

**“In Sisterhood I Will Remain Strong:”  
Indigenous Women’s Resistances, Writings, and Relations, 1970s-1980s**

By Yara Doumani

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
in the Department of History at Brown University  
Thesis Advisor: Naoko Shibusawa  
April 21, 2022

## Acknowledgments

To my advisor Naoko Shibusawa and to the Writing Group.

To my mentor Bathsheba Demuth.

To my thesis writing friends Anna, Ari, Audrey, Basil, Clara, Hanna, Isabella, Jamila, Madi, and Max. Thank you for ensuring that this thesis exists.

To my loving family. My sister Tala, mother Issmat, and father Beshara. My aunts Anan and Adalah. My great uncle Halim.

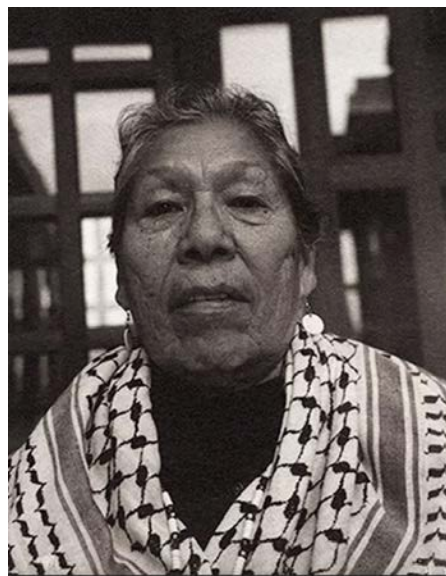
Thank you.

This thesis benefits from access to archives and other privileges of institutional support at Brown University, whose wealth and existence is a result of its continued settler-colonial occupation of unceded Narragansett ancestral homelands in so-called Providence and the stolen lives and labor of enslaved Africans. This work is done in commitment to liberation.

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This thesis embodies a small part of the many responsibilities I have--as a settler on Turtle Island and a queer Palestinian woman--to furthering Indigenous Peoples' resistance to settler colonialism in the ongoing struggle for sovereignty and total liberation. I came to this project nearly two years ago when I learned of Oohenumpa Lakota matriarch and radical Madonna Thunder Hawk's trip to Palestine in 2018, where she engaged in building networks of transnational solidarity and kinship with Palestinians on the ground. Thunder Hawk framed her visit as a continuance of a long-standing commitment to transnational solidarity between Palestinians and Native peoples and their "same land-based Indigenous struggles" since the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> She participated in forging this connection when she and her comrades received a delegation of Palestinian liberation fighters who came to bolster the Lakota peoples' resistance movement in the wake of the federal government's violent crackdown on the Wounded Knee Occupation of 1973.



(Warrior Women Banner)<sup>2</sup>

This photo of Thunder Hawk wearing a keffiyeh--a symbol of Palestinian resistance which has become emblematic of the ongoing struggles for liberation everywhere--brought me to her present work with the Warrior Women Project. The Project's mission is to tell the ongoing activist life histories of Thunder Hawk and other Indigenous matriarchs to "illuminate the past in a way that inspires a radical present."<sup>3</sup> This thesis shares this objective. As Thunder Hawk proclaimed while in Palestine: "Young people are on the move. So change is going to happen. All over. Here and back home."<sup>4</sup> This is a beginning. This is a continuance.

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<sup>1</sup> Madonna Thunder Hawk, "Similarities between Indigenous struggles Live from Palestine 🇵🇸," Facebook Live Stream, January 9, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/1325631535/videos/10215247079793379/>.

<sup>2</sup> Warrior Women Project, 2021, <https://www.warriorwomen.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Madonna Thunder Hawk, "Similarities between Indigenous struggles Live from Palestine 🇵🇸," Facebook Live Stream, January 9, 2018.

## Introduction

### “Let This be a WARning”<sup>5</sup>

In September of 1978, a community of over two hundred “grandmothers, mothers, aunties, nieces, [and] sisters” from dozens of Indigenous nations across the so-called United States and Canada gathered in a community center in Rapid City, South Dakota.<sup>6</sup> There, at the Mother Butler Center, these women sought to “combine...energy [in] struggling for the future generations” and formed the intertribal Women of All Red Nations (WARN).<sup>7</sup> Together, they sought to address the issues they identified as the “most immediate [to the] very survival” of Indigenous women and peoples in the late 1970s: land usurpation, energy resource extraction, coercive sterilization, child removal, the destruction of familial relational structures, the lack of adequate youth education, and political incarceration.<sup>8</sup> WARN argued that in order to contend with these inextricably intertwined “genocidal processes,” Indigenous women must forge simultaneously far-reaching and grassroots networks of support, as well as engage in political organizing that is embedded in the home(land) and the family.<sup>9</sup> These strategies for resistance, and the very matriarchs who asserted them, remain the central drivers of current Indigenous sovereignty uprisings across Turtle Island more than four decades later.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Let this be a WARning,” *Off Our Backs*, December 1978, 9.

<sup>6</sup> “Who We Are,” *Women of All Red Nations: W.A.R.N.*, 1978, 4.; Elizabeth Castle, “‘The Original Gangster’: The Life and Times of Red Power Activist Madonna Thunder Hawk,” in *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*, ed. Dan Berger (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 273.

<sup>7</sup> “Who We Are,” 4.; Many prominent founding members were leaders of the Red Power Movement, including Phyllis Young (Standing Rock Lakota/ Dakota), Pat Bellanger (White Earth Ojibwe), Lorelei DeCora Means (Oglala Lakota and Winnebago, Thunder Bird Clan), Agnes Williams (Wolf Clan enrolled Seneca), Lakota Harden (Minnecoujou/Yankton Lakota and HoChunk), Janet McCloud (Tulalip Tribes), and Madonna Thunder Hawk (Oohenumpa Lakota).

<sup>8</sup> “Who We Are,” 4.; “Women of all Red Nations (W.A.R.N.),” *Akwesasne Notes* (Mohawk Nation, Akwesasne), Winter 1978, 15.; While I open with WARN—an entity that historians have credited as a “launching pad for other Native women’s organizing”—there is no singular organization or history which exhaustively encompasses the diverse activism of Native women in the late 1970s to the mid 1980s. Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows: the Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2019), 118.

<sup>9</sup> “Who We Are,” 4.; “Political Organization at Home,” *Women of All Red Nations: W.A.R.N.*, 1978, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Among others, matriarchs Madonna Thunder Hawk and Phyllis Young led Water Protectors in the Standing Rock uprisings against the Dakota Access Pipeline, and in the anti-Keystone XL Pipeline movement.

This activism has a longer history than most realize. Following Termination policies and laws that attempted to dismantle tribal sovereignty from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, the Nixon administration years (1969-1974) marked an era of reform concerned with quelling Indigenous dissent without challenging the colonial order of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) or effectively addressing the concerns of Native peoples from reservations to urban cities.<sup>11</sup> Dissatisfied with this surface-level disavowal of genocidal policies, and in the context of post-WWII radical movements, intertribal Red Power activists built upon long traditions of sovereignty activism to address the calls for justice made by Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island. In 1968, a group of young urban Anishinaabe (Chippewa) founded the American Indian Movement in Minneapolis, Minnesota in response to rampant anti-Native police brutality.<sup>12</sup> Partially modeled after the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, AIM initially served as a neighborhood patrol and worked on the grassroots level to secure housing, education, jobs, and safety for relocated Native peoples. Violent Federal relocation laws and policies in the 1950s and 1960s directed at throttling Indigenous sovereignty by removing Native peoples from their community networks and homelands and relocating them in urban centers, ultimately “helped birth a new movement [including but not limited to AIM] that arose from both poverty-stricken urban ghettos and rural reservations...[forming] a radical, explicitly anti-colonial political consciousness that took the world by storm.”<sup>13</sup> AIM grew to address treaty rights, political and

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<sup>11</sup> From 1953-1964, Federal recognition of 109 tribes were terminated and reservation lands rendered open for white settlement and capitalist development. Termination was also a regime of coercive assimilation, cultural genocide, and criminalization of Indigenous peoples and practices. Felix S. Cohen, *Cohen's Handbook of Federal Indian Law*, 2012; When established by the Federal Government in 1824, the BIA resided within the War Department and was later transferred to the Department of the Interior in 1849 to expand federal legal and judicial control over Indigenous nations.

<sup>12</sup> Donna Hightower Langston, “American Indian Women’s Activism in the 1960s and 1970s,” *Hypatia*. 18, 2 (2003): 117.; Ward Churchill, “The Bloody Wake of Alcatraz: Political Repression of the American Indian Movement during the 1970s,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 18, no. 4 (January 1, 1994): 254, 255.

<sup>13</sup> Most notably the Indian Relocation Act of 1956.; Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso, 2019), e-book 239.

land sovereignty, the removal of Indigenous children, as well as Indigenous cultural continuance and revival, building Red Power across Turtle Island and internationally. 1978, the year at the heart of this project, was also a year during which laws concerning the protection of Indigenous children and religious freedom were formally established but not meaningfully implemented.<sup>14</sup> These women were organizing within continuing legacies of radical resistance to settler-colonial empire which understood the settler-carceral state as an institutionalizer of genocide rather than a site for liberation.

By bridging the structural and the personal, Indigenous women's activism thus filled a dire lacuna in organizing in the late 1970s in ways that were capable of addressing the needs of Native women, youth, and future generations targeted for violence. They did so, through forging communal and interpersonal relations of political power and care in ways that galvanized the struggles for sovereignty and kin, despite the seemingly insurmountable settler-colonial violences of cisheteropatriarchy, capitalist extraction, and incarceration in the so-called United States. Through an exploration of the writings and histories of four Native women political prisoners, this thesis argues that their fights for intersectional and intergenerational liberation in the late 1970s to the mid-1980s helped forge a distinctive liberatory political imagination that has become central to struggles for just futures in the present decolonial moment.

This thesis seeks to make three key interventions. First, it contributes to an understanding of "the many hidden histories of 1970s radicalism," through an exploration of Indigenous women's activism from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s in the United States.<sup>15</sup> This period and its actors are often overlooked in the historical study of late 20th century US-based radicalisms

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<sup>14</sup> Notably the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA) and the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). The ICWA brought an end to the Indian Adoption Project, which had made it so that up to 35% of all Native children were presently or previously placed in settler adoptive families or foster homes. Manuel P. Guerrero, "Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978: A Response to the Threat to Indian Culture Caused by Foster and Adoptive Placements of Indian Children," *American Indian Law Review* 7, no. 1 (1979).

<sup>15</sup> Dan Berger, *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010) 5.

generally, and of Indigenous radicalisms specifically. It was a time when global and national attention previously captured by the sensationalized Red Power occupations had waned; and the struggles for sovereignty and future generations that continued on the grassroots level were largely ignored by scholars and activists. Second, this thesis utilizes a micro-history approach to center the unique stories, activisms, and theorizations of four Indigenous women political prisoners: Yvonne (Wanrow) Swan (Sinixt Arrow Lakes Band Colville), Rita Silk-Nauni (Standing Rock Sioux), Angie Whiterock (Paiute), and Raven Darkwing (Cherokee). This work contributes to literatures that demand cisheteropatriarchy, environmental violence, and carcerality be understood as rooted in settler colonialism, in order to formulate adequate anticolonial, anticapitalist, abolitionist, and feminist frameworks for liberation. Third, it contributes to theorizing decolonial archival work by turning to hitherto ignored vernacular sources such as activist life-writings and public-facing ephemera. These sources constitute what Black Historian and abolitionist Kelly Lytle Hernández terms the “rebel archive,” or “[t]he words and deeds of dissidents” which persisted despite settler-carceral state forces to silence and disappear their existences and resistances.<sup>16</sup> I argue that these archives serve not only as source material within which this thesis’ events are documented, but as actors themselves in constituting these histories. In writing these largely untold histories, this thesis aspires to amplify the persisting demands for liberation detailed herein.

#### A. Historiography and (Re)Periodization

The 1970s in US history marked the rise of neoliberalism and the accelerated expansion of the carceral state. Historians have interpreted these developments in part as a

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<sup>16</sup> Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 4.

counterinsurgency response to the successes of radical antiracist and anticolonial grassroots organizing in the wake of WWII. After the upheavals of the 1960s, the “long 1970s” became a time in which such organizing fought to persist, change, and grow. The voices of multiply minoritized activists, including Indigenous women, came to the fore in this period in order to build and sustain movements that could not only meet grassroots needs and withstand the wrath of state repression, but also fight the reproduction of hierarchies of power *within* activist spaces. I explore how the Native women within this thesis, not unlike other radicals of the 1970s, engaged in political activism that were “frequently messier and often smaller” than during the 1960s by radically mobilizing in decentralized and interpersonal ways.<sup>17</sup> Because these alternative and more quotidian forms of political practice have been devalued and or ignored, historian Dan Berger aptly categorizes this understudied period of radicalism as “the hidden 1970s.”<sup>18</sup>

Scholarship on Indigenous US-based radicalism tends to fixate on what is commonly considered the rise and fall of the Red Power Movement, bookended from the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969 to following the American Indian Movement’s (AIM) trajectory from the Wounded Knee Occupation in 1973 till the completion of the Longest Walk in 1978. This periodization has gone mostly unchallenged due to the influence of widely cited works such as Alvin Josephy’s *Red Power: The American Indians’ Fight for Freedom* (1971, 1999).<sup>19</sup> More recently, historian Daniel Cobb has problematized this periodization, highlighting the importance of adopting more expansive and holistic understandings of Native resistance in the post-World War II era. Cobb pushes the timeline back a decade before the 1969 threshold to explicitly

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<sup>17</sup> Dan Berger, *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010) 5.

