

*From Alcatraz to Standing Rock:  
Continuing conflict and a new Native protest*



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### **Abstract**

The recent protests by Native activists on the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota against construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline have drawn national and global attention to the continued mistreatment of Indigenous peoples in the United States. It is considered one of the most successful protests in recent history and as such, it has invited comparison to previous Native protest movements, particularly those during the Red Power era, which was at its height during the nineteen-seventies. Although the two movements are different in many respects, they address similar issues and apply similar techniques to achieve their goals. These include the way they attempt to gain publicity, their emphasis on larger issues facing Native communities across the United States, and how protesters identify themselves and their activism as Native.

*Keywords:* Standing Rock, DAPL, Red Power, Native, protest, identity, activism, media, treaty rights, tribal sovereignty, settler colonialism, Indigenous, healing, Great Sioux Nation

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## Introduction

Robby Romero, one of the water protectors at Standing Rock described the protests as “the largest spiritual resistance this world has ever seen” (3), drawing attention to the fact that the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline that took place over the course of 2015 and 2016 were in many ways unprecedented. What started in 2015 as a small protest by a group of young Sioux on the Standing Rock reservation, located on the border of North and South Dakota, soon gained widespread support within their community, across the various Sioux reservations and among Indigenous peoples more generally. The protests also received considerable support from environmentalists, largely due to the emphasis on the potential threat the pipeline posed to local ecosystems and the fact that they made a stand against the oil industry. Despite harsh weather conditions and an aggressive and often violent response by authorities, the protesters, who referred to themselves as water protectors, stayed at their camp outside of Cannon Ball, North Dakota. Part of their protest was also aimed at the fact that the pipeline crossed a piece of land less than half a mile from the reservation, which had been established as Sioux land in 1851 and 1858 treaties, but that has since been taken by the federal government and claimed as private property. The conflict finally seemed to be resolved on December 4, 2016, as the Army Corps of Engineers halted construction until further research into the potential impact would be conducted. This victory turned out to be short-lived however; President Trump signed an executive order shortly after taking office in January 2017 that reversed this decision. Since then, construction has been completed and the camp at Cannon Ball was cleared out on February 23. Protests continue in various locations as well as online, and the construction of the pipeline is still fought over in court, but the main fight has been concluded.

Given the scale of these protests and the fact that over three-hundred tribes were represented, the protests have been compared to the Red Power, or pan-Indian, movement of the nineteen-seventies. During that period, Native activism shifted toward direct action and managed to attract widespread attention, making their demands heard on a massive scale. Red Power emerged from a long tradition of Native resistance to federal government policies that goes back to the first contact between Indigenous peoples and colonizers. Although the Constitution attributed a certain degree of sovereignty to the Native nations, these rights had little significance in practice and came to be restricted only further over time. During the nineteen-fifties and sixties, Native resistance was directed mostly at the termination policy of the Eisenhower administration, which had attempted to dissolve tribes. Gradually, new groups were formed to address these and other issues, but people felt they could not do so merely by formal means, as for example the National Congress of American Indians had been doing.

Instead, new activists moved Native opposition in the direction of a more radical form of protest, including the founding of national organizations such as the American Indian Movement (AIM), which was founded in 1968.

Under the influence of this emerging Red Power movement, Indigenous people across the United States frequently used direct action to express their grievances and to pressure federal and local governments into taking action in support of their communities. Three events that occurred over the following decade stand out in particular. One of the key moments in the Red Power movement, which is also considered its inception, is the occupation of Alcatraz Island in the San Francisco Bay from 1969 to 1971. It was particularly significant because despite the fact that it originated locally, AIM members visited the island during the occupation and were inspired to transform their movement into a national organization with more confrontational tactics. A second major event, organized by a coalition of eight Native protest organizations, was the Trail of Broken Treaties, organized in 1972. It involved a caravan of vehicles, with activists heading to Washington D.C. to express their grievances at the headquarters of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) by presenting the federal government with a twenty-point manifesto. It resulted in the takeover of the headquarters for several days, making it one of several takeovers of federal facilities that occurred during this period. Shortly after that, in 1973, local activists supported by AIM came into confrontation with federal forces and the tribal government at Wounded Knee. This was a small town on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota best known for the massacre that occurred there in 1890, making it a site of great historical and symbolical significance. Another defining moment was the Longest Walk, which took place in 1978, in the wake of the Red Power era. It involved a march across the United States from Alcatraz to Washington D.C. and marked the start of a somewhat less radical period.

As Red Power lost momentum and AIM began to disintegrate over growing internal disagreements, Native protest seemed to disappear from the national stage again, at least for several decades. In reality, however, actions never stopped completely, certainly not locally, and progress continued to be made, although incidents were of a slightly lower profile given the lack of central organization that had characterized the Red Power period. There was also an increased focus on Indigenous issues beyond the United States, as an international movement emerged that did important work at the United Nations. Although AIM was never formally dissolved, its influence has faded, suggesting that there was room for a new movement to emerge. This is where Standing Rock comes in, because Indigenous protests have only recently received widespread attention again, first with the fight against the Keystone XL Pipeline on

the nearby Cheyenne River reservation, and then with the conflict at Standing Rock. What makes Standing Rock particularly interesting is that even though protesters failed to achieve their core objective of halting construction of the pipeline, they succeeded in a very different sense, helping to raise awareness and moving beyond one issue in one place. A good indication that Standing Rock could be the start of something larger is the Native Nations March, which was held in Washington on March 10 of 2017. The goal of this march was not only to address the Standing Rock controversy, but also to draw attention to the status of Indigenous people in contemporary United States society.

There is a diverse body of academic literature on the history of Native resistance against government policies and the Red Power period specifically. This includes Smith & Warrior's landmark study of the Red Power movement (1996), as well as research on more specific topics such as the use of rhetoric (Sanchez and Stuckey 2000), the importance of land seizures (Wetzel 2009), the role of the media (Baylor 1996), and the larger historical context (Cobb 2015). Various scholars have also written about these specific incidents, for example the occupation of Alcatraz, such as Johnson (1994), Wetzel (2012), and Kelly (2014), or the siege of Wounded Knee, including Lindsley, Braithwaite and Ahlberg (2002) and D'Arcus (2003). Taken together, these accounts provide a fairly detailed depiction of Native protest as it emerged in the form of Red Power in the nineteen-seventies, which makes a comparison between the major incidents of that time and the contemporary protests at Standing Rock possible. That is why the following central question will guide this analysis: to what extent have the recent protests at Standing Rock built on the accomplishments of the Red Power movement in terms of goals, strategies, and the construction of Native identity?

To answer this question, the first chapter will deal with the various goals set out by the respective movements, which can be divided into three main categories. The first involves the concrete, immediate demands that were expressed directly and are often the main reason why an incident occurs in the first place. These demands relate to larger political problems, for which Native activists also hope to achieve certain goals. Two particularly important issues here are tribal sovereignty and treaty rights, related to the position of Native tribes within the American political system. These two issues were very much at the heart of the major incidents that occurred during the Red Power era and have continued to be important at Standing Rock. In addition, demands have also been made by both movements with respect to civil rights, living conditions and representation, which belong to the third category, relating to more structural problems. The second chapter will focus on the way both movements have set out to achieve these goals, examining the strategies adopted by the key actors in the major incidents of both

eras. For the most part, these have been characterized by techniques involving direct action, but there have been certain important developments, especially in the way that the tactic of land seizure has been used. Rhetoric has also continued to play a crucial role in presenting their demands and attracting support for their cause. One other important element is the role of the media and the tension between attempts to get publicity and the actual coverage that activists get. Whereas groups during the Red Power era very much had to rely on the mainstream media, protesters at Standing Rock have been able to spread their message through social media. Finally, chapter three will focus on the way that activists have addressed Native audiences and how they have constructed and used traditional Native identity and cultural practices in their protests. These elements have been integral to their strategies as well as their demands, both within a tribal context and nationally. It is also important to consider the impact these constructions of identity may have had, in terms of culture as well as politics.

## **Chapter One – Goals and demands**

When comparing Native protest movements during the nineteen-seventies and more recently, the first questions that are important to consider is why activism emerged in the first place, what demands were made, and what other goals protesters might have been fighting for. Although the Red Power movement was a heterogeneous coalition of Native groups and actors that fought for a range of goals, the main groups involved generally reached a consensus on what demands to present. These were laid out in documents such as the proclamation and manifesto released during the Alcatraz occupation, or the Twenty-Point Manifesto that was the basis of the Trail of Broken Treaties. Although it is important to keep internal divisions in mind, the primary concern here is how activists presented themselves and what they demanded as a group. Furthermore, Indigenous communities across the United States face similar issues; conditions on the Standing Rock reservation are not unique and go back into history well beyond the Red Power era. As a result, there tends to be a discrepancy between the stated demands and the more long-term goals implied in these actions, which makes it important to distinguish between the various types of demands that have been made by Native protesters and different categories of goals.

