
“The Original Gangster”

The Life and Times of Red Power Activist Madonna Thunder Hawk

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There are those of us who are content to assimilate or whatever, but there are those of us who want to maintain the culture our ancestors died for. . . . We have the right to be who we are.

—Madonna Thunder Hawk, 2008

One surprisingly sunny day during the 1973 American Indian Movement (AIM) occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, Madonna Thunder Hawk, who served as a medic and leader in the community, experienced a powerful moment of clarity about her purpose. She plainly felt the spirit of her ancestors and imagined how they had stood their ground in a losing battle to protect their right to be who they were and to protect the land. Wounded Knee brought that insight and experience of freedom that would stay with her and guide her choices when the real work of moving Red Power beyond powerful rhetoric to meaningful community change occurred in the years to come.

For most, the history of the Red Power movement ended with the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee. The rather hidden history of the struggle for Indian self-determination and revitalization unfolded between 1974 and 1980. During that time, women sustained their families and communities through the endless legal trials following Wounded Knee, the growth of the international indigenous movement, the establishment of alternative schooling for Native children, the fight to protect reproductive health against illegal sterilization, and natural resource pollution by companies exploiting Indian land. The central organizations formed to contend with all of these issues were the Wounded Knee Legal Defense/Offense Committee, the We Will Remember Survival School, the International Indian Treaty Council, Women of All Red Nations, and the Black Hills Alliance. One woman connected all of these South Dakota-based groups: Madonna Thunder Hawk.

The history of the Red Power movement has been overly associated with the famous occupations of Alcatraz and Mount Rushmore and the military conflict of Wounded Knee. While these events were vital to showing the world that Native people were still alive and fighting for survival, much of the substantial work of Red Power did not begin until Wounded Knee ended.¹ Many women on the front lines of Indian activism in the 1970s could have been featured in historical writing, but it is precisely because Thunder Hawk insists she was “just one of the people” that her story is so emblematic. She is both ordinary, one of countless grassroots activists and community residents, and extraordinary, in that no one else has quite walked her path.² She may never have given a “chiefly” speech that, one day, will be reduced to a trendy bumper sticker, but her life’s work reflects the greatest-kept secret to the world outside of Indian Country: women are the core and the strength of Native society. This is not a modern social phenomenon but one that extends back prior to European invasion. However since contact, unseeing missionary eyes have recorded a history that erased, or made invisible, the most critical elements of balance in gender relations and the central importance of women to tribal societies.³

Native and women’s history has been slow to reveal the historical experiences of the separate but equal gender roles occupied by Native women in most traditional societies. Former principal chief of the Cherokee nation and Red Power activist Wilma Mankiller, a late twentieth-century example of public leadership, assessed the impact and response of Native women to colonization: “From the time of European contact, there had been a concerted attempt to diminish the role of indigenous women. But even with the sustained efforts by the federal government and various religious groups to assimilate them, women continue to play a critical role in many indigenous communities in formal and informal leadership positions in every sector of tribal society and the larger culture around them.”⁴ As Mankiller points out, the treacherous federal policies administered largely through religious institutions systematically reduced Native’s women’s autonomy and collapsed it into the patriarchal tradition of Euro-America—at least that has been the view from the outside. Native women have consistently remained the backbone of indigenous cultures, and the Red Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s inspired the reclamation of Native identity, spirituality, and traditional gender practices.

Therefore, nothing was unusual about Thunder Hawk’s involvement in every major occupation that is typically associated with Red Power activism: Alcatraz Island (1969–1971), Mount Rushmore (1970 and 1971—a patriotic symbol to many non-Natives, while a desecration of a sacred site to the Lakota), the Bureau of Indian Affairs (1972), and Wounded Knee (1973). Far more significant than these physical occupations of sites with dual symbolic importance was how she inculcated the ideal of Red Power in the lives of Native people after Wounded Knee. Between 1973 and 1980, she co-founded a survival school, Women of All Red Nations (WARN), and the International Indian Treaty Council and helped organize

the Black Hills International Survival Gathering.⁵ During these years, she was sent all over the world by invitation to speak on behalf of the movement.

When I first interviewed Madonna Thunder Hawk in 1998, we were sitting in the living room of her home on the east end of the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation, in the Swift Bird district. Since then we have shared an innovative intellectual partnership that has grown into nonprofit work and informed grassroots activism. Our interviews over the years have become discursive conversations as well as interrogations into the historical meaning of her life’s work. This chapter is a combined effort of our work together, moving in and out of oral history testimony and analysis of the hidden history of indigenous radicalism.

One of her main motivations to participate in this ongoing dialogue was the desire to see a more complex history of women reflecting indigenous values and priorities in contemporary society. She has expressed frustration by what she has observed in academia and the fact that too often curricula have relied solely upon *Lakota Woman* (1991), the autobiography of Mary Brave Bird (also known as Mary Crow Dog), written with Richard Erdoes. In the absence of an overall history of women in the Red Power Movement, many have taken Brave Bird’s personal experience in the movement as the exclusive story of all women.⁶

“I guess I’m not your typical Indian woman,” Thunder Hawk offered reflectively as she began another guest lecture to one my classes. Each time she speaks, she offers new insight into the meaning of her life of activism and organizing: “It was my grandmother who told me there was such a thing as treaty rights. But in her day and even in my day growing up you didn’t talk about that—‘Oh, that’s a thing of the past.’ Even our own people, ‘That’s a thing of the past. Don’t make trouble. What’s the matter with you?’ But that’s being colonized too, you know, that self-hatred that comes out.”