<sup>18</sup> Berger, *The Hidden 1970s*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Originally published in 1971, Josephy’s edited volume came out in an updated version in 1999. Alvin Josephy, Jr., Troy R. Johnson, Joane Nagel, eds., *Red Power: The American Indians’ Fight for Freedom*, 2nd. ed., (1971, Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1999).

“decenter” AIM and spotlight Native political work that took alternative forms to sensationalized direct action, such as grassroots community building and rights-based legal and policy efforts.<sup>20</sup> This approach informs my project which begins in 1978, the very year when the literature drops off. I focus on the late 1970s to the mid 1980s, a time in the wake of violent state-led counterinsurgency efforts to dismantle Red Power in the previous years.<sup>21</sup> In so doing, I examine how Indigenous women built power and strengthened communities in ways that both furthered and diverged from the afterlives of Red Power--how they reimagined the realm of the political as embedded within the everyday and the personal. The thesis also challenges the historical scholarship that positions Native women’s activism in the post-1978 period as purely reactionary, be it to either the “outright counterinsurgency warfare” of assassination, incarceration, and surveillance of male Red Power leaders or “due to the dissatisfaction...with the male domination of AIM.”<sup>22</sup> Instead, the histories within this thesis illustrate that these women were doing organic work on their own behalf and alongside communities who had, in many ways, fallen through the cracks.

Histories on Indigenous radicalisms post-WII overwhelmingly center the same male figureheads who drew mass media attention at the time of Red Power, relegating Native women activists to “appear as mere background figures in most literature.”<sup>23</sup> Such gaps in the secondary

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel M. Cobb, *Native Activism in Cold War America: The Struggle for Sovereignty*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 1-2.

<sup>21</sup> Legalized and extrajudicial surveillance, assassinations, and imprisonments by FBI COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program) operations against AIM dramatically grew during the three years following the Wounded Knee occupation. While local chapters are still active to varying degrees, AIM formally disbanded in 1978 following the incarceration of many of the movement’s leaders.

<sup>22</sup> Ward Churchill, “The Bloody Wake of Alcatraz: Political Repression of the American Indian Movement during the 1970s,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 18, no. 4 (January 1, 1994): 254.; Sandra K. Baringer, “Indian Activism and the American Indian Movement: A Bibliographical Essay,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 21, no. 4 (September 22, 1997): 229.;

<sup>23</sup> Devon A. Mihesuah, *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), xviii.. Canonical works of note implicated in this include Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche) and Robert Allen Warrior’s (Osage) *Like a hurricane: The Indian movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee*, as well as Josephy et al.’s *Red Power*; cited above.

literature have simultaneously laid a porous foundation for, and made all the more necessary, a strengthening of our base knowledge by illuminating the histories of radical Indigenous women in the subsequent post-1978 years. Since the 1980s, and especially with a surge that began in the early 2000s and continues to the present moment, Indigenous women scholars have worked to unsettle and address these silences in this historical narrative.<sup>24</sup> Cherokee women scholars Susan Applegate Krouse and Donna Hightower Langston have each asserted that Native “women’s activism, while less visible, has been crucial to sustaining Indian communities...and to maintaining the momentum begun in the heady days of the 1960s and 1970s. We need to look more closely at the contributions of women,” and ensure that these “now revered elders[’]...contributions receive recognition in their lifetime and in generations to follow.”<sup>25</sup> This thesis is oriented as a response to these calls for epistemic justice. It aims to further these interventions being made by focusing on radical Indigenous women’s histories and world-building in the late 1970s to the mid 1980s. Indigenous women being written out of this history is part of a broader fraught legacy of scholarship as a colonial tool, further informing how as a queer Palestinian woman and settler here on Turtle Island, I aim to be accountable to the peoples I write about and with.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The 1980s marked a period in which “the study of Native American women [was] flowering” after decades of silence and poor scholarship. This shift in the literature was paralleled by a rise in Indigenous women’s activism where these women “defined their own problems and began to articulate their own Native American and female solutions.” Rayna Green, “Native American Women,” *Signs* 6, no. 2 (1980): 265, 256. All three of the pieces mentioned within this paragraph were published in 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Applegate Krouse, “What Came out of the Takeovers: Women’s Activism and the Indian Community School of Milwaukee,” *American Indian Quarterly* 27, no. 3/4 (2003): 533.; Donna Hightower Langston, “American Indian Women’s Activism in the 1960s and 1970s,” *Hypatia*. 18, 2 (2003): 130.

<sup>26</sup> Part of this accountability is building relationships with the women and organizations within this thesis. I am currently in touch with the Warrior Women Project team and hope that I may be able to become involved with and further their work. See the Preface for a more in-depth discussion of my relationship to this work. See for example the notable case of anthropologist Andrea Smith who is widely known for her ethnographic and theoretical work on sexual violence perpetrated against Indigenous women as a genocidal technology of settler colonialism, as well as for being a pretender who based her exploitative career by falsely claiming to be a Cherokee woman. Activist Pamela Kingfisher (Cherokee) wrote that “[b]y unknowingly providing national and international platforms for Andy [Andrea] to stand with us Native activists, to write our stories, I/we gave her credibility and freely shared our knowledge – filling her book pages and providing background to her claims.” Smith’s case remains as a check on how and all knowledge production implicates power. ICMN (Indian Country Media Network) Guest Editorial,

## B. Frameworks and Terminology

Writing on Indigenous peoples' diverse and dynamic histories and resistances, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz asserts that US historical scholarship requires a settler-colonial lens of analysis to dispel settler myths that obfuscate the inherently imperial, genocidal, and (settler)colonial nature of the United States.<sup>27</sup> This thesis heeds Dunbar-Ortiz's call--and upon the insistences of the women within my chapters--for history telling that employs a settler-colonial framework and centers the continuance of Indigenous sovereignties. Pulling centrally from scholars in Native and Indigenous Studies, I define settler colonialism as an ongoing structure which, through systemic genocide, attempts to dispossess and erase Indigenous peoples, sovereignties, and futures, and replace them with white-supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal, and capitalist settler orders.<sup>28</sup> I understand settler colonialism and racial chattel slavery and systemic anti-Blackness as mutually constitutive structures and processes of the US project rather than mutually exclusive and or hierarchable foundational violences.<sup>29</sup> The term genocide is operationalized by Indigenous women within this thesis to name the many systemic violences of settler colonialism that

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"Cherokee Women Scholars' and Activists' Statement on Andrea Smith," *Indian Country Today*, September 12, 2018, originally published on July 17, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>28</sup> See among other works Jodi Byrd's (Chickasaw Nation) *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*, and Nick Estes' (Kul Wicasa, citizen of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe) *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*. Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). Simpson Leanne Betasamosake, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso, 2019).; In addition to the term Native, I use specific tribal affiliations when available. With an understanding that borders are ahistorical to peoples, the term Indigenous inherently a political and often internationalist denotation. In *The Red Deal*, The Red Nation defines Indigeneity as "a political condition that challenges the existence and domination of colonial nation-states." The Red Nation, *The Red Deal: Indigenous Action to Save our Earth* (Brooklyn: Common Notions), 2021, 148.

<sup>29</sup> See Justin Leroy's "Black History in Occupied Territory: On the Entanglements of Slavery and Settler Colonialism" for a discussion of these entanglements, as well as Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang's "Decolonization is not a metaphor."

facilitate the attempted extermination of Indigenous peoples. Genocide is institutionalized within the settler state and society and pervasively manifests in outright and insidious forms (from the removal of Indigenous children, to the poisoning of water, to the criminalization of Indigenous religious practices, and so on.)<sup>30</sup> This thesis pays particular attention to how Indigenous women named and challenged how the US settler-colonial empire operates through the genocidal structures of cisheteropatriarchy, environmental violence, and carcerality.<sup>31</sup>

Cisheteropatriarchy is inherent in settler colonialism.<sup>32</sup> The imposition of Christianity and European cultural orders, the enactment of gender-based violence as conquest, the pathologization of diverse relational practices and gender identities as non-normative, and the attempted destruction of matrilineal/focal or gender-equitable Native orders, established cisheteropatriarchy as hegemonic and at the core of settler empire.<sup>33</sup> The persistence of such oppression, particularly as it manifested throughout Red Power in the 1960s and 1970s, partially “led to a new generation of Native women’s organizing” in the years explored throughout this thesis.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, as Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson writes: “An Indian woman’s body in settler regimes...is loaded with meaning—signifying land itself, the dangerous possibility of reproducing Indian life, and most dangerously, other political orders.”<sup>35</sup> Such an association between the body and the reproduction of Indigenous sovereignties has, therefore, made Indigenous women and others with marginalized gender identities the most

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<sup>30</sup> These definitions work alongside and challenge legal ones. See the 1948 UN Genocide Convention Article II: “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group...including (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

<sup>31</sup> Cisgender-normative heterosexual-normative patriarchy.

<sup>32</sup> Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows: the Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2019), 114.

<sup>33</sup> Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows*, 112.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>35</sup> Audra Simpson, “The State Is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders, and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty,” *Theory and Event* 19, no. 4 (2016): 7.

disproportionately targeted demographic for violence.<sup>36</sup> This thesis also pays particular attention to how cisheteropatriarchal violence facilitates resource extraction, which in turn, cyclically “intensifies a murderous [cis]heteropatriarchy, meaning that grounding resistance in Indigenous feminist interventions has become all the more urgent,” as historian and activist Nick Estes (Kul Wicasa, citizen of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe) has argued.<sup>37</sup>

In order to appropriately write the histories of the grassroots movements to protect unceded sacred lands and ensure the health and sovereignty of future generations by Yvonne (Wanrow) Swan and the Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance, this thesis understands environmental injustice perpetrated through extractivist capitalist projects as a tool to further the genocidal structure of settler colonialism. In the words of the Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance: the attempt to mine Mount Tolman “is a move of extermination and genocide of our future generation and the destruction of our heritage.”<sup>38</sup> Dina Gilio-Whitaker (Colville Confederated Tribes) historicizes “environmental injustice as a process of settler colonialism,” and argues, alongside the Native women in this thesis, that environmental justice necessarily requires a centering of Indigenous liberation, self-determination, and nationhood.<sup>39</sup> Within the context of the Energy Crisis of the long 1970s, during which the United States turned to exploit Indigenous lands for toxic energy extraction with increased voracity, these women were fighting to prevent their peoples and homelands from becoming a “sacrifice” used to literally fuel

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<sup>36</sup> “Gendered violence and anti-Indian violence have long upheld the colonial project of resource exploitation, relocation, displacement, and genocide” The Red Nation, *The Red Deal*, 54.

<sup>37</sup> Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso, 2019), e-book 55.

<sup>38</sup> “Special First Issue: HAZARDS OF MINING Generations of the Colville People,” *Generations of the Colville People* (January 1980): 1.

<sup>39</sup> Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows: the Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2019), 51, 52.; Gilio-Whitaker writes: “the eliminatory impulse and structure [colonization] created in actuality began as environmental injustice... To state it simply: if settler colonialism is environmental injustice and settler colonialism is a genocidal structure, then environmental justice as an analytic framework must be capable of acknowledging the extent to which historical environmental disruption structures Native lives today and should factor into the formation of EJ laws and policies.” Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows*, 36, 52.

settler-colonial empire.<sup>40</sup> As WARN member Pat Bellanger (White Earth Ojibwe) argued in 1979, the importance of resisting this “energy destruction” is most clearly demonstrated by the targeting of Indigenous land and water defenders for criminalization.<sup>41</sup>

In discussing the histories, writings, and activisms of incarcerated Native women, this thesis draws from Hernández’s notion of mass incarceration as an explicitly settler-colonial logic of “mass elimination,” to account for how incarceration functions through the “purging, removing, caging, containing, erasing, disappearing, and eliminating targeted populations from land, life, and society in the United States.”<sup>42</sup> As was true in the 1970s, Indigenous women make up one of the most disproportionately incarcerated populations in the United States today.<sup>43</sup> In her foundational ethnographic work with incarcerated Native women during the late 1990s, sociologist Luana Ross (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes) asserts that the production of Native criminality is inextricably linked to the loss of sovereignty, and that incarceration functions as cultural genocide.<sup>44</sup> Resistance to the use of incarceration as a tool to disrupt such social reproduction and kinship ties is a significant and poignant point of mobilization for Native women who, for generations, had to endure having their children removed from them by the settler state. Such concerns served as central interventions of Native women into the burgeoning feminist anti-violence and anti-carceral movement at this time. Consequently, Ross’

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<sup>40</sup> The crisis was precipitated by the oil embargo by the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) and the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

<sup>41</sup> Pat Bellanger, Lorelei Means, Vickki Howard, and Kris Melroe, “Interview: On the Edge of Extinction,” *Off Our Backs* 9, no. 5 (1979): 9.