The first category is that of practical, short-term goals, usually stated in demands that are shared directly with the public, or at least through news outlets. These demands also tend to reflect the main cause for an incident, and as such they are specific to those events and, not surprisingly, very different from one another. In the second category there are more long-term goals, which are usually focused on federal government policies and tend to be more universal in nature. Although these goals manifest themselves differently in different locations, in most cases they are the kinds of issues that affect not just one specific community, but the Indigenous population as a whole, such as treaty rights and tribal sovereignty. The third category of demands, and also the most abstract, is more cultural in nature. These demands concern the position of Natives in mainstream American society and the way they are perceived by people from other backgrounds. Not only are they denied certain political rights, they have been misrepresented, for example through stereotypes, and erased from historical narratives. It is therefore distinct from the second level in that these issues are not merely a matter of policy decisions, but are more systemic and really involve American society as a whole. Awareness of these issues can in turn help solve widespread problems in Native communities, such as poverty, homelessness, and alcoholism.

**Immediate demands**

This first category is concerned primarily with the demands that protesters made which involve concrete changes, usually in the short term. These are fairly obvious, as in most cases they are expressed in a statement of intent. The Trail of Broken Treaties is something of an exception here because it did not focus as much on one specific site but was inherently national. As a result, there was a considerable amount of overlap between the categories, as most of their immediate goals involved presenting long-term plans to the federal government in Washington D.C. at the BIA headquarters. For the other incidents, however, the distinction is clearer, albeit not entirely uncomplicated. In the case of Alcatraz, the Indians of All Tribes issued a proclamation and a manifesto, in which they gave a comprehensive overview of what they hoped to achieve by means of their occupation. The activists asked for the rights to the island, where they were hoping to start a university, a cultural center, and a museum (Johnson 69), as well as funding from the government to achieve these. Additionally, they wanted “centers for Native studies, education, ecology, and job training” (Kelly 176), all of which were concrete demands that involved a change in the short term, solely affecting Alcatraz in first instance. Similar patterns are visible in the events at Wounded Knee in 1973. These came out of a conflict between various factions on the Pine Ridge reservation, and the main goal of local activists was to remove the current tribal government from office. Although AIM eventually got involved, they did so at the request of local activists and supported their cause. More recently, at Standing Rock, protests occurred mainly because the Dakota Access Pipeline presented an immediate threat to residents of the reservation and nearby areas. The water protectors’ main demand was therefore a halt to construction, and they hoped to make sure that companies abide by the law, because federal regulations about construction had been ignored here, especially in terms of environmental impact and protection of sacred land. The most important aspect to note about the demands made during these three events is that they are vastly different, which is not surprising because they all originated locally. On top of that, there is little debate about the precise nature of these demands, as they were expressed in clear terms and involved concrete changes. What is more interesting, therefore, is the purpose that these demands served, and the extent to which they were achieved.

The notion of success in relation to these events has been a highly debated one; in most cases the short-term goals were not achieved, but nevertheless other significant victories were won. Through careful analysis, scholars have found other ways in which activists participating in these actions achieved major victories. For Alcatraz, Johnson concludes that the occupation should not be judged by its obvious failures in the short term. After all, it contributed to the end

of termination of Native tribes and helped make self-determination the policy of the federal government (75) –significant changes that would most likely not have occurred otherwise, or not as rapidly. Furthermore, the activists succeeded in spreading Indigenous ways of looking at the world and managed to build a movement (Kelly 183), successfully reaching various audiences and spreading their message. Lindsley, Braithwaite and Ahlberg make a similar argument about Wounded Knee, emphasizing that although the direct demands were not met, with tribal chairman Wilson even being re-elected a year later and remaining in office until 1976, they did succeed, if only because they made the world hear their side to the story. The reasons why their immediate demands were not achieved, then, is not necessarily because those demands were unrealistic. Rather, these immediate demands were a means to an end in helping them achieve other victories. This is especially true for Alcatraz, where the Indians of All Tribes claimed rights to the island as Indigenous people rather than as members of a tribal community with specific historical ties to that land, the way for example the Sioux at Standing Rock did. Even at Wounded Knee the power struggle on the reservation soon became a way of dramatizing their problems and attracting attention.

Although this is to some extent true for Standing Rock, their immediate demands were less of a means to an end, as stopping construction remained the main priority for most water protectors. Nevertheless, a similar reanalysis of their achievements is possible because they too ultimately failed to achieve their immediate demands, but were nevertheless successful in other important ways. In spite of the fact that construction of the pipeline was continued in early 2017, Standing Rock had managed to create a renewed sense of community, both within the Sioux tribe and among Natives more generally. Furthermore, the movement managed to raise awareness to their problems, and attracted a considerable number of outside supporters, especially environmentalists. For all of these reasons, the Standing Rock movement should in fact be considered a success. Even though those achievements might be more abstract, these developments are all the more important because they could have a lasting impact. As different as the immediate demands may be, the observation still holds true that long-term goals do not always overlap with the immediate demands and sometimes prevent activists from achieving those altogether (Sanchez and Stuckey 131) for contemporary Indigenous protests. Taking this into account, it is good to turn to the other categories of demands and see what patterns emerge.

### **Policy goals**

In most cases, the demands voiced by protesters deal with short-term changes, but oftentimes these demands reflect problems with larger policies and attitudes by the government that can

only realistically be resolved in the long term. There are many such issues, but perhaps the most controversial one is tribal sovereignty and the precise relationship between Native tribes and the United States federal government. Directly related to this are questions concerning the validity of treaties that tribes made with the federal government prior to 1871, the year treaty-making was suspended. Properly solving these matters would require a thorough revision of the American political system. Although these issues are at the core of many incidents of Indigenous protest, they are therefore not always made explicit in the demands. Consequently, they may seem to be of secondary importance, even if this is not actually the case. Apart from specific local issues that are somewhat less drastic and thus easier to realize, protesters also tend to focus on issues that are more specific and thus easier to identify with. The treaty argument has played a particularly prominent role in the legal battles, including the ongoing one against the Dakota Access Pipeline.

The Trail of Broken Treaties is an important exception here, as goals that were only implied in other incidents were front and center in the Twenty-Point Manifesto. In this document, Native activists expressed their demands, asking the government to acknowledge the sovereignty of Native tribes, restore treaties, and to allow Indigenous people to have a say in decisions that affect them (Sanchez and Stuckey 123), raising concerns that are relevant to Native communities across the United States. Seven points dealt specifically with restoring “the authority to make treaties with Indian communities” (Deloria xi-xii), asking for example for a return to treaty-making, the creation of a treaty commission (Deloria 48), and above all a redefinition of the status of Indigenous people in American politics (Deloria 50). This way, activists drew attention to historic and present failures by the federal government with respect to Native political rights. The rest of the Twenty Points concerned, among other things, issues related to tribal sovereignty and Native citizenship, the dissolution of the BIA, and religious freedom. Where other events dealt mostly with symptoms of disastrous federal policies, the activists involved in 1972 got to the root of the problem. They asked for a fundamental change in the status of Indigenous tribes (Sanchez and Stuckey 127), according to the principles established in the Constitution and the agreements made in various historical treaties. Ultimately, they asked for greater “self-determination and non-interference from Washington” (Sanchez and Stuckey 127), something that would require a fundamental shift in government policy. The same is true for the Longest Walk; a similar march across the United States, which was also organized to present pan-tribal demands to the federal government.

For the other major incidents that occurred during the Red Power era, goals concerning tribal sovereignty and treaty rights are clearly important, even if they were not made explicit by

protesters. The Indians of All Tribes at Alcatraz, for example, laid claim to the island on the basis of certain provisions regarding land ownership and also referred back to historical treaties in their use of rhetoric. Doing so, they hoped to “re-equilibrate power inequalities between Native Americans and the state” (Wetzel 166), which would have more impact than the relatively simple plans they had for the island. Much the same way, the conflict at Wounded Knee was about more than individuals or groups on the Pine Ridge reservation. At the core of the conflict were policies related to sovereignty, most importantly the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which established tribal governments installed by the federal government. Treaty rights also were expressed in their demand for control over the Black Hills, a sacred site on land that had been taken from them. Although the direct conflict at the heart of the confrontation is very different at Standing Rock, in a larger sense these incidents are certainly comparable. At Standing Rock, too, the conflict revolved around Sioux territory outside the Standing Rock reservation. Contrary to what has been suggested by the federal government, these lands were never ceded and “the pipeline is being constructed across lands recognized by the U.S. as Sioux territory in the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty” (Ostler and Estes), suggesting that conflicting interpretations of treaties are at play here as well. Furthermore, activists have also expressed a wish to “unleash a global intersectional resistance to fossil fuels and fascism” (Sacred Stone website, “Take Action”), demonstrating their hopes to make Standing Rock the starting point of something politically larger.

