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'A flag of deceit': the American Indian Movement's subversive use of the Stars and Stripes as a protest tool

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ABSTRACT

This article documents the American Indian Movement's (AIM) subversive display of the American flag between 1970 and 1973. Analysing AIM's flag deployment in Plymouth, Massachusetts; Gordon, Nebraska; Washington D.C.; and Wounded Knee; it is shown how AIM subversively appropriated the American flag in a variety of ways. AIM's creation of spectacle; their critical engagement with the American national character; and their play with flag height, power, and territoriality are all shown to be illustrative of the organisation's keen awareness of flag semiotics. Whilst centring aesthetics as an oft-forgotten component of Red Power protest, this article situates flag play as a common thread interweaving much of the American Indian Movement's major activism. Although the American flag has typically been understood by Native Americans as a symbol of historical and ongoing oppression, such technologies of oppression can double as subversive, reinvented tools of protest, both harnessing and redirecting their original power.

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On May 8, 1973, the joint forces of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organisation (OSCRO) departed Wounded Knee. For 71 days the hamlet had been liberated from both colonial dominance and corrupt Tribal leadership, but the deaths of Frank Clearwater (Apache) and Buddy Lamont (Oglala) had left the so-called 'occupiers' dejected, and in the interest of averting further bloodshed, AIM-OSCRO had reluctantly agreed to surrender their weapons.[1] OSCRO member Arvin Wells (Comanche) remembered being forced on that day to watch the United States Marshals perform a 'victory ceremony':

> They told one of their marshals to get up on top of the steeple and take down the AIM flag that we had up there …
>
> … [they] raised up the [United States] flag and [the leader] went down there and gave his little speech and they all fired off their weapons and all this bullshit. It was all really sickening.[2]

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The Marshals' flag ceremony in the counter-liberation of Wounded Knee was not simply a response to the occupation, but a visual riposte to the repeated flag play of Native American activists at Wounded Knee and within the broader Red Power movement. It drew not only upon the symbolism of the American flag and the gestural politics of flag flying, but also a bank of new meaning derived from the flag's subversive display by Red Power activists.

Flag display was ever-present at protests in the Red Power movement (1969–1978).[3] At the occupation of Alcatraz Island (1969–1971), widely considered to have been the first Red Power protest, the Indians of All Tribes flew two newly-created flags from the Dock Guard Tower to signify Native American territoriality.[4] Similarly, the Pit River Tribe created their own flag in 1970, planting it atop Mount Lassen as an act of territorial claiming in one of many protests staged on stolen Pit River land in northern California.[5] Furthermore, the American Indian Movement not only engaged subversively with the American flag, but also created their own flag in the colours of the Medicine Wheel, pasting their logo in the centre. Flag play was a persistent feature of Red Power activism.

Subversive Native American engagements with flag display (which I call 'flag play') were part of a broader engagement with flag semiotics in the 1960s and 1970s. As will be discussed in the first section, the activist fervour that spread throughout America in the 1960s – perhaps most notably the protests against the Vietnam war – coincided with a rise in consciously subversive contraventions of flag codes (referred to as 'flag desecration').[6] As such, AIM – founded in 1968 – grew into a national organisation just as flag use in protests was reaching its height, and thus AIM's flag use was a product of both contemporary American radical resistance and a long history of Native American activism.[7] Distinctively, AIM's subversive engagement with the Stars and Stripes became a lasting symbol of their struggle. Bob Coronato's 2012 portrait of Russell Means (Oglala) (Figure 1) – which now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. – attests to this, depicting a 72-year-old Means stood proudly with the Old Glory wrapped upside-down around his body, highlighting the longstanding significance of flag play to AIM's activism and identity.

Despite AIM's regular, conspicuous use of the American flag at protests, scholarly consideration of this flag use is lacking.[8] In response, this article documents AIM's deployment of the Stars and Stripes from the very first iteration in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in November 1970, to the end of the Wounded Knee occupation in May 1973. This analysis runs chronologically, covering AIM's Plymouth activism in November 1970; a demonstration against border town racism in Gordon, Nebraska, in February 1972; the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) building in Washington D.C. in November 1972; and the takeover of Wounded Knee in February-May 1973. Each section highlights a new dimension of AIM's engagement with the American flag. In Gordon, Nebraska, AIM utilised flag desecration to generate media attention. At the occupation of the BIA building, AIM's inversion of the flag played upon the recognisable signification of 'distress' to draw attention to Native American hardship, and to critique American values. Finally, the semiotics of flag height and its association with power is discussed in relation to the occupation of Wounded Knee, where AIM used flags to substantiate claims to territoriality and sovereignty. AIM drew on the 'projective conventions' (referring to the culturally defined resemblances of signs) of flags to redirect dominant flag semiotics for subversive use.[9] Throughout the Red Power era, AIM engaged in a recognisable practice of 'reinventing' technologies and symbols of both material and cultural dispossession, expertly harnessing the semiotic power of the flag in a host of ways, illustrating its valuable multivocality as a protest tool.[10]

Figure 1. Bob Coronato, 'Russell Means', 2009, Oil on canvas, 192.1 × 96.8 × 5.7 cm. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Used with permission from the artist.

From Framingham to Plymouth: the rise of flag play

Russell Means, commonly recognised as the orchestrator of much of AIM's eye-catching activism, was characteristically a pioneer of this subversive appropriation of the flag, but the incorporation of the Stars and Stripes in his irony-laden activism in Plymouth,

Massachusetts, in 1970, was by no means the first time the American flag had featured as a protest symbol in the United States. Means and AIM were able to draw upon an extensive historical repertoire of critical Native American and non-Native American flag display.

Whilst flag desecration is commonly associated with the activism against the Vietnam War, this form of protest has its roots in the mid-nineteenth century.[11] At a rally sponsored by the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in Framingham in 1854, William Lloyd Garrison, Sojourner Truth, and Henry David Thoreau addressed a crowd from below an upside-down American flag in an early example of flag inversion.[12] As AIM would later replicate, the Anti-Slavery Society's inversion of the flag drew upon naval signalling to denote Black distress in America, calling for relief through the abolition of slavery and the incorporation of Black people into the American civic body (AIM, as supporters of tribal sovereignty, did not echo the Anti-Slavery Society on the latter point). Less than a decade after the Framingham rally, in 1862, William B. Mumford was executed for pulling down and dragging the American flag through mud as a protest against the Union's reoccupation of New Orleans, thus proffering a successionist visual rhetoric.[13] Though the Anti-Slavery Society sought inclusion into the American civic body whilst Mumford promoted separatism, these distinctive examples are nonetheless illustrative of the long history of flag play in the United States.

State and federal legislation increasingly sought to circumscribe the legal limits of flag desecration in the twentieth century, but despite this, critical flag play only grew, and did indeed proliferate in the Vietnam War era. Flag burning – like draft card burning – became a common feature of anti-war activism, signifying discontent with American imperialism.[14] The 1960s also witnessed a concerted rise in the creation of new flags for activist organisations. American anti-nuclear activists designed numerous protest flags, some of which affirmed their ongoing American patriotism (even amidst environmental concerns) by replacing the stars of the American flag with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament's logo. The United Farm Workers and the American Ecology Movement similarly created organisational flags in the 1960s, whilst the iconic Pride Flag was first displayed in the following decade. The Black Panthers, like the American Indian Movement, saw the American flag as ripe for subversive reinterpretation, with the Panthers' '50 United Fascist States' flag in 1966 rendering swastikas in place of the stars.[15] In visually adapting the Old Glory, the Black Panthers drew upon the flag's signification of the nation and its national values to question America's inherent character.[16] AIM echoed much of this flag-based activism, creating their own organisational flag and engaging subversively with the Stars and Stripes.

