
“You’re in apple land but you are a lemon:” Connection, Collaboration, and Division in Early ‘70s Indian Country¹

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Abstract

In the first years of the 1970s, Indian Country became paradoxically more interwoven and yet also more divided. Three case studies from Oklahoma’s Indigenous communities illustrate this transformation. Beginning in the mid-1960s, a boom in Indigenous media allowed Indigenous people to communicate far more quickly over once prohibitive distances. In western Oklahoma, Southern Cheyenne parents relied upon Navajo ideas to form their own indigenous controlled school in early 1973. As a result of these exchanges between previously removed people, new indigenous communities emerged along ideological lines rather than those of tribal citizenship or ethnic identity. A few months earlier, the National Indian Youth Council’s Oklahoma chapters, one such evolving ideological community out of many in the United States, successfully brought attention to and changed a key state policy affecting indigenous students in public schools. Even as Indigenous activists collaborated with new vigor, corresponding divisions emerged in existing Indigenous communities; Native people began to debate the meaning of the messages new communities popularized. The American Indian Movement attempted to hold its 1973 national convention at Pawnee, Oklahoma, only to find that Indigenous people in the region did not support the gathering as the movement’s leaders anticipated. Together, these three case studies present a portrait of a diverse, indigenous world that facilitated collaboration through Native media yet wrought with emerging ideological schisms.

Keywords: *Oklahoma, Indian Country, American Indian Movement, National Indian Youth Council, United Native Indian Tribal Youth, Education, Nineteen Seventies, Iranian Revolution, Media, Pawnee*

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INTRODUCTION

In January 1980, two Indigenous Oklahomans met in Tehran. John Thomas, a Shawnee-Delaware man from northeastern Oklahoma, accompanied several representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran from a conference in Europe to the captured American embassy in Iran’s capital city.² Thomas represented an international Indigenous organization connected to the American Indian Movement (AIM), a Minneapolis, Minnesota-based activist group famous for its occupation of a federal building in Washington D.C. and subsequent takeover

of Wounded Knee, South Dakota in the first years of the previous decade. In front of a crowd of reporters at the embassy, he led chants of “Down with [then-US President Jimmy] Carter!” and told the crowd that “I stand here as evidence of the oppression, injustice, and genocide...of the United States against my people.”³ In the embassy, Rick Kupke, a Kiowa man from southwestern Oklahoma working for the United States when a militia stormed the building four months earlier, was being held hostage by the Iranian government.⁴ John Thomas tried to convince the Republic of Iran’s representatives to release Kupke, reasoning that North American Indigenous peoples and Iranians were both resisting American imperialism. When he caught wind of John Thomas’s attempts to free him, an insulted Rick Kupke informed the American press that “We have not authorized anyone to speak for us except the chairman of the Kiowa

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September 13, 1972 – Protesters coordinated by the National Indian Youth Council confront Chickasaw Governor and state educational official Overton James about corruption in the state’s public school districts that served Indigenous communities. Carter Camp, a prominent member of the American Indian Movement, stands to the left of James. Courtesy of *The Oklahoman*.

tribe in Carnegie, OK.”⁵ Even after Thomas brought the Kiowa man’s letters to his relatives in Lawton, both his mother and his relative Maye Johnson, a prominent Kiowa tribal government official, argued John Thomas was manipulating the family for the benefit of AIM. The latter told the AIM member to “get a one-way ticket [back to Iran].”⁶

Why did Rick Kupke and his relatives react so angrily towards John Thomas, a man advocating for Kupke’s freedom? In the early years of the previous decade, the way Indigenous people understood one another shifted with advances in Indigenous communication and organization, laying the foundation for Kupke’s frustration with Thomas in Tehran. Once a leader in Tulsa AIM, John Thomas began working outside the state after local residents by and large rejected the national organization’s ideas and methods.⁷ He found his way to Tehran as an indirect result of ideological disagreements in Oklahoma’s Indigenous communities; Rick Kupke understood John Thomas through those disagreements rather than the traveler’s diplomacy, indigeneity, or American citizenship. Kupke’s reaction paralleled broader tensions in

Indian Country - the web of interconnected rural, urban, carceral and educational spaces that North American Indigenous people inhabit. The Tehran confrontation reflected an Indian Country transformed. In the 1970s, Indigenous media proliferated at an unprecedented rate, creating new Native communities based on shared conceptions of sovereignty (or their inherent political rights) rather than geography or tribal citizenship. These communities were rarely located in one location and they did not take the place of existing Indigenous nations; rather, they coalesced at certain times and places. Both existing and new Indigenous communities worked to see their sovereignty recognized and enforced, but they often disagreed on what this should look like on the ground. As a result, Native people who joined emerging communities also found new rivals in the places they already lived in – their peers. In 1980, Rick Kupke and John Thomas interpreted one another through an Indian Country more interwoven yet also more divided by these conversations.

