

Dancing Again: History, Memory, and Activism at Wounded Knee

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On February 27, 1973, discontent Oglala Lakota protestors occupied the town of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, completing a process previously begun on December 29, 1890. Confronting the United States government with little more than a few guns and meager supplies, the Oglalas occupying Wounded Knee instead looked to their past as a means for supporting their present cause. More than just another political movement in an era of upheaval and change, occupiers of Wounded Knee drew on an established history of abuse by the United States government dating back one hundred years plus, in conjunction with an oral tradition stretching back to the creation of the Lakota tribe, to provide support and legitimacy for their struggle. Parallels between those massacred at Wounded Knee in 1890 and the historical and memorial motivations of those occupying the same location in 1973 bound the two events together in a perennial bond. Much like the Ghost Dancers of 1890, the Oglala protestors of 1973 sought a change in their current circumstance, and to accomplish this change they looked to the historical and the memorial to provide viable avenues of change and redress, avenues born in the immediate aftermath of the 1890 massacre, and now resurgent once again.

Historian David Lowenthal speaks of the ultimately futile nature in attempting to recreate the past in its entirety. Stating, “It is impossible to recover or recount more than a tiny fraction of what has taken place, and no historical account ever corresponds precisely with any actual past.”¹ While the past remains irrecoverable, the historical methodology allows historians to paint sections of a larger historical portrait that, while infinitely unfinished, nonetheless allows for a better understanding of what has preceded the present. While political histories of the Wounded Knee occupation have emphasized the role of the American Indian Movement, or the era in which the occupation occurred, such histories are only portions of this larger historical picture.² To focus on the political alone overlooks deeper root causes capable of texturing historians

understanding of the event. Throughout the occupation, physical and symbolic moments arise that demonstrate the position of power history and memory occupied amongst the Oglala. Approaching the siege at Wounded Knee from a perspective less concerned with the political machinations of AIM, or the larger influence of the Civil Rights movement, this history instead aims to understand the deeper motivating factors beyond those that occupied Wounded Knee, to the extent of risking their very lives. Ultimately, the Oglala Lakota at Wounded Knee drew on aspects of traditional Lakota spirituality as well as an established history of the United States abuse of relations with the Oglala as a means of justifying the occupation at Wounded Knee. The Lakota structured their occupation in such a way as to draw on Lakota spirituality to not only legitimize their struggle, but also to assert a new sovereign identity based on interpretations of Lakota history and memorial tradition.

Summarizing the chronology of the Wounded Knee occupation, George Pierre Castile condenses the entire conflict into the following:

A group of about two hundred, led by AM, occupied and fortified the hamlet. They were quickly ringed by federal marshals and FBI agents. Negotiations were called for, demands kept shifting, and several agreements were aborted. Desultory gunfire was exchanged, but no frontal confrontation ever occurred. In May an agreement was finally reached: the occupation would end and those under indictment would submit to arrest. In return, the government would look into charges made against the Pine Ridge tribal government, and white House officials would meet with “traditional chiefs” to discuss the 1868 Sioux treaty. The occupation ended on May 8, and the treaty discussion took place on May 17.³

Although demonstrating the relative simplicity of the chronological events surrounding the Wounded Knee occupation, Castile’s assumption that AIM acted as the leader of the protestors demonstrates a misinterpretation of some sources. Overall, though, the Wounded Knee occupation did not devolve into convulsion. Oglala protestors occupied the town of Wounded Knee and held out for 73 days against the federal government.

However, the event takes on greater significance when analyzed through the perspective of Oglala Lakota protestors inside Wounded Knee. Complexity, rather, lies in the identity created inside Wounded Knee, an identity distinctly Lakota in origin and designed as a rallying point for both Oglala Lakotas tired of their current situation, as well as other Native American activists. This creation of a new identity, its manifestations, and its expressions, offers insight into the significance of Wounded Knee transcendent of a strict chronology, and vested rather in increasingly amorphous concepts and interpretations.

While the Lakota protestors situated the legitimization of their conflict within historical and memorial concepts, their reason for doing so reflected more the economic reality that existed on the Pine Ridge reservation during the early 1970s. Alcoholism, difficult employment situations, and an overall dearth of federal funding helped create a severe economic shortage. Just over 36% of the income earned by all Pine Ridge residents for the 1973 fiscal year came from government assistance programs.⁴ Compounding this reliance on government aid, alcoholism ran rampant, with over 85% of Pine Ridge arrests involving the use of alcohol. However, the Indian Health Service Unit charged with providing medical aid did not have appropriate resources to care for alcoholics. Instead, alcoholics traveled to a state program in Wyoming, although Jayme Longbrake, administrative officer at the service hospital, testified at the Wounded Knee Hearings in June 1973 that the Wyoming program did not help rehabilitate alcoholics in his professional opinion.⁵ While government support did flow into the reservation, its exact usage remained largely unknown. Charlie Red Cloud, grandson of the Lakota chief Red Cloud, testified, “There is a lot of money that comes into the reservation in the name of the people, but nobody knows where the money goes and the people are poorer than ever.”⁶ The situation on Pine Ridge remained bleak to say the least. High reliance on the government for

meager assistance, a lack of quality of health programs to deal with alcoholism, and the misappropriation of what little money did come into Pine Ridge created a situation far removed from the past might of the Lakota nation. To rectify their current predicament, the Oglala Lakota on the Pine Ridge reservation only had to look back to their history and memory to see a time exactly opposite of their contemporary life.