Though AIM are remembered for their subversive play with the American flag, they were by no means the first Native American activists to critically engage the Stars and Stripes. AIM member Mary Brave Bird (Sicangu) claimed that late-nineteenth century Ghost Dancers 'used to wrap themselves in upside-down flags', an act replicated by AIM activists when they revived the Ghost Dance in the mid-1970s (led by AIM's Oglala spiritual leader Leonard Crow Dog).[17] Michael Logan and Douglas Schmittou's study of inverted American flags showed that the example of the Ghost Dance was not unusual, with the inverted flag appearing on reservations and in beadwork and ledger drawings across the Great Plains in the nineteenth century.[18] In the early 1960s, Nisqually, Puyallup, and Muckleshoot activists posed beneath an upside-down American flag at Frank's Landing in Washington, campaigning for recognition of their treaty-derived fishing

rights. The activists told journalists that the inverted flag – also flown at half-mast – signified 'the death of a treaty and a nation in distress'; this rhetoric was echoed by AIM in the following decade.[19] Native American artists had also begun to subversively engage with the American flag in the decade prior to AIM's incorporation of the flag as a protest symbol. As a student at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), Cree artist Alfred Young Man produced *Indians for Peace in Vietnam* in 1967, backgrounding his portrait with a cropped, inverted American flag (Figure 2).[20] Young Man's work highlighted the interrelated struggles of Native Americans and contemporary non-Native activists, documenting Native American support for the anti-war movement. AIM's subversive incorporation would follow shortly thereafter, ushering in a wave of Native American flag play.

AIM first subversively deployed the American flag on Thanksgiving Day, 1970, in Plymouth, Massachusetts. There, Russell Means spoke to a congregation of excitable

Figure 2. Alfred Young Man, 'Indians for Peace in Vietnam', 1967, Oil on canvas, 158.8 × 128.3 cm. Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Used with permission from the artist.

Native Americans and bemused Whites from a plinth he shared with Cyrus Dallin's oversized bronze of Massasoit (Wampanoag):

> Listen. Listen to us, white men. Plymouth Rock is red. Red with our blood. The white man came here for religious freedom, and he has denied it to us. Today you will see the Indian reclaim our rights in this country.[21]

As he addressed the crowd, Means clasped at the corners of the Old Glory, draped upside-down across his body. AIM's activism in Plymouth promoted the inverted American flag as a protest symbol, and prompted a proliferation of similar flag play.[22]

Director of the IAIA museum Richard Hill (Tuscarora) wrote in a 1990 exhibition programme that AIM's flag play in Plymouth 'fuelled artists'' imaginations, and thereafter the upside-down flag became a common symbol in artworks of the 1970s.[23] Even if Native American artists' use of the flag in the 1970s was not entirely unprecedented (as Young Man's work illustrates), Means' display in Plymouth engendered a concerted rise in the use of the American flag. Earl Laws, a Pima artist at the IAIA depicted 'an angry Indian wrapped with an upside-down American flag' in an untitled, undated serigraph from the decade that undoubtedly used AIM activists as the portrait's subject.[24] Anthony Gauthier's (Menominee) *Bicentennial Painting/Freedom* (1976) similarly incorporated the inverted flag as a signifier of American oppression. The work of IAIA students in the period evidenced the far-reaching influence of AIM; many artists felt compelled to contribute – in their own way – to the Red Power movement. Laws' work was indicative of the prominence of AIM's flag-based aesthetics, whilst Gauthier's work demonstrated an alignment with one branch of AIM's flag play: that which critically engaged the flag as an emblem of the nation-state and as a symbol of the American national character (as will be discussed later).

Activists were similarly inspired by Means' display in Plymouth, with the inverted flag swiftly becoming an omnipresent symbol at AIM demonstrations, including the border town activism in Gordon, Nebraska; the occupation of the BIA building; and the takeover of Wounded Knee. So widespread was AIM's flag use, that by 1973 writers felt it sufficient to describe AIM members only by what they were wearing:

> When we hear of a young Indian, a gun in his hand and the U.S. flag hanging upside down on his shoulders, we should try to understand his actions.[25]

The FBI identified AIM protestors through their inversion of the flag, further evidencing the intimacy of the association between the inverted flag and AIM.[26] AIM's incorporation of the American flag rapidly grew, and resultingly, at the protest in Gordon, Nebraska, in February 1972, many of the 2,000-strong activist group hung the Stars and Stripes upside-down from their shoulders.

Gordon, Nebraska, February 1972: conflict and spectacle

Gordon was a small, unassuming town with a population of 2,000, sat just across the border from South Dakota and the Pine Ridge reservation. The town was predominantly White, but Oglala residents from Pine Ridge (where prohibition was enforced) would often travel to Gordon to buy alcohol. As was (and is) the case in many border towns, Gordon's residents profited greatly from the sale of alcohol to Native Americans, but nonetheless expressed violent anti-Indigenous hostility.[27]

On February 12, 1972, Raymond Yellow Thunder (Oglala) was brutally beaten by four white men after he had travelled to Gordon to buy alcohol. Left without his clothes and bleeding, he died from a subdural hematoma, and was found over a week later. Concerns of malpractice in the post-mortem, and the ambivalence of the police and courts to the heinous murder, prompted local Oglala to request AIM's support. When AIM arrived in Gordon in late February, they briefly doubled the town's population.[28]

Means, by then AIM's national coordinator, told the press: 'we are no longer going to stand by and watch our women raped and our men beaten, run over and killed while the courts do nothing'.[29] Photographs from the speech printed in the *Nebraska Reporter* showed Means cloaked in the inverted Stars and Stripes (Figure 3); many Native American supporters in the crowd were dressed similarly. Whilst AIM would explicitly unpack the rhetorical meaning of flag inversion (as will be discussed later), the contravention of flag code in Gordon was most fundamentally illustrative of AIM's use of the flag as a valuable aesthetic tool in their agit-prop activism, capable of prompting fierce White reactions and, in turn, promoting media attention.

In Gordon, AIM's flag desecration manufactured spectacle by baiting local anger. Gordon city clerk, Gerald Swick, who found that AIM had broken into the town's auditorium overnight, articulated a typical local reaction, telling the *Reporter* that he had 'never seen anything like this'. 'When I saw those Indians sleeping on their flags', he continued, 'I almost became ill'.[30] Swick's nausea stemmed from AIM's overt affront to flag decency; the 1942 Flag Code had stated that the flag must fly 'aloft and free', and 'never touch anything beneath it'. It had further stipulated that 'the flag should never be displayed with the union down save as a signal of dire distress'.[31] Newspapers like the *Reporter* enthusiastically printed photographs and stories of flag desecration, and the reflexive anger of the local residents, demonstrating AIM's effective instrumentalization of the flag and media.

To be sure, Gordon's townspeople were not simply recoiling at the contravention of flag code. Rather, it was the Native Americans' contravention of flag code that was so shocking. As Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle highlighted, there exist countless historical and ongoing examples of permitted flag code contravention. Indeed, despite United States code stipulating that the 'flag should never be used as drapery of any sort whatsoever' (later stipulating that 'the flag should never be used as wearing apparel, bedding, or drapery'), both male and female bodies can acceptably be wrapped in the flag.[32] The traditionally-male body of the fallen soldier is often housed in a flag-draped casket, indicative of the sacredness of the male, sacrificial body. Female bodies too can be sacred, representing national regeneration, as is perhaps best illustrated in James Montgomery Flagg's wartime poster, 'Sow the Seeds of Victory', in which a woman in a Stars and Stripes dress spread seeds as a thinly veiled pairing of the female body and the earth as regenerative entities (Figure 4). Rather paradoxically, therefore, there are many permissible acts of contravention. As Marvin and Ingle argued, it is the presence of the sacred body (be it male or female, sacrificial or regenerative) that confers permissibility upon such acts.[33] Necessarily, however, a protesting male Native American cannot be a sacred body. Indeed, as Patrick Wolfe argued, in settler colonialism the Native is necessarily destined for elimination and replacement.[34] The Native American body cannot, therefore, be positively regenerative. Nor, indeed, can a resistive Native American body be sacrificial. To the American nation, the bodies of AIM members were necessarily profane, foreclosing the possibility of permissible contravention, hence the severity of

Figure 3. Russell Means addresses a crowd in Gordon, Nebraska, with a flag wrapped upside-down around his body. Photograph by Bill Ganzel, 1972. Used with permission from Bill Ganzel.

the response to AIM's flag desecration. Therefore, the very same logic of elimination that undergirded racism in border towns also enhanced the efficacy of AIM's acts of flag desecration.

Though AIM's shocking use of the flag was successful in garnering media engagement, it also stoked pre-existing tensions in a violently racist town. In turn, some contemporary Indigenous commentators were concerned by AIM's strategies. The eminent Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor was working for the *Minneapolis Tribune* during Red Power's heyday, and criticised AIM for failing to negotiate on concrete resolutions after raising 'good issues through the press'. For Vizenor, AIM were connoisseurs of 'violent stunt[s]' who neglected

Figure 4. James Montgomery Flagg, 'Sow the Seeds of Victory', c1918, Lithograph, 56 × 36 cm. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, [LC-USZC4-10234], Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. Public Domain.

real reform in favour of media notability.[35] Therefore, whilst AIM's shock-based strategy (of which flag play was a central component) drew attention, some commentators were sceptical of whether this approach – which alienated swathes of the White population – could stimulate serious, much-needed reform.

