation. Rocky Madrid continued to do two more airlifts into Wounded Knee until the standoff ended in May.

While multiple authors address the role of Chicano and Chicana Activist, Madrid's account is the most unique, as he is the only primary source of Chicano or Chicana witnesses to the siege. Rocky Madrid's firsthand account at Wounded Knee, also shows the scale of work he contributed, and how cooperation with AIM leadership on a tactical level during the standoff occurred. By all accounts, Rocky Madrid was immediately put to work and faced no conflict or abuses of power from Native American activists or leadership and his actions cannot be ignored. Madrid, a Chicano activist, helped in airlifts that broke the siege of Wounded Knee and set up the Wounded Knee clinic that was used throughout the whole occupation, these are cornerstones of the occupation's survival. While Rocky Madrid's story is very individualized it reflects the wider Chicano movement solidarity to the Native American struggle at Wounded Knee. The Chicano newspaper *La Raza* just like the Panthers gave complete support to AIM during the standoff, calling for Latinos in the Southwest to have solidarity and give support to the Wounded Knee standoff.²⁰ These calls were also answered by the Denver based Chicano group Crusade for Justice, which used their radio station and newspapers to call for the liberation of Indigenous rights, viewing Native American and Chicanos as "mixed blood" in the same struggle, where they organized and funded supply runs and backpackers on their way to Wounded Knee and attempting to intercept government radio commands.²¹

²⁰ "Wounded Knee," *La Raza*, November 11, 1973.

²¹ Smith, *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power*, 193.

The counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s saw an explosion of Asian-American activism that centered itself on a Pan-Asian identity aimed at opposing White American racism, the war in Vietnam, and advocacy for Asian rights on a grassroots level. Termed “the Asian American Movement,” this paper defines Asian activists within this framework, as these Asian activists saw themselves as a part of the Native American struggle in the United States against American imperialism. The Asian Movement was not separate from the other movements within this paper and had spent years in collaboration on organizational and tactical levels in the United States. This is where overlap between Chicano activists and Asian activists on the West Coast can be seen on a *La Raza* publication by the Asian-American Manzanar Committee, titled “Asian Americans in Solidarity”, the Manzanar Committee released a statement calling Wounded Knee a “necessity of the struggle”, painting the Asian and Native struggle as common cause against American imperialism in Asia, calling the solidarity between groups as the “SAME STRUGGLE WITH MANY FRONTS.”²² The overlap between the Asian American Movement and Chicano movements in relationship to the Wounded Knee standoff is often linked to fighting domestic imperialism against Native Americans and foreign imperialism in Asia. Within *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties*, historian Karen Ishizuka covers the role of an Asian American delegation that traveled to the Wounded Knee standoff, named the “Warriors of the Rainbow.” The 14 warriors traveled from Los Angeles, in separate routes and cars to the Pine Ridge to avoid possible police investigations and had planned to sneak into Wounded Knee, but the warriors were arrested on April 25, while trying to sneak past BIA and federal government lines.²³

²² Karen L. Ishizuka, *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties* (London: Verso, 2016), 97.

²³ Ishizuka, *Serve the People*, 97.

This account shows us the scale of support and networking used within Asian activist circles, to form a delegation and structure to travel to Wounded Knee. The contingent of Asian activists appears to be the “sprinkling of Asians” within *Like a Hurricane* that partook in the Wounded Knee standoff, but ultimately the role of Asian activists seems non-existence in the direct day to day operations of the standoff. While limited, it shows us the network of Asian activists within the West Coast organizing scene and the direct cross-pollination of the Non-Native American Wounded Knee activists outside and around Wounded Knee.