<sup>42</sup> Her book *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965* investigates how Los Angeles became the “carceral capital” of the US, and therefore the world. Hernández’s use of ‘elimination’ draws from Patrick Wolfe’s seminal article, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native.” Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 1, 15.; Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8:4 (December 2006): 387-409.

<sup>43</sup> Leah Wang, “The U.S. Criminal Justice System Disproportionately Hurts Native People: The Data, Visualized,” *Prison Policy Institute* (blog), October 8, 2021, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/10/08/indigenouspeoplesday/>.

<sup>44</sup> Luana Ross, *Inventing the Savage: the Social Construction of Native American Criminality* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 2, 5.

scholarship--which came at a time when “the subject of imprisoned Native American women [was] virtually an unexplored area”--insists that scholarship must confront, rather than reproduce, the attempted invisibilization and erasure of incarcerated Native women by the settler-state. Doing this work, Indigenous and women of color scholars throughout the past decade have insisted on the importance of documenting incarceration and policing as gendered settler-colonial violences, in order to build the appropriate tools necessary to dismantle such systems.<sup>45</sup> This thesis seeks to contribute to the growth of this necessary work.

Among other Indigenous scholars’ definitions of sovereignty, I turn to Jodi Byrd’s (Chickasaw Nation) assertion that sovereignty is an ongoing act of interpretation and Indigenous peoples are unconquered and unconquerable.<sup>46</sup> The diverse practices of sovereignty by the Native women within this thesis include assertions of the inherent right to ensure the corporal, cultural, and spiritual health of future generations; claim and maintain relations to land; practice self-governance and political, economic, and cultural self-determination; disavow the legitimacy of the US nation-state and empire through any means necessary; as well as build and enjoy relations and communities of care.<sup>47</sup> Finally, a deep belief in the power of friendship and love frames my thesis.

### C. Decolonial History and The Archives

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<sup>45</sup> The three branches of the prison industrial system. Such foundational texts with explicit focus on incarcerated Native women include Luana Ross’ *Inventing the Savage: The Social Construction of Native American Criminality* and “Resistance and Survivance: Cultural Genocide and Imprisoned Native Women.” See also Trinidadian scholar Sherene Razack’s *Dying from Improvement: Inquests and Inquiries into Indigenous Deaths in Custody* and legal scholar Sarah Deer’s (Mvskogee) *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America*.

<sup>46</sup> Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xvi.; See Joanne Barker’s (Lenape) “For Whom Sovereignty Matters” in *Sovereignty Matters* and Glen Coulthard’s (Yellowknives Dene) *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*

<sup>47</sup> In formulating this definition, I am indebted to the thinking I did alongside my peers in the course “Collections and Colonialism” under the brilliant guidance of postdoctoral fellow Sophie Abramowitz. I understand self-determination as the ability to determine the destiny of one’s or a people’s own future.

This thesis draws from the Native and feminist presses, grassroots tribal and sovereignty movement publications, anti-prison newsletters and other public-facing ephemera, personal correspondences, poetry, oral histories, environmental and health studies, as well as legal documents.<sup>48</sup> Utilizing these “rebel” archival sources on their own terms, and to read against the grain of ‘official’ hegemonic materials, allows me to document and combat the historical and archival violences which invariably linger throughout these stories.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Maori) offers guidance on engaging in accountable and decolonial historical narration by debunking the colonial myth that History is capable of being totalizing, linear, objective, and non-patriarchal.<sup>49</sup> This thesis refuses a chronological temporal structure and hegemonic periodization, centers the unique stories and original analyses of individual Native women, and turns to ephemeral materials and embodied experiences as historical truths.<sup>50</sup> I move forward with the understanding that, as Oklahoma Choctaw scholar Devon Mihesuah declares, “there is not one [authoritative voice] among Native women, and no one feminist theory totalizes Native women’s thought.”<sup>51</sup>

Concurrent with the Red Power Movement and the growth of American Indian Studies, the Native press exploded during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>52</sup> Notable newspapers and periodicals I draw from that were founded and or grew--largely through the coverage and platforming of the

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<sup>48</sup> Sources for oral histories include the Warrior Women Oral History Project, Donna Coker and Lindsay Harrison’s interviews with Yvonne (Wanrow) Swan, Jennifer Paustenbaugh’s interview with Indigenous Mexican lawyer Gloria Valencia-Weber, and WARN members Pat Bellanger, Lorelei Means, and Vickki Howard’s interview with *Off Our Backs*, among others.

<sup>49</sup> Tuhiwai Smith’s (Maori) seminal book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, explores a multitude of Indigenous epistemological systems toward radical practices of knowing and sharing that subvert colonial research methods and disrupt colonialism itself. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 30-31.

<sup>50</sup> See José Esteban Muñoz’s “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts” for a discussion of ephemera as evidence and a critique of white supremacist constructions of ‘rigor’ in academia.

<sup>51</sup> Devon A. Mihesuah, *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>52</sup> Daniel F. Littlefield, “The American Native Press and American Indian Studies,” *Wíčazo Ša Review* 2, no. 2 (1986): 51.; Josephy et al., *Red Power*, 3.

Red Power Movement's radical rhetorical practices--include the Los Angeles Indian Center's *Talking Leaf*, the American Indian Historical Society's *Wassaja*, the Mohawk Nation's *Akwesasne Notes*, the Inter-Tribal Council of Nevada's *The Native Nevadan*, and the Navajo Tribal Council's *The Navajo Times*, among others.<sup>53</sup> These decades also birthed the Women in Print Movement, which produced many of the feminist and queer publications cited in this thesis, including *Off Our Backs* and *Big Mama Rag*. At the intersection of this "revolution in ephemera" and abolitionist print culture during the 1970s lived the lesbian feminist anti-prison publication central to my third chapter, *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter*, run by the Brooklyn, New York-based Women Free Women in Prison Collective.<sup>54</sup> I also turn to grassroots tribal publication-*Generations of the Colville People* established by Yvonne (Wanrow) Swan and her sister Alice Stewart in my second chapter.

These publications serve not only as source material within which this thesis' events are documented, but as actors themselves in constituting these histories. As the following chapters detail, they circulated personal testimonies in the form of letters and interviews; released movements' statements, demands, and reports; proliferated dissenting views and galvanized diverse publics; built mutual aid networks; as well as connected individuals and forged communities of support and across movements, bars, and borders. Furthermore, these documents function as counter-archives when read against 'official' legal, governmental, and corporate records. This is done throughout the following three chapters, such as with the publication of WARN's own health and environmental studies, the Mount Tolman Alliance's work in

*Generations* to destabilize narratives set forth in AMAX Inc. and Colville Business Council

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<sup>53</sup> See John Sanchez (Yaqui-Apache) and Mary Stuckey's "The Rhetoric of American Indian Activism in the 1960s and 1970s" for an expanded discussion of AIM, Red Power, and the Native Press.

<sup>54</sup> Emily L. Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 89, 92.; Beins, Agatha. "A Revolution in Ephemera: Feminist Newsletters and Newspapers of the 1970s" in *This Book Is an Action: Feminist Print Culture and Activist Aesthetics*, edited by Jaime Harker and Cecilia Konchar Farr; photo-offset printing.; from the Hall-Hoag.

publications, as well as Yvonne (Wanrow) Swan and Rita Silk-Nauni's declarations of innocence in the face of wrongful convictions, to name but a few.

Finally, I rely on these Native women's activist life-writings--including public statements, personal correspondences, and poetry--which illuminate the necessity and power of self-narration, friendship, and Indigenous 'Sisterhood.'<sup>55</sup> The personal correspondences I engage with in my third chapter were previously made public through their consensual publication in *No More Cages* or in lesbian Mohawk writer Beth Brant's anthology *A Gathering of Spirit*. As was repeatedly stated by the women themselves--and most explicitly exemplified by incarcerated lesbian Cherokee woman Raven Darkwing's fight to speak her own truths and be heard--the telling of these stories was a radical strategy to simultaneously facilitate their survival and forge interpersonal and communal relationships of care. I hope, therefore, that the writing of these histories furthers the continuing fight against the attempted invisibilization of incarcerated Native women.

In addition to digitized archives, I conducted much of my primary research in-person at the Brown University John Hay Library's Special Collections during the summer of 2021, as the Douglas W. Squires '73 Racial Justice Undergraduate Hay Fellow. I spent the majority of my time exploring the Hall-Hoag Collection of Dissenting and Extremist Printed Propaganda, which is the largest of such US collections for the years between 1950 and 1999.<sup>56</sup> Handling these unique materials--which often included correspondences between activists and the archive's collectors, or pamphlets used at and by the very events and peoples I write about--brought me

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<sup>55</sup> Beth Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit* (Rockland: Sinister Wisdom Books, 1984), 7.

<sup>56</sup> See recent Brown graduate Jeanne Ernest's history honors thesis on this collection titled "A Snapshot of the 'Radical Middle': On the Life and Labels of Extremist-Watcher Gordon D. Hall, 1946-1969" (2021) which explores the collecting politics of Gordon Hall (and later Grace Hoag) which shaped the archive.; The collection houses over 168,000 items concerning over 5,000 'extremist' organizations. "Hall-Hoag collection of dissenting and extremist printed propaganda" [Brown University Library](#).; Alongside other materials, this collection provided me access to *No More Cages* which is essential to the existence of this thesis.

physically close to the stories within this thesis. This intimacy, and the continuing political lives of these archival materials, demand that I approach writing these histories with deep care.

#### D. The Parts

Part I “Enough is Enough” traces the enduring political life of WARN member Sinixt Arrow Lakes Band Colville woman Yvonne (Wanrow) Swan.<sup>57</sup> Wanrow’s case was one of self-defense against settler-colonial patriarchal violence, in which she killed a white male child molester to protect her life and the lives of many children. Wanrow’s self-directed seven-year-long fight to remain free and mother her children joined a series of other cases concerning Indigenous, Black, and women of color’s right to defend themselves from assault, collectively constituting “a feminist rallying point throughout the 1970s.”<sup>58</sup> Telling a lesser known aspect of this history, this section argues that Wanrow’s case and activism as a political prisoner were situated within, and furthered, contemporaneous Native women’s organizing against familial separation, gendered settler vigilante violence, and criminalization by the settler legal system.<sup>59</sup> The second half of this chapter explores how Wanrow, now going by her maiden name of Swan, spearheads the movement to prevent the mining of the sacred Mount Tolman on unceded Colville Confederated Tribes’ lands. This is a previously untold history that stretched from 1979 to the early 2000s. I argue this iteration of Swan’s fight for Colville Confederated Tribes’ political, cultural, and land sovereignty is inextricable from her defense of her children. I

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<sup>57</sup> By 1980, she began using her maiden name, Swan, instead of her married name, Wanrow. Wanrow served as the political prisoner point-person for WARN.

<sup>58</sup> Victoria Law, “Sick of the Abuse: Feminist Responses to Sexual Assault, Battering, and Self-Defense” in Dan Berger *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 39.

<sup>59</sup> See Donna Coker and Lindsay C. Harrison, “The Story of Wanrow: The Reasonable Woman and the Law of Self-Defense” in Donna Coker and Robert Weisberg’s *Criminal Law Stories* (New York, NY: Foundation Press/Thomas Reuters, 2013). and Laura M. De Vos, “Spirals of Transformation: Turtle Island Indigenous Social Movements and Literatures,” University of Washington, 2020.

also posit that Swan's ongoing capacity to galvanize radical movements--both feminist and Indigenous as well as from the national to the local level--is rooted in her unwavering commitment to realizing intergenerational, intersectional, and grassroots justice.

Wanrow's case contextualizes the limitations of Indigenous women and children facing violence to attain justice within the settler (in)justice system, the subject explored in the following section, Part II: "In Sisterhood I will Remain Strong." Unlike (Wanrow) Swan, the incarcerated Indigenous women studied in this section were not as readily embraced as political prisoners and received significantly less attention from both the feminist and Native movements at the time. Consequently, they worked to build their own networks of aid and care with other Indigenous women.