What is important to keep in mind is that these demands are complicated by the fact that the activists themselves did not have any legal relationship with the federal government (Deloria 40), especially in the case of Alcatraz and to some extent for the Trail of Broken Treaties as well. The tribes they came from and in some cases represented did have such relations, but as a pan-tribal movement claiming to speak for the entire Native community, activists did not have any direct negotiating power of their own. This was particularly problematic because tribal governments at the time generally sided with the federal government and disagreed especially with the fact that Red Power activists were hoping to generate change through direct action (Deloria 40). This has changed slightly since then, because it was not just local Sioux governments that supported the Standing Rock protests; Indigenous tribes from across North America backed their effort and could therefore strengthen their claims for restoring treaty rights. One other aspect that is important to point out is that demands involving recognition and revival of treaties were fairly innovative (Barrie 230), suggesting that the Red Power era set a major precedent that protesters at Standing Rock have continued to build on. Another, more recent development is the international recognition of the fight for sovereignty

and treaty-making (Barrie 231), as a growing international Indigenous movement developed in the wake of the Red Power era. As a result of this these same issues have come to be framed slightly differently in contemporary protest, with protesters at Standing Rock relying more on United Nations doctrines such as the 2007 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the outcome of years of negotiating and lobbying by Indigenous groups. David Archambault II, Chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux, even appealed directly to the United Nations, asking them for help on the basis of this declaration and pointing out the human rights violations that had occurred.

### **Structural goals**

In demanding greater political rights and raising awareness of the issues they faced, Natives not only directed themselves at local actors or the federal government; they also hoped to reach the general American public. Even after centuries of cultural and physical genocide, Indigenous people continue to be marginalized today. This is in part due to the fact that many Americans lack a basic understanding of their present situation, as well as their past. At the same time, that lack of understanding keeps these colonial systems of thought in place. That is why one of the most important goals that activists have been fighting for is to bridge this knowledge gap and to educate the public. What is particularly problematic about this is that education is not just something activists can work toward through their protests, as they need to do some of this educational work beforehand in order to establish credibility with their audiences. Stereotypes and the notion that Native peoples constitute “a vanishing race” play a role in this, but even the basic facts of history as generally taught in school are often inaccurate and biased. Given the history of colonialism and the way this has shaped narratives involving the Indigenous population, these protests have been about “asking that their audience rewrite their own history from an alternative point of view” (Sanchez and Stuckey 128), in which the educational function and the attempts to do something about ignorance of the Native situation are essential. Not surprisingly, this fight against ignorance has been a recurring theme throughout recent Native activism. Alcatraz was not just a political fight, it was also “directed at constructing new visions of community empowerment” (Kelly 184), making it a turning point in the way Indigenous activists engaged with non-Native audiences. At Wounded Knee, activists tried to “constitute a new sort of American audience” (Sanchez and Stuckey 125-126), which also helped them justify their demands. The main problems they faced were related to “multilayered structural inequalities between Euro-Americans and Native Americans” (Lindsley, Braithwaite and Ahlberg 1) as well as intercultural barriers, highlighting the divide between Native and

white audiences. These facts have continued to play a role at Standing Rock, but in a slightly different manner.

What is interesting to see here is that these issues were already typified as “colonialism” by AIM chairman John Trudell in 1972 (in Sanchez and Stuckey 128), which echoes the present-day rhetoric against “settler colonialism.” This more recent theory frames settler colonialism as “a persistent societal structure” (Rowe and Tuck 4), offering a more comprehensive and nuanced view on the issue. Most importantly, it acknowledges the fact that settler colonialism is a specific type of colonialism that is focused on the removal of Indigenous populations, obtaining the land and replacing the Indigenous people with outside labor forces. That is also why settler colonialism helps to put some of the other demands in perspective, as it draws attention to the fact that issues of sovereignty and treaty rights are part of a more systemic problem by which the white settler population has continuously attempted to erase the Indigenous population from existence. What is crucial is the permanent nature of settler colonialism (Snelgrove, Dhamoon and Jeff Corntassel 14), as it did not disappear with the end of the colonial era or the abolition of slavery, but has continued to be a major element of United States society. Although it started mostly as an academic theory, activists have picked it up and used it in their discourse to engage with wider structural problems.

The task of educating audiences may seem like a fairly abstract goal that is hard to achieve given the inherent problems with for example the American education system, but settler colonialism helps to identify these problematic patterns. Furthermore, raising awareness of these problems is an important first step by itself, because increased awareness of the situation Natives find themselves in can have concrete consequences. To some extent, this ignorance on the part of the American public has prevented proper treatment of certain structural issues and problems, especially among Native communities on reservations. On the Standing Rock reservation for example, around 63% of the roughly 10,859 inhabitants are unemployed. Diabetes, obesity and natural resource management are all major problems faced by the community there (Hendrickson, Black Elk and Faller 1). Furthermore, there is “a lack of housing and economic development, excessive substance abuse and physical abuse, high rates of dropouts and suicides, poor education and poor healthcare” (Levin “Standing Rock Chairman Looks to History”). This also helps to explain the involvement of younger reservation members, who used the pipeline as an opportunity to address these issues (Elbein). Just how important this is, is also evident from Luft’s discussion of increased sovereignty in the context of disaster management. Although significant progress has been made in terms of increased self-governance, “the broader conditions of extreme poverty and lack of infrastructure make

substantive self-determination, at least for some tribes, nearly impossible” (Luft 804), which highlights the fact that some of the changes that have been achieved so far are limited in their impact by wider structural conditions that have not been addressed. That is why he argues for further decolonization (817), a process that would be very much about the systemic, cultural problems addressed time and again by protesters, which is especially pertinent in light of discussions about tribal sovereignty.

All in all, looking at the demands made by Native activists, there are considerable similarities between the goals protesters set out to achieve in the various incidents during the Red Power era and those put forward by the Standing Rock activists. This is for a large part due to the fact that even though the immediate goals are usually dependent on local factors, they represent broader, more long-term issues that activists implicitly hope to deal with as well, the Trail of Broken Treaties being something of an exception. Going from one category to the next, there is considerable variation in terms of immediate demands, but the more long-term, policy-related goals underlying them, which concern tribal sovereignty and treaty rights, are very much the same. Although significant progress has been made, especially with the policy of increased self-determination introduced under the Nixon administration, the status of tribes and the precise validity of treaties remain ambiguous. Finally, raising awareness of the Native situation has continued to be an issue, as even today the general American public is largely unaware of the fact that much of the history they know is biased and overlooks many of the complexities of Native traditions and cultures, historically as well as in contemporary times. The main change here is one in terms of form rather than content; even though activists express their message differently, they are still trying to achieve the same systemic changes. Having discussed the various types of demands, I will now turn to the ways in which these were presented by means of carefully chosen tactics.

## **Chapter Two – Strategies and tactics**

The next element of Native protest that is important to consider is how activists during the Red Power era and today at Standing Rock have tried to achieve their goals. That is why the focus in this chapter will be on the major tactics and strategies that protesters employed to bring their demands across to various audiences, especially non-Native. This is particularly important given the innovative nature of the tactics used by Red Power activists, which drastically changed Native protest. Prior to 1969, resistance had been much more formal and mostly happened through organizations such as the National Congress of American Indians. Although there had been an increase in activism since the late nineteen-fifties, the main strategy employed by those trying to incite change was to petition the government through the official channels, or to fight certain policies in court. Although some tribes were initially opposed to the idea of protest (Deloria 26), they also came to realize that it allowed them “to play off the government against the expanding activist organization” (28), characterizing the dynamic that developed as the two types of strategies gradually came to exist alongside each other. Overall, however, Red Power activists introduced a radically new strand to Native activism, mostly through non-violent direct action. Hence the focus will be on these tactics rather than the legal battles that were happening concurrently.

The first type of tactic that is interesting to consider is the use of rhetoric, looking at the way activists chose to express their goals in documents like the proclamation that was issued by the Indians of All Tribes during the occupation of Alcatraz, the Twenty-Point Manifesto, as well as communications by the water protectors at Standing Rock. Another shared characteristic of these protests is that they tended to rely on non-violent direct action tactics, in which land seizures in particular have played an important role. Not surprisingly, similar strategies revolving around space were also used at Standing Rock, where the main part of the protest was a camp that blocked pipeline construction on lands they were hoping to protect. The final point that will be discussed is the dynamic between these strategies and the media, as Red Power activists were known for their use of sensational tactics to attract publicity. This allowed them to spread their demands to a wider audience, something that is likely to have become less important with the rise of alternative outlets, especially social media.