For Oglala Lakota protestors, the usage of history and memory in the assertion of a new identity reflected hardly novel beliefs. In Lakota culture, oral tradition conveyed all of Lakota history from one generation to the next.⁷ Melding the historical and memorial into a single auditory construct offered not only a recollection of the past, but also promoted the creation of a collective identity capable of easily spreading through Lakota communities. Ties dating back to a common origin and common kinship bound all Lakota's together under a shared cultural banner.⁸ Responsibility for passing on this shared culture fell to elderly storytellers, considered sacred thanks to their prestigious societal standing and role.⁹ As elders, these sacred storytellers represented a physical connection between the past and the present through their old age. Establishing a cycle whereby older generations passed on stories to the newer generations, historical and memorial concepts, though ever shifting, guaranteed a common bond amongst all people of the Lakota nation. The significant role of history and memory, compiled together through oral tradition, as a means of creating a collective identity, directly translated into the way protestors at Wounded Knee structured their own identity to draw on these past values and connections.

With oral tradition providing the crux upon which Lakota identity rested, the loss of such a custom prior to 1973 caused a significant cultural crisis. Leonard Crow Dog, a medicine man throughout the Wounded Knee occupation, describes how many of the Oglala Lakota around him

knew nothing of traditional ceremonies of beliefs. Of their predicament, he says, “They were Indians, but they had lived all their lives in the white man’s big cities or they came from tribes where the missionaries had destroyed their old religion.”¹⁰ With oral tradition forming the basic means of communicating a collective identity, the lack of such tradition among Lakota growing up in an increasingly assimilationist era caused a serious lack of traditional native identity. The notion that to be a true Lakota one had to be a full blood Lakota reflected this disdain towards natives conforming to white culture. Perceived as willing subordinates to whites’ subversive intentions, half-blooded Lakotas physically embodied the consequences of straying from traditional belief and practice,¹¹ and only reinforced the need for a new identity based in Lakota ritual. An absence of old Lakota tradition thus prompted the need for a new identity returning to these forgotten or disdained roots.

Into this environment devoid of Lakota tradition stepped the American Indian Movement (AIM) to attempt to revive lost ritual for use in the creation of a contemporary identity. Originally founded in Minneapolis in 1968 to monitor against police harassment of Native Americans, the American Indian Movement gradually evolved into an organization actively seeking the reclamation of native identity within an urbanized setting. What AIM accomplished in activism, however, they lacked in viable connections to Native American culture and spirituality radiating outward from reservations.¹² Following the murder of Raymond Yellow Thunder, an Oglala Lakota, and the subsequent release of his murderers without bail, members from the Pine Ridge reservation sought out AIM in the hopes of achieving a fair and full investigation into the case.¹³ However, the relationship developing between those on the Pine Ridge reservation and AIM proved to be mutually reinforcing. Whereas AIM offered a spark of activism, they lacked guidance by the tribal elders needed to legitimize their struggle.¹⁴ In the

words of Mary Crow Dog, the joining of traditional Oglalas' and AIM "was like flint striking flint, lighting a spark which grew into a flame at which we could warm ourselves after a long, long winter."¹⁵ Promising a new hope, and a new identity, the joining of Oglala traditionals and AIM melded together the strengths that each group had previously held separately, but now held in unison.

The greatest political product resulting from the conjunction of AIM and Oglala traditionals lay in the symbolic voice it returned to elders. Following the investigation into Raymond Yellow Thunder's death, elders living on the Pine Ridge reservation saw a rebirth in Native Americans uncompromising in their stance against white oppression, whether it be in the form of abusive ranchers, or an apathetic government. As elders began to speak out against injustices committed against the Oglala Lakota, a feeling of rebirth and revitalization spread. Severt Young Bear, a district chairman from the town of Porcupine inside Pine Ridge, spoke of how the voice given to elders brought about a feeling of imminent change, and demonstrated the revitalization of traditional Lakota culture.¹⁶ Providing the push necessary to urge traditional Lakotas to stand up to not only the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) but also a corrupt tribal administration with an assimilationist bent, Lakota traditionals found their voice once again and now sought to use it in bettering their nation.¹⁷

For many traditional Oglalas', tribal chairman Dick Wilson epitomized everything immoral with assimilationist policies and the loss of traditional native identity. However, accusations of nepotism leveled against Wilson did not denote a significant change in Oglala politics. In fact, the impeachment of Dick Wilson, which played a key role in the eventual occupation of Wounded Knee, carried on an established habit of accusing new tribal chairmen of corruption and wrongdoing. What set the attempted impeachment of Wilson apart from the

established trend, however, lay in his mixed-blood roots.¹⁸ Prejudice against Wilson because of his heritage found legitimacy in the belief among traditional Oglalas that, against white pressure to assimilate, only the traditional Oglalas had successfully held out. Within Lakota culture, the role of leader or chief lay in the ability to prove oneself as the most able leader, fully committed to the betterment of the tribe.¹⁹ The role of a mixed-blood chairman, with the associated perception of willingly cooperating with the government and white ranchers, did not indicate the best candidate for tribal leadership. Tenets of traditional governance, which had allowed the Lakota nation to rise to prominence in the first place, reiterated the power of Lakota history and tradition as a legitimizing force behind the protests of Oglala activists in 1972 and 1973. Setting up a strict dichotomy between the assimilationist sentiment of Wilson and their own values rooted in Lakota tradition, Oglala activists on Pine Ridge saw the ousting of Wilson as necessary to both improving their immediate physical circumstances, as well as returning to a value system reflective of historic Lakota prominence.²⁰