Part II "In Sisterhood I will Remain Strong" explores the largely untold histories of the movements to keep alive and free three incarcerated Native women: Standing Rock Sioux woman Rita Silk-Nauni, Paiute woman Angie Whiterock, and lesbian Cherokee woman Raven Darkwing. I analyze these women's activist life-writings in the form of poetry, personal letters, and public statements as they assert their right to dignity and to defend themselves and their children from colonial, racist, sexist and homophobic violence. I trace their cases through the lesbian anti-prison feminist news journal *No More Cages*, which worked to subvert the colonial carceral violence of removal and isolation by connecting women on the inside with each other and with friends, family, and anti-prison activists on the outside. I also turn to lesbian Mohawk writer Beth Brant's groundbreaking anthology *A Gathering of Spirit*, which holds personal correspondences between Brant and some of these women as well as provides an analysis of the importance of building connections and power between Native women in the face of erasure and harm from settler society, cisheteromale-dominated Native organizing spaces, and the hegemonic

feminist movement at the time. Through a reconstruction of these three women's histories and a reading of their activist life-writings, I explore how Native women on the inside and outside were theorizing and practicing Indigenous "Sisterhood," by forging and maintaining intimate and communal relationships as care, survival, and decolonial and abolitionist practice.<sup>60</sup>

This thesis concludes with a discussion of the current, ongoing campaign to free Maddesyn George, a Colville mother who is incarcerated for defending herself from a white male rapist in self-defense. The tactics and individuals--namely her mother Jody George alongside now tribal elder Yvonne Swan--involved in securing her freedom, exemplify the radical continuance of Indigenous women's resistances through love as praxis.

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<sup>60</sup> Beth Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit* (Rockland: Sinister Wisdom Books, 1984), 7.

Part I  
“Enough is Enough”<sup>61</sup>

Yvonne (Wanrow) Swan is a survivor, educator, and life-long activist, whose continued resistance stretches far beyond her seven-year legal battle to remain free and with her kin in the 1970s.<sup>62</sup> Born in 1943, she survived the boarding school system as a child and forced sterilization as a young adult.<sup>63</sup> Swan continues to fight for Indigenous women and survivors of violence and sterilization today, as well as to unrelentingly defend Colville sovereignty in the face of resource extraction and cultural erasure.<sup>64</sup> Her story is one of refusal to sacrifice her children, homelands, and future generations to settler-colonial genocide as it manifests on many scales: be it gendered and racialized vigilante violence, the environmental violences of capitalist extraction, that of familial separation and sterilization, and of state abuse and incarceration.



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<sup>61</sup> “‘Enough is Enough’ Yvonne Wanrow Ends Seven Year Court Battle,” *Talking Leaf*, April/May 1977, 5.

<sup>62</sup> I use her married or maiden name (Swan) when referring to times during which she used either.

<sup>63</sup> Yvonne Swan, “Gender Violence and Indigenous Resistance,” May 6, 2019, The Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington, <https://soundcloud.com/therednationpod/gender-violence-and-indigenous-resistance-with-yvonne-swan>.

<sup>64</sup> UN’s Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues Spokane County Bar Association, “Challenging Systemic Racism In Our Regional Justice System: Agenda Speaker Biographies. Elder Yvonne Swan-Wanrow, Sinixt Arrow Lakes Colville. Enrolled Tribal Member Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. Advocate and Activist,” Spokane County Bar Association Annual Review, 2020.

(“How Long is the Future of Our People?” Signed Y.WANROW 11-21-75)<sup>65</sup>

Drawn at the peak of her legal case in 1975 and published in her and her sister’s publication *Generations of the Colville People* in 1980, the illustration “How Long in the Future of Our People?” by Wanrow points to her unrelenting commitment to realizing just futures for generations to come, as well as the inextricability of her fight against vigilante and state settler-colonial violence with that of defending Colville sovereignty. (Wanrow) Swan spearheaded both of these underrecognized movements against gendered violence and for Colville sovereignty by mobilizing simultaneously local and broad-based networks of support, and always centering the livelihoods of her and other’s children.

A. Yvonne (Wanrow) Swan

*“From the very beginning I have said that I am not guilty of a crime and I still say it today.”*<sup>66</sup>

On August 11, 1972, twenty-eight year old Sinixt Arrow Lakes Band Colville woman Yvonne Swan Wanrow shot and killed white male child molester William Wesler, in defense of her life and the lives of eight children.<sup>67</sup> Earlier that day, Wesler attempted to abduct and assault Wanrow’s eight-year-old son and the ten-year old daughter of her baby-sitter Shirley Hooper. The children fled into Hooper’s house, and as Wesler tried to force his way inside, another daughter of Hooper’s recognized him as the man who had raped her earlier that year.<sup>68</sup> The seven-year-old was one of many children Wesler had abused in their town of Spokane, Washington. When Hooper contacted the police for help, they refused to intervene despite them

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<sup>65</sup> “Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance,” *Generations of the Colville People* (Inchelium, Washington: Colville Confederated Tribes of Washington State), First Special Issue: HAZARDS OF MINING, January 1980, 1, Newspaper. UC Berkeley Native American Studies Collection. NAS Newsletters 1- 1:1.

<sup>66</sup> Terre Poppe, “native american benefit for yvonne swan wanrow,” *Off Our Backs*, May 1979, 7.

<sup>67</sup> In addition to her own children, Wanrow protected those of her siblings and babysitter. “Indian Woman fights 25-year sentence,” *Borrowed Times* (Missoula, Montana), July 11, 1975, 9.

<sup>68</sup> “Indian Woman fights 25-year sentence,” 9.

previously having arrested Wesler for child molestation in the past and being familiar enough to refer to him by the nickname “Chicken Bill.”<sup>69</sup> This was the third time Hooper had called the police and was met with inaction within the previous three days. Previously she reported a peeping tom--later identified to be Wesler--who slashed her bedroom window screens and had been hiding in the bushes and unscrewing lightbulbs illuminating the house’s entrances.<sup>70</sup>

Knowing that the police would not protect them or their children, Hooper, Wanrow, and Wanrow’s sister and brother-in-law went to stay at Hooper’s home and brought their children to defend all eight of them together. Wanrow’s brother-in-law went to Wesler’s home nearby to confront him, but inadvertently left the three women and their children in the house with the door unlocked.<sup>71</sup> This instigation resulted in an intoxicated Wesler, accompanied by a friend of his, returning to Hooper’s house and threatening violence against the children and their mothers. Wanrow, who at the time had a broken leg and could not physically fend off the over six-foot-tall Wesler, fatally shot him and wounded his friend with her pistol in self-defense.<sup>72</sup> During Wanrow’s trial, the records of the dead man’s previous infractions, the children’s testimonies, and the defendant’s right to self-defense were all dismissed as non-evidence. Wanrow was found guilty of second degree murder and possession of a deadly weapon by an all-white

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<sup>69</sup> “State of Washington to Retry Yvonne Wanrow,” *Akwesasne Notes* (Mohawk Nation, Akwesasne), September 9, 1977, 19.; “Indian Woman fights 25-year sentence,” 9.; The police also told Hooper to simply file a complaint after the weekend ended. They advised to hit him on the head with a baseball bat if he got too close, and to put flour on the floor for proof that he entered, in no way working to prevent the attack. The name ‘Chicken Bill’ comes from a variation of a common name given to child molesters in the prison system at the time. Donna Coker and Lindsay C. Harrison, “The Story of Wanrow: The Reasonable Woman and the Law of Self-Defense” in Donna Coker and Robert Weisberg, *Criminal Law Stories* (New York, NY: Foundation Press/Thomas Reuters, 2013), 227. This article draws from interviews with Swan conducted in the early 2000s.

<sup>70</sup> “Indian Woman fights 25-year sentence,” 9.

<sup>71</sup> It is not clear what took place during this confrontation.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

woman-majority jury.<sup>73</sup> The judge sentenced Wanrow to twenty-five years in prison on May, 13 1973, Mother's Day.<sup>74</sup>

Wanrow's murder conviction came during the peak of AIM's occupation at Wounded Knee, and the "racist media hysteria" surrounding it invigorated the already pervasive anti-Native racism and violence Wanrow faced, furthering the unjust treatment and coverage of her case.<sup>75</sup> On the local level, Native peoples made up the largest minority community as a result of the reservation system in the Spokane area.<sup>76</sup> The Spokane police had a bloody history of killing, brutalizing, surveilling, and arresting Native people in the city. In a 2002 interview, Wanrow reflected "[t]here was a lot of anti-Indian sentiment...I was always bailing people out of jail...helping people out of predicaments and sheltering people...[Natives] were the ones that always got arrested and got put in jail. My brother was maced...[From] family members and friends, I would hear where [the police] would just beat them up whenever they could."<sup>77</sup> In addition to harm at the hands of the state, Wanrow and her children lived under the constant threat of anti-Native vigilante violence. She stated that she purchased the pistol used to kill Wesler "because of threats from white neighbors who said they didn't want a 'dirty Indian' on their street."<sup>78</sup> Such harassment continued throughout her legal battle. In a 1976 interview with

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<sup>73</sup> Seeking imprisonment, policing, and the expansion of psychiatric industrial complex as solutions to gender-based violence as white carceral-feminist approach is clearly exemplified with the reflections from white female jurors on her trial: "Three jurors convicted because they believed Wanrow needed mental help and 'she would receive in in prison...they don't just lock you up and leave you there.' Believing Wanrow would only serve one year in prison, two others were convicted. One woman voted guilty because she thought Wanrow would end up in a mental institution if the verdict was not guilty by reason of temporary mental irresponsibility... 'We simply did not have any other alternative. They tell you what to do'...woman sympathized with wanrow and understood her provocation [yet]...Denied that any racial factors influenced their decision." See "Wanrow Case Sets Self-Defense Precedent," *Borrowed Times* (Missoula, Montana), May 1, 1977, 8.

<sup>74</sup> "Harassment, Waiting Fail to Dampen Yvonne's Spirits," *Talking Leaf*, September, 1976, 3.; "Indian Woman fights 25-year sentence," 9.

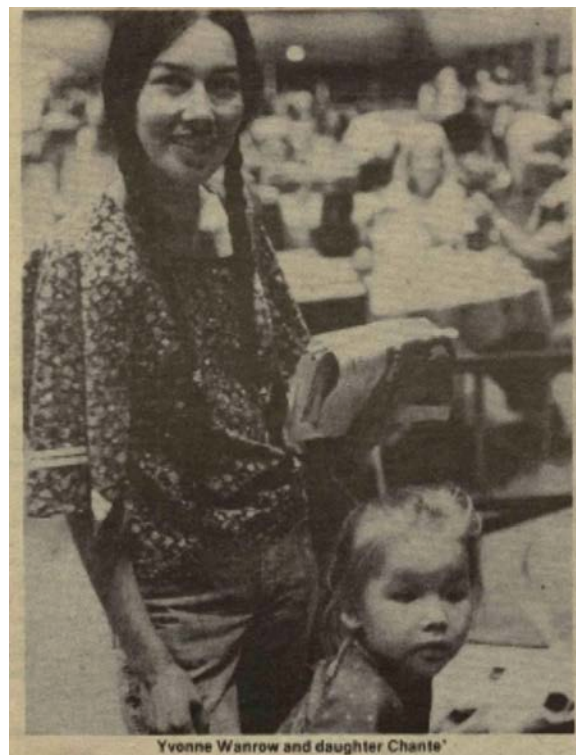
<sup>75</sup> The "national press had been obsessed with the occupation of Wounded Knee...condemning all Indian people for violence." See "Indian woman appeals 25 year sentence for murder of child molester," *The Rag* (Austin, Texas), June 18, 1975, 13.; Abe Weisburd, "wanrow wins new trial" *Borrowed Times* (Missoula, Montana), February 1, 1977, 10.

<sup>76</sup> Coker and Harrison, "The Story of Wanrow," 253.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>78</sup> "Indian Woman fights 25-year sentence," 9.

Los Angeles Indian Center's newspaper *Talking Leaf*, Wanrow spoke "of the constant harassment that she and her family face at their home...[which] ranged from her house being broken into and ransacked to her brother being arrested" in the wake of her case.<sup>79</sup> Despite such omnipresent injustice, Wanrow drew strength from, and built power with, her children, family, and friends from her local community and across the country. Without this, Wanrow noted, "she may have given up long ago."<sup>80</sup>



("Yvonne Wanrow and daughter Chante")<sup>81</sup>

Wanrow's fight for freedom and the right to mother her children is contextualized by a long history of violence against Native mothers and children, through which child removal and familial separation has served as a genocidal tool of settler colonialism. Throughout her

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<sup>79</sup> "Harassment, Waiting Fail to Dampen Yvonne's Spirits," 3.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> "Harassment, Waiting Fail to Dampen Yvonne's Spirits," *Talking Leaf*, September, 1976, 3.; "Indian Woman fights 25-year sentence," 9.

seven-year-long legal battle, Wanrow continuously stressed that her foremost concern was to remain in the lives of her children and avoid separation through incarceration at all cost: “My children have been and will be my life--my family come[s] first.”<sup>82</sup>

When the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) relocated Wanrow from the Colville Reservation in Washington to San Francisco, California to attend fashion school in 1966, they refused to allow Wanrow, then a single mother, to bring her two children with her.<sup>83</sup> Through child protection authorities, the BIA then stole the children from Wanrow’s mother and father and sent them into the deadly foster care system directly after she left.<sup>84</sup> Wanrow and her children’s experiences stem, in part, from an explicit effort by the settler state to target single Indigenous mothers for child removal and criminalization.<sup>85</sup> BIA employees held the very economic precarity of Wanrow’s situation which they helped create, over her head, allowing the children’s release from the program one year later when Wanrow met their demands of having a job, apartment, and babysitter.<sup>86</sup> Partially as a result of Wanrow’s long school and working hours, and lack of access to healthcare, her three-year-old daughter, Julie, died of encephalitis only a few weeks after arriving in California. This tragedy--made possible by long-standing settler-colonial forces manifesting themselves on very intimate and micro-level--brought Wanrow to return to her homelands and relatives. In 1971, a year before her conviction, Wanrow returned to live in Spokane, Washington.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> “‘Enough is Enough’ Yvonne Wanrow Ends Seven Year Court Battle,” 5.