This article aims to broaden a historiography about 1970s Indigenous activism by injecting Oklahoma’s Native communities into that conversation. Since the

Wounded Knee occupation in 1973, participants, journalists and academic historians have often framed the American Indian Movement as the most significant Indigenous activist group of that decade. In 2007, Loretta Fowler and Daniel Cobb called on scholars to broaden that history and include ⁸ activists over the course of the entire twentieth century.⁹ Many scholars have since produced innovative works that connect Indigenous activists in this era to longer stories – of which Nick Estes' treatise on the evolution and resurgence of the Oceti Sakowin is perhaps the most important.¹⁰ Using Oklahoma, this study will take another approach, following others who use new lenses to examine this period of Indigenous history (often interpreted as the decade between AIM's formation in 1968 and the Longest Walk in 1978).¹¹ Davis Joyce and Sarah Eppler Janda note Oklahoma's diverse political traditions and movements.¹² Oklahoma's Indigenous urban neighborhoods, incarcerated associations, rural hamlets, mountainous villages, military communities, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) – a federal agency designed to monitor and control Indigenous people – boarding schools and tribal governments reflect the diversity Davis and Janda cite. By numbers alone, more Native people lived in the state than anywhere else in the United States or Canada during this decade.¹³

Extraordinarily diverse in scope and situation, Indian Country was rapidly becoming more compact. Prior to the 1960s, Indigenous politicians and intellectuals debated Indian Country's future on a national scale through the Society for American Indians and the National Congress of American Indians, but those organizations moved relatively slowly due to logistical and geographical constraints. Regular collaboration across vast distances required time, capital and technological resources that only a tiny minority in Indian Country could muster. Indigenous people did frequently debate national issues, but they did so within the confines of their own communities. These debates were no less contentious in confined spaces and created divisions that shaped Indian Country's realignment decades later. For example, Akim Reinhardt argues that Oglala Lakota debates over the legitimacy of a newly created American-style government in the mid-1930s fed into political disputes that exploded forty years later at Wounded Knee.¹⁴ The War on Poverty – US President Lyndon Johnson's 1964 initiative to create a more equitable society – connected these communities and their internal disagreements by funneling unprecedented amounts of money into Indian Country. Through the mid-1970s, this capital – distributed through grants and programs from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) but locally administered – fueled a national web of Indigenous controlled newspapers, gatherings, and organizations.¹⁵ In 1970, the *Navajo Times* had by far the largest au-

dience (13,000) of any Indigenous newspaper in North America, but five years later, *Akwesasne Notes* and *Was-saja* reached a combined 123,000 people.¹⁶ The creation of widespread, accessible and rapid communication networks in Indian Country helped activists who conceived of sovereignty in similar ways but lived far apart to find one another.

Many decades of abuses motivated Indigenous activists empowered by the War on Poverty to collaborate and to see their sovereignty recognized and enforced. Until the late 1960s, many non-Natives ignored Indigenous rights. In 1962, the city government of Norman, Oklahoma displaced the Big Jim community, part of the Absentee Tribe of Oklahoma, for the benefit of Norman residents.¹⁷ A cash poor Absentee Shawnee government did not have the infrastructure to resist the city's expansion but by the end of the decade, federal funding helped tribal government officials build that infrastructure.¹⁸ In the 1970s, Absentee Shawnee officials began a long process of resituating the Big Jim community.¹⁹ The Absentee Shawnee experience and the three case studies in this essay show Indigenous people exercising their sovereignty in a period that reshaped Indian Country. The first case study, the emergence of the Institute of the Southern Plains at Hammon, Oklahoma, will examine how Southern Cheyenne parents modeled their new school – the Institute of the Southern Plains – on their knowledge of Diné (Navajo) education. Through new organizations and newspapers, a continent-wide Indigenous infrastructure came into being that allowed culturally distinct and geographically removed people who were not career activists or intellectual elites but simply concerned citizens to work with one another and enforce their inherent rights as Indigenous peoples. A second case study, the National Indian Youth Council's campaign to reform Johnson O'Malley funding distribution in Oklahoma's public schools, will explore how this new infrastructure facilitated collaboration. Coalitions and partnerships between Native communities became essential tools in a collective fight to see their sovereignty recognized and respected. However, many who spoke to one another through this new infrastructure disagreed on what sovereignty meant on the ground. In the early 1970s, Indigenous people frequently debated whether emerging communities such as the American Indian Movement (AIM) channeled Indian Country's collective voice. The new communities that many tribal citizens began to identify with did not correspond to their tribal communities – exacerbating differences in the way Indigenous peoples living next to one another interpreted sovereignty and its implications in Indian Country. A third case study, AIM's troubled attempts to hold a national convention at Pawnee, Oklahoma, illustrates just one of those conversations.