To accomplish their goal of removing Wilson and returning to traditional Lakota values, Oglalas came together, through the aid of AIM, to form the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization (OSCRO). Listing over 600 adult members around the time of the Wounded Knee occupation, OSCRO formed as an organization intent on impeaching Dick Wilson, and reclaiming aspects of sovereignty and self-determination.²¹ Moving beyond the misuse of funds under the Wilson administration, OSCRO came to symbolize a reassertion of traditional tribal identity. Grounded in a desire for Lakota self-rule, the physical composition of OSCRO's leaders demonstrated a commitment to Lakota belief existent only in memory by 1973. Supported by a majority of traditional chiefs and medicine men, the legitimization of OSCRO as an organization fighting for a new Lakota identity, based on distinctly traditional ideals, reflected historic ties

between religious belief and political action.²² Demonstrative of an ideal common in Lakota custom, political action gained resonance if it tapped into spiritual belief. Support from those members of Oglala society representative of past political and spiritual practices therefore, translated into OSCRO's ability to present itself as the legitimate heir to the Lakota nation.²³

The days immediately prior to, and at the very start of the Wounded Knee occupation witnessed the birth of a new Oglala Lakota nation conceived in concepts of memory and history. The impeachment process of Dick Wilson, that had begun in October of 1972 and ended on February 23, 1973 with Wilson retaining his position, led many Lakotas opposed to Wilson's rule to meet at Calico Hall, north of Pine Ridge village, to mull over available options for OSCRO.²⁴ The meeting on the night of February 27 however, proved quite different from past meetings. Over 300 people crammed the hall, with only Denis Banks and Russell Means representing AIM at the historic meeting. Beyond simply protesting against Wilson's rule, those in the hall, throughout the night, asserted their desire for a new identity, freed from recent injustice and vested in Lakota tradition. Chief Fools Crow, a traditional Oglala chief, decided the course of action when he told listeners, in Lakota, "Go to Wounded Knee. There you will be protected."²⁵ Conscious of the connotation associated with the 1890 massacre, Fools Crow and others like him saw Wounded Knee as the optimal location for situating a protest so grounded in Lakota tradition and history. Restating the common conviction among Oglala protestors that the spirits of Wounded Knee would provide guidance and protection to occupiers clearly demonstrated the degree to which spiritual belief influenced Oglala activists. The occupation offered a locale where the Oglala's drew on historical and memorial concepts to assert a new identity, capable as both a force for unification and legitimization.

The great Lakota medicine man, Black Elk, long passed before the occupation of Wounded Knee, recalled a time in his youth when he had thought of the current Lakota condition by saying:

I thought about my vision and that my people should have a place in this earth where they would be happy every day and that their nation might live, but they had gone one on the wrong road and they had gone into poverty but they would be brought back into the hoop.²⁶

Returning to the hoop reflected Lakota belief in the eternal cycle of all things, and Black Elk's interpretation reflected a belief in not only the cyclical nature and progression of time, but also the possibility of the Lakota returning to the hoop, and in doing so returning to their past status as a great and powerful Native American nation. By physically returning to Wounded Knee on the night of February 27, Oglala activists sought to return to this sacred hoop, and start the cycle anew. In 1890, Chief Big Foot and his band had been travelling in the opposite direction, heading to Pine Ridge to surrender to federal authorities. Now, Oglala protestors completed the cycle by physically returning to Wounded Knee, traveling in the opposite direction, creating a hoop 83 years in the making.²⁷ In the words of Leonard Crow Dog, "Here we come going the other way. We're those Indian people, we're them, we're back, and we can't go any further. Wounded Knee is a place where we can't go any further."²⁸ The symbolic return to Wounded Knee now complete, the Oglala activists occupied the town and within the provided space, constructed a distinct identity reflecting their interpretation of the past and a synthesis of their historical and memorial perspectives.

Necessity dictates understanding the reasons behind why the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890 represented such a pivotal moment in Lakota history, and furthermore, how such an event came to exemplify Oglala Lakotas spiritual justification for the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973. Shaped by both external and internal interpretations of the event, Lakota

protestors viewed the Wounded Knee massacre as the ultimate symbol of white oppression against Native Americans in general, and the Lakota in particular.²⁹ One Wounded Knee occupant by the name of Rachel Hollow Horn justified her reason for staying in the town by calling the Wounded Knee massacre an unhealed wound.³⁰ The notion that 83 years later the Wounded Knee massacre still served as a source of pain reflects both the significance of the event, and the ability of the Lakota to pass down such anguish from generation to generation. Reiterating Lakota interpretation of the event, Wounded Knee represented more than just another massacre in a string of massacres chronicling the defeat of Native Americans throughout the United States. Rather, Wounded Knee represented the moment at which white desire to civilize and correspondingly strip Native Americans of their identity came to a culmination in a brutal massacre symbolic of both a physical and spiritual loss.

Reflecting themes present in the influential *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee*, understanding the Wounded Knee massacre centered on its status as a symbol of systematic oppression of Lakota culture at the hands of whites.³¹ Interpretation of the Wounded Knee massacre led Oglala protestors to view the site as a spiritual space, filled with the ghosts of their ancestors mowed down in the exact same location, and symbolic of the United States oppression of Lakota culture through brutal force. In the words of Leonard Crow Dog, “Wounded Knee was our most sacred site. To be standing up there would be the greatest thing we could do.”³² Once at Wounded Knee, Leonard Crow Dog went on to state, “I heard the voices of the long-dead ghost dancers crying out to us...They had been waiting for us for a long time. They had known we were coming.”³³ To Crow Dog, and others like him, the ancestors killed at Wounded Knee knew of the current protestors’ eventual return, and the ancestors exhibited their support by encompassing the space around Wounded Knee with their spiritual presence. To Oglala protestors, the Wounded

Knee occupation embodied the near eradication of the Lakota culture by the United States.

