

RED LAND, RED POWER



GROUNDING KNOWLEDGE
IN THE AMERICAN INDIAN NOVEL

SEAN KICUMMAH TEUTON

RED LAND, RED POWER



NEW AMERICANISTS

A SERIES EDITED BY DONALD E. PEASE

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Sean Kicummah Teuton

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For Artemis-Diana Nanyehi Yandell-Teuton
born 9 December 2005

This America
has been a burden
of steel and mad
death,
but, look now,
there are flowers
and new grass
and a spring wind
rising
from Sand Creek.

—Simon J. Ortiz, *From Sand Creek*

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PREFACE



In the shadow of ships, where riveters hammer and welders rain down showers of sparks, Dan McGhee sweeps wood and paint chips, steel shavings and cigarette butts, into a neat pile, when the whistle screams. On 21 September 1943, he tears open a Lucky Strike, sprinkles tobacco on the waves, torches another, turns his collar up, and shuffles out of the Oakland shipyard, heading home to his woman and supper. He plods through the Eastern garden, up the walkway to the strange, low porch steps of the rented home with Japanese architecture. A toe fumbles on the step, slips, and McGhee crashes to the ground, his head a confusion of love, loss, and home. Days later his wife, Oba, opens her grieving fingers and lets fall a train ticket in the conductor's palm. She smooths her dress, and then sits down to endure the rattled ride back to Oklahoma, her man's body awaiting only cars away. She swears never to ride the train again.

Like many other Native people of their generation, my great grandparents, unable to pay the taxes on their federal "allotment," had lost their land, and sold on the hope of what came to be called Indian "relocation." They left Oklahoma and headed to Oakland, California, for work during World War II. Born in 1877, Stooeastah, or Dan McGhee, experienced massive changes in the Cherokee Nation. In 1838, his own grandparents settled on Honey Creek, after their displacement west, in what came to be called the Trail of Tears. After 1898, McGhee witnessed the hegemony of the Curtis Act to allot communally owned Cherokee territory into individual parcels, a plan designed to conclude Cherokee tribalism by transforming the people into yeoman farmers, and, conveniently, selling off the so-called surplus land to European American settlers. McGhee watched the insidious railroads tear through his homeland, and he saw the final and desperate erasure of the Cherokee Nation when the promised Indian

Territory became the state of Oklahoma in 1907. Having been reared in a Cherokee school, having spoken Cherokee as his primary language, and having sworn off his painful “white man shoes,” I imagine that McGhee foresaw the end of his life when he finally headed west to the “darkening land,” the traditional destination of Cherokee souls. From his place in Cherokee history, one might see the life of McGhee as the clear-cut story of an Indian suffering a white man’s world. But lives intersect.

In the same year Dan McGhee died, Dillon Myer, working as the director of war relocation under Harry Truman, engineered the evacuation of Japanese Americans from their homes to concentration camps and even to Indian reservations. In so doing, their property, businesses, and homes were now conveniently available to other Americans. But this was hardly the first case of this form of injustice. In this pattern, groups of people have been demonized, dehumanized, criminalized, torn from their land, and sent into exile, thus making their property available for others to take. Indeed, in 1838 the Cherokees suffered a similar exile when seven thousand federal troops, under the command of General Winfield Scott, felled trees and built roads into isolated Cherokee mountain towns to strip, literally hand by hand, the people who kneeled there hugging their trees. So in 1943, Myer merely refined this program, albeit with utmost efficiency, when Japanese Americans were later “compensated” for their loss, though Cherokees have never been fully compensated for theirs. Later, as commissioner of Indian Affairs (1950–52), Myer designed the relocation program to move American Indians off their lands and into urban areas, thereby once again securing tribal mineral resources for the production of Cold War weapons and preparing Native peoples for the “termination” of their legal relationships as tribes with the U.S. government.

How strange, then, must have been that evening when my great-grandfather hit his head on the porch of the confiscated Japanese American home. Though separated by people and history, such histories often violently collide to reveal a shared stake in the future not only of subjugated groups but of all of us in the United States. Were Dan McGhee and Japanese Americans to know their shared part in this narrative of domination and were they to organize against it, what social justice might have blossomed in the United States? And, were all Americans to discern this entrenched pattern of demonization and exile, betrayal and theft in our colonial history, what ethnic cleansing might have been averted?