However, criticism focussing on the exacerbation of local White ire failed to accurately read AIM's intent. AIM's inflammatory flag display evidenced an alternative target audience rather than a flawed strategy. Instead of seeking sympathy from local Whites, AIM sought to create media-worthy spectacle – through confrontational strategy and flag-based aesthetics – to prompt a wider reckoning with anti-Indigeneity in the United States. When in 1977 AIM co-founder Dennis Banks (Ojibwe) was asked by author and photographer Richard Erdoes if he thought AIM's border town campaign had successfully shifted attitudes in rural communities, Banks responded that it was not the attitudes of rural Whites that had changed, but the reactions of outsiders to rural White-on-Indigenous violence:

> Oh, I think the attitudes of the white ranchers … are the same. I think that they'll just as quickly pull out a gun and kill … but I think they know now that when they do point that gun and pull the trigger that they stand to lose, or they stand to become exposed as the true racist[s] … they really are.[36]

Banks' expansive framing of the racial conflict in border towns – which widened the scope to a national level – suggested that AIM sought action that promoted confrontation locally in an effort to generate national sympathy through widespread reporting. In devising this strategy, AIM perhaps drew influence from such contemporary activism as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Birmingham campaign (1963); in both examples, the ire of local Whites was turned against themselves through the weaponisation of the media.[37] Many of AIM's supporters endorsed this approach. As local Oglala Ted Ghost Dog said: 'maybe things will have to get stirred up to get some change'.[38] Flag desecration, in stoking tensions, supported the notion that AIM were willing to enhance division locally to elevate debates to a national level. Whereas some commentators, such as Vizenor, saw AIM's confrontational strategy as short sighted, it could alternatively be read as an insightful leveraging of the media's ability to broaden the visibility of local issues, as well as demonstrating AIM's keen understanding of the entrenchment of border town anti-Indigeneity. Sicangu activist and scholar Nick Estes has more recently argued that 'the *bordertown* cannot be reformed'; AIM's attempts to leverage external pressure evidenced a similar attitude.[39]

AIM evidently considered their shock-based formula successful, for they continued to utilise flag desecration in search of media attention. Protests such as the takeover of the Pawnee Indian Agency in mid-1972; the campaign against female sterilisation at Claremore hospital, Oklahoma, in June 1974; and activism outside the BIA building in Washington D.C. in the same month; illustrated the popularity of this strategy.[40] In the capital, the FBI documented the efforts of Clyde and Vernon Bellecourt (Ojibwe), Bill and Ted Means (Oglala), and Pat McLaughlin (Oceti Sakowin) to provoke a group of students by inverting the flag, dragging it through mud, and then trampling it. Whilst this act of provocation failed to incite violence, sufficient attention was drawn for it to be documented.[41]

However, though flag desecration generated widespread interest, it was not universally supported by Red Power activists. In the planning of the 1972 Trail of Broken Treaties, organiser and ex-chairman of the Rosebud Lakota reservation, Robert Burnette, was insistent that AIM's provocation could not creep into the peaceful campaign. Though 'all Indians and spiritual leaders of the Western Hemisphere' were invited to participate in the Trail, the call to action was explicit in excluding 'all persons who would cause civil

disorder, block traffic, *burn flags*, destroy property, or shout obscenities in the street'.[42] Burnette represented an alternative voice to AIM in the contemporary activist scene, seeing Native American protest as best manifested as peaceful, respectful activism. Many felt that avoiding inflammatory criticism of the United States would not only garner the support of sympathetic non-Native American spectators, but also avoid alienating Native Americans who saw themselves as, to some degree, American.[43] Burnette's warning illustrated that flag desecration was divisive, even amongst Native American activists. But, despite explicit deterrence, activists continued to play subversively with the American flag as the peaceful Trail turned militant in the occupation of the BIA building.

Occupation of the BIA building, November 1972: the rhetoric of distress

The Trail of Broken Treaties was a large-scale activist spectacle which sought to gather major Native American political organisations into a coalition.[44] Three caravans departed from Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles in early October 1972, stopping at sites of significance in the American national memory (such as Mankato, Minnesota, where 38 Dakota men were hung from a specially-crafted scaffold with the assent of President Lincoln in 1862; and the Little Bighorn battle site, where the 7th United States Cavalry and Civil War hero General George Custer are memorialised following their defeat to Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho forces in 1876) en route to Washington D.C.[45] The caravans were to converge in early November, presenting their Twenty Point Position Paper (authored primarily by Hank Adams, Assiniboine) to the two presidential candidates, Richard Nixon and George McGovern. Though the Trail was hailed by some as the pinnacle of the Red Power era, it nonetheless struggled to draw broad media attention.[46] Whilst Native American outlets supportive of the Red Power movement – like *Akwesasne Notes* – provided detailed daily accounts of each caravan's movements, national media reports were 'unremarkable, straightforward, and brief', lending validity to Ghost Dog's earlier claim that 'things … have to get stirred up' to capture the attention of the disinterested mainstream American (predominantly White) press.[47]

With many activists already dissatisfied by the Trail's lack of media coverage, discontent rose amongst the rank and file as they began to arrive in Washington D.C. and found that accommodation plans had collapsed. Thereafter, a series of miscommunications (or government perfidy) led to around 1,000 activists barricading themselves inside the BIA building on November 2nd, demanding adequate accommodation.[48] As the occupation became a standoff between activists and federal forces, peaceful representatives from the organising coalition, like Burnette and Adams, shrunk from view, superseded by AIM's militant brand of leadership. Burnette was dismayed, telling Dennis Banks before he left: 'you guys have spoiled everything. You have gone too far. I'll not say anything about you, Dennis, but I'm not going to do anything for you either'.[49] AIM, however, saw the takeover as another opportunity to finally grab the media attention that the Trail had, up to that point, lacked.

As the new leadership, AIM increasingly sought to create shareable scenes for eager photographers. This included erecting a large tepee on the lawn of the BIA building, and hanging a banner above the doorframe reading 'Native American Embassy', affirming Indigenous separatism and sovereignty through the establishment of an Intertribal embassy for international diplomacy with the United States.[50] Russell Means was

characteristically inventive, photographed carrying a metal pipe in one hand and a painting of Richard Nixon in the other as a shield, perhaps as an irony-laden reference to the lack of protection presidents had provided Native Americans in the past.[51]

The American flag appeared everywhere, no longer outlawed by Burnette's original mandate. Activists wandering around in front of the BIA building were photographed with inverted flags characteristically draped over their shoulders, and on the front lawn the occupiers pulled the American flag from its pole and rehoisted it upside down. Asked to explain why the flag was being inverted, Winnebago AIM activist Peter LaPointe told the press that the inverted flag 'is the national code for a distress signal. American Indians are in distress … [and] we are going to continue wearing this flag upside down to show people we are in distress'.[52] AIM borrowed the rhetoric of distress from a range of historical precedents. This included sanctioned uses, such as naval flag signalling, but also unsanctioned uses, such as the aforementioned fishing rights activism in Washington in the 1960s.[53] As will be shown, AIM expanded upon this visual rhetoric, playing with it variously. In some instances, AIM drew conventionally upon the naval signification of distress to draw attention to contemporary Native American hardship. In other cases, distress was used rather more subversively to critique the United States. This multiplicity illustrated AIM's ingenious exploitation of the multivocality of flag semiotics.

On the one hand, as Peter LaPointe articulated, AIM's inversion of the flag signified Native American distress. In 1970, Native American unemployment sat at almost 50%, around 10 times the national average, and one third of Native American families lived below the poverty line.[54] Alcoholism was rife, whilst alcohol-related arrests sat at 12 times the national average.[55] The average life expectancy was just 44 years, in part a product of significantly higher rates of disease caused by poor living conditions.[56] Cultural genocidal campaigns, such as boarding schools and the Termination and Relocation policies, actively manufactured Native American cultural dislocation and the diminishing of tribal languages.[57] In response, many AIM activists sought to publicise the dire conditions of contemporary Native American life through their flag play. The choice to invert the American flag was significant, for doing so directly implicated the settler state in the manufacture of Native American distress.