However, despite the U.S governments' best efforts, the spirits of those massacred at Wounded Knee in 1973 survived as ghosts, biding their time until their Lakota heirs returned and reclaimed the sacred site in the name of Lakota tradition and history.

Whereas the occupation of Wounded Knee predicated the spiritual legitimization of the protestors struggle on the memory of the Wounded Knee massacre, the establishment of the Independent Oglala Nation (ION) on March 11, 1973 based its sovereignty off the history of relations between the United States and the Lakota nation.³⁴ For Oglala protestors inside Wounded Knee, as well as supporters abroad, the declaration of an independent nation confirmed their desire to separate from white culture and create an identity rooted in their own past rituals and history. Grace Black Elk, and similar protestors, believed that the Great Spirit had provided the traditional form of tribal government, and by returning to these roots, they returned to their rightful relationship with their spiritual creator.³⁵ To Russell Means the declaration of an Independent Oglala Nation offered the only viable possibility in ensuring the survival of the Lakota people, both in the present and for future generations alike.³⁶ Thus, the declaration of the Independent Oglala Nation combined themes common in Lakota culture, particularly the aforementioned synthesis of both memorial and historical belief, as a means for qualifying the existence of the Oglala Lakota. That the justification for an independent nation pointed to the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 reveals the complex processes involved in not only the creation of a new Lakota identity, but also Oglala protestors interpretation of past events and the significance assigned to such events.

The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 occupied an important position within Lakota memory and history, because it represented the last instance in which the United States and the Lakota

dealt with each other as separate but equal nations. Within the memory of Lakota protestors, the Treaty of 1868 offered meaning pertinent to their current situation, and thus their interpretation of the document reflected more their contemporary relationship to the United States government, and less the reality of the treaty.³⁷ In actuality, the Treaty of 1868 established the Great Sioux Reservation, designed solely for Lakota habitation and away from United States influence.³⁸ However, Lakota protestors at Wounded Knee fixated on the degree of self-determination afforded by the treaty, and less on the large reservation created in return. In addition, the Treaty of 1868 established the United States and the Lakota as equal rivals, contending for the Great Plains, and this notion of equality in status but separate in nationality had key implications in its subsequent utilization by protestors in 1973. To occupants of Wounded Knee, the Treaty of 1868 provided a legal framework in which to situate their struggle, but their interpretation of the treaty reflected more their own desire for sovereignty, and less their understanding of what the treaty actually dictated.³⁹

The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, in the minds of Oglala protestors inside Wounded Knee, epitomized Lakota self-determination and the Lakota nation's past status as a great Native American power, capable of political relations with the United States on relatively equal ground. The 1868 Treaty represented more than just the delineation of a distinctly Lakota space, it symbolized the sacred basis of legal Lakota sovereignty.⁴⁰ Seeking to establish a separate identity, the 1868 Fort Laramie treaty legitimized Oglala protestors' current struggle against the United States government.⁴¹ Ellen Moves Camp, one of the key female protestors inside Wounded Knee stated, "This place [Wounded Knee] has always been a nation, it was always recognized as a nation, and you go back into the 1868 Treaty, it's all there."⁴² To Moves Camp and other Lakota protestors, the declaration of an independent Oglala nation separate from the

United States did not break any laws, but rather fulfilled historic agreements. Interpreting the 1868 Treaty as legitimatizing their claims to sovereignty, as well as symbolizing lost equality with the United States, Lakota's throughout Pine Ridge revived long dormant nationalist sentiment.⁴³ Not surprisingly, the construction of this nationalism drew on common motifs of historical and memorial importance.

Throughout the Wounded Knee occupation the construction of a distinct identity, rooted in the past and directed towards the future, occurred not only in symbols capable of conveying culturally relevant meanings to Lakota supporters, but also in the interpretation of occurrences around the town of Wounded Knee itself, with a particular case in point being that of ghosts. Reverend John Adams, of the National Council of Churches, recalled a conversation he had with one of the government officials outside of Wounded Knee. According to Adams:

The tension on everyone was fantastic. This man told me about how one night he kept hearing cries and screams and he thought he saw Indians approaching his bunker. He shot at them but they kept coming. They finally disappeared. The Indians said, 'Those are the victims of Wounded Knee- they're all around here.'⁴⁴

The supposed interaction of both government forces and Oglala protestors with ghosts at Wounded Knee came to signify the sanctity of the Oglala cause, and paradoxically, the illegality of the United States government involvement. Lakota tradition holds that hearing a ghost signals bad luck in the near future.⁴⁵ Thus, the fact that government officials heard ghosts outside of Wounded Knee signified their illegal trespass against the Oglala, both those physically occupying the town and Wounded Knee, as well as those who had died at the hands of government officials in 1890. However, as Leonard Crow Dog mentioned before, the Lakota at Wounded Knee often felt the presence of ghosts as well. While Lakota tradition holds that bad luck accompanies hearing ghosts, tradition also views as ghosts as forebears of potential events

to come.⁴⁶ While government officials encountering of ghosts demonstrated their illegal action against the spiritual rights of the Lakota, the Lakotas interaction with the spirits foretold a return to the great hoop. By feeling the presence of their ancestors around them, the interpretation among the Lakota protestors held that the spiritual given legitimacy of their cause found support in long lost ancestors. The interpretation of events such as ghostly encounters only further reinforces the role Lakota tradition played in demonstrating the legitimacy of their current occupation, while simultaneously discrediting the United States government involvement in an issue outside of their control, if predicated upon the legality of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868.