Her grandmother’s words were a constant source of strength that sustained her activism and nourished her intellect. Indeed, it was her female ancestors who ingrained in her a duty to “do what’s right” no matter the circumstance—whether she had to speak out against her own people, the federal government, or the media-recognized male leaders of the movement.

Contrary to popular masculine conceptions of the Lakota, fueled by the ubiquitous headdresses and warriors-on-horses imagery, the culture is not patriarchal—though this is relatively unknown to most outside of Lakota Country. Even more problematic is the trend of men adopting sexist practices from mainstream white culture and claiming them as “traditional Lakota ways.” This, to some degree, goes unchallenged by both men and women.⁷

During a 2008 filming of Thunder Hawk visiting Mount Rushmore to describe the occupations she was a part of in 1970 and 1971, she stated, “This is our land, y’all [standing in front of Mount Rushmore, widely and protectively gesturing to the land behind her]. Keep that in mind. Don’t ever forget it. I will tell you what my grandmother told me—‘The Black Hills belong to us, and don’t you forget it.’ No profound words from no stoic chief—it was *the women!*” What Thunder Hawk

wants us to know is that, despite the highly masculinized stereotypes of Lakota men, women are equal partners in protecting land—and in her family, they were the ones who led the fight and resisted. She is also lightly referencing the inside joke that you never “give an Indian man a microphone,” because he will never stop talking.

Thunder Hawk hails from the Feather Necklace *tiospaye* (extended family). She was born in 1940 on the Yankton Sioux Reservation but grew up in the old Bureau of Indian Affairs agency town on the fertile grounds near the Missouri River, on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation, in north-central South Dakota.⁸ While Thunder Hawk’s early life was very typical of the lives of Native people of her generation—the historical violence of boarding schools, the blatant anti-Native racism, the intrusion of the federal government, the misdirected rage—few responded with such explicit forms of resistance as the women in her family.

You know, now that I’m older and have thought about it, it seems like our family—the strong people in our family—were all women. You know, it’s not that there weren’t a lot of the grandpas and uncles and all that were around in our family. But I guess you can say this is a matriarchal family, but I don’t think we were that different from everyone else, because it’s always been that way, and it still is, where the women are the center of the family. For real. It’s not just something from our past history. It’s because there’s neo-colonialism still going on in Indian country that people don’t know this. A lot of it’s been twisted; for example, the Tribal Councils are male-dominated by choice, because that’s what non-Indians expect—but just on the top, the surface—but underneath, it’s still women, you know. It starts with the family. [Women are] in control of the family and how things go, and they’re the mainstay. So—and it’s not a competition-type thing either, because you look at our Indian colleges on the reservations, the students are predominantly female. And you go to any of the tribal offices, the programs, the majority are women employed and the directors are—the majority of them are women. So it’s not such a competition thing between men and women with our people as looking at it in terms of survival as a people, that whatever’s the most efficient way to get things done [is best].

In Thunder Hawk’s lifetime, a harsh test of that gender balance and community resilience was the devastating impact of the 1944 Pick-Sloan Act. The U.S. Army Corp of Engineers decided it was necessary to dam and flood reservations all along the Missouri River to protect predominately white towns from flooding. Millions of acres of prime reservation land were lost forever as the government flooded towns and a few burial grounds.⁹ Though no quantitative study has been conducted, qualitatively, through countless interviews, women have located this event as that which plunged their nations into welfare dependency in the 1950s, as the ability to produce, collect, or hunt their own food was dramatically reduced by the loss of these fertile lands.¹⁰

Later in life, Thunder Hawk connected her unbridled anger, and her urge to “slug any cowboy who looked at me wrong,” to this event. She was known for her deadly elbow punch, which she used to survive boarding school, as well the occasional bar fight. As a student, she was “one step ahead of getting kicked out” of every school she attended, more for her ostensibly disruptive attitude than her “bad” behavior. She questioned an educational environment that mandated complicity and docility. Every Native person living has been affected in some way by the boarding school experience. Corporal punishment was used to keep children from speaking their language or “acting” Indian culturally or spiritually, and sexual abuse was commonplace, which greatly disrupted the Native sense of self and affected the intergenerational ability to parent. Young children were forcibly taken from their homes and not returned until they had completed school. For many, it forever broke their family and community bonds.¹¹ While the stories of victimization were severe, there were always stories of resistance. Thunder Hawk remembers her time at boarding schools as marked by constant rebellion.

The federal government’s plan to relocate Native people from the reservations to urban areas to further assimilate them into the American experience, while simultaneously gaining access to remaining reservation land, backfired.¹² The relocation policy brought Native people together in urban areas, where they shared common experiences of colonization and organized a movement of resistance. Thunder Hawk went on relocation to Cleveland, Ohio, and later moved out to the Bay Area, where she was drawn into the emerging social movements.