Furthermore, as the national flag is traditionally read as an embodiment of the nation, AIM's inversion of the Stars and Stripes also signified American distress. This strand of criticism sought to situate settler colonialism as antithetical to the ideal American character, playing upon the flag's embodiment of the nation and its national values.[58] As Jennifer Marmo claimed, these values were drawn broadly from sacred American texts: 'the flag began as a representation of the freedom and rights in the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights as well as to the individual liberty set forth in the Declaration of Independence … [subsequently growing] into the greater values we know it to represent today … unity, freedom, liberty, and hope for American citizens'.[59] Marmo's reading was corroborated by the United States Government Printing Office, which declared: 'the flag of the United States of America is universally representative of the principles of justice, liberty, and democracy enjoyed by the people of the United States'.[60] The inversion of the flag might be understood to signal the American nation in distress in light of a failure to embody the values typically signified by the Stars and Stripes.

Indeed, at times, AIM explicitly challenged conventional American understandings of the Stars and Stripes' connotations. In an interview in 1973, AIM leader Vernon Bellecourt

referenced the organisation's signification of distress before commenting that the American flag is 'not a flag of democracy … [but a] flag of deceit'.[61] Bellecourt thereby used the flag to forward a critical interrogation of the American nation, questioning the integrity of American claims to righteousness and honourability by implicitly referring to the perfidy of the American government in treaty negotiations. Suzan Shown Harjo (Cheyenne and Muscogee), the creator of the popular Red Power radio station, *Seeing Red*, utilised a similar brand of criticism, reimagining the flag in a 1971 article: 'bars of red for Indian blood, background of blue for European immigrant blood, and stars of white for the whiter-than-whiteness of America'.[62] Harjo related the colours of the flag to America's sordid past, not only referencing the genocidal campaigns enacted in the name of Manifest Destiny, but also illuminating America's oft-forgotten reliance on the exploitation of its European settlers, thus dispelling the myth of American unity and liberty. Notably, Harjo's broad criticism articulated anti-oppression in America as a campaign incorporating not only Native Americans, but also African Americans and the working class.

In a similar manner to Bellecourt and Harjo, Institute of American Indian Arts graduate Anthony Gauthier subversively engaged the American flag as an all-encompassing symbol of the United States. *Bicentennial Painting/Freedom* (1976) reimagines the flag's form in an AIM-inspired critique of the settler nation (Figure 5). The inverted American flag bisects the canvas, separating the floating heads of Chief Joseph (Nez Perce) and Martin Luther King Jr.[63] At the bottom of the painting, the American flag morphs into the physical oppressor of Native Americans and African Americans. The stars re-form into the cotton bolls picked in the fields by silhouetted figures, whilst the stripes contort into lightning which strikes the tepees below. Gauthier's reformulation of the Old Glory proffers a criticism of the United States that relies upon the projective convention of the flag *as the nation*, which understands the Stars and Stripes as a bodily representation of the nation writ large. Therefore, the rendering of the flag as a physical, sentient oppressor forwards a critique of the nation itself. The flag, perhaps more than any other symbol, portrays the nation *in toto*, encapsulating its past, present, and future from the East coast to the West. Resultingly, Gauthier's flag-based criticism asserts that these crimes are not aberrational chapters in the otherwise-idealistic formation of the United States, but instead a reflection of the inherent character of the nation, rejecting settler moves to innocence that rely on temporal or geographical circumscription.[64] In other words, the use of the Stars and Stripes frames the extermination of Indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Black people as structural, not coincidental; it implicates the nation as a whole in a way that other aesthetic manifestations of the United States fail to achieve.

Though postcolonial scholars have been sceptical of critiques that centre settler colonists, AIM's (like Harjo's and Gauthier's) inversion of the flag centred the United States in a novel way, shifting representations of distress or disfunction onto the colonial power.[65] In reading distress as an American phenomenon, AIM forwarded a vision of Indigenous-settler relations which countered renderings of this relationship found in American popular culture. Most obviously, American distress ran contrary to the image of the 'vanishing Indian', which was popularised in the nineteenth century (by works such as James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the* Mohicans), and remained prevalent even in the 1970s, as illustrated by Keep America Beautiful's 1971 'Crying Indian ad'.[66] Gerald Vizenor labelled such representations 'melancholic', perhaps referencing the theorising of

Figure 5. Anthony Gauthier, 'Bicentennial Painting/Freedom', 1976, 132.7 × 132.7 cm. Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Used with permission from the artist's estate.

Sigmund Freud, who defined melancholia (in response to loss) as the impoverishment of the ego, and the suppression of self-preservatory instinct.[67] The applicability of Freud's description to the vanishing Indian trope is evident, for the vanishing Indian himself offers little resistance to his eventual disappearance.[68] To be sure, as Sean Teuton argued in *Red Land, Red Power*, conversations surrounding Indigenous hardship represent an important component of decolonial narratives, but equally, without counterposes, this emphasis on struggle may serve to over-define the 'Indian' as a figure that exists only in melancholic form.[69] The inversion of the flag as a signal of American distress countered this overdetermination by turning the tables on colonial narratives, situating, for once, tragedy in the American camp. Thus, whereas some postcolonial scholars see the decentring of Indigenous narratives as a reaffirmation of settler predominance, AIM's novel attack on the flag's symbolic qualities represented an example of subversive settler centring.

The flag's capacity to visually encapsulate the American nation *in toto* helps us to understand why AIM activists were so drawn to the inversion of the Stars and Stripes at protests like the BIA takeover. The inversion of the flag was a recognisable symbol of distress that rejected the American idealisation of its character, telling settlers that their actions and the actions of their government were antithetical to the values they believed

characterised their nation. The reimagination of the flag was not just a critical reflection on contemporary conditions, but more broadly an engagement with the inherent character of the settler state.

Wounded Knee, 1973: territoriality, power, and counter-play

AIM agreed to end the occupation of the BIA building after the federal government promised amnesty, consideration of the Twenty Point Position Paper, and $60,000 in travel expenses.[70] Thereafter, the federal government sought to discredit AIM, inviting chairmen from the National Tribal Chairmen's Association (NTCA) to condemn the activists as urban troublemakers who could not speak for the 'real' Native Americans on reservations.[71] AIM responded by furthering their move towards rural campaigning that they had begun with the demonstration in Gordon, travelling to Custer, South Dakota, in February 1973 in response to the murder of Wesley Bad Heart Bull (Oglala).[72] Between 1972 and 1973, Russell Means became increasingly involved in the politics of the local Pine Ridge reservation, where Tribal chairman Richard Wilson was accused of corruption, and the harassment of political opponents.[73] This laid the foundations of the eventual takeover of Wounded Knee.

Whilst in Custer, AIM were asked by the newly-formed Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organisation to help demonstrate against Wilson. AIM's leadership sought to secure the perceived legitimacy of their activism (in light of recent NTCA criticism) by subordinating themselves to OSCRO, who called for the occupation of the hamlet of Wounded Knee, previously the site of the massacre of 1890. Resultingly, the joint forces of AIM-OSCRO entered Wounded Knee on February 27, 1973, claiming the territory in the name of the Independent Oglala Nation. The takeover called for recognition of the sovereignty and separatism of the Oglala nation, BIA reform, and an end to political corruption on South Dakotan reservations.[74] Whilst AIM's flag play during the BIA takeover had engaged primarily with settler colonialism's historical and ongoing oppression, flag play at Wounded Knee was squarely focussed on power and territoriality. This was true of both AIM's use of flags, and the counter-visuals of the United States Federal Marshals.

In Wounded Knee, AIM's flag play relied on a juxtaposition between a low-flying, disempowered American flag, and the dominant AIM flag. A photo taken by Richard Erdoes framed AIM's flag play effectively (Figure 6). An unidentified occupier sits in the foreground, his candid nonchalance undermined by the careful placement of Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, which faces the camera as it rests on his thigh. Behind him, an American flag is flown from a three-foot pole, its corners presumably scraping in the dirt and rubble behind a row of cinder blocks. Finally, in the upper section of the image is AIM's flag, flown from the radiant-white church atop the hill, its vertical stripes of black, yellow, white, and red rendered in monochrome by the photographic film. AIM had created their flag in 1970, overlaying the colours of the Medicine Wheel with their logo. At Wounded Knee, however, AIMs logo was conspicuously absent, perhaps as an effort to reaffirm AIM's supporting role in the takeover.