One of the multitudes of ways in which Oglalas' expressed their newfound, yet evolving identity, beyond their interpretation of ancestral spirit encounters, existed in the popularity of sweat lodges among the protestors. Unlike the Sundance or the Ghost Dance, the United States never viewed the sweat lodge as symbolically defiant to their assimilationist stance on Native American culture. Within Lakota culture, the sweat lodge purifies the body, and in return, the body receives strength.⁴⁷ Mary Crow Dog and other protestors inside Wounded Knee recall the popularity of the sweat lodge, particularly as a means for providing strength to warriors undertaking the actual fighting against U.S. government forces.⁴⁸ Wallace Black Elk, one of the medicine men present during the Wounded Knee occupation, captured the significance of the sweat lodge, by prophesizing of an upcoming purification in which only Native Americans survive, while whites' preoccupation with wealth, particularly gold, brings about their own downfall.⁴⁹ Whether or not Black Elk actually believed in a physical doomsday, the prominent societal role Black Elk occupied, in conjunction with his beliefs on the importance of purification, reinforce the significant cultural standing given to the sweat lodge. Rooted in Lakota tradition, the interpretation of the sweat lodge's meaning as offering an avenue towards

achieving purity sanctioned by the Great Spirit reinforced the spiritual legitimacy of those occupying Wounded Knee.

Facilitated by the strength and purity given to protestors from the sweat lodge, many Oglalas saw the occupation as enabling a return of the long extinct Lakota warrior.⁵⁰ During the meetings at Calico Hall, Gladys Bissonette pleaded with those around her, saying, “For many years we have not fought any kind of war, we have not fought any kind of battle, and we have forgotten how to fight.”⁵¹ Rallying men to fight for the ION called upon memorial notions of long lost warriors, and the values they so embodied. By returning to Wounded Knee, protestors consciously chose to create an identity that reflected their interpretation of Lakota warriors, and to utilize this identity as one of the many ways in which Oglalas at Wounded Knee presented their struggle as grounded in the past. Stan Holder, head of the Wounded Knee security and a Vietnam veteran, stated: “Indian warrior societies were born out of the community life that the Indian existed in...When the nation he belonged to needed defense the warrior societies vowed to do this fighting. That’s basically the same way that our army is set up.”⁵² Remembering historic warrior societies, and their role as defenders of the Lakota nation, signified the important role contemporary warriors defined for themselves as men ensuring not only the physical survival of Wounded Knee occupants, but also the survival of traditional Lakota culture. Reclaiming the warrior status of old indicated the Oglala protestors’ conscious linkage between their current situation inside Wounded Knee and the great warrior societies of a past Lakota nation, tied together through a mutual commitment to traditional Lakota belief.

The association between Lakota warriors of the past and the men of Wounded Knee evoked specific gender connotations that translated into the construction of gender identity for woman protestors as well. During the occupation, Mary Crow Dog recalled how lack of publicity

for woman failed to correlate with their actual role within Wounded Knee.⁵³ In reality, the role woman played reflected historic Lakota notions of separate yet equal roles for males and females. The role of the women both at Wounded Knee, and within broader Lakota tradition, fell to being industrious.⁵⁴ Whereas the social role of men dictated that they protect the nation and safeguard its survival through hunting and warfare, woman played the equally important yet less visible role of ensuring all the inner workings of Lakota society functioned as smoothly as possible. A woman present at Wounded Knee by the name of Kathy recalled how woman cooked, cleaned, and worked as medics.⁵⁵ In doing so, women like Kathy fulfilled gender specific roles that, while not as visible as the male warriors, nonetheless ensured the continued existence of the Wounded Knee community. Returning to traditional Lakota gender roles gave the actions of women inside Wounded Knee amplified importance, because by consciously taking on roles similar to those that Lakota woman had fulfilled throughout their history, the women of Wounded Knee asserted their desire to return to a society where past tradition delineated social roles and expectations.

Enveloping all protestors, no symbol better validates the critical role history and memory played in the creation of a new Oglala identity during the Wounded Knee occupation, than the revival of the Ghost Dance. Russell Means captured the significance in reviving the Ghost Dance by stating:

The white man says that the 1890 massacre was the end of the wars with the Indian, that it was the end of the Indian, the end of the Ghost Dance. Yet here we are at war, we're still Indians, and we're Ghost Dancing again. And the spirits of Big Foot and his people are all around us.⁵⁶

Reiterating the broken hoop metaphor, the renewal of the Ghost Dance signified to Oglala protestors that, despite attempts by the United States government to oppress and replace their ancient culture, the Oglala survived and now reclaimed the Ghost Dance from its suppressed

position within the annals of American history. The Ghost Dance gave hope to those inside Wounded Knee, and the source of this hope sprung from the memorial significance and spiritual sacredness connecting the Ghost Dance of 1890 to the Ghost Dance of 1973.⁵⁷ Understanding how Oglala Lakota's at Wounded Knee interpreted the Ghost Dance and the meanings imbued to the Ghost Dance since its suppression in 1890 further demonstrate how the creation of a traditionally rooted Lakota identity for protestors found resonance in memorial and historical interpretations.