THE INSTITUTE OF THE SOUTHERN PLAINS

Southern Cheyenne people in western Oklahoma drew from widely publicized examples of Diné controlled education in northeastern Arizona to address both immediate and longstanding problems in their community of Hammon, Oklahoma. Race divided the town from its inception. Although Indigenous peoples in Oklahoma were legally classified as white after statehood in 1907 and therefore possessed a different status from African Americans, Hammon's Native residents still suffered from consistent racial discrimination.²⁰ White settlers socially and economically marginalized their Southern Cheyenne neighbors, while drawing wealth out of their community and withholding consistent employment, meaningful political power and public education. In 1911, a federal official noted that "whites seem friendly to the Indians, but this is just a pretense that they may skin the Indians in a trade."²¹ Over sixty years later, the town's aging settlers still exploited a younger, more numerous generation of Southern Cheyennes.²² Within an ostensibly now integrated school system, Indigenous children suffered from de facto segregation, bullying by non-Native students and faculty alike and disproportionate corporal punishment.²³ By October 1972, many Indigenous parents were justifiably frustrated. Some resigned from the school's Indigenous advisory board.²⁴ Others formed an association to reform the system internally. Despite these warning signs, the school administration did not attempt to reconcile with disillusioned parents. On January 3, 1973, tensions exploded when a non-Native teacher assaulted a disabled Indigenous student in class.²⁵ This event, along with the school administration's failure to address the situation, pushed many Southern Cheyenne parents to withdraw their children; on February 12, they opened the institution that later became known as the Institute of the Southern Plains.²⁶

Although this new educational space might have survived on its own, the school stabilized with the help of newly established Indigenous media and organizations that transmitted ideas between otherwise unrelated Native communities. Several prominent scholars of Indigenous education note that the Diné activists both pioneered and popularized the idea of a school controlled by an Indigenous community and oriented around Indigenous cultures.²⁷ In 1966, Diné educators formed Rough Rock Demonstration School near Chinle, Arizona, with funding from the Office of Navajo Economic Opportunity (ONEO), a Diné extension of the War on Poverty.²⁸ Rough Rock was an institution "controlled and operated by the local Navaho community," a new kind of school distinct from boarding, public or religious institutions where Diné children were vulnerable to violence, discrimination and discouragement.²⁹ The school emphasized

local Indigenous control over a curriculum that taught children about their culture, language and community. In 1968, some of these same educators established the Navajo Community College, the first Indigenous post-secondary institution in the United States, with another ONEO grant. Under Navajo Studies director Ruth Roesel, the NCC created an academic press to "present [a]...Navajo point of view...written...by Navajos."³⁰ The press, Diné representatives, and frequent Indigenous visitors to the two institutions spread the idea of Indigenous controlled schools to distant communities; the college even published a bulletin, the *Navajo Community College Newsletter*, for that purpose.³¹ Emerging Diné-controlled schools in rural Arizona shaped the actions of Indigenous educators across North America.

Through new Indigenous newspapers and networks, Southern Cheyenne parents in Hammon gained help from distant Indigenous communities in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and Albuquerque, New Mexico. The Institute of the Southern Plains's opening divided their community. Some Indigenous parents felt that those who withdrew their children from Hammon's public school system were overreacting and taking resources away from those who remained.³² One observer reported that "guns and iron bars and chains and arrows ... [began to flash] on three sides [between] the divided Indian and the whites."³³ By early February, the nascent school's organizers, perhaps after consulting the Indigenous newspaper *Americans Before Columbus*, contacted, joined and began receiving assistance from its distributor, the National Indian Youth Council – an Albuquerque, New Mexico-based organization already monitoring potential civil rights abuses in Hammon.³⁴ From there, tensions rose. Hammon's city government cut off the utilities of those attending the new school.³⁵ NIYC representatives asked several Oklahoma AIM chapters to protect the children attending the Institute.³⁶ Hammon's sheriff responded to the arrival of AIM members, an organization many perceived to be dangerous, by deputizing 150 men (almost a fifth of the entire town). By late February 1973, what locals later labeled the "Wounded Ankle" crisis – a joking reference to AIM's subsequent occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota – looked like it might explode.³⁷ Both coalitions stationed armed men near the new school, located on Hammon's main street.³⁸ At any time, this conflict might have boiled over into a gunfight. In several instances, the two coalitions came close.³⁹ Fortunately, calm prevailed and the confrontation fizzled, but violence and deep resentment darkened Hammon long afterward.⁴⁰

With the immediate crisis averted, the Institute began to adopt Diné educational ideas through the Coalition of Indian Controlled School Boards (CICSB), another newly formed Indigenous network that transmitted ideas and connected activists across distant geographic spaces.

The CICSB, an organization intended to lobby for Indigenous controlled education in Washington D.C. and support Indian-controlled schools on the ground, formed in April 1972 at Red Cloud Indian School in Oglala, South Dakota.⁴¹ At first, the organization’s membership largely consisted of Northern Great Plains institutions familiar with Diné education, but within six months a significant Diné contingent and a smattering of isolated schools stretching from Washington to Maine complimented the founding membership.⁴² This organization spread the Rough Rock model across North America through its representatives, influence and its own publication, *CICSB*. Like the Office of Navajo Economic Opportunity, the *CICSB* received much of its funding from the War on Poverty.⁴³ In fact, the *CICSB* was one of many Indigenous controlled, federally funded networks that emerging across Indian Country. In March 1973, the Institute of the Southern Plains connected with *CICSB* officials, who began training the institution’s teachers two months later.⁴⁴