The placement of the flags signified the respective power of the United States and AIM-OSCRO. This aesthetic play relied on what Robert Shanafelt described as a social-evolutionarily derived association between flag height and power.[75] Sasha Weitman further explained: 'by mandating that the national flag be flown high above the ground

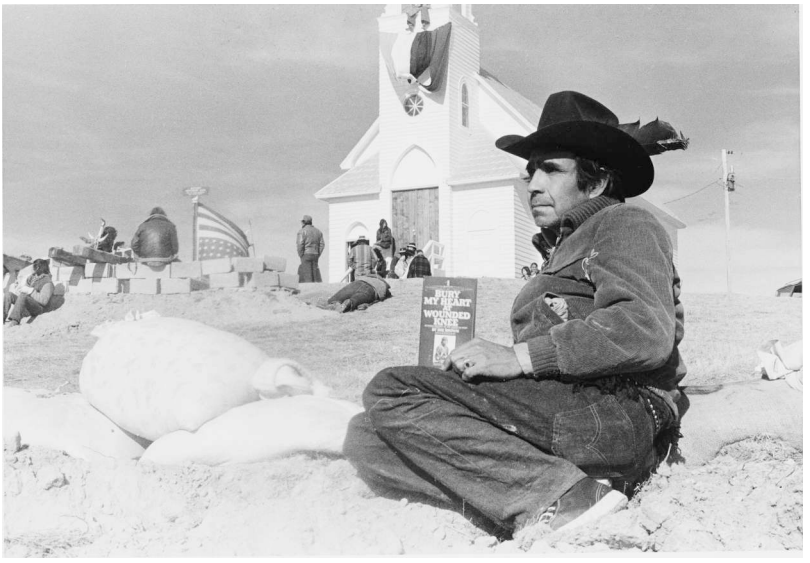

Figure 6. An occupier sits below the church of Wounded Knee. The American flag and the AIM flag fly in the backdrop. Photograph by Richard Erdoes, 1973. WA MSS-S-2609, Box 232, Richard Erdoes Papers, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut. Used with permission from the Beinecke Library.

(thereby forcing people to look up to it) … the nation communicates unambiguously that it is the supreme authority in the land'.[76] Evidently cognizant of the association between height and power, the federal government instructed: 'when flags of two or more nations are displayed, they are to be flown from separate staffs of the same height. The flags should be of approximately equal size'.[77] The 1942 flag code sought to codify diplomatic flag behaviour in ensuring that flags, as national emblems, were always seen to embody the equal standing of nation states. Contravening this protocol, AIM-OSCRO sought to weaponise associations between height and power. In flying the AIM flag above the Stars and Stripes, AIM-OSCRO symbolically undermined American dominion, visually signalling the restoration of Oglala sovereignty over their lands.

The juxtaposition also played upon visual denotations of territoriality. The 'scenario of discovery' had typically seen Euroamerican colonists plant the flag into appropriated lands to survey the nation's expanded dominion. Representations including John Vanderlyn's *Landing of Columbus* (1846) and the moon landing (1969) affirmed a cognitive frame that enabled spectators to recognise subsequent reiterations of discovery/claiming, associating the planting of the flag with the acquisition of territory.[78] The AIM flag's heightened position atop the church's bell tower was thus a subversive reiteration of colonial semiotics of territoriality; this subversion affirmed the new (or continuing) territoriality of the Independent Oglala Nation. The upside-down Stars and Stripes, on the other hand, problematised the American claim, using literal inversion to proffer a metaphorical abrogation of American territoriality.

Remarkably, AIM-OSCRO's territorial flag play was aesthetically countered by the U.S. Marshals. At one roadblock around 400 yards from the church, American Marshals posed for photographers beneath the Stars and Stripes (Figure 7). Much like AIM's

flag play, and the historical flag play of the scenario of discovery, the erection of the Old Glory proffered American territoriality and sovereignty over the land. The American counterpoint to AIM-OSCRO's flag play visually demarcated the limits of the Independent Oglala Nation, thus defining, in recognisable terms, the no-man's land that separated the rival forces. The photograph's framing is notable, for it rejects the permanence of the Oglala's visually-denotated territoriality: the flag's panoptical gaze extends deep into the image's background, touching the church of the occupied hamlet, and thus hinting at the future expansion of American dominion over Wounded Knee. In the photograph, the eventual outcome is framed as a foregone conclusion.

Figure 7. Four United States Marshals gaze up at an American flag. In the distance is Wounded Knee church. 1973. *Source:* US Marshals Service (USMS) – Operation Wounded Knee, Box 6, Folder 150, Photographs of Agency Officials and Activities, General Records of the Department of Justice, 1790–2002, National Archives, College Park, Maryland. Public Domain. Many thanks to Professor Nick Estes for sharing this photograph, and to Jennifer Marley for digitising it.

Alternatively, it could be argued that the Marshals' visual counter-engagement played into AIM's staging efforts. At Wounded Knee, AIM-OSCRO had attempted to articulate the standoff as a clash between sovereign nations, utilising the rhetoric of war to validate the present sovereignty of the nascent Independent Oglala Nation, as well as the historical sovereignty of Tribal Nations more broadly. On February 27, AIM-OSCRO issued the statement:

> Communicate this to whoever is in charge. We are operating under the Provisions of the 1868 Sioux Treaty. This is an act of war initiated by the United States. We are only demanding our country.[79]

The framing of war was substantiated by symbolic acts, such as taking American postal workers as 'prisoners of war', and meeting government negotiators in the 'demilitarised zone'.[80] AIM had also utilised this framing prior to Wounded Knee, calling themselves the 'shock troops of Indian sovereignty'.[81] The rhetoric of war conjured a cognitive frame which assumed the sovereignty of both nations, locked in international conflict. Therefore, though federal marshals countered AIM-OSCRO's flag play with their own in an effort to affirm America's power, the visual product perhaps also played into AIM's staging, and as a result substantiated AIM-OSCRO's assertions of sovereignty.

Despite fierce commitment, the occupation ended after 71 days on May 8, 1973. Though AIM-OSCRO had negotiated favourable terms for their surrender (namely an audience for the traditional Oglala Tribal leaders with White House representatives), the demilitarisation of Wounded Knee was performed as a federal victory.[82] OSCRO member Arvin Wells documented the occupiers' removal from the hamlet:

> After we searched the church for weapons we came down and all these marshals had grouped around in front of the church. They told one of their marshals to get up on top of the steeple and take down the AIM flag that we had up there. And this other marshal was holding the United States flag, and said they that they were going to have a little ceremony there, a victory ceremony.
>
> … [they] raised up the flag and [the leader] went down there and give his little speech and they all fired off their weapons and all this bullshit. It was all really sickening.[83]

The Marshals' flag play enacted a counter-liberation of Wounded Knee that directly responded to AIM's popular flag play whilst also drawing upon the recognisable flag gestures of the scenario of discovery. In replacing AIM's flag with the Stars and Stripes, the Marshals reaffirmed America's supreme authority over Indigenous lands. Concurrently, forcing the occupiers to stand to attention as the Marshals performed a gun salute explicitly subjugated the temporarily-independent AIM-OSCRO forces in an act of ritual humiliation. The Marshals therefore used flag play as a hyper-masculinist riposte, demonstrating cognizance of AIM's flag engagement across the Red Power era.

Conclusion

Though many of AIM's leaders found themselves hamstrung by countless court cases following the surrender at Wounded Knee, flag imagery remained proliferous.[84] In radical newspapers like *Akwesasne Notes*, amateur artists produced countless works that played in novel ways with the form of the American flag. Most popular was the reformulation of the stripes as prison bars, a subversive play that first appeared in the early years

of AIM's flag use.[85] The imagery originally questioned American liberty and freedom, but took on further meaning as AIM members like Leonard Peltier (Chippewa) were imprisoned amidst questionable circumstances.[86]

Though the inverted flag had been used subversively by Native American activists and artists many times prior to Russell Means' flag play in Plymouth in 1970, AIM's weaponisation of the Stars and Stripes nonetheless proved groundbreaking. AIM characteristically expounded the flag's many subversive qualities with great ingenuity. Using the flag to play with settler memory, power, and territoriality evidenced the multivocality of flag semiotics, whilst AIM's novel play demonstrated why the flag, as an emblem of the nation, could provide such successfully subversive imagery.

Focussing on AIM's flag play helps to illustrate the remarkable complexity of Red Power's performative activism. It also serves to identify common threads in the movement that can not only help to relate disparate phenomena in the period (such as the art of IAIA graduates and AIM's activism), but illuminate the longstanding influence of Red Power broadly, and AIM specifically, on Indigenous activism. Indeed, the inverted American flag has regularly been flown at Idle No More and #NODAPL protests in the last 15 years, and remains a regular feature in Indigenous art (Figure 8).