Beginning with such narratives, this book seeks to ground studies of American Indian life and art in a material past and present. For only in

linking and testing our theoretical claims in the real world will any of us ever really understand how over half of all Native people today reside in urban areas, or, despite this displacement, why Indian people so defiantly defend a distinct cultural identity. Indeed, in situating Indigenous literature within narrative histories that intersect, scholars expand and empower Native studies. For in so doing, we are asked to deal more honestly with unpleasant truths often expurgated from our histories, such as the lottery winners in Georgia who rushed to their stolen Cherokee homes or my great-grandparents who availed on the low rent of a confiscated Japanese American home. But while I seek to discover the historicizing narratives that, across cultural and social differences, often join us, I also attempt to claim different ground on particular histories that define us. Were we not to dare articulate those real events that shape discrete cultural identities, we risk undermining the very differences that enrich a diverse society.

Looking down the hill from Oakland, Dan McGhee would have seen Alcatraz Island, where Indians had been imprisoned since the 1870s. He never would have dreamed, however, that in a mere thirty years his grandchildren's generation would in 1969 occupy that worthless island for months in the name of Indian rights, thus setting off the Red Power movement of Native consciousness-raising and American Indian writing—the era and subjects of this book. Again, the ironies of Indian displacement pervade. Native people like my great-grandfather had been displaced to cities only to bolster a savvy population of Indigenous organizers. From my own experience, I was a child of that Red Power era, and, like a child, I lived on some of the innocent hope of the movement. During the 1970s, with my father often away, I saw my mother, Judith Fox, become beautiful. On afternoons, we five brothers would await her return from her waitress job, then rub her feet as she silently planned our escape with food stamps and a new husband. It was a time when she, like many inspired by Red Power, began to grow proud of her Indianness. As a first-generation college graduate and a professor of English, I recall those Indians of other eras and am made aware of the privileged ground on which I now stand, where such a life was not possible for Dan McGhee or Judith Fox. From such a view, I hope to look out on a new Indian Country where social transformation is for many of us now more than ever within our grasp. But, as I argue and demonstrate in this book, it is a transformation that must be theoretically grounded in the past and the land, in identity and experience, concepts I develop in the pages ahead.

To do so, I have sought to organize a new approach to Native studies. I begin by engaging a widespread theoretical assumption in the field, often growing out of poststructuralism, which I characterize as a rejection of our human capacity to make normative claims to knowledge. Denied this capacity, however, Indian scholars are unable to justify how Native cultures can change and still be authentic, or moreover, how Indigenous people can experience legitimate cultural or political growth in relation to community and land. I thus foreground the epistemological claims of this position to disclose its limitations in decolonizing Native America. My concern, however, about the usefulness of theory in American Indian studies should be understood as a forward-looking critical examination of what is thought to be a progressive position in the field.

With these practical goals for Native culture and literature in mind, I explore an alternative theoretical position drawn from Indigenous oral philosophy, which I call tribal realism. I link this view with other minority scholars, who develop a similar “postpositivist realist” view, which allows for genuine debate and exchange across cultures, while still respecting how social location may grant special access to knowledge. Though all of us may share a world, that world is also different for tribal peoples, especially as long as colonialism exists. Indeed, in recognizing these social facts of colonial control, tribal realism develops more secure knowledge about American Indian culture and literature. From this more grounded perspective, our theoretical attachments to history or culture are less obstacles to block objective knowledge than they are tools to serve it. Notwithstanding the humane goals of skeptical theories of knowledge, the U.S. government implicitly employs this position to disable Natives’ relationship to land, people, and self. For this reason, I argue that Indian people can and should engage such relations as a serious philosophical issue. Properly theorized, identity, for example, can produce reliable knowledge about a colonized world. From a realist perspective, such concepts are certainly mediated—but also relational. Identities are theories we develop in order to explain our pasts, our lands, our daily lives. Through identity we may intellectually evaluate our experiences, and new accounts of our experiences may demand a change in self-conception. In so doing we achieve a homeland and a culture and a politics.

I have set out to compose a more objective view to Native knowledge because without a workable understanding of how we know the world—in relation to our own selves, our personal and collective tribal pasts, our homelands, and our colonized present—we cannot adequately plan an

Indian future. Such an understanding must enable us to imagine and realize a decolonized Indian Country, first in terms of lands (as I show in part 1 of this volume) and then, growing from that ground, in terms of politics (part 2). In each chapter, these central cultural and philosophical issues facing Native peoples guide my readings of the *Red Power* novel, particularly as it represents the political and moral transformation of Native people responding to various forms of repression. *Red Power* provided the social vision for this kind of novel to emerge. This was a time when American Indian activists, scholars, and artists, across myriad differences, joined hands and raised their voices to claim a forgotten history and a stolen land. So began a political awakening that made available alternative narratives of tribal lives: new knowledge for a new Indian future.