<sup>83</sup> The BIA is the central bureaucratic agency charged with administering colonial rule. It was founded in 1824 under the War Department and later transferred to the Department of the Interior in a move to expand federal legal and judicial control over Indigenous Nations.

<sup>84</sup> Coker and Harrison, “The Story of Wanrow,” 217.

<sup>85</sup> The Red Nation, *The Red Deal* (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2021), 60.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 217

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.



(Yvonne Wanrow pictured with her family)<sup>88</sup>

Out on bail during the appeals process, Wanrow organized her own defense. To litigate her case, she sought out the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) after observing their politically-progressive work on fellow AIM activist Russell Means' challenging 1975 case concerning the occupation at Wounded Knee.<sup>89</sup> Replacing Wanrow's public defender--who had entered a plea of guilty in October 1972 against her wishes to the detriment of her case--the CCR formed an all-women legal defense team.<sup>90</sup> "There was a natural built-in sisterhood," Wanrow reflected, "so I never had to explain myself to women or sisters...And so it made sense that I had

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<sup>88</sup> "Indian Woman fights 25-year sentence," *Borrowed Times* (Missoula, Montana), July 11, 1975, 9.

<sup>89</sup> Founded in November of 1966, the CCR litigated to aid more radical organizations and individuals such as AIM and by the early 1970s, was the only legal organization with a focus on women's rights concerning self-defense and gender-based violence. Means was a central AIM leader at occupation of Pine Ridge and a key target of COINTELPRO. Coker and Harrison, "The Story of Wanrow," 235.

<sup>90</sup> "Indian Woman fights 25-year sentence," 9.; Note for myself: Lawyers Schneider and Stearns, joining forces with lawyers from the National Lawyers Guild and other civil rights and criminal defense lawyers Coker and Harrison, "The Story of Wanrow," 243.

a team of women lawyers.”<sup>91</sup> This cultivation of “sisterhood,” a kind of kinship which goes beyond both blood and coalition politics explored more explicitly in chapter three, constituted the core of Wanrow’s fight for freedom. Wanrow founded the Defense Committee for Yvonne Wanrow with her sisters, who utilized their talents as artists and designers as political action to put on art and fashion shows to raise funds for her defense.<sup>92</sup> AIM members who traveled to Washington from across the country to participate in her campaign facilitated and fortified Wanrow’s connections with the Native American Solidarity Committee, Native American Church, and individuals in Native and feminist networks and presses to put her story on blast.<sup>93</sup> As a result, feminists across the country established organizations to fight for Wanrow’s freedom, such as the Yvonne Wanrow Defense Committees of Seattle and Washington, DC, and Lesbian Feminist Organizing Committee in Minnesota (which became one of the first lesbian political organizations in the US).<sup>94</sup>

Wanrow participated in conferences, interviews on TV programs, and spoke at local college events to publicize her case and organize for the freedom of others, using her visibility to galvanize change and other contemporaneous movements.<sup>95</sup> Wanrow traveled across the country doing solidarity organizing for and with AIM political prisoners, namely Leonard Peltier (over five decades later, she continues to serve on the Board of Directors of the Leonard Peltier International Defense Committee).<sup>96</sup> She also fought alongside other Indigenous, Black, and

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<sup>91</sup> Coker and Harrison, “The Story of Wanrow,” 239-240.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 215, 239.

<sup>94</sup> Frédérique Delacoste and Felice Newman, eds., *Fight Back! Feminist Resistance to Male Violence*, 1st ed (Minneapolis, Minn: Cleis Press, 1981) 316.; Victoria Law, “Sick of the Abuse: Feminist Responses to Sexual Assault, Battering, and Self-Defense,” in *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 40.

<sup>95</sup> Native American Indian Club at Eastern Washington State College. “Indian Awareness Week at EWSC,” *Rawhide Press* (Spokane Tribe, Wellpinit, Washington), February 1976, 13.

<sup>96</sup> “My case and his case were parallel throughout the years” See “Yvonne Swan // Indigenous Peoples' Day- Honoring Our Women” 500 years of Indigenous resistance  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CU5PeOut0f4&ab\\_channel=RoxannMurray](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CU5PeOut0f4&ab_channel=RoxannMurray)

women of color facing similarly unjust sentences for self-defence against white male sexual violence (namely Cuban and Puerto Rican woman Inez García, incarcerated Black woman Joane Little, and Black muslim woman Dessie Woods).<sup>97</sup> The reach of her organizing brought her to the international stage as a presenter at the 1976 Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels and a representative of the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) in one of their transnational Indigenous solidarity campaigns in the 1970s.<sup>98</sup> In April of 1976, Wanrow released a public statement in the American Indian Historical Society's newspaper *Wassaja*, declaring:

I feel that I am the victim of a gross miscarriage of justice in the state of Washington. The courts have discriminated against me as a Native American, as a woman and as a mother. I feel that politics has played a great part and railroading me through the courts, and I am fighting for my freedom my very life. I need the support of the people to help me be free to live with my children. I need money to help cover the raising expenses of my defense. I need the service of the mass media to educate people about my struggle. This cannot be allowed to become a case where the victim is made into the criminal. I stand in solidarity with the struggle of my people and with all sisters who like Joanne little and Inez García choose resistance over passivity.<sup>99</sup>

Wanrow articulates her fight for justice and freedom as one against racialized and gendered violence at the hands of not only her attacker, Wesler, but also the settler state and legal system. Because of her politicized identity as a Native mother, Wanrow declares that the law was fundamentally incapable of serving justice in her case, at least not without a mass grassroots fight to forcibly realize it. As part of her repeated commitment to “choose resistance over passivity,” is her declaration of communal resistance with “my people” and “all sisters.” Once again, she stresses not only the fight for her “very life,” but also to “be free to live with my

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<sup>97</sup> Emily L. Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 42.; After returning to the US, Wanrow traveled to “Cleveland to offer support in the defense of Kathy Thomas, an African American woman on trial for killing her abusive husband.” See Coker and Harrison, “The Story of Wanrow,” 256.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.; In 1993, she was the IITC's political prisoners coordinator. Spokane County Bar Association, “Challenging Systemic Racism In Our Regional Justice System: Agenda Speaker Biographies. Elder Yvonne Swan-Wanrow, Sinixt Arrow Lakes Colville. Enrolled Tribal Member Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. Advocate and Activist,” Spokane County Bar Association Annual Review, 2020.

<sup>99</sup> Yvonne Wanrow, “A Victim of Injustice,” *Wassaja* (San Francisco, California), April 1976, 11.

children,” turning to the public to ask for monetary support and for her story to be shared, in a practice of proposing and creating new relations in the struggle.<sup>100</sup>

Such a key relation was WARN, who during their first year of operation in 1978, served as a central advocate for Wanrow. Taking place just weeks before Wanrow’s anticipated final trial, WARN organized a Native Women’s benefit for Wanrow in Washington, D.C., from April 6-7th of 1979, which was one of the final and most impactful actions which organized support for Wanrow. The cultural events and workshops across the two days went beyond the \$500 raised to support Wanrow’s defense, as this event connected over 200 people and served as a seminal event for Indigenous women and other radical organizers from across the country and the world to physically and politically come together.<sup>101</sup> The benefit included film screenings, political education on the history of settler colonialism and Native resistance in recent decades, as well as a Native women’s panel on which Wanrow spoke. Solidarity statements were received from radical liberation movements from across the country and the globe, exhibiting how Swan became far more than just a “symbol” for the mobilization of the women’s movement.<sup>102</sup>

Wanrow’s fight to remain free, and in turn to protect and mother her children, embodied a broader fight against settler violence and institutionalized genocide through familial separation and coercive sterilization which were central nodes for Indigenous women’s organizing in this period.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Wanrow, “A Victim of Injustice,” 11.

<sup>101</sup> Poppe, “native american benefit for yvonne swan wanrow,” 7.

<sup>102</sup> The article lists “Adelante, All-Africa People’s Revolutionary Party, D.C. Fight Back, National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, Iranian Students Association, South African Support Group, Borinquen, Chile, and National YWCA Racial Justice Center,” in attendance and performing was Native woman singer Periwinkle and Bernice Reagan from Sweet Honey in the Rock Poppe, “native american benefit,” 7.; victoria Law from berger

<sup>103</sup> Thuma, *All Our Trials*, 43.



(Image of Yvonne Wanrow from the Benefit)<sup>104</sup>

Wanrow understood the mass attention given to her and her case, which came to represent something much larger, as a responsibility: “I provide a voice for people who are powerless to speak up yet, but who feel what I am talking about. I want them to get hope from this case; hope to talk, move, act. I know people depend on me. I pray every day that I say and do the right thing.”<sup>105</sup> Rather than serving as an object for others activists and movements to utilize, Wanrow was an active agent in realizing change for her own case and as a mobilizer for the oppressed and ““little people to fight back”” on both the small scale alone and collectively together.<sup>106</sup>

The simultaneously wide-reaching and interpersonal nature of the movement to secure her freedom is further exemplified by the letter writing campaigns which largely contributed to the court’s decisions on her case. Wanrow and her team tapped into feminist and Native presses to push a letter-writing campaign to demand the dismissing of her case without a retrial, and for

<sup>104</sup> Terre Poppe, “native american benefit for yvonne swan wanrow,” *Off Our Backs*, May 1979, 7.

<sup>105</sup> “Wanrow Case Sets Self-Defense Precedent,” 8.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

monetary support to the Wanrow Legal Defense Fund in order to grow her defense.<sup>107</sup> Potentially in an effort to broaden and ensure the reach of her case, such presses sensationalized Wanrow's situation. They used catchy titles and highlighting--at times condemning the violence in ways that reproduced--the traumas of the case, namely the sexual abuse of children. Reaching thousands, these alternative press articles almost invariably encouraged readers to write to Wanrow directly and or to sign petitions to the state of Washington to demand she be freed. Riding the momentum of the "general public outcry" of the campaign to free her, Wanrow's legal team appealed the case to the Washington State Supreme Court.<sup>108</sup> On January 7, 1977, in the matter of the *State v. Wanrow*, the court granted Wanrow a new trial on the basis that the key evidence mentioned above concerning Wesler's transgressions was not presented to the jury.<sup>109</sup> Establishing a new precedent in case law that protects women's rights to self-defense, the court asserted that jury instructions for such cases must "afford women the right to have their conduct judged in light of the individual physical handicaps which are the product of sex discrimination."<sup>110</sup> They further asserted that there must be considerations of a woman's "perceptions of the situation...which were the product of our nation's long and unfortunate history of sex discrimination."<sup>111</sup>

Yet, this ruling on jury instructions from Wanrow's case was a win in the fight against the criminalization of women's resistance to gender-based violence only. Washington State Supreme Court dismissed arguments made by Wanrow's defense about racial power dynamic between Wanrow and Welser that *also* informed the impetus and necessity of her acts of self-defense. The

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<sup>107</sup> "Yvonne Wanrow Still Struggling," *Feminist Alliance Against Rape Newsletter*, March, 1, 1977, 14.;

"Harassment, Waiting Fail to Dampen Yvonne's Spirits," 3.

<sup>108</sup> "Harassment, Waiting Fail to Dampen Yvonne's Spirits," 3.; Yvonne Wanrow, "A Victim of Injustice," *Wassaja* (San Francisco, California), April 1976, 11.

<sup>109</sup> "Wanrow granted a new trial," *Wassaja* (San Francisco, California), October 1977, 11.

<sup>110</sup> *State v. Wanrow* (1977).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

ruling instead asserted that “the jury could decide whether or not Wanrow had acted reasonably *as a woman*, separately from her Indigenous identity.”<sup>112</sup> In other words, the court’s decision illustrates the continued refusal of the US legal system to account for colonial violence.