Diné artist Demian Dinéyazhi''s 2019 bright-yellow neon work, *my ancestors will not let me forget this*, reminded spectators that 'every American flag is a warning sign'.[87] Indeed, the Stars and Stripes has historically been seen by many Native Americans as a symbol of settler colonisation and Indigenous subjugation. However, the semiotic power it carries is not necessarily unidirectional. In subversively misappropriating the vexillary symbol of American supremacy, AIM enacted a recognisable practice of 'reinventing' colonial technologies of oppression that proved deeply influential both in the period and beyond.[88]

Figure 8. An activist protests the Dakota Access Pipeline on the Standing Rock reservation, 2016. Photograph by Vanessa Teran. Used with permission from Vanessa Teran.

Notes

1. Eschewing the homogenisation of Indigenous peoples, I provide the Tribal affiliations of those mentioned, where known.
2. Akwesasne Notes, *Voices From Wounded Knee, 1973: In the Words of the Participants* (Mohawk Nation, via Rooseveltown, New York: Akwesasne Notes, 1975), 241–2.
3. Early scholarship – such as Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Warrior's *Like a Hurricane* - claimed the Red Power movement was bookended by the occupation of Alcatraz (1969–1971) and the occupation of Wounded Knee (1973). Increasingly, scholars have expanded the temporal frame, suggesting that the Longest Walk in 1978 was the final protest of Red Power's dominant phase. However, as Lucie Kýrová and György Ferenc Tóth wrote, the periodisation of Red Power remains a hot topic; Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement From Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996); Lucie Kýrová and György Ferenc Tóth, 'Red Power at 50: Re-Evaluations and Memory Introduction', *Comparative American Studies An International Journal* 17, no. 2 (2020): 107–16.
4. These flags took distinct forms. The first flag depicted a tepee and a broken peace pipe set between two horizontal stripes. The second flag was designed by Lulie V. Nall, and was named the 'Flag of Utopia U.S.A'. The latter was based on the Stars and Stripes, but the stars in Nall's design were relocated within a tepee (placed bottom right), signifying 'the 50 guests of the American Indian'; Kent Blansett, *Journey to Freedom: Richard Oakes, Alcatraz, and the Red Power Movement* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2018), 145; 'Original Flag That Flew over Alcatraz during the Time It Was Occupied by Native Americans from 1969 to 1971', PBA Galleries, 2008, https://pbagalleries.com/lot-details/index/catalog/171/lot/48496/Original-flag-that-flew-over-Alcatraz-during-the-time-it-was-occupied-by-Native-Americans-from-1969-to-1971 (accessed September 5, 2024).
5. John Hurst, 'Pit River Indian Flag Placed atop Mr. Lassen', *Redding Record Searchlight*, 26 June 1970, 1.
6. Michael Welch, *Flag Burning: Moral Panic and the Criminalization of Protest* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2000), 7.
7. There is a tendency to view Red Power as a movement that developed *sui generis*. This is demonstrably false, and problematically frames the early- to mid-20th century as a period of Native American placidity. Works such as Bradley Shreve's *Red Power Rising* demonstrate the longer ideological development of Red Power, whilst scholars such as Daniel Cobb and Loretta Fowler look *Beyond Red Power* to document broader 20th century Native American activism. Such works challenge Stan Steiner's 1968 articulation of Red Power activists as 'New Indians': a radical break from their predecessors. The work of Shreve, Cobb, Fowler, and others, continues the work of Jack Forbes (Powhatan and Lenape), who argued that 'Indian resistance is very much like the famous 'Mother Lode' gold vein in central California, running continuously below the surface for many miles, but being exposed only at intervals'; Bradley G Shreve, *Red Power Rising: The National Indian Youth Council and the Origins of Native Activism* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012); Daniel M. Cobb and Loretta Fowler, *Beyond Red Power: American Indian Politics and Activism since 1900* (Santa Fe, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2007); Stan Steiner, *The New Indians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968); Jack Forbes, 'The New Indian Resistance?', *Akwesasne Notes*, Late Spring 1972, 20–22.
8. Scholars have not ignored AIM's flag use, but have tended not to consider its significance; See, for instance, Smith and Warrior's narration of the funeral of Wounded Knee occupier Buddy Lamont; Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 261.
9. Umberto Eco used 'projective convention' to refer to the culturally defined resemblances of signs. These conventions in mapping (the relationship between the signifier and the signified) predispose similar readings of signs, such that we understand unequivocally that, for instance, a green man means pedestrians have right of way at a crossing. Projective conventions predispose a reading of national flags as signifiers of the nation, despite their arbitrary association (see endnote 16 for further explication of this association); Umberto Eco, 'Producing Signs', in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 181.

10. Native Americans have long had a problematic relationship with the American flag. The flag (as an ever-present symbol in America) followed settlers west as they claimed Native American land. On top of demarcating the advancing boundaries of settler territory, the American flag was often erected on reservations, signifying American dominance (and paternalism) over recently-dislocated Native American populations. The American flag's appearance therefore coincided with, and represented, the dispossession of Indigenous lands. The flag also featured centrally in assimilation campaigns, and has therefore been associated with cultural genocide. The Last Arrow Ceremonies of the late-19th and early-20th centuries saw Native Americans who accepted allotted lands (under the Dawes Act of 1887) theatrically shoot a final arrow before posing for photographs with a plough and an American flag, performing their supposed transformation from savagery to civilisation. Similarly, in the Wanamaker Expedition for Citizenship in 1913, author and photographer Joseph K. Dixon encouraged members of the 'dying race' to sign declarations of allegiance to the flag, telling Native Americans: 'success will all come to you when you swear allegiance to the flag and put your hands to the plough'. Acts of patriotic flag allegiance were also commonly forced upon Native American children in boarding schools, seeking to further the assimilation of Indigenous children. As such, many Native Americans consider the Stars and Stripes to be a symbol of oppression. Diné artist Demian Dinéyazhi's summarised this attitude in a 2019 artwork, which asserted: 'every American flag is a warning sign'; Reinvention here references the work of Joy Harjo, Gloria Bird, and Simon Ortiz; Richard Lindstrom, '"Not from the Land Side, but from the Flag Side": Native American Responses to the Wanamaker Expedition of 1913', *Journal of Social History*, 30, no. 1 (1996), 214; Alexandra Witkin, 'To Silence a Drum: The Imposition of United States Citizenship on Native Peoples', *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, 21, no. 2 (1995): 353–83; David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928*, 2nd edn (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2020), 29; Demian Dinéyazhi', 'My ancestors will not let me forget this', Glass, Neon & Aluminium Frame, 2019, in Jeffrey Gibson, ed., *An Indigenous Present* (New York: DelMonico Books, 2023), 30; Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird, eds., *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998); Simon J. Ortiz, 'Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism', *MELUS* 8, no. 2 (1981): 7–12.
11. Welch, Flag Burning, 6.
12. Laura Walls, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 346.
13. Welch, *Flag Burning*, 6.
14. Ibid, 6–9.
15. 'Modern American Protest and Message Flags – Part I', Historical Flags of Our Ancestors, n.d., https://www.loeser.us/flags/protest.html (accessed February 2, 2025).
16. The flag's denotation of the nation has been widely recognised. Emile Durkheim described the flag as a totemic emblem: a stand-in for the nation that binds the people to that nation. The flag is an essential component of group identification, acting, as Robert T. Schatz and Howard Levine argued, as 'a tangible representation of the group … a manifest object of identification' that engenders feelings of connectedness with an 'imagined community' (Benedict Anderson) so inconceivably large as to preclude direct experience 'with more than a nominal fraction of the group'. Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle similarly built upon Durkheim's foundational description of the flag-as-nation in advancing the concept of the flagbody, which captures not only the flag's signification of the nation, but its embodiment of the life of the nation. Massimo Leone summarised the prevailing scholarly opinion, arguing that whilst the national flag's connotative qualities are 'extremely various' (as illustrated by many efforts across Western nations to 'reclaim' national flags under diverse political ideologies), the flag's denotative qualities are commonly understood. Marvin and Ingle's anecdotal discussion of a survey undertaken outside a sports stadium supports Leone's claim, for whilst the flag's signification of the nation was broadly identified, little consensus was found when sports-goers were asked to articulate the values the flag represented; Emile Durkheim, *The*

Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, translated by Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995); Robert T. Schatz and Howard Lavine, 'Waving the Flag: National Symbolism, Social Identity, and Political Engagement', *Political Psychology* 28, no. 3 (2007): 330; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Massimo Leone, 'The Semiotics of Flags', in *Flags, Colour, and the Legal Narrative: Public Memory, Identity, and Critique*, ed. Anne Wagner and Sarah Marusek (Switzerland: Springer, 2021), 53–63.