Shortly after the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890, Lakota elders recorded their views on traditional Lakota belief and ritual. One man by the name of Short Bull stated of the Ghost Dance, "This was our religion. I taught peace for all mankind."⁵⁸ Short Bull goes on to state that whites waged war against the Lakota to prevent them from practicing their religion, even one rooted in peace such as the Ghost Dance. To Lakota Ghost Dancers in 1973 however, the Ghost Dance took on a meaning more relevant to the goals of their own time. To Leonard Crow Dog and others, the message espoused by the Ghost Dance, promising the survival of Native Americans and the eventual triumph of their culture, further legitimized Wounded Knee occupiers' similar struggle to create a superior and separate identity from that of white Americans. Although the peaceful nature of the Ghost Dance may have been an aspect of those partaking in the ritual, more likely the Ghost Dance symbolized the physical reclamation of their past, particularly with regards towards Native American religion. Leonard Crow Dog stated, "When they killed our people here so long ago, it was said that the nation's hoop was broken. We'll make the sacred hoop whole again."⁵⁹ By recreating the Ghost Dance once again, it symbolized, to Crow Dog and others, that despite the United States government's best attempts to break their spiritual hoop, and thus finalize their political and religious victory over Native

Americans, the United States ultimately failed. Espousing a spiritual belief and ritual previously suppressed but never extinguished, Oglala protestors at Wounded Knee, by participating in a revived Ghost Dance, demonstrated the survival of Lakota culture from the past into the present day.

Negotiations between the United States and the Independent Oglala Nation continued this broader theme of Lakota memory interwoven with the historic relationship between the Lakota and the United States. During the Wounded Knee trials, following the occupation, Gladys Bissonette testified, “The Indians are guided by the Great Spirit and our sacred pipe,”⁶⁰ and while the Lakotas taking part in negotiations with the United States could not manifest the Great Spirit, they brought the next closest option: the sacred pipe. George Sword, a Lakota chief interviewed in 1896, spoke of how the smoke from a sacred pipe communicated with the Great Spirit, and that by smoking the pipe one established not only a friendly repertoire with the Great Spirit, but also asked for guidance.⁶¹ More importantly though, by smoking the pipe one promised to tell the truth, because the pipe acted as a sacred object directly linked to the all-encompassing Great Spirit.⁶² These themes of traditional sacredness and truth directly translated into the manner in which Oglalas’ at Wounded Knee organized their negotiation with the United States and framed their own goals. Reliance on the spiritual as a guiding force behind their political decisions again reflected the significant role Lakota tradition played in how Oglala protestors shaped not only their new identity, but also their interaction with outside forces, particularly the United States government.

Initial negotiations between the United States and the ION took place over the first few days in April. As the negotiations wrapped up all involved smoked the sacred pipe, where Gladys Bissonette, praying in Lakota, said, “We smoke the sacred pipe here with our white

brothers, and we hope this will bring peace. Because in the past there were a lot of violations of the sacred treaties and honors. This is real. We are not playing here.”⁶³ Emphasizing the sacredness of the event and the understanding that smoking the peace pipe held both parties accountable to the Great Spirit, through their mutual commitment to honesty and good actions, Gladys linked the spirituality of the sacred pipe to the history of Lakota relations with the United States. By calling out the United States for their history of broken promises, the peace pipe at Wounded Knee now symbolized a renewed connection between this history of deceit and the hope for new honesty on the part of the United States. In this way, the Oglala Lakota at Wounded Knee extended the influence tradition held during the occupation to the very manner in which they negotiated with the United States. By returning to past methods of negotiation, and promoting a long-established interpretation of the sacred pipe, the Oglala Lakota at Wounded Knee positioned themselves as heirs to Lakota tradition and culture, and thus rightful in their current protest against the United States.

Whereas the sacred peace pipe symbolized a connection to the Great Spirit for the Oglala Lakota at Wounded Knee, the surrounding physical landscape signified their eternal connection to Mother Earth. Wallace Black Elk encapsulated the significance of the land by stating, “We’re going back to the beginning of time. It is better to go back and honor our Grandfather, honor our sacred Mother Earth.”⁶⁴ The spiritual connection to the very earth upon which protestors situated their struggle took on spiritual properties designed to reinforce Lakota connection to the land, a universal bond incapable of breaking under U.S. governmental pressure. Lakota spiritual belief holds that the Lakota originated from beneath the Black Hills, and that ancestors of the Lakota still live beneath the area to this very day.⁶⁵ Lakota protestors believed that they had a physical and spiritual connection to the land dating back to their very origin as a people. It serves as no

coincidence that Lakota tradition involving the Sun Dance, the most sacred of all Lakota traditions, involved painting people and sacred objects red, a reiteration of their belief in the ability of the surrounding physical environment, such as the red earth beneath them, to provide life.⁶⁶ The significance of the land at Wounded Knee came to represent more than just the physical arena in which their struggle played out, the land came to symbolize their very existence, dating back to the origin of the Lakota people, a physical tie to the land that remained forever unbroken.

Woody Kipp, one of the protestors inside Wounded Knee during the siege, summarized the importance of the fight by saying, “It was a rebellion by those who had been on this land for millennia, eighteen to sixty thousand years...And we say this: You may be in physical control of the land, white man, but spiritually we are still landlords.”⁶⁷ The protestors at Wounded Knee reflected Kipp’s belief that while the United States held, in their opinion, dubious legal claim to the land on which the occupation occurred, the Lakota had forged a spiritual bond with the land legitimized through thousands of years living in North America. Land took on greater symbolism than merely the physical space utilized by the protestors. Two Vietnam veterans at Wounded Knee best captured the spiritual connection the occupiers felt they had established with the land, and the power of this connection to bring about positive change. Bob spoke of the internal change that occurred by returning to the land as equivalent to a moral and mental cleansing. Tiger spoke of the spirit that lived in the land, a value incapable of purchase or by those who do not value the Native American connection with the land.⁶⁸ In this sense then the land around Wounded Knee provided an aspect of spiritual support, sustaining those inside the town to push for an improvement in conditions for the Oglala. With a rich history tied to the land, in conjunction with an oral tradition that established the land as the birth of the Oglala, land

symbolized the very soul of the Oglala people. Beyond a political protest, the land around Wounded Knee manifested Lakota spirituality and Lakota tradition, thus reinforcing those protestors seeking a return to the tradition of the past so rooted in the landscape.⁶⁹