Following the ruling, her defense committee shared that they saw

Yvonne’s fight as a part of the struggle of women against a system that not only tolerates male violence and barely provides women with any real protection from rape come wife beating, etc., but which also perpetuates that violence on every level. In addition, Yvonne is part of the struggle of Native American peoples against genocide and for national sovereignty. The state’s attack on Yvonne for defending herself and her family is a part of its attack on the Native American family and nations through forced sterilization, the forced removal of Native American children to white foster homes and boarding schools where white culture is taught, and an overall policy of genocide against native people that is centuries old. We hope you will join in supporting Yvonne Wanrow.<sup>113</sup>

This lucid and powerful articulation of the power of Wanrow’s story and action by her defense team illuminates the importance of her resistance as intersectional, anti-carceral feminist, and anti settler-colonial. By framing her fight as one against a structure of genocide, Wanrow’s commitment to the protection of her children is understood as an assertion of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. This statement also serves as political education, making the invitation for people to join also an indoctrination into a broader resistance movement to support Native women.

Two days before her scheduled retrial on April 26, 1979, Wanrow pleaded guilty to the lesser charges of manslaughter and assault. While leaving the Spokane County Superior Court, Wanrow stated “Enough is enough.”<sup>114</sup> In so doing, she simultaneously declared her refusal to accept the injustices enacted upon her and the end of the legal battle and campaign that had dragged on for seven years. This plea was in part made possible because of the inadmissibility of

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<sup>112</sup> Laura M. De Vos, “Spirals of Transformation: Turtle Island Indigenous Social Movements and Literatures,” University of Washington, 2020, 147. Italics in original. This dissertation was written in correspondence with Swan.; Coker and Harrison, “The Story of Wanrow,” 221.

<sup>113</sup> “Wanrow Case Before Federal Court,” *Voz Fronteriza* (San Diego, California), April 1, 1979, 3.

<sup>114</sup> “‘Enough is Enough’ Yvonne Wanrow Ends Seven Year Court Battle,” *Talking Leaf*, April/May 1977, 5.

the key evidence used to convict her in the initial trial. Illegal audiotape recordings of the call Wanrow and Hooper placed to 911 were used to paint Wanrow out to be a cold-blooded killer because supposedly did not sound “‘hysterical’” enough, when, in fact, she was “so petrified [she] could barely talk.”<sup>115</sup> Reflecting on the wrongful use of the tapes by the prosecution, Wanrow stated: “‘I feel that because I’m a woman and because I’m an Indian they [the police] didn’t care. They just didn’t want to give me a fair chance.’”<sup>116</sup> Wanrow’s statement indicts the settler state apparatus as structurally determined to ensure her injustice precisely because of her identity as a Native woman, making her resistance to such criminalization an inherently political act of resistance to settler colonialism and cisheteropatriarchy.

Wanrow was officially free after completing her sentence of five years of probation and one year of community service. She spent only three days in jail, directly following her arrest.<sup>117</sup> Despite the formal close of her case, Wanrow continued to mobilize for justice for other Native mothers who defended themselves and their children from domestic and state violence during the late 1970s, including Standing Rock Sioux mother Rita Silk-Nauni, a central figure in the following chapter.<sup>118</sup> Wanrow continued the work she had already been doing since before and throughout her time on probation as a community builder and leader in the Spokane and Inchelium, WA areas. She established a spiritual camp and center; worked at the local alcoholism center for Native people; worked also as a classroom development technician; took in Native children who would have otherwise been thrown into the foster care system (as her own children

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<sup>115</sup> “Indian Woman fights 25-year sentence,” 9.; “Wanrow Case Before Federal Court,” 3.;

<https://soundcloud.com/therednationpod/gender-violence-and-indigenous-resistance-with-yvonne-swan>

<sup>116</sup> “Indian Woman fights 25-year sentence,” 9.

<sup>117</sup> Coker and Harrison, “The Story of Wanrow,” 255.

<sup>118</sup> Spokane County Bar Association, “Challenging Systemic Racism In Our Regional Justice System: Agenda Speaker Biographies. Elder Yvonne Swan-Wanrow, Sinixt Arrow Lakes Colville. Enrolled Tribal Member Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. Advocate and Activist,” Spokane County Bar Association Annual Review, 2020. <https://www.spokanebar.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Systemic-Racism-CLE-Speaker-Biographies.pdf>. Another woman who fought against violence and was aided by Wanrow was Lakota mother Paula Three Stars.

had been just years prior); and enrolled in college courses.<sup>119</sup> As a continuance of her radical act of self-defense, (Wanrow) Swan relentlessly organized in defense of Colville sovereignty and future generations on the grassroots level in the years following her case.<sup>120</sup>

## B. The Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance



(Map of the Colville Reservation Annotated by the Mount Tolman Alliance)<sup>121</sup>

During and directly after her seven-year long fight for freedom, Yvonne Wanrow--now going by her maiden name of Swan--led a grassroots campaign through the Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance, which she founded in 1979 to prevent the leveling of the sacred Mount Tolman and irreversible toxic pollution of the lands and peoples on and around the Colville Reservation on the Sanpoil Valley lands which she grew up. This previously untold history illuminates critical aspects of Swan's life and her intersectional and intergenerational activist work, as well as contributes to an understanding of the long histories of Native women-led resistance against settler-colonial capitalist extractivist projects which poison the Earth and

<sup>119</sup> "Indian Woman fights 25-year sentence," 9.

<sup>120</sup> Swan continues to do so today, see the Epilogue and the case of Colville Tribal member Maddesyn George.

<sup>121</sup> *Generations of the Colville People*, Cover, January 1980, 1.

violate Indigenous sovereignties across Turtle Island. Swan and her sister's work continued in their family's radical tradition of community building and leadership. Noting that their mother was her "best mentor," Swan believes that her "defense for our land rights came from my mother's teaching me since my childhood."<sup>122</sup> Their mother served as a translator for Elders on the reservation, fighting against linguistic death during the cultural genocide of Termination in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>123</sup> Their father was killed in a hit and run by a logging truck on the reservation, making the violence of extractive ventures on her homelands particularly immediate to Swan and her sister.<sup>124</sup>

In January 1980, Swan and her sister, Alice Stewart, established *Generations of the Colville People*, a Colville tribal membership publication. Their first issue, "HAZARDS OF MINING," featured reports on the mining project and other urgent concerns facing Colville tribal members. The issue circulated an anti-mining petition, chronicled the histories of the Colville Confederated Tribes, and contextualized the proposed mining initiative within the long histories of resistance to settler-colonial and capitalist projects of land usurpation, environmental violence, and the degradation of Colville Tribes' economic, political, and cultural health. Run for and by Colville peoples, *Generations* functioned as a tool of political organization and education, and worked to counter dominant narratives and findings presented by official impact reports and environmental planning documents produced by the tribal governmental and company bodies.

Dozens of mining companies approached the Colville Confederated Tribes--which included Colville, Lakes, Okanogan, Wenatchi, Nespelem, Moses-Columbia, Entiat, Chelan, Methow, Sanpoil, Chief Joseph Band of Nez Perce, and Palus Peoples--throughout the 1960s and

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<sup>122</sup> Tiarra Drisker, "Yvonne Swan: A Revolutionary Woman," Texas A&M College of Liberal Arts Blog, March 8, 2022, <https://liberalarts.tamu.edu/blog/2022/03/08/yvonne-swan-a-revolutionary-woman/>.

<sup>123</sup> Coker and Harrison, "The Story of Wanrow," 216.

<sup>124</sup> Poppe, "native american benefit," 7. I do not have the names of her parents.

1970s with hopes of extracting, processing, and selling minerals from Mount Tolman.<sup>125</sup> As early as 1964 and into the late 1970s, mining companies conducted feasibility studies on the reservation to draw up plans for an enormous one and a half mile wide by one-mile deep open-pit mine in the belly of Mount Tolman.<sup>126</sup> The materials of interest included silver, gold, uranium, and most importantly, copper and Molybdenum. Molybdenum, or moly, is an element used to lighten and strengthen steel that played a critical role in the production of military weaponry, nuclear reactors, oil pipelines, and other deadly machinery “stockpiled” by the Federal government and sold on the global market during the increasing militarization post-WWII Cold War Era.<sup>127</sup> The Mount Tolman Alliance’s fight against the mining project was one that aimed to disrupt the cycle of US imperialism, colonialism, war-making abroad and on Turtle Island, which would be made possible through the destruction of Colville lands and lives.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, mining would desecrate and remove spiritual altars and artifacts, as well as block access to “tul’mm”--a Salishan word which is where the name Mount Tolman comes from--a red pigment used in ceremonial practices that “offered both blessings and spiritual protection to those who wore them.”<sup>129</sup> Swan and the Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance stressed that destruction of this sacred site, central to ceremonial practices of Native peoples of

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<sup>125</sup> Trisha Johnson, “Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation: A Brief History,” The History & Archaeology Program, June 16, 2021. <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/bb31cd48d0284fa59d6f454cafabe962> : <https://www.colvilletribes.com/>.

<sup>126</sup> “Prospecting,” *Navajo Times* (Rock, Arizona), May 27, 1965, 12.; “Mount Tolman Project: A Cooperative Venture Between the Colville Confederated Tribes and AMAX Inc.,” Beak Consultants, Portland, Oregon, 1980, 3.

<sup>127</sup> *Generations* stated that “Amax and the U.S. Government are in a race to control the new global economy.” “Economic Plunder,” *Generations of the Colville People*, January 1980, 11.; “Open-Pit Mining at Colville Res?” *Wassaja* (San Francisco, California), May 1978, 1.; “Mining Agreement Stirs Controversy Among Colville Tribe,” *Indian Trader* (Gallup, New Mexico), November 1981, 33.; Becky Kramer, “Mountain of controversy,” *The Spokesman-Review*, February 13, 2006.; “Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance,” *Generations of the Colville People* (Inchelium, Washington: Colville Confederated Tribes of Washington State), First Special Issue: HAZARDS OF MINING, January 1980, 1, Newspaper. UC Berkeley Native American Studies Collection. NAS Newsletters 1-1:1.

<sup>128</sup> *Generations* wrote that molybdenum was a “strategic material necessary for the production of many of the tools of war, and the federal government has stockpiled molybdenum since it first be in accumulating strategic materials after World War II.” “Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance,” *Generations of the Colville People*, January 1980, 1.

<sup>129</sup> Yvonne Swan, “Mollie, our tradition came from God,” *Tribal Tribune* (Nespelem, Washington), September 13, 2007, 6.; Kramer, “Mountain of controversy.”; “Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance,” 1.

the Sanpoil Valley, was a deplorable harm that would simultaneously dispossess, poison, and take away the traditional rights of generations to come.<sup>130</sup>

The Colville Reservation was established by the Federal government in 1872, which *Generations of Colville People* reported was done “in order to bring the aboriginal tribes under the authority of a colonizing government by initiation of forced changes in the cultural traditions[,],...life patterns of operations,” and political structures.<sup>131</sup> Encouraged by the ‘discovery’ of gold by settlers, later known as the Fort Colville Gold Rush, Homesteading and Allotment in the late 1800s furthered the usurpation and degradation of Colville Peoples’ lands and livelihoods, and facilitated invasion by settlers and US military troops. The settler state implemented the Homestead Act in 1875 and the 1887 Dawes Act to privatize and settle lands in the northern portion of the reservation, purchased from tribal members without their consent for \$1 per acre.<sup>132</sup> This halving of the reservation, construction of the Grand Coulee Dam and Chief Joseph Dams in the 1940s, as well as forced relocation and assimilation in the following decades decimated Colville economic, cultural, and political structures. Unsettled lands were placed into land trust status by the Federal government, whose stealing and mismanagement of the trust funds further impoverished members of the Colville Tribes, with devastating ramifications that continue to persist today.<sup>133</sup> Both corporations and the Confederated Tribes’ governing body, the Colville Tribal Business Council (CBC), weaponized this context to justify further exploitation.

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<sup>130</sup> Swan, “Mollie,” 6.

<sup>131</sup> “Colonialism,” *Generations of the Colville People* (Inchelium, Washington: Colville Confederated Tribes of Washington State), First Special Issue: HAZZARDS OF MINING, January 1980, 6-7, Newspaper. UC Berkeley Native American Studies Collection. NAS Newsletters 1- 1:1.

<sup>132</sup> Logan Camporeale, “The Steamboat Forty-Nine Gold Mining on the Upper Columbia,” *Spokane Historical* (Eastern Washington University). <https://spokanehistorical.org/items/show/728>; Kramer, “Mountain of controversy.”; The northern half of the lands were homesteaded in 1892, and the southern on a smaller scale in 1916. “Colonialism,” *Generations of the Colville People*, 6-7.

<sup>133</sup> Kramer, “Mountain of controversy.”