17. Mary Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman* (USA: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 58, 150.
18. Michael H. Logan and Douglas A. Schmittou, 'Inverted Flags in Plains Indian Art: A Hidden Transcript', *Plains Anthropologist*, 52, no. 202 (2007): 209–27.
19. 'Indian Magazine', c.1971, GOGA 35283, Box 1, Folder 6, Golden Gate National Recreation Area Park Archives and Records Center (PARC), San Francisco, California.
20. Alfred Young Man's painting highlights a connection between Native American and national issues. It also perhaps infers an association between the United States' intervention in Vietnam and its treatment of Indigenous peoples at home. The similarities between America's foreign policy in Vietnam and its domestic policies would become a focus in radical newspapers like *Akwesasne Notes* in the late 1960s and early 1970s.
21. Russell Means quoted in 'Mourning Indians Dump Sand on Plymouth Rock', *New York Times*, 27 November 1970, 26.
22. Director of the Institute of American Indian Arts museum, Richard Hill, attested that the Plymouth Rock activism of 1970 was Means' first use of the inverted flag; Richard Hill, '"Radicals and Renegades: American Indian Protest Art" Exhibition Guide', 1990, IAIARG01, Exhibitions, Box 6, Folder 1, Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) Archives, Santa Fe, New Mexico.
23. Ibid.
24. It is unclear where the original resides. A reproduction can be found in: Hill, 'Radicals and Renegades'.
25. Tsa-wa, 'A.I.M. Convention at White Oak', *Akwesasne Notes*, Early Winter 1973, 15.
26. For examples, see the 'American Indian Movement and Native American Radicalism' collection at 'Archives Unbound', Gale Primary Sources, 2009, https://www.gale.com/intl/primary-sources/archives-unbound (accessed September 5, 2024).
27. Towns around Pine Ridge benefitted greatly from the reservation's prohibition measures which remained in force until 2013. In 2012, for instance, Whiteclay, Nebraska sold 162,100 cases of beer, despite the town having just a dozen residents; Scott Neuman, 'Pine Ridge Reservation Lifts Century-Old Alcohol Ban', NPR, 15 August 2013, https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2013/08/15/212272144/south-dakota-reservation-lifts-century-old-alcohol-ban (accessed September 5, 2024).
28. AIM brought with them around 2,000 protestors; 'Yellow Thunder's Death', *Akwesasne Notes*, Early Spring 1972, 4–6.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Pub. L. 77–829, H.J.Res. 359, 77th Cong. (Dec. 22, 1942).
32. Ibid; Pub. L. 105–225, § 2(a) (Aug. 12, 1998).
33. Marvin and Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*, 53–5.
34. Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, No. 4 (2006): 387–409.
35. Gerald Vizenor, *Crossbloods: Bone Courts, Bingo and Other Reports* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 164.
36. Richard Erdoes, 'Interview with Dennis Banks', 1977, WA MSS-S-2609, Box 232, Richard Erdoes Papers, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut.
37. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) non-violent campaign in Birmingham is remembered for the brutal response of Eugene Bull Connor (Birmingham's Commissioner of Public Safety) to the peaceful demonstration, immortalized in photographs capturing children and young adults being attacked by dogs and knocked off their feet by high-pressure

jets of water. As Davi Johnson argued, the SCLC's campaign utilised what Kevin DeLuca called 'image events': 'deliberately staged spectacles designed to attract the attention of the mass media and disseminate persuasive images to a wide audience'. Sam Hitchmough has also applied DeLuca's concept to Red Power activism, noting the movement's reliance upon ocular rhetoric. Some of AIM's flag play could be read as 'image events', though in Gordon the protests relied as much on verbal rhetoric derived from flag play (in the form of White responses and textual journalism) as it did the ocular rhetoric such flag play forwarded; Davi Johnson, 'Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 Birmingham Campaign as Image Event', *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10, No. 1 (2007): 2–3; Kevin Michael DeLuca, *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism* (New York: Guilford, 1999); Hitchmough, 'Performative Protest', 231.

38. 'Yellow Thunder's Death'.
39. Nick Estes has written that all White-dominated urban spaces in America are structured by the 'logic of the bordertown': the elimination of the Native. Therefore, it is likely he would argue that an appeal to urban White liberals also promises little success; Nick Estes and others, *Red Nation Rising: From Bordertown Violence to Native Liberation* (USA: PM Press, 2021).
40. 'The Pawnee Indian Agency Is Taken Over', *Akwesasne Notes*, Late Autumn 1972, 9; 'Sterilization of Young Native Women Alleged at Indian Hospital – 48 Operations in July, 1974 Alone', *Akwesasne Notes*, Early Summer 1974, 22.
41. American Indian Movement, 100-462483, Volume: 47. MS 100-462483-2832; 100-462483-2916, American Indian Movement and Native American Radicalism. Federal Bureau of Investigation Library. Archives Unbound. https://link-gale-com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/apps/doc/SC5101083179/GDSC?u=cambuni&sid=bookmark-GDSC&xid=b06bdff3&pg=291 (accessed September 5, 2024).
42. Richard LaCourse, 'The Beginning of the Trail', *Akwesasne Notes*, Early Winter 1973, 3.
43. Native American national identity in the twentieth century was (much like now) complex. Whilst the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act had conferred American citizenship upon all Indigenous persons born in the United States, many Native Americans preferred to exclusively identify as citizens of their respective Tribal Nations. John Trudell, for instance, expressed an overtly separatist rhetoric in the mid-1970s as AIM's national director: 'we do not ask for a voice in this [American] system. Fuck this system!' Conversely, many AIM-OSCRO members at Wounded Knee were Vietnam veterans (though it must be stated that not all Native American veterans considered themselves to be American). In short, Native American national identity in the period was extremely diverse and complex; 'FBI OUT OF NATIVE AMERICAN NATIONS', WA MSS-S-2609, Boxes 281, Richard Erdoes Papers, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut; Woody Kipp, *Viet Cong at Wounded Knee* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).
44. The Trail was supported by numerous organisations, including AIM, the National Indian Youth Council, the National Indian Brotherhood of Canada, the Survival of American Indians, the National American Indian Council, the Native American Rights Fund, the American Indian Commission on Alcohol and Drugs, and others. However, the absence of the National Tribal Chairmen's Association (NTCA) was glaring, for the NTCA was instrumentally elevated by government officials as spokespeople for the Native American population, thus undermining the voice of the Trail coalition. The NTCA would subsequently seek to discredit the leadership of the BIA building takeover in press conferences arranged by the federal government. The NTCA's hostility towards urban activist organisations was primarily derived from concerns over the possible diversion of federal funds towards urban causes, but also partly stemmed from concerns over the tenability of political structures introduced by the 1934 Indian Reorganisation Act, which some Red Power activists critiqued as colonial impositions; LaCourse, 'The Beginning of the Trail'; Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 160.
45. The Red Power movement engaged with sites of American national memory in a variety of ways. Sites such as Mount Rushmore were targeted due to their association with American political hagiography, questioning the right of the United States to memorialise on stolen lands. The Little Bighorn Battlefield is rather more a complex space, where the United States memorialises and mourns its military at a site of historical Indigenous predominance

(the United States' forces were defeated in 1876). At the Little Bighorn Battlefield, the Red Power movement played on the tensions around memory by celebrating victory and mourning Indigenous deaths, inverting the dominant discourse. Mankato represented an alternative case, where spaces of Indigenous death were illuminated, pushing against the settler colonial tendency to obfuscate the murderous conditions of the nation's production (to paraphrase Lorenzo Veracini). In each case, as Sam Hitchmough pointed out, Red Power sought to forward counter-narratives which challenged the dominant discourse, thus critiquing American national memory; A fourth caravan, led by Carter Camp, departed slightly later from Oklahoma. This caravan travelled the path of the Trail of Tears in reverse; Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 14; Hitchmough, 'Performative Protest'; Richard LaCourse, 'United, We Put Our Foot on the Trail', *Akwesasne Notes*, Early Winter 1973, 4.