How often it is that scholars, when meeting me, ask where I am from. As a Cherokee citizen with light skin, I imagine I invite curiosity when some seek to place me. But as I hope this book will show, our own worlds have a lot to do with what we come to know, and we come to know other worlds by examining and sharing our own. Trusting that truth, I offer much of myself in this book to be clear about from where and for whom I speak. As Dan McGhee's reluctant trail west would attest, to be "from" the land of one's ancestors is a right, ironically, denied many Indigenous people. Here, I work to show Indians like McGhee another way home, at least intellectually, where they may justify the recovery of land and culture. This book is my own best attempt to honor those lives.

INTRODUCTION



IMAGINING AN AMERICAN INDIAN CENTER

For the sake of our children, for the sake of the spiritual and material well-being of our total community we must be able to demonstrate competence to ourselves. For the sake of our psychic stability as well as our physical well-being we must be free men and exercise free choices. We must make decisions about our own destinies. We must be able to learn and profit by our own mistakes. Only then can we become competent and prosperous communities. We must be free in the most literal sense of the word.

—**Clyde Warrior**, February 1967

Do you see what happens when the imagination is superimposed upon the historical event? It becomes a story. The whole piece becomes more deeply invested with meaning. The terrified Kiowas, when they had regained possession of themselves, did indeed imagine that the falling stars were symbolic of their being and their destiny. They accounted for themselves with reference to that awful memory. They appropriated it, recreated it, fashioned it into an image of themselves—imagined it.

—**N. Scott Momaday**, March 1970

On 9 November 1969, a young American Indian student dove from a borrowed sailboat into the frigid waters of San Francisco Bay and swam 250 yards against swift currents to reclaim Alcatraz Island as Indian land. Richard Oakes, a Mohawk man from the St. Regis reservation in upstate New York, had migrated to San Francisco to join a community of Indigenous people “relocated” to urban areas during the 1950s

era of federal tribal termination.¹ By the 1960s, generations of Indian people in the Bay Area had grown restless about their displacement and poverty, and young people responded by organizing across tribal groups and raising their voices in public protest.² While attending San Francisco State College, Oakes worked to organize members of the Indian student group who shared a similar vision of renewal for American Indians. The San Francisco State College group soon reached out to bring its dream of change to Indian student organizations at the University of California at Berkeley and at Los Angeles. Among Native students, the Red Power Indian movement had begun.³

This book concerns the writing that began around 1969 and grew into an inspiring decade for American Indian people. During the era of Red Power, Native writers imagined a new narrative for Indian Country, and they did so neither by longing for an impossibly timeless past nor by disconnecting Indians' stories from the political realities of their lives. Instead, writers of the era struggled to better interpret a colonized world and then offered this new knowledge to empower the people. In this introductory chapter, I begin to chart the development of that liberating theoretical vision in the literature of Red Power.

Oakes's courageous leap into dangerous waters remains a fitting image of political change in Indian Country. Initially a defensive rampart during the Civil War, Alcatraz Island later became a prison for American Indian military leaders during the so-called Indian Wars of the nineteenth century. Reclaiming Alcatraz, the Red Power leaders believed, would lay bare one of the most glaring ironies of colonialism: Indigenous people imprisoned in their own lands.⁴ Oakes's plunge heralded a new form of Indian activism, shaped by those who had grown tired of the slow machinery of the federal government and who were deeply suspicious of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Red Power was as much physical as intellectual; Indian organizers drove the movement with the bodily momentum of drumming, singing, dancing, marching, and even swimming. Though the federal policies of termination and relocation unraveled entire communities, urban Indians were especially prepared to contend with the particular racial oppression they encountered in cities. In urban centers such as Minneapolis, Denver, and San Francisco, young Indian people came together to imagine a collective future free of U.S. government control. Urban displacement thus helped to create a startlingly new form of political activity in Indian Country: Red Power was young, urban, intertribal, and ready to confront an imperialist world with a full range of spiritual,

physical, and intellectual weapons. Red Power protesters were angry, but their anger was justified in the countless public disclosures of their colonial experiences in Native America. In this way, the movement grew not out of romantic claims to a pure Indian past and culture, as often characterized in the mainstream, but rather through an ongoing encounter with the world as members sought to produce more enabling accounts of American Indian lives. As Ponca activist Clyde Warrior describes it, Natives were prepared to “learn and profit” from their mistakes.