Thunder Hawk became involved in the American Indian Movement during its early years and recalled Indian communities from all across the country asking AIM to come and support them in their struggles. Cheyenne River Lakota tribal president T. O. Traversie disparaged AIM as being “only the have-nots, young people, and old people.” Thunder Hawk laughs, remembering this interview, and replied, “Who else is there?” His point, however, demonstrates how AIM and the Red Power movement differed from other organizing at the time: They were indeed a movement of the people. If an event or meeting was held, entire extended families came; they had to plan for elders, infants, and everyone in between.

When the movement was constrained within the legal system starting in late 1973, the days of AIM as a protest movement shifted. After the tanks rolled away, the government’s next quasi-legal tactic of suppression was the most insidious and effective: the entrapment of AIM in court for months, or even years, on end. Sitting in court or jail with no protest actions left many frustrated and restless, for they were accustomed to the excitement of being on the move. Responding to the shift from open war in the fields of Wounded Knee to subterfuge in the federal courts, AIM was quick to respond with an impressive volunteer team of lawyers and legal workers. Headed up by Ken Tilsen, they formed the Wounded Knee Legal Defense/Offense Committee (WKLD/OC) during the March 1973 occupation to respond to the mounting court cases.¹³

The aftermath of Wounded Knee brought both great violence and great hope. Without a dramatic confrontation to focus the eyes of the world on the area, the revenge violence on Pine Ridge made it the most dangerous place to live in America in 1974 and 1975. Some residents of Pine Ridge described the vigilante GOON squad (the "Guardians of the Oglala Nation") as little more than a terrorist operation funded by the federal government. There was no one but AIM to stand in its way—and at times, meet violence with violence. Murders occurred on a near-weekly basis, gaining little attention until the deaths of FBI agents Ron Williams and Jack Coler in 1976.¹⁴

With the violence as an ugly backdrop, the court cases spread like shrapnel in multiple cities in South Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska, and Minnesota, requiring a goodly supply of the hardest resource to come by: money. While many involved had the time, talents, and courage necessary to defy the FBI, getting the capital to keep bailing out the hordes of people thrown in jail for every sort of offense required genius. So, as the major network cameras turned away from the battlefield spectacle of the painted warriors of Wounded Knee, a new kind of war was already raging in the courtrooms and the unlit gravel roads of Pine Ridge. The new warriors were those involved with WKLD/OC.

The offices were in a constant state of activity, be it determining whether a visitor was a friendly or an infiltrator or managing the serious and sometimes comical conflicts around personal relationships between the lawyers, legal volunteers, Native activists, and the media-recognized Red Power leaders. Madonna Thunder Hawk never had a break from keeping the movement on track, or somewhat managed. Her role in WKLD/OC could best be described as interpersonal liaisons manager. In other words, she had to sort out the culture and gender clashes that were common as such a diverse group came together.

While families were caught up on the trial process, someone was needed to look after the children they left behind. These extended Indian families had been the mainstay supporters of the movement. There were no lone, stoic warriors here. Proactive measures were needed to protect the family and community from persecution.

Survival Schools

Not all was grim in the struggle that lay ahead. Another movement on the rise gave hope to building sovereign Native minds out of the destruction the boarding schools caused: the alternative education of young Indian people. This hope came in the form of the "survival school" phenomenon that emerged during the Red Power movement in the 1970s as an explicitly political and pragmatic response for Native cultural and intellectual revitalization. Whatever their geographic location, activist families were persecuted, and their children suffered. In response, these families applied the passionate ideals of self-determination by combating colonization on the front lines, through educating Indian children with indigenous

values and knowledge. Because education for Indian people had been the primary site of assimilation, the ultimate expression of Red Power resistance was creation of an "alternative" form of education in line with cultural practice, language, and values. Survival schools were designed to instill cultural pride and tribal awareness, and offer tribally specific history and language as an alternative to the public or Bureau of Indian Affairs school system at the time, which did not offer these things.

Determined to never again have their young people suffer the damage of the boarding schools, women assessed what was best for their communities in the process of reclaiming education. The schools they started fell largely into two main types—one was an indigenous version of the public school experience, and the other was a less-structured group-home experience. Approximately sixteen of these schools appeared in urban areas and reservations across the country throughout the 1970s. Unlike other alternative-education institutions for indigenous people at the time, these schools were explicitly associated with the movement. They formed themselves into the Federation of Native-Controlled Survival Schools, with a shared affirmation of Native self-determination and indigenous knowledge and culture at the center of their efforts.

One of the earliest of these schools was established by the Ojibways, who founded the American Indian Movement in the Twin Cities. Established in January 1972, the first to open was the AIM Survival School, located at 1209 Fourth Street, SE, in Minneapolis. In March 1974, its name was changed to The Heart of the Earth Survival School, providing a curriculum of routine academic subjects—Indian history, literature, art, music, and the Anishinabeg language—to 135 students.¹⁵ The Red School House—often incorrectly and diminutively called the "Little" Red School House, to the chagrin of its founders—also opened in 1972 and was located just across town at 643 Virginia Street in St. Paul. Charlotte Day, known to many as the "grandmother" of the St. Paul chapter of AIM, was central to the establishment of this school. It offered culturally based education services to students from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Both schools received federal monies through the United States Office of Education and followed the nationally accepted curriculum of the public school system.¹⁶