By the late 1970s, the CBC considered proposals from ten major mining companies, citing “economic need...[as] the over-riding factor in the...decision to go ahead with the project.”<sup>134</sup> Through *Generations*, the Alliance called out mining companies (acting as “accomplice [to] the U.S. government”) and the CBC’s view of Mount Tolman as a ““sacrifice for progress”” and the turn to mining as made possible by the CBC’s “fear” of losing tribal income with the Reservation’s declining logging industry.<sup>135</sup> Alongside all other Federally recognized Native tribes, the Colville Confederated Tribes’ status as a domestic dependent nation under paternalistic Federal Indian law limits the pathways for pursuing economic development under capitalism, making the selling and exploitation of lands, waters, and natural resources the main pursuit of the CBC.<sup>136</sup>

As of July of 1978, after the passing of an unjust referendum by tribal members on December 17, 1977, multinational mining corporation American Metals Climax (AMAX) won the bid to develop the project after having its eyes on Mount Tolman for over fourteen years, seeking to extract the estimated 1.1 billion pounds of copper and 900 million pounds of molybdenum.<sup>137</sup> AMAX finds its roots in The American Metal Company, Limited--one of the first and most influential US metal enterprises--and continues its settler-colonial capitalist legacy through AMAX which claimed to be “constantly exploring to find new sources of minerals and

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<sup>134</sup> “Open-Pit Mining at Colville Res?” 1.; “colvilles to get mining billions,” *The Native Nevadan*, March 6, 1981, 4. “Mining Pact Inked by Colville,” *Wassaja* (San Francisco, California), July 1978, 12.

<sup>135</sup> *Generations* 1-2; Amax and the U.S. Government are in a race to control the new global economy” “AMAX, an accomplice with U.S. Government” *Generations* 11

<sup>136</sup> The relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the Federal government as one of a “ward to its guardian,” is the conclusion made in the supreme court decision *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, a 1831 case which found the Cherokee Nation neither a foreign nor a US state, but rather a “domestic dependent nation.” This case was one of the three Cherokee cases, or the Marshall Trilogy, which serve as foundational legal precedent regarding Native land and jurisdiction rights under the US judicial system. These decisions attempt to eradicate Indigenous sovereignties and expand the jurisdiction of settler government and law. The Red Nation, *The Red Deal: Indigenous Action to Save our Earth* (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2021), 123.

<sup>137</sup> This referendum is elaborated on further in the following pages. “Open-Pit Mining at Colville Res?” 1.; “Mining Pact Inked by Colville,” 12.; Bruce Johansen, “Indians Fight AMAX Project,” *The Multinational Monitor*, July 1980.

natural resources to meet current and future worldwide demand.”<sup>138</sup> AMAX, which at the time produced almost half of the world’s supply of molybdenum, was determined to exploit Colville Confederated Tribes lands that were “believed to contain perhaps the highest amount of molybdenum in the continental U.S.”<sup>139</sup> The CBC entered into a unique joint venture lease with AMAX that would allow the Council to both participate in the management of projects and share all the profits.<sup>140</sup>



(“Tribal Representatives receive an exploration installment of \$8.5 million on August 7, 1978.”)<sup>141</sup>

This partnership was the “thought to be the largest mineral lease from an American Indian tribe on record,” with an expected income of \$1 billion for the Colville Tribes over the course of the estimated forty-three years of mining.<sup>142</sup> During the first two years in the

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<sup>138</sup> The American Metal Company was founded in 1887. No. 1 Report 2

<sup>139</sup> “Mount Tolman [would have been] the largest molybdenum mine in the world in terms of the amount of ore moved and the third largest, in terms of actual production.” Johansen, “Indians Fight.”; “Mining Pact Inked by Colville,” 12.

<sup>140</sup> After going through BIA officials and geologists, independent consultants, tribal planning and land and forestry committees. “Colvilles Ponder Copper Mine,” *Rawhide Press* (Spokane Tribe, Wellpinit, Washington), July 1977, 15.; The project manager racistly and condescending stated: “It takes a sophisticated tribe to negotiate a deal like this, but the Colvilles are right there. They check everything.” “colvilles to get mining billions,” 4.; “Mining Pact Inked by Colville,” 12.

<sup>141</sup> Fact Sheet Mount Tolman Project.

<sup>142</sup> “colvilles to get mining billions,” 4. “By the end of August 1980 more than 360,000 feet of drill core had been brought to the surface of Mount Tolman from 277 test holes....Plans call for a 60,000 ton per day mill” 3

exploratory drilling stage alone, the Confederated Tribes received an advance of \$17 million.<sup>143</sup> The agreement posited that \$1 million in royalties would be paid annually for the following five years, then approximately \$50 million a year in a fifty-fifty split of profits with the company.<sup>144</sup> Colville Business Councilman Dale Kohler boasted about this lucrative partnership, touting it as a not only a “landmark event” of cooperation in the history of Indian tribes and the mining industry, but also the start of a very lucrative one that would make them “the economic colossus of North Central and Eastern Washington.”<sup>145</sup> This project included a \$11-12 million annual payroll, in which Colville tribal members were promised to be prioritized for the estimated 500-600 jobs created by the venture.<sup>146</sup> AMAX’s offer of economic and educational opportunities for Colville tribal members was sweetened by the promise of a \$6,000 annual check to each member, living on or off the reservation.<sup>147</sup> Despite this supposed guarantee of financial security, in no way was there a consensus within the tribal membership concerning the project. One unnamed tribal member was quoted two years after the signing over of Mount Tolman to AMAX, acknowledging that while the money was “tempting,” they worried about leaving a legacy to their children. “I’d rather leave them a homeland than buy them a motorbike.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> “Colville,” *Wassaja* (San Francisco, California), March 1979, 15.; This initial stage included metallurgical tests, installation of five drill rigs, and the drilling of 277 test holes.

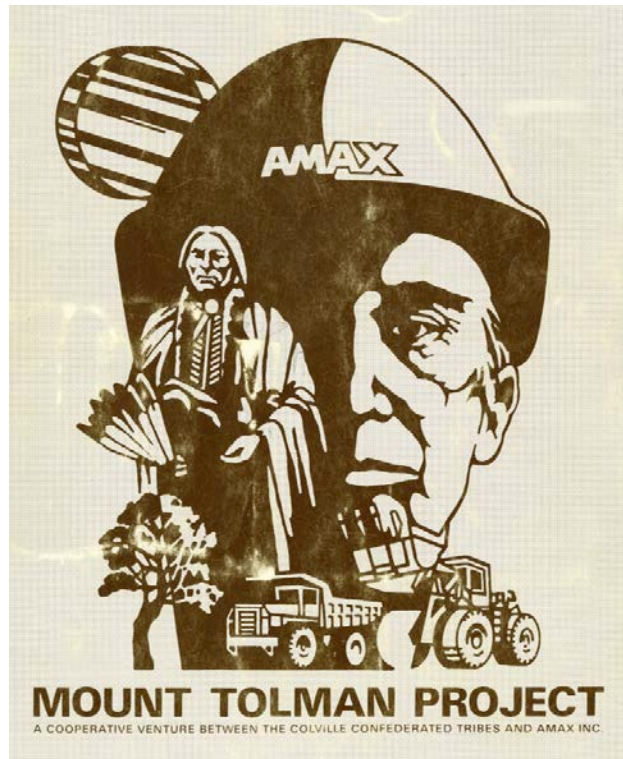
<sup>144</sup> “colvilles to get mining billions,” 4.; “Mount Tolman Project: A Cooperative Venture Between the Colville Confederated Tribes and AMAX Inc.” Beak Consultants, Portland, Or.

<sup>145</sup> “Mining Agreement Stirs Controversy,” 33.

<sup>146</sup> This held true as of March of 1979, when 55% of the thirty-eight people employed by AMAX at the time were Colville tribal members. Some estimations suggested that up to 1,500 jobs could be created. “colvilles to get mining billions,” 4.; “Colvilles Ponder Copper Mine,” 15.; “Open-Pit Mining at Colville Res?” 1.; “Colville,” 15. “Mount Tolman Project: A Cooperative Venture Between the Colville Confederated Tribes and AMAX Inc.” Beak Consultants, Portland, Or. 4

<sup>147</sup> Johansen, “Indians Fight.”

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.



(Mount Tolman Project: A Cooperative Venture Between the Colville Confederated Tribes and AMAX Inc.)<sup>149</sup>

The image used to publicize the Mount Tolman Project depicts AMAX and the CBC's unified vision for progress, in which resource extraction would facilitate Colville peoples' prosperity and future. A tractor is drawn literally uplifting the face of a Native man wearing an AMAX hard hat, as a suggestion of the mobility that employment under AMAX would provide. A tree signals AMAX and the CBC's advertised considerations for the health of the land. In the shadow of the modernized worker, a Native man in regalia faces the path ahead set by the mining vehicles below him. The key condition supposedly at the foundation of this agreement was that AMAX would "restore to its natural state" the affected areas after the mining ended.<sup>150</sup> Company statements and pamphlets on environmental considerations produced by AMAX and the CBC asserted that "[t]o meet the world's needs...the mineral wealth of the earth can be utilized for

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<sup>149</sup> Report cover 1.1

<sup>150</sup> "Open-Pit Mining at Colville Res?" 1.

human progress in complete harmony with conservation and preservation of other natural resources...[and] the reservation's natural beauty."<sup>151</sup> With the CBC's support, this colonial rhetoric of using "modern technology" to facilitate "human progress" was marketed as harmonious with tribal priorities, and AMAX's project branded as one that was capable of "meshing those values."<sup>152</sup> The first issue of *Generations* reflected on how this messaging within AMAX and CBC materials were received at the time, that while "it was stated in the information packets that the benefits from the mine would be just rewarded from the 'risks and disturbances' that would take place during mighty development in operation," such a "sacrifice" was unacceptable.<sup>153</sup>

The project proposed in the heart of Mount Tolman had been part of a series of AMAX's extractive ventures across Indian Country and the Global South. By 1980, AMAX had mined for copper, molybdenum, and other minerals with catastrophic results from the Cheyenne Reservation in Montana to parts of Namibia in Africa.<sup>154</sup> Such mining projects were proven to create airborne sulfur oxide contamination, as when elements from inside the mountain are exposed to air, toxic fumes are created as a by-product and produce acid rain. Water usage during the mining process would deplete supplies and leach toxins into the groundwater with materials from inside the mountain as well as from the poisons, such as cyanide, used to extract them. To be located just three miles south of the reservation town Keller and on top of the Sanpoil River, the project would cause catastrophic and potentially irreversible harm to the lands and the thousands of Indigenous peoples living on and off of it for generations to come.<sup>155</sup>

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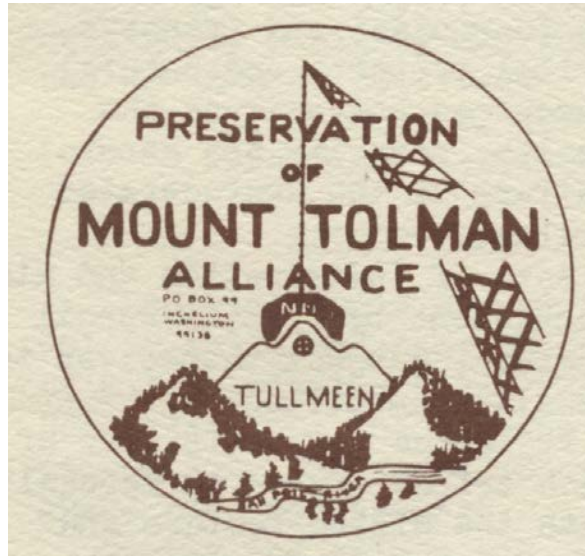
<sup>151</sup> AMAX & CBC, "MOUNT TOLMAN PROJECT ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS," 1, 6.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>153</sup> "Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance," 1.

<sup>154</sup> Johnson, "women of all red nations," 12.; (Report 2, "ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS AT MOUNT TOLMAN")

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.



(Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance emblem. A crane is drawn attempting to extract the core of the mountain.)<sup>156</sup>

In their legal, direct action, and educational campaigns, the Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance cited a study conducted by scientists at the University of Colorado in 1974 on the effects of water contamination from molybdenum mining tailings by AMAX in two locations in Colorado. The studies found that molybdenum and heavy metals in water supplies were statistically related to higher incidences of all cancers (namely leukemia), high blood pressure, digestive disorders, as well as spontaneous abortions, and sterilization.<sup>157</sup> At the same time as this project, AMAX was facing lawsuits from the three other tribes, including the Northern Cheyenne and Crow Tribe in Montana concerning coal mining rights, and groundwater usage rights with the Tohono O’odham Nation in present-day Arizona.<sup>158</sup> Part of the movement protesting the mining, tribal member Albert Louie stated: ““Money can be stolen, lost, burned. But that mountain, nobody can steal it; it can’t be lost and even if it burns, grass will grow again. The

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<sup>156</sup> *Generations 1*

<sup>157</sup> Johansen, “Indians Fight.”