Not satisfied with creating an identity for themselves, the Oglala protestors at Wounded Knee emphasized and reinforced their larger desire to separate from the dominant white culture of the United States. Vine Deloria Jr. captured the desire of not only the Lakota, but nearly all Native Americans, by stating, “What we need is a cultural leave-us-alone agreement, in spirit and in fact.”⁷⁰ Towards this end, Lakota protestors again looked to their history of relations with the United States to qualify white identity, and the ideological chasm separating white belief from those of Native Americans. Conceptualization of the white man’s values directly contradicted those of the Lakota. Black Elk talks of the interrelationship between the Lakota, land animals, animals of the air, and the prosperity that stemmed from this bond. However, with the arrival of the white man, Black Elk speaks on the eradication of the Lakota’s past relationship with the animals, and the further extinction of Native American spirituality.⁷¹ The white man thus manifested notions of greed and corruption for their own selfish sake. Traditional Lakota chiefs during the 1890s and early 1900s spoke of the happiness and prosperity that had existed amongst the Lakota prior to the arrival of the white man. With their arrival however, whites, in the view of the Lakota chiefs, went about destroying the physical land that provided sustenance, and went further by attempting to suppress Native American spirituality for the promulgation of their own Christian ideals.⁷² In Lakota memory then, the white man embodied notions of evil, greed, and destruction. The added inability of whites to comprehend Native American spirituality further evidenced their concern with material wealth over all else.

Emphasis by the Oglala's on the constructing a white identity predicated on material desire and apathy, particular towards nature, continued at Wounded Knee. Mary Crow Dog summarized her understanding of whites by saying "There was little that was sacred to them. They had no strong beliefs of their own, except a faith in naked power, numbers and paragraphs."⁷³ Whereas protestors at Wounded Knee reinforced their communal bonds through reviving traditional Lakota spiritual ceremonies, white government forces, in the eyes of the Oglala protestors, demonstrated a sole commitment to suppressing the protestors and little else. Unrestrained individualism manifested through material wealth existed in direct contradiction to the Native American protestors inside Wounded Knee so focused on caring for one another.⁷⁴ Within Wounded Knee, Stan Holder stated of the surrounding American forces:

They just want to wage wars on a mass scale and keep identity totally out of it...And they're not only killing or wounding human beings but they're wounding the animal life. They just have no personal feeling at all. They can't see the human aspect in this fight.⁷⁵

The white system, embodied by U.S. government forces, symbolized everything Lakota protestors fought against in their struggle. A preoccupation with death, little regard towards nature, and the inability to allow Native American sovereignty in any form characterized Oglala Lakotas' understanding of white government forces. Reiterating the gap between the Oglala and the white government, characterizations of the government continued trends rooted in a deep memorial hatred for the white system that had taken away Lakota land and rights during the 1800s, and now sought to squash this resurgent Oglala identity.

For all the utilization of history and memory as a legitimizing force for their conflict, and reclamation of the past greatness manifested by the Lakota nation, the Wounded Knee occupation came to a rather inglorious end. The death of Buddy Lamont, a Vietnam veteran and

beloved Oglala, spelled the end of the protest.⁷⁶ At Buddy's funeral, his mother recalled the last words he said to her before his death:

I [Agnes Lamont] asked him to go home. 'I need you at home,' I said. "Well, mom, maybe you need me, but," he said, 'I'm here for a good cause.' He said, 'Watch now, we're going to win. We're going to come to the top. And you're going to be happy. All the people will be happy. So in the end we will win-you remember that,' he said...And that's the last time I saw him.⁷⁷

Buddy Lamont died believing that the struggle at Wounded Knee would bring about real change for the Oglala people. However, the question remains, what change did the Wounded Knee occupation bring about? For the three years following the Wounded Knee occupation Dick Wilson unleashed a reign of terror targeted towards adversaries, many of whom either partook in or supported the occupation. Seventy of Wilson's opponents died in a multitude of inexplicable ways and the murder rate on the Pine Ridge reservation exceeded the national average by 17 times.⁷⁸ In a very real sense then the Wounded Knee occupation, and by extension Buddy's death, had accomplished little of real value. The blood, toil, and sacrifice of those both inside and outside Wounded Knee in an effort to revive past tradition and reassert self-determination appeared to have fallen victim to Wilson's brutal reign.

The significance of the Wounded Knee occupation however, transcends the brutal conditions that existed on the Pine Ridge reservation immediately afterwards. Capping the end of a multiple year struggle by Native American activists, the Wounded Knee occupation, in conjunction with other Native American activism, renewed a sense of pride in Native American culture, and caused a reevaluation of what qualified American identity.⁷⁹ The Wounded Knee struggle, while unsuccessful in its short-term goals, ultimately helped inspire thousands of Native Americans to reassert a new native identity rooted in history and memory. In the same sense in which the Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee massacre symbolized the systematic attempt by the

U.S. government to eradicate Native American culture,⁸⁰ so too did the Wounded Knee occupation symbolize the final rebirth of a new native identity cloaked in memory and legitimized in history. Asserting principles of self-determination, with particular regards to the revival of traditional Lakota belief and ceremony, the protestors at Wounded Knee challenged the very dominance of white values, and in doing so demonstrated the inherent might of all Native Americans, not just the Lakota.⁸¹ Throughout the occupation, notions of memory and interpretations of history guided the protestors in both their physical actions, and the meaning they assigned to the physical and immaterial objects surrounding them. Demonstrating the power of utilizing historical interpretation and memorial revival as an avenue to challenge even the mightiest of nations, the Oglala protestors asserted a new Native American culture and identity. Completing a hoop that had begun 83 years ago in the very same location, the Oglala protestors demonstrated not only their ability to dance again, but also their ability to revive universal pride in Native American culture, history, and tradition, so long suppressed, but now liberated once more.