The most radical edge of these schools was embodied by the We Will Remember Survival School (WWRSS), which was established for the children of the many defendants of the Wounded Knee trials. Rejecting the path of the more conventional survival schools (if there was such a thing as "conventional" survival school), this group of young people was entirely in control of the school and learned *how to learn*, as they were given the freedom to think for themselves, without the enforced guidelines that the government imposed when a school accepted federal monies. This also meant that the experience was marked by a certain degree of chaos and excitement that comes when a group of young people is in charge of itself.¹⁷

The WWRSS grew primarily out of the combined efforts of the dynamic duo of Madonna Thunder Hawk and Lorelei De Cora. Though Thunder Hawk was thirteen

years older, the pair had been side by side **since** their arrest for looting and liberating the trading post at the beginning of **the Wounded Knee** occupation. Inside Wounded Knee during the occupation, **they had** run the medical clinic and were considered grassroots leaders whom fellow **occupiers** turned to when they felt they were not being heard by the media-recognized leaders. In April 1974, they had established the Cultural Learning Center with a small grant of eleven thousand dollars provided by the American Friends Service Committee and were living in Rapid City in the condemned flood-disaster house **that** the city allowed them to use.¹⁸

In hindsight, there is a noticeable **pattern** in the beginnings of many Red Power projects. While other movement **organizations**, primarily those of the New Left, created programs to better the world, **indigenous** organizing often emerged from circumstances of need and survival, **because** of the pressing need to take care of their own. As historical actors are **asked** to reflect on the reasons for their actions, the most common refrain is, "We **did** what we had to do." This was also how the WWRSS came about; Thunder Hawk remembered the school's beginnings as just another step in the survival process:¹⁹

I mean it first started with our own **kids**, my own children and relatives. And then pretty soon some other kids **were** hanging around. A lot of these kids were looking for a night's sleep in **safe** surroundings. We didn't recruit students, nothing like that. They **showed up** at our door with a backpack, and I don't even know how the word **spread**. I don't know if they were run-aways, or dropouts or what. But no **parents**, truant officer, social worker, police officer, no one ever came to my **door** and said, "What are you doing with all these kids here? Who gave you **permission**? Where's your papers?" Well, it just proves what we were **saying** about the school systems and everything. These kids were throwaways, **you** know, push-outs as far as the system was concerned. And if their **parents had** drinking problems or whatever, it just made it easier for them, **for us** to take their responsibility and take care of the kids.

But at the same time, our main **focus was** the kids. We didn't have a lot of money and the best meals and **all that**. But those young people knew when they went to bed, no one was **going to** beat them up or molest them. There was always food; it might have **been** pretty slim sometimes, but there was always food. It was like they found **some** place where they were safe and treated well.

From its practical and protective **origins**, the survival-school model was important because it was the ultimate **rejection** of the boarding schools' cultural genocide. In the 1970s, young Native students were no longer subjected to boarding schools as a matter of course and could **attend** public schools, but the racism they faced was often equally intolerable. **Many** generations of boarding schools had significantly impacted the ability of **Native** families to pass on healthy parent-ing skills, let alone cultural knowledge. **This was** where survival schools could be a

place of cultural replenishment. The survival-school model offered a powerful way to revitalize Indian identity through an educational experience.

Women of All Red Nations

The idea for Women of All Red Nations (WARN) was born in late 1977 during a meeting of a handful of **key** indigenous women organizers in San Francisco, after they returned from the International Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas, held in Geneva, Switzerland, sponsored by the Sub-Committee on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Apartheid, and Decolonization of the Special Committee of NGOs on Human Rights. Phyllis Young, Pat Bellanger, and other women attended the Geneva conference as **representatives** of the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC). IITC was formed as a means to bring the issue of human rights and treaty violations committed by the U.S. federal government against American Indians to the United Nations. IITC, which had formed in 1974 following Wounded Knee, achieved NGO status and sought to create coalitions with other indigenous groups around the world (see chapter 6). During the Geneva experience, the IITC women realized they were the **only** indigenous group that did not have a "women's society" representing the issues of importance to women as the culture-keepers and centers of family and community.

WARN was formally founded in 1978 at a meeting at the Mother Butler Center in Rapid City, South Dakota, by a group of women including Madonna Thunder Hawk, Lorelei Means De Cora, Agnes Williams, Phyllis Young, Lakota Harden, Pat Bellanger, and Janet McCloud and a collective of other female leaders under the philosophy that "Indian women have always been in the front lines in the defense of our nations." For many of the activists, however, the choice to work together as women was as **much** a pragmatic response to government infiltration and effective state repression as it was an attempt to organize consciously around shared women's concerns.

At the founding conference, WARN decided to address sterilization abuse, **political** prisoners, **education** for survival, the destruction of **family** and theft of Indian children, and the **destruction** and erosion of an indigenous land base.²⁰ Its first major publication, called the *WARN Report I*, asked: "What are you doing to **fulfill** your duties as a sovereign Native American woman? What are you doing to channel the strength of the Great Power within you and all around you, your family, your nation, your planet? That's what working on the local-national-international level means. As you read through this booklet, we'd like you to be thinking about these things, and about **how** you can join hands with other women to work on those local, national, and international levels to bring about meaningful action against the genocidal processes we face at every turn."²¹

The newly formed group issued a challenge to Native women. Rather than **take** the approach of victimhood, WARN demanded accountability for the "great

power” women wield and how that power should be utilized to fight against genocidal processes to protect family and community. It was a call to recognize that they had *responsibilities* to fight for family and community. Those obligations were critical to a definition of community that was simultaneously local and global, and that included Mother Earth.