Aware of the unpredictable shifts in American attitudes, American Indian scholars and activists living in the midst of Red Power took advantage of an upsurge of interest in Indians to publish the crucial texts defining Red Power. In 1969, the young Sioux legal scholar Vine Deloria Jr. composed his “Indian manifesto” under the provocative title *Custer Died for Your Sins*. He chided U.S. culture for its fickle relationship to American Indians: “Indians laugh themselves sick when they hear these statements [that the United States must remain in Vietnam to keep its promises]. America has yet to keep one Indian treaty or agreement despite the fact that the United States government signed over four hundred such treaties and agreements with Indian tribes” (1988, 28). For many, the most exciting aspect of Deloria’s book was its vision of a liberated Indigenous future. His final chapter, “A Redefinition of Indian Affairs,” reads at times like the Ghost Dance prophecy of the nineteenth-century Paiute visionary Wovoka, in which industrialized America recedes, the bison repopulate the Plains, and Native people return to their ancestral homelands: “The eventual movement among American Indians will be the ‘recolonization’ of the unsettled areas of the nation by groups of Indian colonists” (263). Deloria recognizes the connection between Red Power and the African American freedom movement, but cautions that specific cultural groups must pursue specific goals: “Civil Rights is a function of man’s desire for self-respect, not of his desire for equality. The dilemma is not one of tolerance or intolerance but one of respect or contempt. The tragedy of the early days of the Civil Rights movement is that many people, black, white, red, and yellow, were sold a bill of goods which said that equality was the eventual goal of the movement. But no one had considered the implications of so simple a slogan. Equality became sameness. Nobody noticed it, but everyone was trained to expect it. When equality did not come, black power did come and everybody began to climb the walls in despair” (179). In 1969, Deloria was alerting Indian leaders that Red Power militancy risked attracting the same government-sponsored assassinations perpe-

trated by the FBI's COINTELPRO against the Black Power movement.⁵ Recognizing Black Power's tendencies toward romantic posturing, Deloria stressed the need for self-criticism that would allow the diversity within Indian Country to fuel but not burn out Red Power.

Ironically, the FBI would ultimately crush the militancy of Red Power only to see it reemerge in the form of a powerful revival of traditional spirituality in Indian communities. In his 1973 book *God Is Red*, Deloria summarized the surprising outcome of the year's occupations: "[A] result of the Indian activist movement was the tremendous surge of interest in traditional religions and customs. At the BIA occupation and again during the Wounded Knee confrontation, medicine men had been prominent in performing ceremonies for the activists" (1994, 23). Added to these cultural strides were material developments; the movement drove the passing in 1978 of new legislation such as the Indian Child Welfare Act and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act to protect Indigenous lives and customs. The revived interest in the recovery of Indian cultural identity and homelands, which consumes contemporary Native culture, derives directly from the intellectual and political vision of Red Power. Though it raises questions that I address below, the very presence of Native scholars in U.S. universities attests to the success of the movement and thus gives credence to Deloria's vision of a reflowering Indian America. Even more promising is that Indian communities may be carrying out the recolonization that Deloria hoped for decades ago. A front-page article in the *New York Times* in 2001 announced that for the first time in a century Natives comprised the fastest-growing population in North Dakota.⁶

Today, Indian scholars of Red Power build on the foundation laid by Deloria with research that traces the creative origins of Native cultural revival and that confronts some of the internal tensions within the Indian movement. Robert Warrior returns to the era: "By the late 1960s and early 1970s the diversity of the viewpoints among North American Natives had become so pronounced that no group was able to unify all the various elements" (1995, 34). Reservation Natives went west to add their voices to those of the protestors, though the struggles faced in rural places differed significantly from the problems faced by Bay Area Indian urbanites. Protestors disagreed on whether similar Indian rights struggles or different tribal beliefs, for example, should form the basis of the movement. Various tribal beliefs themselves differed significantly, ultimately underscoring the multiculturalism of twentieth-century Indian Country. Regretfully, activists often allowed their different experiences to divide

them and thus undermine Red Power philosophically. Because many of today's Indigenous scholars and activists consider the location of a shared experience a major goal of Red Power, they seek to balance tribal unity and tribal autonomy. For the new Native scholars, then, one central challenge is to reconsider the theoretical grounds for experience as in American Indian tribalism. To serve this need, I develop a more expansive concept of Native experience to better support an Indian liberation movement.