Northern Cheyenne *CICSB* representatives, who could point to a successful example of an Indigenous controlled school they formed a year earlier, trained Southern Cheyenne educators with Diné ideas that informed their own activism. In 1904, the federal government opened Busby Boarding School on the western side of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in southeastern Montana. As with many boarding schools, the institution’s founders labeled Northern Cheyenne culture and language backwards; for the following sixty-eight years, Indigenous students at Busby were forbidden from speaking their languages and consistently punished if teachers caught them doing so.⁴⁵ As they learned of new Diné educational spaces such as Rough Rock Demonstration School that not only tolerated but embraced Indigenous cultures, many Northern Cheyenne people began to demand that their tribal government take over the Busby school’s operations. Between February 1971 and March 1972, the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Council negotiated for and acquired the school from the federal government.⁴⁶ Sylvester Knowshisgun and Ted Risingsun, two Busby locals who traveled to Hammon a year later as *CICSB* representatives, helped acquire the school and served on the first board of trustees.⁴⁷ The tribal government renamed the institution the Northern Cheyenne Tribal School and in April 1972 the first elected school board began reformulating the school’s policies and procedures.⁴⁸ Immediately, the Busby School Board struck down any punishment for Cheyenne speech, instead implementing an explicitly bilingual curriculum.⁴⁹ The board also rejected many of the old institution’s disciplinary procedures.⁵⁰ These choices created a radically different educational experience for Northern Cheyenne children.

Northern and Southern Cheyenne communities share

historical, cultural, linguistic and religious ties, so the *CICSB*’s Northern Cheyenne members were well positioned to transmit Diné ideas into an otherwise foreign community. Although their situation differed to some extent in that they addressed problems within a public rather than federal school and consequentially had to form their own institution rather than transform an existing one, the founders of the Institute of the Southern Plains adopted many of the Busby School Board’s tactics. Institute educators encouraged Cheyenne speech.⁵¹ Their community-oriented curricula emphasized Southern Cheyenne culture, art and history lessons for both children and adults. Administrators provided an encouraging environment and good food. The school grew and quickly established formal ties with the Cheyenne-Arapaho tribal government.⁵² Like the Northern Cheyenne Tribal School at Busby, these new Diné methods produced a radically more successful student body. In contrast to the high Indigenous dropout rate in Hammon’s public schools due to student disillusionment, no students dropped out of the Institute in its first four years and of the seven who graduated, five went to college. One observer summarized the two school systems: “one...motivates Indian students for cognitive learning and the other nourishes apathy.”⁵³

THE NATIONAL INDIAN YOUTH COUNCIL’S JOM CAMPAIGN

Southern Cheyenne people living in Hammon only made up one community out of hundreds located in a relatively well-connected region within Indian Country. Most of Oklahoma’s thirty-nine tribal governments lay close enough to maintain regular contact with their citizens in Oklahoma City, Tulsa and Lawton. Almost fifty percent of the state’s Indigenous population lived in those three cities and many remained involved in their respective nation’s politics, driving tribal politicians to court urban voting bases such as the Oklahoma City Council of Choctaws, Tulsa’s Kiowa residents, or the Oklahoma County Cherokee Community Organization.⁵⁴ One Osage political candidate living in Hominy, Oklahoma went so far as to campaign among Osage voters in southern California.⁵⁵ In many other areas of Indian Country, urban Native people had little access to services and political representation from their tribal governments, which often did not have the infrastructure to reach out to citizens living hundreds of miles away. Such dysfunction was relatively new. During World War II, many Indigenous people migrated to manufacturing centers in search of employment.⁵⁶ In the 1950s, a federal program relocated many Native people to metropolises, including Los Angeles, Chicago, Minneapolis and Dallas. By the late 1960s, urban Indigenous communities began demanding a voice in Indian Country’s politics.⁵⁷ In lieu of tribal govern-

ment intervention, relocated Indigenous people living in Minneapolis formed the American Indian Movement to combat police brutality. Indigenous people in Oklahoma City and Tulsa relied far more on tribal government assistance. In 1971, Oklahoma City police shot and killed Seminole teenager Kenneth Harjo.⁵⁸ Soon after, Seminole Nation officials began a formal investigation from their offices in Wewoka – just a seventy-mile drive from the city – and received answers from the police department about the boy’s death. The divide between rural and urban Indigenous people oversimplified a universe of Indigenous communities that included suburban homeowners, urban reservations and small-town activists, but Oklahoma’s compactness should still complicate this binary.⁵⁹