In general, women active in the Red Power movement could rarely afford the time to work in more direct coalition with women’s liberationist groups. The pragmatic considerations of their tiny population and the severe lack of resources made focusing on their own organizing critical. Conflict arose when they had to work in close association with feminist groups, such as at fundraisers, conferences, or gatherings. In these situations Native women encountered behavior by non-Indians, particularly white women, that reminded them that as indigenous people, “we were still invisible.” As a speaker for a university program for International Women’s Day, Thunder Hawk heard fellow speaker (and New York Congress member) Bella Abzug claiming women’s place alongside men in “fighting on the frontier on the trek west.” When Thunder Hawk, the last speaker in the line-up, finally had her chance to speak, Abzug had already left for another engagement. Deflated and feeling Abzug’s comments as a stinging reminder that white women narrowly and ignorantly defined the terms of the feminist movement, Thunder Hawk asked the audience, “Who were your ancestors fighting [on the trek west]? Well, that would be the Indians, wouldn’t it—and you didn’t even hear her say it.”

While Abzug reminded Thunder Hawk that white privilege and general ignorance blinded even the most educated or politically experienced when it came to understanding Indians, this was not atypical of Indian encounters with other feminist activists, many of which occurred at the Black Hills International Survival Gathering.

Consistent experiences like the one she had with Abzug made Thunder Hawk feel she simply lacked the patience to speak to audiences about the Native struggle. However, it was critical that she travel internationally to raise awareness for the movement and to help raise the always-needed bail money. She felt she was not a natural speaker and was reluctant at first. Though she was asked to visit various countries, including Iran, Libya, Japan, Mexico, and Panama, she said the place that had the most impact on her was Northern Ireland, which she visited as a guest of Sinn Fein in 1974. By speaking to social clubs in Dublin and Derry, she gained insight into a much wider definition of what it meant to be indigenous.

There were all these parallels to what had gone on with us, our people. Man, it was just an incredible experience. Then from Dublin, I went from there to Northern Ireland and ended up in Derry with the coolest bunch of people. I just felt at home. I mean even their humor was the same; nobody understands Indian humor. They were the same way as us. When they had meetings and had to restrict the booze, all of that because—well, they’re Irish! They had the same problems we do. I think that’s what really helped

me for the long haul. I think back to our ancestors, and then I think back to the Irish. All these hundreds of years of colonization and they are still Irish. Why? They got their vision and they stayed with it.

That’s when I really developed this whole global view. I didn’t have the word *indigenous* then, but for the indigenous around the world, regardless of what color, it is a struggle for the land and who you are.

In the same manner in which Malcolm X’s Hajj showed him that the unity of Islam undermined the false construction of race, Thunder Hawk connected the land struggle and the fight for cultural preservation as inherent to all indigenous peoples, regardless of racial identity or skin color. This realization was crucial to the cross-racial organizing she did to prevent Union Carbide and other corporations from drilling for uranium in the Black Hills.

The late 1970s was a crucial time of organizing in the Black Hills area of South Dakota. AIM was based primarily in Rapid City to handle the Wounded Knee trials, and during that time, it became publicly known that Union Carbide was planning to lease some sites to conduct exploratory drilling for possible uranium mining. Thunder Hawk recalled: “Well, right away, that got everybody’s attention. Again, the Black Hills still belong to the Great Sioux nation legally, despite having been stolen by the United States government in 1877. So it isn’t just something that we’re saying, ‘Well, this is our land and it’s sacred.’ It was more like, ‘Well, here we go again. On top of everything else, now we’ve got to do the work of the government, which should be at least protecting the land they stole. This is an issue that we are going to have to fight.’”

That fight was an example of what Thunder Hawk described as “cowboy and Indian” politics. The landowners, with small homesteads in the Black Hills, were “shocked and appalled” that the government would allow this, and they looked to the very people they usually battled against—the Indian activists. Colleen Ragan, a member of the Black Hills Alliance, remembered how they would recruit in the Black Hills area to gain support: “We are talking about uranium tailings under people’s houses, in the water, cattle breakin’ their legs in exploratory holes that nobody knew about. Russell Means starting talking about doing speeches out in the white community about how you’re the new Indians, they are taking your land. Oh, they don’t need your land? Perhaps your water or your mineral rights. Get used to it! This is how they treated us, this is how they’re treating you—how do you like it?”²²

The ranchers did not like it at all—and were willing to involve themselves in a coalition established in 1978 known as the Black Hills Alliance (BHA). The BHA was Native-led and dedicated to protecting the Black Hills from exploitative and destructive uranium mining, for environmental and spiritual motivations. Producing a newsletter, the BHA was run on a daily basis by the energetic Mark Tilsen, son of the lawyer Ken Tilsen and the organizer Rachel Tilsen. Working alongside Mark was a crew of women that included Thunder Hawk, Lakota Harden, Liliias Jones, and Colleen Ragan, to name a few.²³

Thunder Hawk found it possible to work in coalition with those with whom she had significant philosophical and political differences. "We saw the value of coalitions and alliances with different people," she said. "We could be issue-oriented, rather than dwell on anything else. The issue was the most important thing, and the bottom line is how do we stop this desecration of the land? So those cowboy and Indian differences didn't even become an issue."