### **Rhetorical strategies**

One particularly important strategy, especially during the early Red Power period, was for activists to use rhetorical devices to present their demands in compelling ways. The proclamation that was released by the Indians of All Tribes during the occupation of Alcatraz

is an excellent example of this particularly type of strategy, as investigated by Kelly (2014), who looks specifically at the use of *détournement*. This is a strategy that subverts expectations to expose flaws in government policy and draw attention to the protesters' demands (170), mostly through misappropriation, twisting the government's language in humorous ways. For example, they offered to pay "twenty-four dollars (\$24) in glass beads and red cloth" (Indians of All Tribes Proclamation) for the rights to the island, emphasizing that that is more than was paid for the island of Manhattan. Another example is the proposed creation of a "Bureau of Caucasian Affairs" (Indians of All Tribes Proclamation), expressing their discontent with the BIA. These kinds of remarks fit a larger process of decolonization that critically examines the language used by the federal government and turns around language to demonstrate how it has been used "to dispossess, assimilate, or exterminate American Indians" (Kelly 169), thus undermining this colonial rhetoric and using it against the government. The Alcatraz proclamation contains various examples of this, but what is most interesting is the way it deconstructs and parodies several foundational texts, most importantly the American Constitution, the Doctrine of Discovery, and treaties made with tribal nations. Each of these documents contained language that expressed negative attitudes toward Indigenous peoples and was used to justify stealing their lands. That is why exposing these mechanisms in the texts helped activists to strengthen their claims for sovereignty and create a new group identity (Kelly 176), allowing them to address immediate goals while simultaneously working toward more long-term objectives. This way, activists could bring colonization "into the immediate present rather than obscuring it in the distant past" (Sanchez and Stuckey 129) by connecting past policies with present realities. Although white audiences were confronted with a radically different point of view, irony was not used to upset them, but rather to disarm them and make them feel a similar sense of loss, hoping to make audiences empathize with the Native cause. The approach to white culture is a good example of this, as the activists promise to "further guide the inhabitants in the proper way of living" (Indians of All Tribes Proclamation) and provide education to civilize them. These kinds of comments are supposed to make non-Natives reflect on notions of savagery and civilization, as it makes explicit what the federal government did to Indigenous people, for example through boarding schools. It is demeaning to white people, but to get angry at such statements would ultimately reflect back on their own actions.

While Native activists have continued to use these types of techniques, as humor remains important, the main focus has been on more concrete language rather than elaborate rhetorical constructions. Still, there were other ways in which Natives used language effectively to help bring across their demands. Looking at a document like the Twenty-Point Manifesto,

the purpose is different, with language that is more straightforward and clearly a statement directed at the federal government. Activists here made a deliberate choice to ensure that their audiences would focus on what they were saying rather than how they were saying it. Hence, the argumentation was more important, ensuring that non-Native audiences would take their demands seriously (Sanchez and Stuckey 127) and act upon them; causing change rather than merely attracting attention. Another way that straightforward language has been used is through excessive demands; by asking for more than could realistically be expected (Lindsley, Braithwaite and Ahlberg 2), something that gradually became more important to Native protest, especially during the siege of Wounded Knee. What is crucial here is that although these demands might appear excessive to a white audience, they were in fact very reasonable from a Native perspective. Explicit demands for increased tribal sovereignty are a good example of this, and it also helps to understand the actions of the activists at Wounded Knee. As the conflict wore on, activists were reluctant to give in because of the government response to the Trail of Broken Treaties a year earlier, and a group of Oglala Sioux eventually decided to declare their independence from the United States as a way to put force behind their demands. This was in many ways a rhetorical tactic, using language that asserted their sovereignty on the basis of an 1868 treaty (Deloria 78), but in straightforward language, in a clear attempt to be taken seriously as political actors. Even if such demands for recognition were in some ways excessive, their language expressed the intent to establish a functioning government-to-government relationship, while also highlighting the spiritual nature of their political existence. A final example of rhetoric during the Red Power era is the very name of protest events like the Trail of Broken Treaties and the Longest Walk. These were intended to invoke historical events such as the Trail of Tears and the Long Walk, both of which involved forced removals of Indigenous peoples. This way, implicit comments were made about sovereignty and the lasting effects of such policies on Native lives today.

When considering the rhetoric used by activists at Standing Rock, there is a similarly straightforward phrasing of demands, relying on language taken directly from the treaties on which they base their demands. For example, activists have cited Article 16 of the 1868 Treaty, which states that “lands north of the permanent reservation were designated as ‘unceded Indian territory’” (Ostler and Estes). Still, although issues of tribal sovereignty and treaty rights were at the heart of the issue, these mainly played out in court (Treuer). The water protectors instead focused on the immediate environmental threat, which they described using two main types of language. On the one hand, they used rhetoric that refers to Indigenous traditions and symbolism, most importantly the Black Snake as a metaphor for the pipeline, which also linked

their fight to protests elsewhere, especially those against the Keystone XL pipeline (Elbein). Another example is the rhetoric that expressed belief in a holistic worldview, tying back to traditional Native beliefs, which helped them connect to other Native tribes, but also to the fight for clean energy more generally. On the other hand, the water protectors also presented their demands in a way that illustrated to non-Natives how they are affected by such policies (Treuer), which created sympathy among local farmers who rely on the Missouri River for drinking water and irrigation (Archambault, "Taking a Stand"), and attracted environmentalists more generally. Here, activists managed to frame their demands in a manner that appealed to non-Native audiences, highlighted also by the fact that their camps relied mostly on renewable sources of energy for everyday purposes. Similarly, their fight was linked to larger issues of social justice, which led to support from groups like Black Lives Matter (*Black Lives Matter*, Solidarity with Standing Rock), a remarkable shift in the dynamics between minority groups in comparison to the Red Power era. As Laurel's article suggests, other minority groups, such as Asian Americans, also took notice of the protests, and even if their support or involvement was not as sizeable as that of other ethnic groups, it is an important indication of solidarity among minorities. Although there could be explanations other than rhetoric, this unprecedented amount of outside support is undeniable. The combination of fundamentally Native rhetoric and more general rhetoric therefore allowed Standing Rock to grow beyond any of the major Red Power incidents in terms of support.

### **Land seizures and other spatial strategies**

Although the way activists express their demands rhetorically continues to be important, these demands have always been accompanied by some form of physical protest, typically non-violent direct action. Although these direct action tactics have taken various forms over the years, including protests and marches, the most important and uniquely Native type of activism has been the use of land seizure. This is a strategy that encompasses a range of tactics, including "occupations, sit-ins, takeovers, and blockades of buildings, bridges, or parcels of land" (Wetzel "Theorizing Native American Land Seizure" 19). How it is carried out exactly tends to vary from incident to incident, but it is interesting to see why it is chosen and what it signifies, given the symbolism involved. Although fairly simple to organize, these kinds of operations attract attention and can lead people to reconsider their views on American history, directing attention at the taking of land from the Indigenous peoples. It also helped Natives establish themselves as a powerful voice in American society and American politics (Wetzel "Theorizing Native American Land Seizure" 30), reorganizing power relations and helping them achieve some of

their more long-term goals. More concretely, occupations were also a way for activists to put pressure on the government, as well as a way to make territorial disputes visible through barriers (D’Arcus 432), giving their claims of sovereignty a physical dimension. Before 1969, during what Wetzel calls the recuperative phase, land seizures were quite rare and generally carried out by individual tribes to achieve reservation-specific goals (“Theorizing Native American Land Seizure” 21), which changed dramatically with the occupation of Alcatraz. This marked the start of the “expropriative phase” (Wetzel “Theorizing Native American Land Seizure” 23), which lasted until roughly 1975, characterized by increased activism, with as many as forty-six seizures over the course of six years, mostly carried out by pan-tribal coalitions. The type of land occupied was also different, focusing on “off-reservation ‘surplus’ federal lands” (Wetzel “Theorizing Native American Land Seizure” 23) that were not as important to the actual demands. As a result, activists’ claims often did not directly concern the land occupied, using it instead to emphasize the larger problems that Natives have faced historically. At Alcatraz for example, the island “represented a rejection of colonialism, an assertion of Indian rights, and a desire to protect Native lands” (Wetzel “Theorizing Native American Land Seizure” 24), effectively helping activists to achieve goals of a more long-term nature. Although Wounded Knee is slightly more complex, Sioux activists there also did more than merely occupying the land. By erecting bunkers and roadblocks with old cars to demarcate the boundaries of the occupied land (D’Arcus 421), they put force behind their otherwise mostly rhetorical declaration of independence.

The final phase that Wetzel examines came after the height of the Red Power era, from 1975 until 2000, which he calls the “demonstrative phase,” characterized by a decrease in activism, with more focus on reservations (“Theorizing Native American Land Seizure” 25) and the use of occupied land for leverage in larger conflicts. This last fact is particularly important because the activists at Standing Rock built their main camp on tribal land off the reservation not just because they wanted that land, but mainly to stop construction in that specific site. Another similarity between demonstrative phase activism and Standing Rock is that a construction site was occupied (Wetzel “Theorizing Native American Land Seizure” 28), helping activists to strengthen their position in negotiations. Although Standing Rock clearly bears most resemblance to this latter phase of activism, it does not fit entirely for two main reasons. First of all, activists occupied the land not just as a negotiating tactic, but also because they wanted to protect the land from construction for environmental reasons and because that land was sacred to them, as the site of ancestral burial grounds. Second, the Standing Rock activists essentially took the strategy of occupying land a step further, using the land they

occupied to set up so-called 'spiritual camps' (Wong), which had the important additional function of community building, helping to form a multi-ethnic community. What makes this development particularly interesting is that Native activists across the United States have copied this strategy, setting up similar prayer camps (Richardson). Although it is difficult to determine whether this marks an entirely new phase, land seizures have clearly continued to be a core element of Native protest.