In Oklahoma and across Indian Country, Indigenous communities shared a common desire to see their inherent sovereignty recognized and respected by their non-Native contemporaries. Each community expressed that desire through a different lens. Oklahoma chapters of the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC), a collegiate group that by the late 1960s diversified into a “national organization with semiautonomous affiliates” active in “public high schools, BIA boarding schools, Indian communities, Indian reservations, college campuses, and prisons,” reflected those differing expressions of sovereignty.⁶⁰ In Hammon, NIYC officials assisted Southern Cheyenne parents as they formed an Indigenous-controlled school. At Hobart, Indigenous high school students connected with the NIYC after a walkout in protest of their lack of representation on the student council.⁶¹ NIYC representatives helped Native men living in a federal prison near Oklahoma City negotiate with the warden to create a chapter that celebrated their indigeneity.⁶² Pawnee, Oklahoma’s Indigenous community drew especially large amounts of support. Through litigation and partnerships with national organizations such as the NIYC, Pawnee tribal citizens fought to see their civil rights recognized by hostile non-Native police, city government and public school officials.⁶³ One resident described a portrait of the Pawnee City Police Department reminiscent of the Jim Crow South or any number of contemporary reservation border towns, stating that “an Indian cannot talk intelligently with a policeman. If he does, he is [accused] of being against law and order and threat[ened] to be thrown] in jail if you argue a point too strongly.”⁶⁴ Instead of attempting to impose their own ideas on these different situations, for the most part NIYC leaders in Albuquerque embraced local conceptions of sovereignty – in these cases, control over education, political representation, the right to practice culture and religion, and civil rights – and worked alongside those communities to see them realized.

New infrastructures like the National Indian Youth

Council knit Indigenous people from geographically removed and culturally distinct communities together, helping them find common cause and allowing them to collaborate at speeds and in numbers not feasible a decade earlier. Johnson O’Malley Act (JOM) fraud, the misdistribution of funds from a 1934 federal law intended to pay for Indigenous students in public schools, was one such issue.⁶⁵ Until 1971, federal and state officials often failed to monitor where JOM funds went and local public school administrators routinely distributed them to children or institutions for which they were not intended.⁶⁶ In some cases, public school officials did this openly.⁶⁷ Some Indigenous people, such as Comanche activist LaDonna Harris, were aware “the school district could use [the money] in any way they saw fit” and a few, such as non-Native Oklahoma historian Angie Debo, even investigated JOM abuses.⁶⁸ Most did not know how widespread this misuse was until a nationally distributed 1971 report – publicized in Indian Country by Indigenous newspapers such as the Norman, Oklahoma-based *OIO Newsletter* – proved that numerous public school districts routinely cheated Indigenous children out of the funding they were entitled to by federal law.⁶⁹ A few states quickly partnered with Indigenous people to reform JOM abuses and some local school districts already had working relationships with Indigenous parents to monitor JOM distribution, but in much of Oklahoma, administrators were slow to respond to these revelations.⁷⁰ NIYC reporting through *Americans Before Columbus*, exchanges at key nodes within Indian Country such as Elko, Nevada or Norman, Oklahoma and professional development for local leaders such as Hobart activist Cornell Tahdooahnippah or University of Oklahoma student LaVonna Weller helped these communities cross existing logistical barriers and combat common affronts to Indigenous sovereignty, such as Johnson O’Malley funding fraud.⁷¹

The NIYC’s 1972 protest at Oklahoma City and Pawnee epitomized the growing ability of activists from distant communities to quickly and effectively communicate and collaborate. The NIYC’s flexible structure was well-suited to tackle and illuminate JOM misdistribution, an abuse facilitated by negligence or outright fraud on federal, state and local levels. On September 12, 1972, 150 to 200 activists from Indigenous communities across the state, all coordinated by Hobart NIYC activist Cornell Tahdooahnippah, stormed into the Oklahoma State Department of Education’s Indian Education Division office in Oklahoma City and demanded director and Chickasaw Governor Overton James address JOM abuses or resign.⁷² After James argued that he was addressing those abuses through an ongoing investigation, the frustrated activists traveled to Pawnee – whose school board was cited in the 1971 report – and occupied the town’s Bureau of Indian Affairs agency.⁷³

To the surprise of many Indigenous people and school administrators alike, the protesters successfully negotiated with BIA officials to freeze JOM funding distribution to Oklahoma’s school districts until ongoing state and federal investigations concluded.⁷⁴ In a subsequent letter to Oklahoma’s congressional delegation, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Louis Bruce, who traveled to the state and met with Indigenous officials in response to this event, noted that the Pawnee occupation functioned as a much-needed impromptu meeting between federal and state officials and Indigenous people on JOM misappropriation.⁷⁵ Freezing these funds did not end JOM fraud; Indigenous Oklahomans continued to meet, protest and lobby their representatives for reforms that eventually led to a 1975 federal law institutionalizing Native control over JOM funds.⁷⁶ These particular protests marked a moment in which different Indigenous communities crossed prior ideological, cultural and geographical lines to see their collective sovereignty respected.