The BHA and WARN organized a major event, the first of its kind, when they hosted the Black Hills International Survival Gathering from July 18 to 27, 1980. The event was held on the ranch land of Marvin Kammerer, featuring huge tents on the open plains, and was attended by an estimated ten thousand people from all over the world. BHA's goal for the gathering was to create a rural solar- and wind-power awareness campaign and invite other groups who were dedicated to living sustainably on the earth. One group, the Women's Feminist Health Collective (WFHC), attended to provide workshops on women's health topics, including birth control, self-examination, lesbian health issues, and childbirth. WFHC member Carol Downer recalls how their plan to teach women how to conduct vaginal self-examinations, to be done in an open tent as other sessions were, was approved in the planning stages but banned once they had arrived at the gathering. Downer remembered Thunder Hawk's behavior as particularly hostile to their participation. Downer stated that the WFHC felt they could not compromise their agenda by censoring their workshops. They chose to pull out of the program and simply be attendees.²⁴ Thunder Hawk's perspective was that the group should have respected the cultural mores of the Lakota as well the conservatism of the local ranchers, who would be alienated by the exposed vaginal exams.

The Original Gangsta Granny

The story of Madonna Thunder Hawk's activism has no end point. In her elder years, which she enjoys for the status it affords her as an Indian woman, she is no less engaged in shaking up Indian Country than she was forty years ago. She remembers the controversy she created in the mid-1990s when she spoke out against the \$100 million casino resort development with railroad access being planned by actor Kevin Costner and his brother Dan. After his performance in *Dances with Wolves*, Costner apparently had little conflict over commercially exploiting the same Black Hills he was giving lip-service to protecting in the media. "Dunbar, Co." (named after his heroic white film character, John Dunbar) decided to withdraw the project due to the negative publicity generated by Thunder Hawk, who plainly called out his duplicitous game.²⁵

Madonna Thunder Hawk returned home in the 1990s to the Cheyenne River Reservation to work on "decolonizing" her people from the grassroots before it could become the latest academic trend. She did so by taking positions on the school board and housing board and demonstrating, through her leadership, indigenous values and protocols that have underpinned Lakota society for generations. Using

her "elder card" to gain access, she frequently addressed the tribal council and urged them to develop more community-based projects and to think "green" in developing wind energy. She established the Swift Bird Oyate Center in her district of the reservation. Preferring to be "poor and free," as she describes her lifestyle, she has taken paid work positions only when they advanced the cause she was involved in at the time; otherwise, she insists that being accountable to employers compromises her ability to be accountable to her community. She has continued her community organizing and hell-raising because she feels it is the closest way to re-create the experience of living free in Wounded Knee. She has had to "hustle," as she describes it, to get by in her never-ending quest for gas money and has received support from the radical activist community over the years. In 2006, she began work as the tribal liaison for the Lakota People's Law Project, which allows her for the first time in her life to be paid for what she says she would be doing anyway—traveling around Indian Country to talk to the typically voiceless and to bring their concerns to light. At this time in her life, after years of being called a militant, radical, terrorist, and communist, she accepts just two titles: "warrior woman" and "granny." Her oldest *takoja* (grandson) expanded that title to "original gangsta granny," not for any association with negative violence, but rather as the definition of a woman who stood her ground as an Indian before it was hip to be Native—and one who never compromised, despite the pressures, in her fight for indigenous life.

The years go by so quickly, but I just feel like working as a community organizer was the closest thing I could get to as an individual to carry on a lot of the issues and the principles we had as a movement. We were a movement of people. It wasn't a certain generation, or radicals over here and elders over there. It was a movement of people. That's basically the bottom line for me.

It influenced my family, my children. I saw them as individuals . . . it would've been easier for me to travel around and play militant and stick my kids in school, and let someone else take care of them. But as a result of that, we had our own school, because that's what my children wanted. It brought my thinking in how work with people, alliances with non-Indians. Up until that point it was foreign to me. I mean, I didn't even think of it like that. But since then, it's been a good life, because you're constantly striving to keep your principles intact, to be accountable. If you're working for an issue, then you're accountable to the people that it affects. And of course you stay true to your family, because the bottom line is your family. But yeah, that's what Red Power did for me.