In fact, the search for common ground involving tribes with specific experiences has been a central political issue for centuries. Before Europeans arrived, tribal peoples began organizing across cultural and geographical boundaries in such powerful confederacies as the League of the Iroquois, which was formed at least as early as the sixteenth century. In 1763, the Ottawa leader Pontiac organized his so-called rebellion across Ottawa, Potawatomi, Ojibwe, Huron, and several other tribal groups. In 1806, the Shawnee leader Tecumseh gathered in solidarity the Shawnee, Kickapoo, Winnebago, Menominee, Ottawa, Wyandot, and dozens of other tribal nations to halt the further encroachment of the United States into American Indian homelands.⁷ Aware of this history of pan-tribal alliances, Red Power activists developed a new, more sophisticated form of resistance to American imperialism. Boldly intellectual, they were better trained than their forebears to translate their culture-specific tribal values to European Americans.

Upon reclaiming Alcatraz for Native people, the Indians of All Tribes read their proclamation to the press. With bitter irony, they announced their discovery of a new uninhabited land and declared their right to remain by a treaty delineating a fair purchase of the tiny, worthless island: "We, the native Americans, re-claim the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians by right of discovery" (Josephy, Nagel, and Johnson 1999, 40). The protest statement exuded a new intellectual rigor that would characterize the Red Power movement. Red Power Indians presented a darkly humorous inversion of the deplorable state of Indian Country to encourage white Americans to view Native life more as Native people did. Movement organizers began by interpreting their experiences of colonialism on reservations, which they represented as thinly disguised prison camps designed to confine and control Indigenous people. As they looked around their world, they began to see their poverty not as the fitting consequence of their hapless lives, but as political subjugation enforced by an occupying power. In their proclamation, the Indians of All Tribes made explicit their formerly vague feelings of

hopelessness—their “imprisonment”—by audaciously declaring Alcatraz prison an appropriate site for a future Indian reservation:

We feel that this so-called Alcatraz Island is more than suitable for an Indian Reservation, as determined by the white man’s own standards. By this we mean that this place resembles most Indian reservations, in that:

1. It is isolated from modern facilities, and without adequate means of transportation.
2. It has no fresh running water.
3. It has inadequate sanitation facilities.
4. There are no oil or mineral rights.
5. There is no industry so unemployment is great.
6. There are no health care facilities.
7. The soil is rocky and non-productive; and the land does not support game.
8. There are no educational facilities.
9. The population has always exceeded the land base.
10. The population has always been held as prisoners and kept dependent upon others.

Further, it would be fitting and symbolic that ships from all over the world, entering the Golden Gate, would first see Indian land, and thus be reminded of the true history of this nation. This tiny island would be a symbol of the great lands once ruled by free and noble Indians. (41)

The document was a watershed for American Indians. With humor and irony, it expressed a clear analysis of colonialism. The colonizer comes to control tribal nations methodically so that, after the initial military conquest, the slow destruction of an entire culture is hardly noticed. Nations are brutally conquered, but the domination of a people occurs within the person, in a slow erosion of one’s sense of self-worth.

Following the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969, a decade-long flurry of events would define the time of Red Power. The era is now proudly remembered among seasoned organizers and continues to inspire a growing number of Indigenous scholars. Driven by Red Power, American Indian intellectuals recall the great moments of the Indian movement for Native liberation: the 1972 march on Washington for the Trail of Broken Treaties; the 1973 takeover of Wounded Knee; the 1975 intervention of the American Indian Movement on the Pine Ridge reservation; the 1978 Longest Walk on Washington to reenact the displacement of Indian peoples from

their homelands. Between these touchstone events, elders, faith keepers, students, scholars, and activists organized dozens of occupations of stolen American Indian territories, staged takeovers of corrupt BIA offices, and filed multiple legal claims demanding the return of stolen lands and property, as well as compensation for centuries of cultural destruction.⁸

During Red Power, Indigenous writers such as Kiowa intellectual N. Scott Momaday began to explore in the Native novel this process of political awakening as a moment of insight to understand oneself in relation to a dominant nation. Contrary to many current conceptions of culture, which assume that identity is largely externally imposed and therefore restrictive, Momaday and others harnessed Indian identity to serve their artistic vision and cultural renewal. Cultural identity during Red Power became a rich form of inquiry into one's past and cultural world. As a founding Indian voice at the rise of Red Power, Momaday declares his identity to be an inroad to a massive resource of tribal knowledge. In a well-known statement from a 1971 lecture, he explains how an encounter with his ancestral history granted him greater access to a more nuanced, more encompassing Native self-conception: "I think of myself as an Indian because at one time in my life I suddenly realized that my father had grown up speaking a language that I didn't grow up speaking, that my forebears on his side had made a migration from Canada . . . along with Athapaskan peoples that I knew nothing about, and so I determined to find out something about these things and in the process I acquired an identity" (quoted in Schubnell 1985, 141). Momaday does not present American Indian identity as self-contained or unchanging but rather embraces the complexity of tribal knowledge in which tribal identity is flexible and developing. He achieves identity through insight and hard work, in an interpretive process engaged with his own self-conception and a tribal world.