THE AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT AND THE PAWNEE-WHITE OAK DEBACLE

As larger volumes of communication created new Indigenous communities oriented around conceptions of sovereignty rather than tribal citizenship, those forces also exacerbated existing divisions or fostered new ones. AIM, which by 1972 had transformed from a local organization into a national community with influence across much of Indian Country, proved especially controversial. In communities that never witnessed a physical AIM member, Native people furiously debated that organization’s authority to speak for them. AIM’s polarizing reputation first emerged in the aftermath of the organization’s BIA headquarters occupation. Prior to that moment, few people expected what was referred to at the time as the Trail of Broken Treaties Pan-American Quest for Justice to end with an occupied BIA Building.⁷⁷ Just a year before, a coalition of the most powerful Indigenous organizations in Indian Country, including AIM, the National Congress of American Indians, the National Indian Youth Council and the more politically conservative National Tribal Chairman’s Association (NTCA), pledged to work together. These organizations collaborated at a September 1971 protest at the US capital and two months later all but the NTCA joined together into the Coalition of Organized Indians and Natives “to set a national Indian strategy for the 1970s.”⁷⁸ As Indigenous caravans rumbled eastward in October 1972, no one anticipated the total collapse of this alliance; instead, prominent Indigenous journalists characterized the campaign as a sophisticated intervention into the final days of George McGovern and Richard Nixon’s struggle for the US Presidency.⁷⁹ When the orig-

inal plan crumbled in early November, AIM members led a seven-day unplanned occupation of BIA headquarters. Although some Indigenous people supported AIM’s efforts, this event alienated many others who saw the destruction of BIA records as a major inconvenience to tribal government operations.⁸⁰

In February 1973, that gap widened. On Pine Ridge Reservation in southwestern South Dakota, Oglala Lakota protesters repeatedly tried and failed to remove their elected leader, Dick Wilson. In concert with these protesters, AIM’s national leaders – a group of urban, charismatic, and at times misogynistic Native men – employed their most dedicated followers as field support to oust Wilson. They first advocated locally for the leader’s removal. When that effort failed, the AIM-Oglala coalition staged an impromptu political protest at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, on February 27 to bring national attention to Wilson’s controversial status.⁸¹ In the process, the coalition became embroiled in a shooting match with well-armed federal agents. As news of renewed violence at the site of an infamous 1890 US Army massacre of several hundred Lakota people spread across Indian Country, this event became more associated with AIM’s rhetoric, ideas and goals than Oglala politics. Within two weeks, the organization’s national leaders began planning a second intervention in Oklahoma, a place teeming with potential allies, to spread their message.

With their notoriety in Indian Country at its height as Indigenous and non-Native news media publicized their efforts at Wounded Knee, the movement began a second front, an intervention into a Pawnee tribal administration.⁸² Their choice, an attempt to spread their message and gather support for their evolving community, was based on what AIM’s national leaders in March 1973 believed to be a successful collaboration with Oglala Lakota activists. In Oklahoma, Pawnee politicians Thomas Chapman and Austin Real Rider were embroiled in a legal dispute over the legitimacy of Chapman’s administration. At face value, this struggle resembled Oglala Lakota politics on Pine Ridge Reservation. Real Rider, a politician who claimed to represent Pawnees rooted in their traditional cultures, argued that Chapman’s administration was not a legitimate representative of the Pawnee people, as AIM’s Oglala allies had in South Dakota.⁸³ In both cases, the American Indian Movement, bolstered by a vocal minority of local Indigenous activists, believed the tribal government to be controlled by “apples” (red on the outside, white on the inside) or Indigenous people so assimilated into Anglo-American culture that they could no longer articulate or represent the desires of their constituents. Both Oglala and Pawnee activists joined AIM’s fight to remove Dick Wilson from office.⁸⁴ It seemed only natural for AIM’s national leadership to connect the two cases. Southern

Ponca activist Carter Camp, the most prominent Oklahoman in AIM, became particularly excited at Wounded Knee to “fight the real war down there” in his home state.⁸⁵ To AIM’s national leadership, the Chapman-Real Rider dispute seemed an obvious opportunity to help authentic Indigenous people regain their authority over a tribal government run by apples. At the organization’s statewide March 11, 1973 meeting in Norman, a non-Oklahoman announced that the movement would hold its national convention at Pawnee at the end of April.⁸⁶

One of the principal differences between the National Indian Youth Council’s 1972 campaign for JOM reform and the American Indian Movement’s efforts to hold a national convention at Pawnee the following year was that NIYC officials supported local conceptions of sovereignty while AIM’s national leadership tried to impose their own. As the convention date approached, a significant portion of the Pawnee Nation recoiled at the notion that the American Indian Movement represented their interests. AIM’s convention at Pawnee rested on a misassumption that most Pawnees perceived Thomas Chapman to be a corrupt apple. In fact, Chapman, a person deeply rooted in Pawnee traditions, stories and ceremonies, was not nearly as controversial as Dick Wilson; three years after his displacement by Austin Real Rider, Pawnee tribal citizens reelected Chapman.⁸⁷ Furthermore, many Pawnees understood AIM, which did not have a chapter at Pawnee, Oklahoma, through television coverage and Indigenous news reports of the BIA and Wounded Knee occupations.⁸⁸ In fact, the Pawnee tribal government issued a November 1972 reprimand to its citizens involved in the BIA occupation and banned them from using tribal government property.⁸⁹ This news coverage, especially non-Native sources, presented at times an exaggeratedly violent image of AIM members. BIA bureaucrats further muddled Pawnee politics by endorsing Austin Real Rider’s chairmanship over Chapman, who initially had the support of the US court system in the legal dispute; paradoxically, this meant that AIM and the BIA backed the same political leader, a notion that must have created some cognitive dissonance within the former organization.⁹⁰ As AIM members unfamiliar with Pawnee politics voiced their support for Austin Real Rider and prepared to hold their national convention at Pawnee, Oklahoma, an event supposedly supported by the majority of the Pawnee Nation, many Pawnees confronted those AIM members, creating more confusion. In April 1973, an AIM official traveled to Pawnee to hold a press conference, only to be chided by a Pawnee woman who told him “you’re in apple land, but you are a lemon. Yellow on the outside and sour on the inside.”⁹¹ This woman anticipated AIM’s claim that apples could not represent the interests of the Pawnee Nation and fired back that the organi-