Thunder Hawk's life and experience provide insight into the difficult realities of Indian Country, and the central place gender occupies in preserving indigenous cultural practices, worldviews, and cosmological beliefs. Her life and work have been a fight for the cultural right to be, a struggle that is deeply connected to rebalancing gender relations in Native society. From early on in Madonna's

organizing life, having learned directly from well-known community organizer Saul Alinsky while on relocation in San Francisco, she emphasized the need for group empowerment and achievable goals. Consistently prioritizing the importance of community accountability, she felt process was as important as the outcome, and the outcome should be attainable. She expressed this commitment through always seeking to connect the rural residents of the reservation to national or international policies and issues. For instance, in the 1976 film *Indian Country?*, produced during the bicentennial to juxtapose more assimilated Native people against the “militants” of AIM, she criticized the National Indian Policy Review Committee’s work, stating that it held little value if the residents in outlying districts of her reservation had never heard of it.²⁶

While she has been fiercely committed to social justice, she has not been dogmatic in her approach. She has been happy to see “young people on the move,” seeing youth as the only phenomenon powerful enough to create social change. She always sympathized with the “underdog” as she described it, believing that *everyone*, no matter how life had rendered them, had something to contribute. The centrality of “women’s work” to indigenous communities was what kept them together and was not secondary to the role of men as leaders—who more often than not appeared as media window dressing. It was women’s work and commitment that maintained the Red Power Movement beyond the 1973 Wounded Knee occupation when it was left for dead by the media. This was not the result of any essentialist “natural” power of women but because they were the ones most often doing the work in maintaining the relationships that are so critical to developing social movements. And Madonna’s particular experiences, from traveling to Ireland to working with white ranchers, show a fascinating commitment to creative thinking about politics and alliances that brings her understanding of sovereignty to bear on local issues, be they in her own backyard or across the world. The local is indeed the global in the scope of the “original gangtza granny.”

NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Madonna Thunder Hawk are taken from fourteen separate interviews conducted by the author between 1998 and 2008. The collection will be available online as part of a Ford Foundation-supported collection on the website www.warriorwomen.org.

1. Only two books offer a narrative of the Red Power Movement, and these focus on the years from 1969 to 1973. See Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: New Press, 1997); and Troy Johnson, *The American Indian Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Red Power and Self-Determination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008). Neither work addresses the importance of gender relations and the centrality of women’s activism in the Red Power Movement.
2. Madonna Thunder Hawk has resisted being focused on as a singular activist, knowing that she comes from a group of women who relied heavily upon on each other for success and survival. These women include her sister, Mabel Ann Chasing Hawk, and her kinship sisters in struggle, Lorelei Means DeCora, Andria Syke Robideau, Minnie Two

Shoes, Mary Quintana, and Phyllis Young. This is by no means a full list of the women she worked alongside, but a short list of the most referenced.

3. European colonization is based on a patriarchal monotheism, which has presupposed the inferiority of women since invasion, to the present day. As an American-style patriarchy has developed, women have responded with movements for women’s rights, called at different times *women’s suffrage*, *women’s liberation*, or *feminism*. Because of the success of colonization, all women of color suffer under this patriarchy, but typically their method of response is imbedded in the cultural context to which they connect the most. A number of historians have located Native women’s history in the context of indigenous cultural radicalism. See, for example, Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei, *Race, Gender, & Work: A Multi-Cultural Economic History of Women in the US* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 31–61; Wynne Hanson, “The Urban Indian Woman and Her Family,” *Social Casework: The Journal of Contemporary Social Work* (1980); M. Annette Jaimes with Theresa Henley, “American Indian Women: At the Center of Indigenous Resistance in Contemporary North America,” in *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, ed. M. Annette Jaimes (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 311–344; Clara Sue Kidwell, “What Would Pocahontas Think Now?: Women and Cultural Persistence,” *Callaloo* 17:1 (1994): 149–159; Beatrice Medicine, “The Role of Women in Native American Societies,” *The Indian Historian* 8:3 (1976): 50–53; Devon Abbott Mihesuah, *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003); Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Marla N. Powers, *Oglala Women: Myth, Ritual, and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Karen Anderson, *Changing Woman: A History of Racial Ethnic Women in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Nancy Shoemaker, “The Rise or Fall of Iroquois Women,” *Journal of Women’s History* 2:3 (1991): 39–57; Lisa J. Udel, “Revision and Resistance: The Politics of Native Women’s Motherwork,” *Frontiers* 22:2 (2001): 43–62; Robert A. Williams, Jr., “Gendered Checks and Balances: Understanding the Legacy of White Patriarchy in an American Indian Cultural Context,” *Georgia Law Review* 24 (1991): 48–72; Shirley Hill Witt, “The Brave-Hearted Women,” *Civil Rights Digest* (Summer 1976): 39–45.
4. Wilma Mankiller, *Every Day Is a Good Day: Reflections by Contemporary Indigenous Women* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2004), 9.
5. It is important to emphasize that WARN was not established until 1978. One book has mistakenly set the founding earlier, and this error has been repeated in subsequent references to WARN. See Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., Troy R. Johnson, and Joane Nagel, eds., *Red Power, American Indians Fight for Freedom*, 2nd ed. (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1999).
6. Mary Brave Bird, who took the name of her husband, Leonard Crow Dog, is commonly known as Mary Moore on the Rosebud reservation, where she grew up. A common critique among Native activists is that the book portrays her as a more pivotal historical character in the movement than she was.
7. This is a difficult claim to source using existing literature, as it is based quantitatively and qualitatively on seventy oral history interviews that I have completed during the past ten years. It is generally agreed upon that the tribal relationships of men and women in pre-invasion indigenous societies were not exclusively based on a religious or social hierarchy, but rather on egalitarian recognition of the separate, but equally necessary, roles of women and men. Not to say that there were no hierarchies, but in various tribes you would find women holding high political or spiritual positions. One theme that has emerged over time in my work as an interviewer, historian, and professor in the heart of Lakota country is how contemporary Lakotas remember their own history in a way that generally contradicts existing anthropological research about gender relations.