Not surprisingly, dynamics of space have factored into Native protests in ways other than land occupations as well, most importantly through events involving movement between symbolically significant locations. These tend to be journeys across the United States that allow activists to increase the scale of their actions, highlight certain locations, and above all, to connect communities and gather support. The Trail of Broken Treaties, with a caravan of vehicles from Alcatraz to Washington D.C., is a classic example of this, as activists were essentially building up tension along the way and attracting publicity before actually presenting their demands (Deloria 47). It has also been used by activists at Standing Rock, who organized "a 500-mile relay run from the Sacred Stone Camp to Omaha to deliver a letter to the Army Corps of Engineers" (Elbein), not only presenting a letter to their opponents, but using it to gain publicity at the same time. More importantly, they planned their route so that they passed several other Sioux reservations along the way, which was important to increase the scope of their activism beyond the Standing Rock reservation and get other local tribes involved. Another important aspect to this is the fact that the locations included in these events are not always major population centers, but tend to be places that have purely symbolic significance, chosen and linked to connect past and present in a highly visible manner. These are usually sites that have historical significance, such as Alcatraz, which was the starting point in the Longest Walk, or the various Sioux reservations that activists ran to as part of the Standing Rock protests.

### **Media**

Another major aspect of strategy is why particular tactics were chosen, especially because many of the incidents during the Red Power era involved a certain degree of staged drama. This was not only done to put pressure on the federal government, but also to generate interest and help activists attract the attention of major news outlets to help spread their demands. The occupations at Alcatraz and Wounded Knee in particular are known for the ways in which activists dramatized their demands. Wetzel describes the tactics used at Alcatraz as "evocative performances" ("Envisioning Land Seizure" 152), specifically aimed at drawing attention to

Native demands and goals. Likewise, Wounded Knee has been described as “a relatively new kind of political spectacle” (D’Arcus 419), in part because of the dramatic nature of the siege. One of the main benefits of this strategy was that it helped activists spread their message to a wider audience, helping them move toward achieving goals in all categories, as it was no longer just the federal government that heard about their actions. Additionally, “new media technologies allowed for dramas like Wounded Knee to be played in spaces previously quite marginal” (D’Arcus 433), making it less relevant that some of these incidents occurred in fairly isolated areas (Baylor 250), which has continued to be important at Standing Rock, although in a slightly different sense.

Overall, however, strategies aimed at mainstream media were mostly unsuccessful (Baylor 248) because the media only focused on certain aspects and ignored much of what the activists’ were actually trying to do. There are various reasons for this, most importantly the fact that mainstream news coverage represents those in power, who tend to be of a white middle-class background (Loew and Mella 2), focusing on aspects that appeal to their target audiences but ignoring the issues that Natives actually hope to address. At Alcatraz for example (Wetzel “Envisioning Land Seizure” 163), the events were placed in a larger context that had little to do with Native concerns. Because of this, activists were forced to choose between being ignored and being heard for the wrong reasons (Sanchez and Stuckey 131). Looking specifically at television news in the period from 1968 to 1979, Baylor finds that although activists managed to get the media’s attention, frames were used in such a way that they gained little from it. What is particularly striking is that the frames concerned most with the activists’ actual demands were used least, and in conjunction with other, more negative frames (Baylor 245), highlighting their militancy rather than the issue of treaty rights for example. Just how difficult it was to get positive press coverage is also evident from the fact that Native activists at Alcatraz were portrayed as weak and lazy (Wetzel “Envisioning Land Seizure” 160), relying on different stereotypes but with equally harmful effects. Additionally, media often chose to cover violence committed by activists (Baylor 249) while ignoring what the authorities were doing. The Trail of Broken Treaties is an excellent example, where the takeover of the BIA Headquarters eventually became the sole focus. In other cases, the government even interfered directly, as was the case at Wounded Knee, where the BIA used the fact that Native activists relied on mainstream media to their advantage (D’Arcus 426) by restricting media access and controlling who could and could not enter the area. Despite protesters’ best efforts, these strategies therefore had mixed results because of systemic problems with mainstream media.

One way in which Native activists initially came to circumvent these issues was through Native newspapers. These grew to prominence in the context of economic improvements and increased tribal sovereignty (Loew and Mella 1-2), which came about in the wake of the Red Power era. By establishing their own media outlets, Natives adapted their strategies in a way that worked toward increasing their sovereignty, but also reduced the problems posed by mainstream media. This was particularly important because Native journalists reflected sentiments felt widely within the Native community (Loew and Mella 17) and that had great resonance among Native communities. Although local and tribal newspapers, like those investigated by Loew and Mella, played an important role in community building, the rise of a national movement really changed the media landscape. The Native American Journalists Association was founded in 1983 and national magazines arose around the same time, like the Indian Country Today Media Network, which was established in 1981. The latter institution in particular has continued to be an important source of news for the Native community, now with a website and Facebook page that provide news of issues that affect Natives, but also pays attention to the larger context and important historical events, which may appeal to non-Native audiences as well. The network also released a special issue about Standing Rock in the fall of 2016 with articles about various aspects of these protests from a Native perspective, demonstrating that such magazines can be a major platform for protest activism.

Aside from the emergence of strong Native journalism on a national rather than a local level, the most important development for activists has been the rise of social media. Although there have been some improvements in terms of mainstream media coverage, even at Standing Rock similar patterns emerge. Media have continued to neglect and misrepresent protests, describing them simply as a land dispute while ignoring the environmental side (Bell), or paying little attention to violence by the authorities. While this is something that requires closer examination, it makes sense to assume that activists were less inclined to rely on traditional mainstream media and provide a counter-narrative of their own by means of social media, for example through live videos or Tweets. This has been helpful not only to broadcast their demands, but also to show their side of events by revealing the often violent ways in which authorities responded. Most of the major confrontations between water protectors and the police were filmed by bystanders, and in some cases livestreamed, to let people see what was happening in real time. This way, social media has further diminished the problem of remoteness and access, because even when there are few or no media representatives to cover certain events, activists themselves now have tools available that allow them to show the world what was happening. Rights of free speech and privacy also prevent the government from

controlling information flows the way they could before. Still, the use of social media has its own limitations. For one, although authorities may not be able to control the information that is put out, they can control the transmission of internet signals, blocking activists' online access and thereby limiting their reach. Additionally, there is the danger of surveillance through social media by the FBI and other intelligence agencies, which is why activists have been careful about releasing information and imagery that could be used against them. Despite these new risks, the rise of social media has allowed activists to tackle some of the problems posed by relying on traditional media. It has also allowed the protests to live on after activism had mostly wrapped up at Standing Rock itself.

In conclusion, although Red Power activism was not new in all respects and built on what had been done throughout the nineteen-sixties and before, it revolutionized Native protest in ways that have had a significant impact on the recent protests at Standing Rock. In some major ways, Red Power activists were innovative, introducing and reinventing strategies that have continued to be used by Native protesters. In terms of rhetoric, the Red Power era established a serious and straightforward use of language to present their demands, with the playful techniques of *détournement* that were important at Alcatraz as something of an exception. Language has continued to play a crucial role at Standing Rock, both in terms of community building and to attract support from non-Natives, especially environmentalist and social justice activists. Similarly, the emphasis on non-violent direct action and the novel ways in which Red Power activists used land seizures are another important example, because Standing Rock was also based on an occupation, but it was used in a very different way. With the introduction of spiritual camps, land became an even more integral part of their strategy, and the emphasis really shifted toward community building and ritual.