Like Momaday, we require a reasonable means of evaluating different kinds of tribal and self-knowledge. This book studies a process similar to that which Momaday describes in his journey to Kiowa personhood. Momaday trained himself in his own cultural knowledge in a project of social and historical inquiry, through which he discerned a fuller account of his social and cultural situation. His new understanding of himself as a Kiowa man with a specific tribal history better explains his cultural background and present world: why his father spoke Kiowa but he himself did not, for instance. The author discovered his present Indian life to be hardly accidental but in part the product of a colonial history that system-

atically silenced Indigenous languages. From this realization, Momaday was led further to theorize his Native self, in what we might consider a moment of political awakening. What I will call the Red Power novel often presents a similar empirical process of decolonization, in which the interaction between the concepts of identity and experience drives a dynamic of political awakening and cultural recovery. To articulate this process, I engage identity not as a self-evident fact of birth but as a philosophical issue that can support and be supported by a more defensible and useful epistemological position. Ultimately, I target concepts such as identity and experience in order to investigate and build a strong position on Indigenous knowledge. Native cultural identities and tribal experiences can help us to understand how domination shapes the Indian world today. In turn, these new understandings transform American Indian identity. Momaday's corrected vision of a tribal past, land, and self, however, calls for a supple means of evaluating categories of culturally produced knowledge. For not all theoretical claims are equally justified. That is, we need to be able to deliberate among claims to knowledge not only in Indian America but also across national borders, where Indian-U.S. colonial relations frequently present competing histories. To illustrate, let me provide an anecdote from *Red Power* in which such contentious claims to identity and history likely precipitated a hate crime.

On 20 February 1972, the Yellow Thunder family found Raymond beaten to death in his pickup truck in Gordon, Nebraska, a small border town whose economy relied, in part, on the sale of liquor to the Oglala people of Pine Ridge, the neighboring Sioux reservation. Raymond Yellow Thunder was a middle-aged ranch hand who sought off-reservation work but returned home regularly. When he did not arrive one weekend, his family knew that something was wrong. An investigation revealed that four white men had grabbed Yellow Thunder while he was standing in front of a bar. They stripped him, beat him, and put him in the trunk of their car, then drove around for a while. Eventually, they took him to the American Legion hall, where a dance was underway. There, the abductors forced Yellow Thunder to dance for the crowd, and later beat him again. He escaped to his truck, there only to die. In response to this case of sadistic brutality came the emergence of the American Indian Movement (AIM), which arrived in Gordon to demand redress. Comanche intellectual Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Warrior introduce the incident: "It was a tremendous and unexpected response to the death of a rather ordinary man. Raymond Yellow Thunder's story reached out to every Indian person who

could see in him not just another Indian drunk, but a brother, a father, an uncle, or a cousin" (1996, 117). For many Indigenous people, Yellow Thunder's death served as an emblem of colonial oppression. In an era of growing Native consciousness, that beating emboldened American Indians to recover alternative histories and make evaluative claims against the dominant narratives that reproduced their subjugation.

Many citizens of Gordon, however, responded differently to Yellow Thunder's death. Suspiciously, local police and courts refused to allow the Yellow Thunder family to view the body. We can imagine the underlying racism that reproduces cultural and historical distortions to justify such a crime. A local rancher might have understood Yellow Thunder's presence, and that of other Natives from the nearby reservation, as an invasion of his town by an inferior people rather than as the result of his own country's treaty breaking and land theft. On hearing his claim, though, a historically informed person would likely conclude as erroneous the rancher's account of how European Americans came to possess Sioux territories. The rancher might even declare an inherent right to confiscate American Indian homelands based on a colonialist assumption that Indians comprise an inferior and thus doomed race that should make way for his civilization. On this manifest destiny, he would be obligated to colonize Indian lands and force Native people to surrender their "savage" ways. Like Indigenous peoples' own claim to history, this rancher's cultural narrative is clearly socially constructed, but to a large U.S. population a colonialist history and a white supremacist identity would seem flawed because such notions inaccurately account for our colonial past and attempt to justify the denial of human worth. They do not describe the world that all of us, white or Indian, know. I argue that, whether culturally inherited or politically chosen, our claims to knowledge can—indeed, must—be evaluated. We need a way to distinguish between cultural narratives that provide assessments of colonialism or protect human worth and narratives that condone imperialism or allow racist domination. To make these distinctions, we can engage concepts such as experience and identity as theoretical tools to produce knowledge of our shared world. Simply put, it is unacceptable to say that all knowledge is constructed and to leave it at that. How people explain themselves in the world entails real political consequences for which all of us must be accountable.