8. *Tiospaye* is a Lakota word meaning extended family. An agency town is a reference to where the Bureau of Indian Affairs first set up its services when reservations were established. The majority of resources were available there.
9. Michael Lawson, *Damned Indians: The Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux, 1944–1980* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).
10. Of all the interviews I conducted for my book, *Women Were the Backbone, Men Were the Jawbone: Native Women's Activism in the Red Power Movement* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming), every woman with Lakota cultural connections discussed the devastating impact of the Pick-Sloan Act on their tribe and personal life.
11. The literature exposing the history of the boarding-school policy has dramatically increased in the last ten years. This history has also received recognition by Amnesty International as a human rights violation, and the Canadian government has officially apologized for its policy. Every interview I have ever conducted includes a traumatic boarding-school experience. See, for example, David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1997); Margaret Archuleta, Brenda J. Child, K. Tsianina Lomawaima, eds., *Away from Home: American Indian Boarding School Experiences, 1879–2000* (Phoenix: Heard Museum, 2000); and Ward Churchill, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2004).
12. The relocation program following World War II was another dramatic pendulum-swing in federal Indian policy, from self-determination back to assimilation. Scholar Donald Fixico is the expert on the termination and relocation policies. See his books *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945–1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990); and *The Urban Indian Experience in America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000). Troy Johnson's first chapter in *American Indian Occupation of Alcatraz Island* directly connects the outgrowth of activism to the relocation program.
13. Ken Tilsen donated the WKLD/OC papers to the Minnesota Historical Society. See also John William Sayer, *Ghost Dancing the Law: The Wounded Knee Trials* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), for a full history of WKLD/OC.
14. Pine Ridge residents have claimed that during the period known as the "Reign of Terror," approximately sixty tribal members were murdered, homicides that have gone unsolved to this day. There is little evidence other than consistent oral-history testimony and that it was referenced in Peter Matthiessen, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (New York: Penguin, 1992).
15. It survived the transformation from a private AIM school to alternative-school status, to its current charter-school designation in 1999.
16. Data on the Twin Cities schools was drawn from archival documents, including the school newsletter, located in the Ethnic Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley.
17. I have interviewed Mark Tilsen (2005), Marcella Gilbert (2003, 2008), Roddy Little (2008), and Lakota Harden (2001, 2004), all of whom attended WWRSS and commented on the freedom as well as the chaos that came with a large degree of self-supervision as young people.
18. Cultural Learning Center, fundraising document, produced in 1975, personal archival collection of Madonna Thunder Hawk.
19. The survival schools created during the Red Power Movement shared some of the same motivations of racial-group empowerment in their formation as those schools established by black and Latino groups. The primary difference for Native activists was utilizing these schools as a means of recovery from the damage of boarding schools. In order to establish some universalities in the experience, these schools formed the

- Native-Controlled Federation of Survival Schools. The We Will Remember Survival School was different from the others because Thunder Hawk, Lorelei DeCorra, and Ted Means rejected any state funding, which they felt would compromise their goals and they might be forced to follow state curriculum guidelines.
20. The founding conference for WARN was held in September 1978 in Rapid City. The program from the conference reflected these areas of priority. These documents are held in the private collection of Madonna Thunder Hawk and will be scanned and made available through www.warriorwomen.org.
 21. *WARN Report I* (1979): 4. The *WARN Report* can be found in the Native American Studies Library at the University of California, Berkeley.
 22. Colleen Ragan, interview with author, March 6, 2009.
 23. See Zoltan Grossman, "Unlikely Alliances: Treaty Conflicts and Environmental Cooperation between Native American and Rural White Communities," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 29:4 (2005): 21–43. Scanned copies of the BHA newsletter and the handbook for the Black Hills International Survival Gathering held in 1980 will be available at www.warriorwomen.org.
 24. Carol Downer, e-mail interview with author, July 30, 2008.
 25. Throughout 1994, this story was covered in the *Rapid City Journal*. See also Ginia Bellafante and Elizabeth Taylor, "Broken Peace," *Time*, July 31, 1995, available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,983255,00.html> (accessed July 24, 2009); and "Actor Kevin Costner's Bison Indian Center Provides Insight on American West," *Voice of America News*, August 23, 2003, available at <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2003-08/a-2003-08-23-6-Actor.cfm?moddate=2003-08-23> (accessed July 26, 2009).
 26. *Indian Country?*, VHS, 26 minutes, 1972, Cinema Guild, New York, Producer Brenda Horsfield. The commission was established by Congress, who declared "it is timely and essential to conduct a comprehensive review of the legal and historical developments underlying the Indians' unique relationship with the federal government in order to determine the nature and scope of necessary revisions in the formulations of policies and programs for the benefit of the Indians." Most grassroots organizers on reservations foresaw no worthwhile results for the "average reservation Indian," which they felt was a necessity for any further research or reports conducted on or about Native people. Lloyd Meeds, "The Indian Policy Review Commission," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 40:1 (Winter 1976): 9–11.