When Angela Davis was stopped by Federal agents the New York Times called Davis an “undesirable” and “the Black militant,” a reflection of government paranoia, overall the government reaction to this intersectionality was panic over the fear of a united multi-racial armed popular front that would engage war in the Pine Ridge.²⁴ Internal Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) documents raised concerns of possible armed Native American cells supplied by armed Black and Chicano radicals that would attack and raid National Guard armories for weaponry. Likewise the FBI believed that Black activists and Chicano activists smuggled 30 rifles, 30-40 semi-automatic weapons, and “Mexican ammunition” into Wounded Knee.²⁵

The FBI also saw the role of Vietnam Veterans as a point of concern due to their combat experience in Vietnam. However, nowhere does the government attempt or find areas of conflict between the activist groups, as the FBI concern with the intersectionality of the Wounded Knee occupation, was tied to armed struggle. Looking at the multiple historical narratives around Wounded Knee, we can see a moment of intersectionality, without major internal conflicts or contradictions among Native American and non-Native activists. While *Like a Hurricane* at times is limited on the discussion of Native American and Non-Native American solidarity, the growing

²⁴ Siddons, “Red Power in the Black Panther,” 7.

²⁵ Smith, *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power*, 194.

historiography of Wounded Knee evolves from *Like a Hurricane*'s and has spawned work from Sherry Lynn Smith to Louise Siddon. Sadly in this discussion, Asian activists are quickly addressed but this opens the narratives on how Asian-activists viewed the Native American struggle in the 1970s in relation to American imperialism in Asia. As the "sprinkles" of Asians are left as sprinkles, which is understandable in relation to the daily operation of the standoff, however this oversimplification of the Asian students ignores the active organized movements and actions by an Asian collective. This is where Ishizuka fills in the gaps but is simply as a small section within her wider targeting of Asian activism during the 1970s.

Smith and Warrior addressing the arrival of Angela Davis, Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), and Sherry Lynn's work on Ralph Abernathy is a great starting point in relation to the Wounded Knee standoff and greatly supports the solidarity that existed during the standoff between Black and Native Americans. Building off *Like a Hurricane* is where Sherry Lynn's work becomes a great place to understand the tactical levels of support within and outside of the occupation. Likewise, Siddon's work is needed to see the ideological driving functions between the Black Panther Party (BPP) and AIM beyond the occupation itself. The death of Perry Robinson is not addressed in *Like a Hurricane*, which is important to understand Wounded Knee and violence at the Pine Ridge, yet his murder remains a legal mystery. Lastly, the role of the New Left is presented in an accurate way by Smith and Warrior, showing the direct actions committed by these groups and their lack of conflict with AIM leadership.

Taking all of these sources into account, we see how Deloria Jr. criticism of attempts to co-opt the standoff is not accurate. Non-Native American activists were active in the standoff and by all accounts except one, did not come into conflict with AIM's decision during the standoff but became vital players in the standoff. With the killing of activist Perry Robinson being the strongest

place of tension, however his killing did not affect the outcome of the standoff, the actions by major organizations and collectives or the legal proceedings at the Wounded Knee Legal Defense. This is not to say Deloria Jr.'s statement is based on tension that did not exist, his statement is reminiscent of Non-American-Indian and American-Indian activist tension and the question of American-Indian agency. As said by an unknown American-Indian activist prior to Wounded Knee "I have always fought against White paternalism...But I am not about to substitute White paternalism for Black paternalism and fight the old fight of the last decade again." However, this concern of a Black or White paternalism was not present or a problem during the Wounded Knee standoff and by all accounts Wounded Knee was not "a valiant effort to turn the confrontation into the last rock festival and clan gathering of the New Left."

Seeing that AIM allowed Non-Native activists to operate within Wounded Knee, appears to be a tactical choice and not a product of spontaneous or malicious intent by Black, Chicano, Asian, or White New Leftist groups. Within the readings, we do not have moments of political or social conflict between the multiple groups in the standoff, whether it was major units like Chicano and White New Left activists or smaller contingents of Black and Asian activists inside or outside of Wounded Knee. The consensus from all groups and the Federal government is a united racial front, used to raise awareness for treaty rights and anti-corruption led by the American Indian Movement. Concerns within the wider Red Power movement of co-option by Non-Native activists was present since the occupation of Alcatraz, but this tension did not boil over at Wounded Knee or the Trail of Broken Treaty or at the Alcatraz occupation. What we see instead is a moment of multiple movements converging onto the pine ridge and working toward a common goal, uniting under AIM's leadership, a constant theme with the Red Power movement and the wider counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s.