Endnotes

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 - ² George Pierre Castille, *To Show Heart: Native American Self-Determination and Federal Indian Policy, 1960-1975* (Tuscon, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1998): 128-130.
 - ³ *Ibid.*, 129
 - ⁴ *The Causes and Aftermath of the Wounded Knee Takeover: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Indian Affairs of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs*, 93d Cong., 1st Sess. (1973):191.
 - ⁵ *Ibid.*, 62-63
 - ⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.
 - ⁷ Raymond J. DeMaille, ed., *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984): 30.
 - ⁸ Rolland Dewing, *Wounded Knee: The Meaning and Significance of the Second Event* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1985): 3.
 - ⁹ William A. Young, *Quest for Harmony: Native American Spiritual Traditions* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002): 159.
 - ¹⁰ Leonard Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes, *Crow Dog: Four Generations of Sioux Medicine Men* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995): 128.
 - ¹¹ Mary Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990): 93-94.
 - ¹² John William Sayer, *Ghost Dancing the Law: The Wounded Knee Trials* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997): 29.
 - ¹³ *Ibid.*
 - ¹⁴ Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allan Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996): 198.
 - ¹⁵ Crow Dog, *Lakota Woman*, 76.
 - ¹⁶ Robert Anderson et al., eds., *Voices from Wounded Knee 1973 in the Words of the Participants* (Rooseveltown, NY: Akwesasne Notes, 1974): 13.
 - ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.
 - ¹⁸ Castille, *To Show Heart*, 131.
 - ¹⁹ DeMaille, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 320.
 - ²⁰ Akim D. Reinhardt, *Ruling Pine Ridge: Oglala Lakota Politics from the IRA to Wounded Knee* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2007): 210-211.
 - ²¹ *The Causes and Aftermath of the Wounded Knee Takeover*, 141.
 - ²² *Ibid.*, 143
 - ²³ Stephen Cornell, *The Return of the Native: American Indian Political Resurgence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 64.
 - ²⁴ Reinhardt, *Ruling Pine Ridge*, 185-186.
 - ²⁵ Russell Means, "Russell Means: On the Siege of Wounded Knee" In *Fighting Words: Competing Voices from Native America* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2009): 237.
 - ²⁶ DeMaille, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 259.
 - ²⁷ Smith, *Like a Hurricane*, 201.
 - ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 202.
 - ²⁹ Jeffrey Ostler, *The Lakotas and the Black Hills: The Struggle for Sacred Ground* (New York: Viking, 2010): 172.
 - ³⁰ Peter Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980): 69.
 - ³¹ Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc.,1970): 400.
 - ³² Crow Dog, *Crow Dog*, 188.
 - ³³ *Ibid.*, 189.
 - ³⁴ Anderson, *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 55.
 - ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.
 - ³⁶ *The Causes and Aftermath of the Wounded Knee Takeover*, 180.
 - ³⁷ Castille, *To Show Heart*, 135.
 - ³⁸ *The Causes and Aftermath of the Wounded Knee Takeover*, 338-343.
 - ³⁹ Means, "Russell Means: On the Siege of Wounded Knee,": 238.

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- ⁴⁰ Paul Robertson, *The Power of the Land: Identity, Ethnicity, and Class Among the Oglala Lakota* (New York: Routledge, 2002): 2.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 200.
- ⁴² Anderson, *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 57.
- ⁴³ James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1980): 172-174.
- ⁴⁴ Anderson, *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 188.
- ⁴⁵ Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 104.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.
- ⁴⁸ Crow Dog, *Lakota Woman*, 145.
- ⁴⁹ Anderson, *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 110.
- ⁵⁰ Sayer, *Ghost Dancing the Law*, 32.
- ⁵¹ Smith, *Like a Hurricane*, 198.
- ⁵² Anderson, *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 76.
- ⁵³ Crow Dog, *Lakota Woman*, 131-132.
- ⁵⁴ Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 114.
- ⁵⁵ Anderson, *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 201.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.
- ⁵⁷ Sayer, *Ghost Dancing the Law*, 20.
- ⁵⁸ Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 141.
- ⁵⁹ Crow Dog, *Crow Dog*, 126.
- ⁶⁰ Sayer, *Ghost Dancing the Law*, 156.
- ⁶¹ Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 82.
- ⁶² DeMaille, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 145.
- ⁶³ Anderson, *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 147.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.
- ⁶⁵ Young, *Quest for Harmony*, 189.
- ⁶⁶ Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 187-190.
- ⁶⁷ Troy Johnson, Joane Nagel, and Duane Champagne, eds., *American Indian Activism: Alcatraz to the Longest Walk* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997): 208.
- ⁶⁸ Anderson, *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 201-202.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.
- ⁷⁰ Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1969): 27.
- ⁷¹ DeMaille, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 288-289.
- ⁷² Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 138-141.
- ⁷³ Crow Dog, *Lakota Woman*, 141.
- ⁷⁴ Anderson, *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 236.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 232.
- ⁷⁸ Reinhardt, *Ruling Pine Ridge*, 205.
- ⁷⁹ Smith, *Like a Hurricane*, 278.
- ⁸⁰ Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001): 196.
- ⁸¹ Sayer, *Ghost Dancing the Law*, 219-220.

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