zation’s members were themselves illegitimate representatives of Pawnee sovereignty. Other Indigenous Oklahomans, ranging from powerful politicians to laypeople afraid of what the Pawnee convention might bring, also spoke out.⁹²

For the most part, Oklahoma’s AIM chapters, which constituted their own regional activist community within the broader organization, were not as invested in the Pawnee convention as the national leadership. Most members of AIM in Oklahoma preferred to see public institutions recognize their sovereignty rather than overturning the institutions. With bullets flying at Wounded Knee, the Tulsa American Indian Movement formally requested and received a permit from their city government to protest.⁹³ Oklahoma City AIM’s leaders registered their chapter as a non-profit.⁹⁴ Lawton AIM established an Indigenous bar, a dire need.⁹⁵ Indigenous people in other locales noted the hostility of bar owners towards even routine Native customers.⁹⁶ Perhaps the most innovative chapter formed in Anadarko. Led by a Kiowa man named Kent Poolaw, Anadarko AIM explicitly fought a growing tide of disproportionate Indigenous incarceration in the city’s jail.⁹⁷ Due to their small numbers, many Oklahoma AIM members worked with a variety of organizations. Beginning in 1974, Tulsa AIM members published the *Tulsa Indian News*, which knit the city’s Indigenous community together.⁹⁸ American Indian Defense, Inc., which evolved from Anadarko AIM, collaborated with the Native American Center in Oklahoma City and the Oklahoma Indian Rights Association in Norman to extend all three organizations’ reach into a neighboring penitentiary.⁹⁹ These strategies differed from those employed by AIM’s national leadership at Wounded Knee, but for the time being, geographical distance - and to an extent prominent Oklahoman Carter Camp’s presence in the national leadership - kept these ideological differences at bay.

The Pawnee convention proved disastrous for AIM, alienating many potential Indigenous supporters in Oklahoma and exacerbating unrealized internal differences within the organization. Two schools of thought emerged as the convention date approached, one from the Oklahoma chapters and one from the national leadership’s perspective. Oklahoma City AIM leader Mike Haney, a Lakota-Seminole man from Seminole County, Oklahoma, epitomized the general tendency of the Oklahoma AIM chapters to reshape public institutions, while Four Corners AIM leader Hank Howell, a Pawnee living in Durango, Colorado, drew on the larger organization’s tendency to challenge the legitimacy of those institutions.¹⁰⁰ This ideological gulf - the difference between reformative activism and revolutionary activism - is common, but proved highly disruptive to AIM’s operations in Oklahoma. Howell argued that as a Pawnee person he had an inherent right to use the tribal govern-

ment’s land, but the Chapman administration denied AIM requests to use public or tribal lands.¹⁰¹ In late April, he became the spokesperson for an impromptu encampment of out-of-state supporters near Yale, Oklahoma, a few miles south of Pawnee. Two years earlier, Indigenous college students in Durango led a camp-in protest that resulted in a significant legal victory for their community.¹⁰² Howell was likely trying to imitate that movement’s successful tactics, but he did not consider the influence that violence between federal agents and AIM’s forces at Wounded Knee had on reshaping public perceptions of the latter organization. Many Indigenous people believed that the Pawnee convention would become “Wounded Knee in Okla[homa]” and their worst fears seemed to come true on April 22, when state police arrested Yale-bound AIM members who ran a tollgate near Muskogee, Oklahoma and found numerous weapons in their car.¹⁰³ In response, the residents of the Yale camp constructed “a rural fortress” to protect themselves, with bunkers, pillboxes and trenches, while Governor David Hall stationed state police on the camp’s perimeter.¹⁰⁴ After several tense days, Mike Haney – reflecting his Oklahoma City chapter’s more reformatory goals – negotiated both within the organization and with state officials to push the conference back to July rather than see bullets fly at Yale.¹⁰⁵ Haney’s diplomacy cooled the situation. On April 26, Hank Howell decided to shut down the Yale camp and its residents gradually left.

