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Collecting to the Core — Native American Activism

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Column Editor’s Note: The “Collecting to the Core” column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the Resources for College Libraries bibliography (online at http://www.rcwweb.net). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

Throughout 2016, protests in North Dakota over the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) near the northern border of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation placed Native American activism before the national media. Images of protesters fighting for water protection and tribal rights appeared on news broadcasts and feeds, demonstrating the reach, coordination, and media-savvy of today’s activist movements. As Matt Petronzio of Mashable observed, so successful were the social media efforts publicizing resistance to the pipeline that the Twitter hashtag #NoDAPL effectively became synonymous with the protest.¹ While such activism is hardly unprecedented, those not attentive to Native American affairs in the United States might think otherwise. Fortunately, there is a vibrant and still-growing scholarship available for exploring the historical context and precedents to contemporary Native American activism. This essay describes a selection of titles on Native American activism published over the last twenty years. This body of research has dramatically broadened the study of activism both chronologically and thematically, and it increasingly spans international boundaries in explicit comparison of the experiences of First Peoples around the globe. While early contributions to the literature discussed protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s, newer works help to illustrate a varied and extensive history of Native American activism. They also remind us of the degree to which the historical record itself is a tool for redress, and how scholarship and activism have long entwined and informed the study of Native American history.

In Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee (1996), Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior concern themselves, nominally, with just three events: the nineteen-month occupation of Alcatraz Island by Indians of All Tribes that began in November 1969; the cross-country Trail of Broken Treaties protest and subsequent occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs national offices in Washington, D.C., in 1972; and the siege at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation by members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) protesting corruption and abuses by the elected tribal government and its chair, Dick Wilson, in 1973.² Beautifully written and supported with dozens of interviews — so many the coauthors apologize to those whose stories they were unable to include — Like a Hurricane is expansive on the consequences of these protest actions, and Smith and Warrior produce a cohesive narrative exploring the concerted action and, often, disarray inherent in movement politics.

The Alcatraz occupation is the heart of American Indian Activism: Alcatraz to the Longest Walk (1997), edited by Troy Johnson, Joanne Nagel, and Duane Champagne.³ The collection ostensibly presents accounts of a decade of activist efforts from the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz Island to the Longest Walk in 1978, but the contributions themselves are almost exclusively concerned with Alcatraz, even as the editors set the event in conversation with dozens of subsequent occupations. Most of the collection’s contents are reminiscences and recollections by Alcatraz occupation principals, while several essays afford context and afterward. Johnson, Nagel, and Champagne argue that the Alcatraz occupation served as the nexus of other resistance efforts and pioneered the use of media attention to publicize injustices and promote direct social action.

More recent scholarship has positioned the actions of the 1960s and 1970s within a larger historical context and shifted some emphasis away from the activities of AIM and the Red Power movement. Paul McKenzie-Jones’s Clyde Warrior: Tradition, Community, and Red Power (2015) represents an exceptional portrait of a profoundly influential American Indian activist during the Red Power era.⁴ Although Clyde Warrior died in 1968, his role in crafting movement’s direction had lasting influence. As McKenzie-Jones demonstrates, Warrior did not reconcile “tradition” and activism; instead, his commitment to Ponca culture grounded his activism, and his intense devotion to his people was a predicate for intertribal organization. Warrior was one of the founders and leaders of the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC), which was established in Gallup, New Mexico, in 1961. The NIYC is the focus of Bradley Shreve’s Red Power Rising: The National Indian Youth Council and the Origins of Native Activism (2011).⁵ Shreve does not dispute the significance of Alcatraz, the BIA occupation, and the Wounded Knee incident; instead, he “seeks to illustrate how those episodes, and their main actors, followed in the footsteps of an earlier generation.”⁶ Shreve’s work illuminates a previous cohort of activists — one less urban, less male, and pointedly aware of their connection and continuity with tribal pasts, effectively broadening the discussion and scope of the Red Power movement.

Often, essay collections or collective narratives can best weave together the seemingly-disparate experiences that exemplify the breadth and diversity of Native peoples’ activism. Frederick E. Hoxie’s This Indian Country: American Indian Activists and the Place They Made (2012) seeks to reframe American Indian history by highlighting known and lesser-known players in the political and legal struggle for Incaled citizenship in the United States.⁷ Similarly, the sixteen essays in Beyond Red Power: American Indian Politics and Activism since 1900 (2007), edited by Daniel Cobb and Loretta Fowler, are wide-ranging and explicitly provide context, historical perspectives, and contemporary approaches to tribal sovereignty and activism.⁸ The most expansive and extraordinary such collection is Indigenous Women and Work: From Labor to Activism (2012), edited by Carol Williams.⁹ The seventeen essays in this volume explore place, context, and the role of women via diverse First Peoples communities from across the globe, including the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands, showcasing how work and activism entwine to sustain community and advance survival, dignity, and sovereignty.

The American Indian Movement has also been reconsidered in light of a more holistic approach to activism, much like recent studies of the Black Panther Party that have emphasized the organization’s contributions to health, education, and community welfare. Similarly, Julie Davis’s Survival Schools: The American Indian Movement and Community Education in the Twin Cities (2013) eschews protest to portray community-building actions, detailing AIM’s creation of the Red School House and Heart of the Earth school in the Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota, respectively.¹⁰ Davis’s account relies extensively on oral interviews to recover the experiences of the activists, teachers, students, and parents involved in this initiative, providing a useful example of how local activism can affect community education, child welfare, and juvenile justice.

Finally, it should be noted that much of the scholarship on this subject is deeply sympathetic to the individuals, organizations, and communities that they study. Sometimes this perspective is so ingrained as to make it difficult to critically assess the actions of the activists. This is an understandable concern, but it should not obscure the need for a critical, historical perspective on the subject.

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and objectives of the activism it describes. It is further important to note that such engagement in no way diminishes the rigor or accomplishment of these works. Perhaps no other work better exemplifies how scholarship can document resistance — or, in its study of the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk people, a “grounded refusal” to accede to ongoing settler colonialism — and serve to advance both cause and scholarship than Audra Simpson’s Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States (2014). An exquisite contemporary ethnography and powerful political argument, Mohawk Interruptus invites readers to appreciate not merely the tenacity of a people, but the audacity and activism of everyday lives. This and the other works discussed here are complex, sophisticated, and thoughtful scholarly treatments enlarged and enriched by interest, empathy, and in some instances profound commitment to activism and the historical record. They belong in any academic library collections, particularly those engaged with American Indian, civil rights, or social justice studies.  

Endnotes

1. Editor’s note: An asterisk (*) denotes a title selected for Resources for College Libraries.