In other instances, the Red Power movement did introduce new strategies, but ones that have to some degree become obsolete, as was the case with their spectacular events that were staged specifically to get the media's attention. Due to the fact that mainstream media often ignored the Native perspective, framed events in harmful ways, and were subject to government interference, this strategy has become less relevant over time. This is not surprising, given the development of alternatives, such as a strong Native journalism and the rise of social media as a communication tool. Social media also allowed activists at Standing Rock to spread their demands well beyond the Native community and even beyond the national borders of the United States, creating an international movement. This is one of the reasons why Standing Rock managed to raise such an unprecedented amount of outside support. All in all, the strategies

used at Standing Rock may therefore not always be a direct continuation, but activists today have clearly benefited from much of what was done during the Red Power era. Another good example of that, which is somewhat related to strategy, is the ways in which activists have constructed of Native identity, something that will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **Chapter Three – The construction of Native identity**

The goals and strategies discussed so far have mostly been those aimed at non-Native audiences. An important aspect that this still leaves to be addressed is how activists engaged with Native audiences, how they employed traditional cultural practices and rituals as part of their protests, and what influence this has had. Although there is some overlap with goals and strategies, the focus here will specifically be on the Native side to the protests and the impact activism has had on Native communities. In general, activism has redefined what Natives are in the modern United States and above all, what they can be. Furthermore, Native protest cannot be understood without a discussion of the influence of Native traditions, as these permeated every aspect of activism. The Red Power era very much introduced activism rooted in a pan-tribal sense of Native identity (Nagel and Snipp 211), as well as a focus on more tribally specific rituals. At Alcatraz, for example, calls were made for Natives across the United States to come together, and at Wounded Knee, sacred rituals played a major role. Developments that have occurred since the nineteen-seventies have also led to an increase in the use of ceremony, as it became easier for Natives to practice these rituals due to increased tolerance and new legislation. This is part of the reason why Standing Rock was characterized by an unprecedented emphasis on ceremonial practices, and was in many ways a uniquely Native protest, perhaps even more so than the incidents of the Red Power period.

This chapter will first provide an overview of the ways in which spirituality and traditional rituals have factored into constructing identity in modern Native activism, and how activists have expressed Native identity through their protest. Here, an important development is visible over the course of the Red Power era, from general references to Native beliefs, to a more specific use of rituals, a development that has continued and grown at Standing Rock. This overview will be followed by an analysis of the effects it has had, culturally as well as politically. On the one hand, this spiritual revival has led to a major cultural reawakening among Native communities, especially during protests, although some developments outside activism are also apparent. This has been very important to help participants begin a process of healing by reconnecting with their ancestors and breaking with a past of colonial oppression. On the other hand, these revitalization efforts have also had important political consequences in a Native context, as activists have increasingly organized communities in traditional ways. At Standing Rock, attempts were also made to revive the Great Sioux Nation, reunifying a long-divided political entity. This also gave Sioux activists something larger to identify with than their reservation status, or the specific band of Sioux to which they belong.

### **The application of Native culture**

Before discussing more specific examples of the way ritual has been used in contemporary Native protest, it is important to address how elements of Native identity have played a role in these protests. On the one hand, identity is expressed in a fairly universal, pan-tribal manner, addressing themes that Natives across tribes can relate to. On the other hand, rituals are used that are more specifically focused on specific tribes, something that was initially less common. In the former category there are elements integral to Native belief systems, such as land. The significance of occupations has already been mentioned, but not how much of that is rooted in Native worldviews, which are in many respects anathema to western views on land. The fact that land was taken from the Indigenous tribes by the federal government is all the more problematic because of the land's deep spiritual significance. Land is central to the natural world, referring to elements both physical and spiritual (Rowe and Tuck 5), an interconnectedness that makes performing tradition a way of spiritually taking back their land and their culture (Snelgrove, Dhamoon and Corntassel 5). This is particularly important because land plays a crucial role in constructions of Native identity, both for individuals and for communities (Wetzel "Theorizing Native American Land Seizure" 18), which adds an extra sense of urgency to their demands. Such views are widely shared within the Native community, regardless of tribal affiliation, and as such these have been a constant factor in Native protest. Not surprisingly, Red Power groups like AIM characterized themselves as spiritual movements (Sanchez and Stuckey 129), even if initially there was little ceremony to their protest. One of the main reasons for this was a certain stigma on ritual practice, in part due to oppressive policies passed during the eighteen-eighties that made it illegal to practice Native religious rituals. Nevertheless, the activists expressed their identity as Natives in other ways, mostly by emphasizing shared values.

Looking at the individual events, Alcatraz is an excellent example of this, as one of the earliest incidents of the Red Power era, and one where the focus was still very much on a general sense of Indigenousness. Although activists at Alcatraz did appeal to Native culture, they did so in more implicit ways and without much ceremony, choosing to highlight their "common history, particularly their subjection to colonial federal policies" (Wetzel "Theorizing Native American Land Seizure" 23) to overcome differences between tribes, rather than similarities in their cultures. In addition to their ironic proclamation, the Indians of All Tribes also released a manifesto, in which they called upon Indigenous peoples to "unite in one brotherhood" (Cobb 157), characterizing their occupation as the beginning of a new type of protest. These references express an important sense of identity, but the main sentiment is one of opposition, marking

themselves as Native through a contrast with mainstream American society. Similarly, during the Trail of Broken Treaties, activists hoped to facilitate communication with the federal government by addressing important Native issues without really relying on Native rhetoric. Furthermore, the march and subsequent occupation were carried out without much traditional ceremony. What mainly typified these activities as Native was their goals, rather than a positive identification with Native culture. Still, one of their demands directly concerned “religious freedom and cultural integrity” (AIM website, “20-Point Position Paper”), demonstrating that although they did not necessarily use rituals, they made them an integral part of their demands.

Nevertheless, Alcatraz marked the start of a cultural reawakening. Around 1972, there was an increasing interest in cultural revitalization (Deloria 43), which was visible especially during the siege of Wounded Knee the following year. Many of the activists there were traditionalists and part of the reason why they felt Wilson had to be removed was because the tribal government at Pine Ridge had become too westernized in their view. As a result, the siege was different from other incidents not only because it originated locally and had more specific tribal traditions to build on, but also because they actually used these traditions. Defying government policy, activists performed sacred ritual ceremonies and dances (Lindsley, Braithwaite and Ahlberg 2) as part of the occupation. This marked the start of a shift toward a more positive self-identification, using the “reenactment of symbolic rituals” (Lindsley, Braithwaite and Ahlberg 6) to help revive group identity, both as Sioux, and as Indigenous people more generally, with the involvement of Natives from across the United States. This more positive portrayal of Native identity became increasingly important with the rise of “diffuse institutional racism” (Vasquez and Wetzel 1562) in the post-civil rights era. It allowed activists to distinguish themselves from mainstream American culture by reaffirming their own cultural heritage (Vasquez and Wetzel 1569) rather than by merely opposing government policy. Overall, the main development during the Red Power era was a shift toward a more concrete use of rituals and a wholesale revival of cultural practices, especially among younger generations.

This development continued over the following decades and Standing Rock is a prime example of the progress that has been made. Most importantly, the set-up at Standing Rock was very different, as the notion of a prayer camp meant that spirituality was integral to activism. These camps were not just an occupation, but they had an important spiritual function and provided a space for activists to come together in ritual. Additionally, activists adopted the name water protectors and framed their fight as part of a mythological battle against the Black Snake, which reflects certain beliefs but is also a direct reference to Lakota mythology.

Furthermore, the Lakota language was spoken not just in prayer but also during casual conversation (Romero 2) and it played an important role in the form of the rallying cry *Mni Wiconi*, or “Water is Life” in English. Prayers took place on a daily basis in the camp, but also during the confrontations on the front lines (Romero 3), asking for strength in their fight to stop the pipeline. Finally, there were also other, more physical examples, such as the fact that the camps consisted mostly of traditional-style tipis to provide shelter for the water protectors, and that many activists chose to go around on horseback. What is interesting to note is that some of these practices also played a role in the protests against the Keystone XL pipeline (Elbein), including spirit camps, references to the Black Snake, and an environmentalist approach, indicating that Standing Rock is part of a larger movement, not just in terms of the bigger issues they address (Estes), but also in their use of traditional elements. These important developments therefore did not occur in isolation.

### **Cultural implications**

One of the main implications of performing rituals that the federal government had tried to take from them, was that Native activists were able to demonstrate that their activism was not just about land or sovereignty, but about protection of their ways of living (Deloria 228). This sentiment was also expressed by chairman Archambault, pointing out the history of taking children and putting them in boarding schools, where officials “cut their hair and stole their language” (in Levin “Standing Rock Chairman Looks to History”), depriving Natives of their humanity as well as their land. Rejecting these policies by embracing their culture gave Natives across tribes a renewed sense of pride in their ancestral traditions. The efforts made during the Red Power era also led to concrete changes, most importantly the introduction of the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act, which allowed Natives to freely practice their beliefs. As a result, the younger generations today are among the first to have grown up “free to be Indian” (Elbein), which helps explain the unprecedented scale on which ceremony took place during the Standing Rock protests. Performing Native rituals still represents an act of defiance and a way of showing that colonization efforts have failed. By making spirituality a part of everyday life in the camp, speaking their tribal languages, and performing certain sacred rituals, activists broke with this past. This way, Native activists created a reality that was in direct juxtaposition to the notion that Natives and their cultures have been erased from existence. Related to this is the concept of *survivance* (Dunbar-Ortiz 217), which suggests that Native protest revolves around continuity, not just breaking with a past characterized by colonization. At Standing Rock for example, ancestors were honored by addressing them in prayer, asking

“for strength, patience, and compassion” (Romero 3), which demonstrates that past generations were a major source of inspiration.