In a gambit to revive their flagging momentum after their May 8 surrender at Wounded Knee, AIM’s national leadership decided to move their convention to John Thomas’ family ranch at White Oak, a rural community in northeastern Oklahoma. It is unclear whether AIM had permission beyond Thomas to use this Eastern Shawnee religious, cultural and social space.¹⁰⁶ Still, the White Oak convention initially looked like the movement might reconcile with Indigenous people alienated by the national leadership’s collective actions over the past nine months. In an interview with a reporter representing the national Indigenous periodical *Wassaja*, local leader Mike Haney and his national counterpart Clyde Bellecourt asked Indigenous peoples in Oklahoma to trust a new American Indian Movement that focused on “voter registration drives, AIM members [in] city councils...Indian hiring, and...Indians on school boards.”¹⁰⁷ These new goals might have radically shifted the organization’s meaning and role in Indian Country’s overlapping sea of ideological and tribal communities. Yet even as AIM’s officials swore that the White Oak meeting, not the events of the past nine months, would define their organization, relatively few people listened; only 500 of an expected 4000 people attended.¹⁰⁸ Held in Oklahoma’s mid-summer heat, White Oak represented an Indian Country irreversibly reshaped by differing conceptions of sovereignty. In the following months, those

divisions shattered the national organization’s ties to its Oklahoma membership. Just weeks after White Oak, Carter Camp, the bridge between the national leadership and the Oklahoma chapters, shot Bellecourt in a dispute. When AIM’s national leadership kicked Camp out of the movement in February 1974 without including the Oklahoma chapters, most of AIM’s Oklahoma membership seceded.¹⁰⁹ The loss of AIM’s base in a state where more Indigenous people lived than anywhere else in the United States struck a crippling blow to the national leadership’s effort to reinvent itself and may have contributed to its gradual decline.

THE CONTINUING INFLUENCE OF THE INDIGENOUS 1970S

In the early 1970s, Indigenous communities found themselves divided along new lines. In 1975, J.R. Cook, a Cherokee basketball coach working at Southwestern Oklahoma State University, created the United Native Indian Tribal Youth (UNITY) “as an alternative to the American Indian Movement” based upon youth, activism and positivity.¹¹⁰ Members pledged “to live a four square life...mentally, physically, socially, and spiritually...to be a positive person...to put myself and others up [and] ...to remember that the word ‘American’ ends in I CAN.”¹¹¹ A few years later, Oklahoma City-based Indigenous activists representing themselves as “the silent majority of Indians” formed American Indian Response (AIR) out of frustration with AIM.¹¹² Their organization claimed to “represent the ‘contemporary, moderate’ viewpoints of American Indians.”¹¹³ By the time Rick Kupke encountered John Thomas in Tehran, he understood his fellow Oklahoman through the prism of a reordered Indian Country. Alongside Mike Haney, John Thomas represented the International Indian Treaty Council, a transnational Indigenous organization recognized by the United Nations and working with global partners, such as the Puerto Rican Socialist Party and the Zimbabwe African National Union.¹¹⁴ John Thomas’ embrace of global Indigenous sovereignty that might supersede the powers of a Dick Wilson or a Thomas Chapman clashed with Kupke’s belief that only the Kiowa government wielded Kiowa sovereignty. Rick Kupke’s choice to wait for assistance from that government – which had already sent a direct communication to the Iranian leadership – was also a choice to support one conception of sovereignty and reject another.¹¹⁵

Indian Country’s reordering did not just create division. From the early 1970s onward, Indigenous people increasingly communicated and collaborated with distant peers and although they sometimes disagreed, Indian Country’s ideological realignment did not stop a spectrum of different Indigenous communities from partnering together. Although the Coalition of Indian Con-

trolled School Boards no longer exists, many Indigenous communities run their own schools and colleges while coordinating with one another through national organizations such as the National Indian Education Association and the American Indian Higher Education Consortium. These same communities, assisted by decades of nation rebuilding, have substantially more power and oversight over Johnson O'Malley funds. Fueled by the continuing proliferation of Indigenous media since the 1970s, Native protests that draw continent-wide or even global support in solidarity with one community's sovereignty have only grown more prominent. Amid a series of 2016-17 Native protests against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline on Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota, Oceti Sakowin Camp's Flag Row – a long line of Indigenous flags that served as an entryway into the main encampment – reflected broad support across Indian Country for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's fight against the pipeline.¹¹⁶ Similar Indigenous coalitions – among others, the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls movement's battle against sexual violence or widespread Indigenous efforts in spring and summer 2020 to support Diné communities disrupted by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic – wield considerable influence through post-1970s Native infrastructure. Indian Country is a different space than it was before the 1970s, but it is ultimately one more interwoven and connected.



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NOTES

¹ Sarah Eppler Janda, Rachel Henson and JA Pryse, Mallory Covington, Jim and Sheri Bement, Northern Cheyenne elders such as Farrell Evans, Allen Clubfoot, and Mina Seminole, Casey Wilson and Alaina Ellis-Harrison at the Cultural Preservation Office – Absentee Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma, Michael Elizondo Jr. and Brendan Haag at the Department of Education – Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes, the Payne County (Okla.) Sheriff's Department, and Hammon Public Schools gave this article direction in varying ways. Jennifer Holland,

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