During Red Power, Indians offered public reevaluations of competing histories. In reclaiming Alcatraz Island for Native people, they reclaimed and revalued the lives of American Indians like Raymond Yellow Thun-

der. They began to recover the “true history of this nation” in the suppressed history of American lands “once ruled by free and noble Indians.” The growth of Red Power thus describes what I find to be a practical implementation of an alternative, historically grounded theory. I read Red Power as a materialist, political, and artistic vision that informs today’s Native writers and scholars. In the midst of the Indian movement, vaguely felt experiences of colonialism were made explicit and were evaluated for accuracy in explaining Indigenous lives and their relationship with the United States. Red Power leaders gleaned new social knowledge through their political work, knowledge that was verified or revised as the movement grew: “If Oklahoma Indians realized the repressive conditions under which they lived, many simply accepted that Indians’ fortunes were supposed to be harder than whites because Indians were stupid. However, most of the Oklahoma tribes maintained their own societies and ceremonies belying the myth of inferiority that kept them in social and economic bondage” (V. Deloria 1994, 7). With the inspiration of Red Power, American Indians began to ask why mainstream stories of Indian degradation contradicted their own experiences of a rich cultural life. In declaring and sharing their right and capacity to express themselves culturally, many Natives began to recover their tribal knowledge and to strengthen their identities as they elaborated new, more enabling accounts of Indian domination and resistance.

While they practiced their new theoretical vision of justice for Indian peoples, Oakes and other American Indian students were refining this vision in American universities. Native students brought their identities and experiences to college campuses, creating “Native American studies.” Pressuring universities to accept a more diverse student body, American Indian students and professors demanded a place in the university for the production of Native ideas in a body of knowledge produced by and for American Indian people. Crow Creek Sioux scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn recalls participating in this exciting moment for Indigenous people: “For four days in March 1970, American Indian scholars met at the First Convocation of American Indian Scholars at Princeton University. . . . This milestone event set the agenda for strategy discussions that would bring about a change in the way Native life in America was studied. The main aim of these discussions was to assert that Indians were not just the inheritors of trauma but were also the heirs to vast legacies of knowledge about this continent and the universe that had been ignored in the larger picture of European invasion and education” (1997, 9). Departing

from the ingrained anthropological approach to studying Native peoples, American Indian scholars announced that the study of a people is likely to improve when the people themselves contribute to it. Most importantly, notice the scholars' imaginative shift in self-conception: Natives are not helpless victims of colonial devastation, but instead the shrewd protectors of Indigenous thought. Like the Red Power activists on Alcatraz, like the Indians of Oklahoma, these Native intellectuals underwent a moment of creative realization. For decades, mainstream academics had said that Native people were spiraling in decline: depressed by their cultural loss they continued to lose their culture. But this assumption failed to explain why Native people were still dancing and still practicing the old ways, as well as continually inventing new ones—on Alcatraz, on reservations, in cities, in universities. If American Indians were hopelessly conquered, how could they be sharing tribal knowledge at Princeton? At the close of the decade, Native scholars and organizers had built from the ground up a process-oriented view of Indigenous knowledge and a vision of cultural renewal to inform the criticism, politics, and art of American Indians. I now introduce these interrelated theoretical issues as they inform the Red Power movement, the growth of Native studies, and the organization of this book.

American Indian Studies Today

Into the 1980s, the production of American Indian cultural knowledge as a discipline remained a site for imagining a Native emergence. Yet, despite Red Power's historicist beginnings, Native scholars such as Paula Gunn Allen, Ward Churchill, and Annette Jaimes began to espouse what many today might call essentialist conceptions of American Indian life.⁹ In their stance on Indigenous nationhood, such scholars and organizers often did not consider more complex accounts of the diverse and changing tribal consciousness in North America. In forceful, exhortative tones, such intellectuals frequently drew on a collection of idealist notions about Indian history, culture, and identity. In advancing such a critical discourse, they hoped to establish a clearly defined infrastructure from which to resist the intellectual and material invasions of the U.S. mainstream. Of the many issues they addressed, the concept of identity was the most contentious. To build an anticolonial movement, these scholars argued, Natives must have a clear understanding of the contemporary tribal self. American Indian scholars composed an often essentialist program

not only to benefit Indigenous people but also to edify those who had been defining—indeed, naming—tribal peoples for centuries.