46. Vine Deloria Jr. was particularly complementary of Hank Adams' Twenty-Point Proposal, which called for the renewal of constitutional treaty-making authorities, the repeal of termination, and the protection of religious freedom, among much else. Deloria labelled it 'the best summary document of reforms put forth in this century'.; Vine Deloria Jr., 'Alcatraz, Activism, and Accomodation', in *American Indian Activism: Alcatraz to the Longest Walk*, ed. Troy R Johnson, Joane Nagel, and Duane Champagne (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 50.
47. Jason A. Heppler, 'Framing Red Power: The American Indian Movement, the Trail of Broken Treaties, and the Politics of Media' (Lincoln, University of Nebraska, 2009), 45.
48. Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 154–5; Richard LaCourse, 'We're Staying Here Tonight', *Akwesasne Notes*, Early Winter 1973, 6.
49. Richard Erdoes, 'Excerpt from Dennis Banks Interview', WA MSS-S-2609, Box 185, Richard Erdoes Papers, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut.
50. This example raises the question of how Intertribal affirmations of sovereignty translate to the level of tribal sovereignty, or tribal nationalism. Certainly, there is scope to suggest that Intertribal slogans can serve to homogenise Indigenous peoples in the eyes of spectators. However, Indigenous activism on a national stage has also been, historically, most successful at garnering attention when issues are framed at the Intertribal – rather than tribal – level. This is a dilemma without a purely unproblematic solution, and is reflective of the ways in which coloniality circumscribes the boundaries of plausible Indigenous resistance. This echoes Michel Foucault's claim that resistance necessarily cannot manifest as some 'single great locus of refusal', but rather tends to 'challenge and reinforce hegemonic power relations, at the same time'; Michel Foucault, as quoted in Carl Death, 'Counter-Conducts: A Foucauldian Analytics of Protest', *Social Movement Studies* 9.3 (2010): 238; Death, 240.
51. Cy Griffin, 'Excerpt from Cy Griffin's 'Sister Hidden Many Still: Inside Wounded Knee II'', WA MSS-S-2609, Box 278, Richard Erdoes Papers, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut; 'The Trail of Broken Treaties: A March on Washington, DC 1972', Muscarelle Museum of Art, 2021, https://muscarelle.wm.edu/rising/broken-treaties/ (accessed September 5, 2024).
52. Richard LaCourse, 'B.I.A. I'm Not Your Indian Any More', *Akwesasne Notes*, Early Winter 1973, 7.
53. In an interview with Richard Erdoes, Vernon Bellecourt explicitly stated that AIM's flag inversion drew on 'the traditional navy distress signal'; 'Vernon Bellecourt on AIM', WA MSS-S-2609, Box 174, Richard Erdoes Papers, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut
54. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population: 1970 SUBJECT REPORTS Final Report PC(2)-1F American Indians* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973); U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population: 1970 SUBJECT REPORTS Final Report PC(2)-6A Employment Status and Work Experience* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973); Ronald L. Trosper, 'American Indian Poverty on Reservations, 1969–1989', in *Changing Numbers, Changing Needs: American Indian Demography and Public Health*, ed. Gary D. Sandefur, Ronald R. Rindfuss, and Barney Cohen (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1996), 174.
55. Thomas M. Brod, 'Alcoholism as a Mental Health Problem of Native Americans: A Review of the Literature', *Arch Gen Psychiatry* 32, no. 11 (1975): 1385.

56. Lyndon B. Johnson, 'Special Message to the Congress on the Problems of the American Indian: "The Forgotten American"', The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/237467, (accessed September 10, 2024).
57. Kent Blansett explained that the 'termination policy was established to destroy tribal governments', whilst 'relocation was forged under the guise of terminating individual Connections the tribal communities'; Blansett, *Journey to Freedom*, 76; Adams, *Education for Extinction*.
58. As discussed in greater depth in an earlier note (see endnote 16), the flag-as-nation signification is commonly recognised by semioticians and sociologists.
59. Jennifer Marmo, 'The American Flag and the Body: How the Flag and the Body Create an American Meaning', *Kaleidoscope* 9 (2010): 45.
60. U.S. Government Printing Office, as quoted in Marmo, 'The American Flag', 46.
61. 'Vernon Bellecourt on AIM'.
62. Suzan Shown, 'The Roosevelt Raid: Red Is for Indian Blood', *The Village Voice*, 26 August 1971, 28.
63. Though Gauthier's use of the flag implied AIM's influence (as Richard Hill described), the rendering of Chief Joseph and Martin Luther King Jr. perhaps also acted as a lament to the current state of activism. The canonization of the pacifist leaders in *Bicentennial Painting/ Freedom* might be read as a plea: 'where are the peaceful leaders of today?'
64. Perhaps the most popular example of this move to innocence would be the claim that slavery, though abhorrent, was a product of an underdeveloped South soon brought into moral order by the Union. Temporal circumscription is an obvious case in discussing Indigenous histories, with present Americans feeling they cannot be held accountable for the genocidal crimes of their forefathers. In both examples, the compartmentalization (both geographical and temporal) of immorality serves to protect the perceived authenticity of fundamental American values by characterizing phenomena such as slavery and genocide as exceptions rather than the rule. Critical engagements with the flag, on the other hand, posit American atrocities as products of America's inherent character, playing upon the flag's expansive embodiment of the nation.
65. Bill Ashcroft has written about this debate on several occasions. See, for instance: Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), 14.
66. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans* (New York: Penguin, 1986); Reelblack One, 'Keep America Beautiful: The Crying Indian (1970)', YouTube, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0sxwGlTLWw (accessed February 6, 2025).
67. Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (USA: Bison Books, 1999).
68. Ranjana Khanna, 'Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia"', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Psychosocial Studies*, ed. Stephen Frosh, Marita Vyrgioti and Julie Walsh (e-Book, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 17–32.
69. Sean Kicummah Teuton, *Red Land Red Power: Grounding Knowledge in the American Indian Novel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 127.
70. Gerald Vizenor called the payment 'hush money' in an article for the *Minneapolis Tribune*; Vizenor, *Crossbloods*, 163.
71. Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 160.
72. Ibid, 183.
73. Ibid, 191.
74. Akwesasne Notes, *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 34.
75. Robert Shanafelt, 'The Nature of Flag Power: How Flags Entail Dominance, Subordination, and Social Solidarity', *Politics and Life Sciences* 27, no. 2 (2009): 13–27.
76. Sasha R. Weitman, 'National Flags: A Sociological Overview', *Semiotica* 8, no. 4 (2009): 337.
77. Pub. L. 77-623, H.J.Res. 303, 77th Cong. (Jun. 22, 1942).
78. Diana Taylor described scenarios as 'meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviours, and potential outcomes'. The foundational scenario of discovery was the landing of Columbus, but since then the scenario has been reiterated endlessly. It is from regular reiteration that scenarios derive their recognisability; Diana Taylor, *The*

Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas, 3rd ed. (USA: Duke University Press, 2007), 12.

79. Akwesasne Notes, *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 34.
80. AIM-OSCRO took six postal workers hostage on March 11, 1973. Russell Means announced to the media: 'if any foreign official representing any foreign power – specifically the United States – comes in here it will be treated as an act of war and dealt with accordingly'. 'Spies' were to be 'shot by a firing squad'; Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 218; Akwesasne Notes, *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 52, 58.
81. Kills Straight, 'AIM EXPO 1969-1979', MSS711BC, Box 1, Folder 2, Roger A. Finzel American Indian Movement Papers, Centre for Southwest Research and Special Collections, Albuquerque, New Mexico.
82. The meeting was eventually only attended by American representatives too junior to have serious conversations about the reinstatement of a nation-to-nation relationship with Tribal Nations. The terms of surrender agreed between AIM-OSCRO and American government were thus once again violated by the colonists; Akwesasne Notes, *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 249–58.
83. Akwesasne Notes, *Voices from Wounded Knee*, 241–2.
84. Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*, 271.
85. Illustrations that rendered the stripes of the American flag as prison bars were very popular in radical Indigenous newspapers and magazines in the 1970s; 'Indians in Prison', *Akwesasne Notes*, Late Spring 1971, 44; 'Chapter Reports', *NASC News*, 1:3, 4–5.
86. Peter Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (New York: Viking Press, 1983).
87. Demian Dinéyazhi', 'My ancestors will not let me forget this'.
88. Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird, eds., *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*; Simon J. Ortiz, 'Towards a National Indian Literature'.

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