Reviving culture and tradition is all the more significant from a Native perspective, as the performance of traditional rituals has great spiritual significance, especially in the context of healing. This, in most Native cultures, is a process aimed at restoring balance and bringing harmony to the natural world (Rybak and Decker-Fitts 335), which can be achieved through explicit healing rituals as well as more general acts of cultural expression. Policies of assimilation have continued to disrupt ties to culture, land, and to nature more generally; a traumatic experience that has been linked to mental health issues (Gone 314). Being together as a community and carrying out sacred rituals in a way that had long been impossible is a way for Natives to come to terms with this past and begin the healing process. The very act of engaging with traditional culture, for example through story-telling (Rybak and Decker-Fitts 337) or performing rituals, can serve as healing. Nevertheless, explicit healing rituals have also played an important role, perhaps the best example of which is the Sun Dance, a ritual that is part of Oglala Sioux culture and involves a dance that involves sacrifice of the participants, which is meant to offer relief to participants as well as bystanders (Rybak and Decker-Fitts 336). Although not technically legal at the time (Fenelon 286), the ritual was practiced during the siege of Wounded Knee, and it was also done at the Standing Rock encampment, alongside other healing rituals (Romero 2).

Furthermore, healing is not only about coming to terms with the past, it is also about moving forward. The narrative constructed around Standing Rock for example provides a hopeful vision for the future, with emphasis on the prophecy of the Seventh Generation, which describes how a new generation of Indigenous people will rise up against the Black Snake and free their people from the threats it represents, including problems like substance abuse and poverty (Elbein). These kinds of stories are part of the reason why the youth group that started the movement got such support from spiritual and tribal leaders (Romero 1), including chairman Archambault. Particularly powerful was a ceremony where Sioux elders presented the leaders of the youth movement with a ceremonial pipe to symbolically hand over responsibility (Elbein), putting the fate of their people in the hands of the next generation. By coming to terms with their past, embracing their culture and looking forward to the future, processes of healing therefore helped to restore pride and confidence in Native traditions, especially on a tribal level.

Just how significant these notions of healing were for participants at Standing Rock is also evident from the way activism came to an end. Ray Cook, a Mohawk who took part in the protests, identifies a lack of closure as one of the movement’s biggest failures. Whereas there

had been a formal opening ceremony, with prayers and the lighting of a sacred fire, there was no ceremonial ending. All the major events of the Red Power era, successful or not, had ended with a prayer, freeing “everyone from the responsibility of pursuing the intent” (Cook) and thus giving them a sense of closure. This lack of closure gives a good impression of how meaningful the camps were; the abrupt, informal ending was painful to participants and disturbed their healing process. Although the occupation at Standing Rock therefore lacked a ceremonial ending, activists managed to end it on their own terms in a different way. Because the tipis would have to go anyway once the protests came to an end, activists decided to burn them rather than have the authorities desecrate them. Although devoid of ceremony, this was an important moment, as it allowed activists to take control of their cultural heritage and “avoid the careless destruction of this ceremonial presence” (Lee and King), making sure that the camp would be closed in a respectful manner to prevent further trauma. It is also another good example of the way that spirituality informed virtually every decision made at Standing Rock from beginning to end.

### **Political implications**

In a similar manner, this spiritual revival has also been a determining factor in the political side to Native activism and the way they organize their communities. Sovereignty is important not just as a western legal concept, related to attempts at redefining a government-to-government relationship, but also in an Indigenous context, as Natives have revived their own forms of politics. Consequently, the revitalization of traditional cultures and the fight for tribal sovereignty went beyond defining their relation to the United States. From a Native perspective, “sovereignty is a ‘holistic system’ comprising laws, culture, religion, and even language” (Loew and Mella 19), which makes spiritual revival an important process with major political implications. One particularly important aspect to this is the fact that occupations, especially the prayer camps at Standing Rock, allowed Natives to build a community on their own terms. What makes this so meaningful is the fact that disruption of the social order in Native communities is one of the primary causes for the social conditions in Native communities today (Dunbar-Ortiz 211), as the reservation system forced a new social structure on them in a way that hurt their ability to function as a society. Traditionally, in most tribes the entire community was involved, and everyone had their role to fulfill, but this became increasingly difficult with the loss of land and resources, especially on reservations (Nagel and Snipp 216), which also diminished their economic independence. Activism has provided an important first step in helping to counter these developments. A good example of this is the fact that in the wake of

the fight for self-determination during the Red Power era, Native tribes rewrote their constitutions according to their cultural norms (Dunbar-Ortiz 215), a good example of concrete political change within Native communities as a result of activism.

Looking at the ways in which traditional community organization factored into the protests themselves, the spiritual camps at Standing Rock are particularly interesting. With these, the water protectors managed to make the occupation into an unprecedented form of community building that was not just a traditional occupation, the way most of the Red Power incidents had been. Instead, they created a miniature society in which activists had different tasks depending on the community's needs, so that the camp was self-sufficient and relied on the community rather than the individual. Likewise, the movement had a spiritual leadership, but no real leader, a move away from the system of tribal governments imposed by the federal government and western notions of singular leadership. Furthermore, the more traditional way of community organizing at Standing Rock had a major effect on gender dynamics. An overwhelming number of influential water protectors were women (Levin "Women Lead Fight"), which is in part due to the fact that they strove for a more matriarchically organized community. This also highlights "the enduring strength of Indigenous women's leadership in questions of tribal governance" (Dhillon), something that has traditionally been very important. Many members of the youth group who started the movement were women, as well as various influential people among the older generations, including Faith Spotted Eagle, a Yankton Sioux elder and leading figure. She also became the first Indigenous person ever to receive a vote for in the Electoral College following the 2016 presidential election (NoiseCat), an indication that women have been regaining their traditional position in Native communities across the United States, and that these developments are not restricted to Standing Rock. What makes this particularly important, too, is the position that Indigenous women find themselves in today, as they face greater risks of sexual violence and kidnapping (Dhillon), which has been a destabilizing factor for Native communities. This way, restoring the position of women is a way to go against more systemic oppression and limit some of the harm that is being done. Although women did play a role in Native activism during the Red Power era, the leaders at the time were predominantly male, especially within major national organizations like AIM. This change can be explained in part by developments that have occurred in American society more generally, but for the most part this is directly tied to a revitalization of Native political traditions.

These developments may appear fairly abstract and small-scale, but the Standing Rock movement also provides an interesting example of concrete Indigenous political revival in the efforts that were made to revive the Great Sioux Nation. Although the Oglala Sioux did

something similar during the siege of Wounded Knee, their declaration of independence was mostly symbolic. Whereas that was mostly a sensational tactic, what happened at Standing Rock was more enduring and formed the heart of the protests. It was done less to antagonize the federal government or for publicity and more for internal purposes, as a way to heal the divides created by the reservation system. Also, rather than focusing on one band of Sioux, Standing Rock activists managed to unite all of the Seven Council Fires of the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota Nations, known collectively as the Great Sioux Nation, something that had not happened since the late eighteen-hundreds (Romero 2). Although the Great Sioux Nation was a tribal republic made up of “kinship alliance systems” (Fenelon 266) spread out over an expansive area, rather than a nation in the modern sense of the word, they shared a culture and a language (Krakoff 1105). It was not until after its territory was carved up into six smaller reservations in 1889 that this sense of unity faded. These more permanent divisions between the different bands (Fenelon 262) led to a loss of culture and coherent tribal identity, even though this process was not entirely successful.

As a result, reservation residency alone falls short as a marker of Native identity and is mostly complementary to traditional tribal affiliation (Nagel and Snipp 209), which is why many Sioux still prefer to identify themselves in more traditional terms. Consequently, a larger sense of Sioux identity has remained, also because different bands within the nation were put together on reservations. The Standing Rock Sioux for example are a mix of middle and western Sioux, (Krakoff 1116), which is why it is not surprising that the Standing Rock protests received considerable support from Sioux living on other reservations. To further increase this sense of shared tradition and get people to identify with a broader conception of Sioux identity, various aspects of the protest invoked the Great Sioux Nation. Example of this are the formal opening, which included the lighting of a ceremonial fire, a ritual that was central to the Great Sioux Nation (Krakoff 1104), or the fact that the biggest of the four camps was named *Oceti Sakowin*, the traditional name for their nation. Another example is the erection of the Council Lodge (Elbein), which used to be important as the central meeting place for the Great Sioux Nation. Now that the Standing Rock protests have come to an end, it will be interesting to see how these developments continue, but this has undeniably been a very important first step in bringing back a greater sense of Sioux identity. One issue that may prove problematic for a more permanent revival of the Great Sioux Nation is land, as their territory remains small and they do not have control over all of their sacred sites. Nevertheless, activists were successful in highlighting their connections to the past and breathing new life into the Great Sioux Nation as a larger political entity with which Sioux from various backgrounds could identify.