Of course, the essentialist formulation preserves but also limits Native knowledge. From this approach to Indigenous inquiry, Native people become restricted in their capacity to know the world. Each tribal person, on this view, possesses an unchanging, self-evident tribal understanding. In *The Sacred Hoop*, Laguna and Sioux scholar Paula Gunn Allen famously describes this perspective as “a solid, impregnable, and ineradicable orientation toward a spirit-formed view of the universe, which provides an internal structure to both our consciousness and our art, . . . [and is] shared by all members of tribal psychic reality” (1992, 165). Note the rigid language of Allen’s declaration: a single worldview held by “all” Native people is provided intact, in advance, and cannot be revoked, for it is an “internal” and “ineradicable” essence. In this restrictive view of tribal awareness, Native people have little room to develop. Allen’s essentialism might have led the Lakota people to refuse the entrance of the horse, which was to become central to their culture. In Indian Country, tribal people looking to their own cultural histories might question Allen’s generalization. Like the leaders of Red Power, they might also seek cultural improvement, an achievement that her essentialist views often disallow. Beyond Indian Country, in the universities where many American Indian intellectuals work, one comes to understand the charge of essentialism that Allen’s declaration invites. The category of Indian is, in fact, not homogeneous across space and time but rather responds to the contingencies of history. Accepting this fact in the scholarly work of Native studies, Muskogee scholar Craig Womack writes: “To be sure, there is no one pure or authoritative act that constitutes Native literary criticism” (1999, 5). When struggling, however, to support our claims regarding tribal origins, homelands, nationhood, and spirituality, some Native scholars today unnecessarily rely on various forms of essentialism. Such claims do require defense, but they need not be essentialist. To serve this need, in this study I introduce the concept of an Indigenous “center” of Native thought to develop a theory of Indian identity, tribal experience, and social transformation. Employing Indigenous and Western philosophical notions of evaluation and knowledge, thereby avoiding essentialism, I propose an epistemological view of communally conferred objectivity, which I call *tribal realism*. I define and elaborate this position in the pages ahead.

Today, most Indian scholars, in some way, respond to the above question of change in tribal knowledge, and so their work might be loosely

characterized in relation to three intellectual attitudes toward essentialism: some scholars defend essentialism as a necessary political strategy; others reject it by exposing its fixed claims to knowledge; still others resolve it by historicizing their ideas. Of course, these theoretical views often converge, diverge, or entangle, sometimes within a single scholar's argument. Native intellectuals who take the second path often turn to various forms of poststructuralism in order to liberate static views of knowledge regarding American Indian history, experience, and identity.¹⁰ In the 1990s, American Indian scholars such as Kimberly Blaeser, Louis Owens, and Gerald Vizenor began this dismantling of such supposed cultural foundations. Building on Anishinaabe theorist Vizenor's notions of "trickster discourse" and "mixedblood" or "crossblood" identity,¹¹ such scholars have sought to correct the essentialist insistence that Native culture remains immutable despite external social and historical influences. Anishinaabe critic Kimberly Blaeser discusses Vizenor's introduction of the oral traditional trickster conception of identity to American Indian studies: "In Vizenor's writing the trickster figure becomes nearly synonymous with and a metaphor for the tribal mixedblood, whose symbolic role is to subvert the artificial distinctions of society. Like the trickster, whose very identity reflects all duality and contradiction, the mixedblood is a marginal character, one who exists on the border of two worlds, two cultures, the white and the Indian. In fact, the existence of the mixedblood resists even that definitiveness" (1996, 155). While an era might be behind us, some Native scholars and most non-Native scholars still accept Vizenor's view of tribal knowledge, perhaps because, as Blaeser describes, the trickster either promises to liberate Indigenous identity, or, more modestly, helps to challenge colonialist stereotypes. Yet perhaps most attractively, the trickster provides a model to survive a capitalist world at war with tribalism. I imagine that this hope underlies the late Choctaw-Cherokee scholar Louis Owens's interest in this position on Indian selfhood and, more deeply, on knowledge. Indeed, Owens appears to choose a mixedblood trickster identity as the only perceived alternative to essentialism: "For those of us who, like most of the authors we recognize as Native American, are mixedbloods, the hybridized, polyglot, transcultural frontier is quite clearly internalized. For all of us, however, territory remains a constant threat, an essential fiction of the colonial mind" (1998, 27). Beneath such claims seems a view of knowledge as necessarily unstable, yet purportedly liberating in its very instability: "Frontier, I would suggest, is the zone of the trickster, a shimmering, always changing zone