To conclude, modern Native activists have engaged with Indigenous audiences by using markers of Native culture to construct a sense of identity that Natives could identify with, in which the use of specific rituals and ceremonies in particular has become increasingly important. Red Power activists relied on Native culture to a limited degree, focusing mostly on widely shared values and self-identification in contrast to the Anglo-American other, but their actions have proven crucial in paving the way for Standing Rock. The activism of the nineteen-seventies set in motion important changes, such as an increased interest among Native communities in their traditional cultures and rituals. It also led to greater tolerance, to such a degree that at Standing Rock, ceremony was no longer restricted to rituals and prayers, but very much permeated every aspect of daily life in the camps. Although there may be other explanations for these developments, such as the fact that the tribal government at Standing Rock has been more accepting of activism than the one in for example Pine Ridge (Fenelon 285), the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 was one of the important victories of the Red Power era that made the recent movement at Standing Rock possible. This spiritual revival played out on a cultural level, allowing communities to break with oppressive policies from the past and begin a process of healing by restoring their group identity. This was done through special rituals, but also simply by performing traditional ceremonies and speaking their ancestral languages. A return to tradition not only meant cultural revival, as there were also important political developments in terms of reconstructing Native sovereignty, especially in the way that activists organized their communities during the occupation. Nevertheless, the Sioux at Standing Rock did not just make claims about their identity, but went a step further and attempted to recreate a sense of tribal unity by invoking the Great Sioux Nation. This is an important step in regaining their sense of community as a political entity and works toward increasing their sovereign position within the United States, albeit in a slightly different fashion and reasoning mostly from Native interpretations of sovereignty. This makes it all the more important that Standing Rock received widespread support, not just from individuals, but from various tribes as well, both within the United States and internationally.

## Conclusion

The recent activism at Standing Rock has built on what was done by Native activists in the various incidents of the Red Power era in major ways, although in some respects the water protectors have clearly adapted and improved on what was done earlier. In terms of the goals and demands that both movements fought for, for example, it is clear that although the immediate demands varied, the larger, more long-term goals have remained largely the same. This does not mean that the Red Power movement was unsuccessful, but rather that some of the goals they fought for simply take time and are still being fought for today. In addressing the federal government, the struggle for increased tribal sovereignty and more rights has continued to play an important role. This is especially important because these same issues continue to put Natives at a disadvantage and Native rights were violated at Standing Rock, as also happened during the nineteen-seventies. In directing their attention at non-Native audiences more generally, Native protesters have continued to challenge more structural problems of settler-colonialism. An important part of this has been educating white audiences about Native cultures and histories, but also about their present situation. One reason why this is so important is that it may help solve issues surrounding the social conditions in Native communities, which is made difficult by a general lack of awareness among non-Natives.

When looking at the tactics and the strategies that both movements have employed to bring these demands across, the turn toward a more serious rhetoric that characterized the Red Power movement has persisted. Nevertheless, activists at Standing Rock have increasingly relied on a combination of specific Native rhetoric and rhetoric aimed at non-Native audiences. This has allowed them to not only unite Natives, but it also helped them to attract an unprecedented amount of outside support, for example from environmentalists. Direct-action strategies, especially those involving land seizures, have remained important, even though there has been a shift toward the use of occupation mostly as a means to a slightly different end, using it mostly as leverage in negotiations. Another important development at Standing Rock was the introduction of prayer camps, which transformed land seizure into something that could be used for the purposes of ritual. It is also a clear indication that these protests were more about Native audiences and less about attracting the attention of mainstream media. Where activists during the Red Power era made use of sensational tactics to get the media's attention and have them spread their message, this has gradually become less important. The rise of Native journalism on a more national level provided a platform for activists and helped mobilize Native communities across the United States, while also informing outsiders. This was an important intermediate step in the development from Native news on a local level to social media, with

its potentially global reach, which has allowed activists to transcend the problems posed by mainstream media, such as selective coverage and framing.

As far as constructions of Native identity are concerned, these have factored into the protests in major ways, both during the Red Power period and at Standing Rock. As a result, activism has had a major impact on Native communities and the Indigenous population as a whole. Red Power activists, many of whom were traditionalists, began to rely more on concepts of Native identity to express themselves, both in a general, pan-tribal sense, and in more specific ways, performing sacred rituals important to certain tribes. Clearly, this renewed interest has only grown over time, as these achievements allowed Standing Rock to surpass any of the other incidents in terms of spirituality, as they did not just perform rituals, the way protesters at Wounded Knee also had, but made ceremony an integral part of everyday life. This has led to a renewed sense of Native pride, which has had important cultural and political implications. For one, it has allowed Natives to develop a more positive sense of identity by breaking with the history of colonization and reconnecting with past generations. This is particularly important given Native views on healing as a way to restore communities and overcome historical trauma. As far as politics is concerned, these cultural revivals enabled the water protectors at Standing Rock to organize their communities in traditional and non-western ways, something which had long been impossible. Furthermore, they used ritual and language to invoke the Great Sioux Nation, which gave the various bands of Sioux a renewed sense of group identity, as they had long been divided by the reservation system.

Overall, Standing Rock is an important continuation of recent Native protest activism, especially during the Red Power era. This way, they were able to develop a successful movement, using some of the successes made during the Red Power era to their benefit, while also continuing to fight for what had not yet been achieved and adapting their tactics where necessary. The intermediate decades, focused on a more international fight for Indigenous rights, have also helped Standing Rock become a global fight, although at its core it is still very much an Indigenous protest. And it is important to remember that, although Standing Rock is only one protest, the events did not occur in isolation. Not only were the protests against the Keystone XL pipeline happening around the same time, new activism against other pipelines has already started to emerge, such as the Diamond Pipeline in Oklahoma and the Bayou Bridge pipeline in Louisiana. There has also been increasing opposition to other threats to Native culture, such as the debate surrounding Bears Ears, a sacred site in Utah that is in danger of losing its protected status as a national park. This is reason for optimism, given the growing willingness of Natives to stand up for their rights, although it also shows that there is still a long

way to go. It also suggests that like the early events of the Red Power era, Standing Rock may come to mark the start of a new period in Native protest activism.

Regardless of how Native activism will develop and evolve precisely over the course of the following years and decades in the wake of the Standing Rock protests, there are various aspects to the Standing Rock movement and the way it compares to Red Power activism that already invite further research. After all, the research presented here is in many ways an initial survey of the similarities and differences that can be observed between the Red Power movement and Standing Rock. One important aspect is the larger context of contemporary Native protest in which Standing Rock took place, looking more closely at its connections with other protests, especially those against the Keystone XL Pipeline. Some similarities have been observed here, but a more thorough examination is in order. In doing so, it is important to look beyond the United States as well. Although a national focus makes sense within the framework of the questions posed here, it is important to keep in mind that national borders rarely match territorial divisions observed by Indigenous peoples. As such, it would be very interesting to see what influence the protests at Standing Rock have had in a transnational context, especially in Canada and Mexico, where Native peoples are perhaps most likely to be influenced. Nevertheless, it is also interesting to look at countries with significant Indigenous populations elsewhere, such as Australia and New Zealand. Furthermore, the larger international Indigenous movement has grown considerably in recent decades, which is why it is all the more important to examine the impact of Standing Rock outside the North American continent. It would also be interesting to consider how this international movement has taken shape and how it links the Red Power era to the present, as Native activism did occur in the intermediate period and is likely to have influenced Standing Rock in more ways than suggested here.

Another important aspect that could be investigated more closely is the unprecedented level of outside support that the water protectors at Standing Rock received, which has been mentioned here but not dealt with in great detail. It would be interesting to see what concrete impacts this has had, especially given the emphasis on spirituality that was so central at Standing Rock. More specifically, it is important to consider how environmentalists and other activists from outside the Native community were included in some of the rituals that took place, and what place they had in the camps. This includes celebrity endorsements by people like Neil Young and politicians, such as Bernie Sanders, which may have had different effects altogether. It is also important to consider the composition of the protest population in terms of for example age, gender and ethnicity to get a more intersectional view on activism and to see what developments are visible in that respect. Another major point that needs further

investigation is how mainstream media covered the protests at Standing Rock, examining the amount of coverage and the use of certain frames. Additionally, a more in-depth analysis of the Standing Rock movement's use of social media would be valuable, for example through quantitative evaluations of the number and types of posts across various platforms. This is necessary to get a better impression of how influential these kinds of tools have really been and to what extent and for what precise purposes activists used them. Related to this is the question of how the authorities responded, as their use of force against peaceful protesters has been controversial, and may have been presented differently by different media outlets. Finally, the focus here has been on major incidents involving direct action strategies, especially occupations, but the legal fights that occurred in connection to these incidents would be worth investigating to see for example if and how their approaches have changed. These kinds of questions would all give a more complete picture and help to recognize the monumental nature of Standing Rock as a movement in its own right that will likely be influential to Indigenous protest for decades to come.

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