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

next year, we can eat off it.”<sup>159</sup> Just as harm to the land means harm to future generations, care for children and the body must also mean care for the land.

These intergenerational concerns were at the core of Swan’s work, which connected her legal battle to protect and be with her children to the gendered, reproductive, and long-lasting genocidal harms of this mining project on Colville reservation lands. In a July 1980 report titled “women of all red nations” in *Off Our Backs*, Swan posited her concerns as one with those of WARN, with whom she organized, stating: ““Our common concern is that our children will be born deformed.””<sup>160</sup> The article directly makes this tie by asserting “[t]he Colville Indians in Washington state are trying to prevent a similar disaster” to that at Pine Ridge, where WARN was fighting to prevent, document, and seek justice for those facing spontaneous abortions and other gendered health complications as a result of extractive enterprises.<sup>161</sup> It is important to note the simultaneity of, and potential collaboration between, these Native women-led movements for sovereignty and life. Not only did Swan serve as the political prisoner point-person for WARN, she also attended the BHA Survival Gathering in 1980, one year after both the Black Hills Alliance and Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance were founded by WARN and Swan respectively.<sup>162</sup>

In a scathing critique of the project, and the predatory extractive energy development industry and settler-colonial regime that it represented, the Alliance named mining as “a move of EXTERMINATION and GENOCIDE of our future generations and the destruction of our

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<sup>159</sup> “Mining Agreement Stirs Controversy,” 33. Note for myself: Cover story in the Pacific magazine of the *Seattle Times*.

<sup>160</sup> Johnson, “women of all red nations,” 12.

<sup>161</sup> Sandie Johnson, “women of all red nations,” *Off Our Backs*, July 1980, 12. “Now that valuable minerals have been discovered on that land, many multinational corporations are anxious to ‘help the Indians develop their natural energy resources.’...If you wish to take a stand with the people who are organizing against this threat, send contributions and letters of support” to both WARN and the Alliance.

<sup>162</sup> Black Hills Paha Sapa Report. Vol 1, No. 1 (July 1979), 11. I deleted the chapter which addressed this before the submission of my thesis.

heritage,” as well as as a tool to facilitate the underdevelopment of Indigenous nations and further the “wealth of the country through the plunder of their land and resources.”<sup>163</sup> This economic violence is only possible through the destruction of the land and the livelihoods of future generations, linking violence against one as violence against both: “our future will be for survival, and the protection of our children, and our future generations.”<sup>164</sup>

The project would additionally require the building of an invasive processing plant and an estimated influx of 10,000 persons, which created deep worries “of law and order problems...[and] opposition to growing non-Indian populations on Indian land and the fear of losing more tribal lands.”<sup>165</sup> AMAX held that “[c]ommunity planning will take into account the social impacts caused by a new workforce on existing communities,” yet such planning took the form of increased policing on and near the reservation. Colville peoples’ very real concerns were disturbingly facilitated by the Colville Tribal Police, who were paid by AMAX to secure the profit project and violently chill interference from dissenters.<sup>166</sup> This influx of mostly male workers would establish a bordering ‘Man Camp,’ furthering and encouraging settler-colonial frontier violence and gender-based sexual violence, putting particularly Indigenous women and youth at risk. Such sites where male settler workers in extractive industries live and “interact with Native peoples without accountability,” facilitate “the long American tradition of anti-Indian violence...[which] takes on a particularly gendered form...especially in areas where

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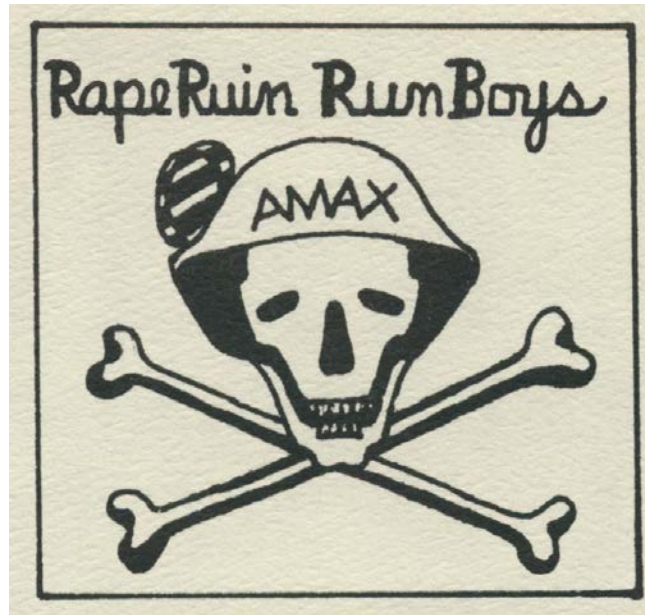
<sup>163</sup> “Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance,” 1, 2.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>165</sup> “Colvilles Ponder Copper Mine,” 15.

<sup>166</sup> “Indian Police,” *Wassaja* (San Francisco, California), December 1978, 1.; “AMAX will pay the cost of an officer for 20 hours a week to provide security for its facilities on Mount Tolman.” The tribal police were also hired by the Shoalwater Bay Tribes, located nearby in South Bend, Washington to help set up its own law enforcement on the Shoalwater Bay Indian Reservation. “Indian Police,” 1.; AMAX & CBC, “MOUNT TOLMAN PROJECT ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS,” 6.

resource extraction occurs.”<sup>167</sup> This was the case on the Colville Reservation, and a central concern of the Alliance.



(“Rape Ruin Rum Boys: AMAX”)<sup>168</sup>

Accompanied by the words “Rape Ruin Rum Boys,” the above illustration of a skull and crossbones wearing an AMAX helmet appears on the second page of the first issue of *Generations*. This image (potentially drawn by Swan like other illustrations in the issue) and caption exemplify how the Alliance understood AMAX’s presence and the gendered threats of violence and “ruin,” namely “rape,” that the presence of their figuratively and literally deadly workforce of “rum boys” pose. This image works alongside the rest of *Generation* materials as warning, political education, and a call to action to readers.

As the lead organizer of the Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance, Swan galvanized others on the Colville Reservation to order an injunction in the summer of 1980 to put a stop to

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<sup>167</sup> The Red Nation, *The Red Deal: Indigenous Action to Save our Earth*, 56.

<sup>168</sup> “Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance,” 2.

the mining before it could begin.<sup>169</sup> The Alliance argued that the Colville Confederated Tribes' government, headed by the CBC, was an illegitimate political structure formed by the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 that did "not represent a majority of the Colville people."<sup>170</sup> As was the case on many politically reorganized reservations at the time, Colville peoples "boycott[ed] elections, regarding the government as a colonial instrument."<sup>171</sup> Such a boycott occurred during the tribal referendum which gave the Mount Tolman mining project the green light in 1977, and only 875 of 3,500 eligible voters participated.<sup>172</sup> Reflecting on the referendum, Swan wrote that the "vote was pushed through during the hubbub of Christmas [and]...was thrown together with a confused opinion poll, strategic plan to get votes of approval," which "groomed" tribal members into voting in support of mining.<sup>173</sup> The Alliance filed a civil rights suit in addition to the injunction in the Federal District Court of Spokane, basing their case on this and other irregularities in the corrupt voting procedures.<sup>174</sup> While pursuing these legal avenues, the Alliance also held the belief that they, alongside many other Native anti-mining initiatives, "have found that the legal system is a weapon used against them."<sup>175</sup> With an intimate understanding of the failures of the US (in)justice system since the resolution of her case, Swan led the Alliance's call to direct action through collective pressure, a community-wide debate, and new referendum. A petition calling to put a stop to the mining project read:

The pollution of the air and water, combined with the degradation of destruction of the land, will destroy lifestyle...[and] sources of survival for the tribal membership... We here by state that we are totally opposed to all mining exploration and development, and demand that all my activities be halted immediately and permanently. And the continued

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<sup>169</sup> Johnson, "women of all red nations," 12.

<sup>170</sup> "[T]heir actions are not honest or sound but very injurious to the tribes." "Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance," 1.; Johansen, "Indians Fight."

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> According to the CBC, 567 voted in favor of mining and 308 against. Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Yvonne Swan, "Mining on Our Reservation," *Tribal Tribune* (Nespelem, Washington), January 3, 2005, 7.

<sup>174</sup> The CBC undemocratically amended voting regulations for this specific referendum and wrongfully kept certain aspects of the contract confidential. "Preservation of Mount Tolman Alliance," 1.

<sup>175</sup> Generations, 11.

exploitation of destruction of the land and the tribal membership, will be considered an atrocious violation of human rights, sanctioning genocide, and an assault on the integral part of the tribal culture, traditions, and heritage.<sup>176</sup>

While to some, particularly non-Native observers at the time, it may have seemed that “the opposition has not been able to mount any effective challenge,” the movement to save Mount Tolman from 1978-1981 laid the foundations for power to be built by Swan and other concerned tribal members in a resurgence of the movement decades later.<sup>177</sup> By the early 1980s, production of molybdenum began to exceed its demand, and the severe depression in the molybdenum market encouraged AMAX to pull out of the potentially \$4 billion venture. Molybdenum prices “tanked” for approximately twenty years, and then skyrocketed once again in the early 2000s.<sup>178</sup> Given the lack of access to healthcare, underfunded schooling systems, and high unemployment rates at 40% on the reservation, the CBC once again cited economic precarity as the reason to reconsider mining as a pathway to potentially “create a permanent fund for long-term needs.”<sup>179</sup>

Over twenty years later in 2005, Swan organized another successful campaign against AMAX and the CBC’s attempts to mine Mount Tolman. Swan frequently wrote in the Colville Reservation’s newspaper the *Tribal Tribune* to share her poetry, wisdom from the previous movement to save Mount Tolman, and to spur readers to take action against the new proposal. Swan reflected that in the 1970s, the Alliance “consulted with elders and follow[ed] their advice.

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<sup>176</sup> (Dated 19th December, 1979... presented to the tribal, state and government officials. Make additional copies for circulation) Generations, 16.

<sup>177</sup> Gary L. Atkins, “Northwest Indian tribe strikes historic deal for mining its mountain,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 5, 1981.

<sup>178</sup> Prices went from \$13 per pound to \$5 during this time, then up to \$30 in the early 2000s, meaning this new project would yield more than \$10 billion. A question that this raises: is does this have a correlation with the expansion of US empire and warmaking during the ‘War on Terror’ in the early 2000s? Kramer, “Mountain of controversy.”; Jack Mcneel, “Colville to vote on mining referendum,” *Indian Country Today*, March 16, 2006. <https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/colville-to-vote-on-mining-referendum>.

<sup>179</sup> Kramer, “Mountain of controversy.”

The project is so against nature, they pity anyone who tries to re-open the mine.”<sup>180</sup> Now an elder herself, she boldly stated that to “barter away Mt. Tolman for money would be like killing our future generations and auctioning off their baby clothes.”<sup>181</sup> Swan’s statement illuminates her unwavering commitment to intergenerational justice, and her organizing work addresses--as she reminded readers--the fact that “[g]enocide and termination policies are not some thing of the past.”<sup>182</sup>

Unsurprised by the council members’ reconsideration to allow mining, Swan labeled them a selfish “‘clique’” who never intended to do right by the tribal membership, and only wanted to enrich themselves.<sup>183</sup> Swan wrote that in the 1970s, CBC, BIA, and tribal managers were shareholders in an AMAX subsidiary mining corporation in Delaware, and were looking to use monetary “crumbs” to placate Colville peoples concerned about corruption and the spiritual, cultural, and environmental devastation of the mining project.<sup>184</sup> Swan encouraged the membership to vote “NO” to mining in an upcoming referendum that would lift a moratorium on hardrock mining on Colville reservation lands put in place in 1995 (a ban which came out of the hard work of Colville tribal elder and great-grandmother Georgia Iukes and the Colville Indian Environmental Protection Alliance she co-founded).<sup>185</sup> Framing her call once again within the scope of justice for youth and generations to come, Swan wrote: “Vote NO on behalf of those who are under voting age.”<sup>186</sup> The successful campaign to block mining was led by members of the Alliance as well as Visions for Our Future (women-led group run out of the home of Colville

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<sup>180</sup> Swan, “Mining on Our Reservation,” 7.

<sup>181</sup> Yvonne Swan, “Mount Tolman,” *Tribal Tribune* (Nespelem, Washington), September 7, 2005, 5.

<sup>182</sup> Swan, “Mollie,” 6.

<sup>183</sup> Swan stated the CBC “want mining on our reservation don’t care about you. All they care about is themselves.” Swan, “Mining on Our Reservation,” 7.

<sup>184</sup> Yvonne Swan, “The ‘Clique’ is the Minority,” *Tribal Tribune* (Nespelem, Washington), October 5, 2005, 6.

<sup>185</sup> Formed after the Tribes were approached in 1994 by a gold-mining company. Chris Carrel, “Tribes strike back at mining,” *High Country News* (Paonia, Colorado) Aug. 31, 1998.

<sup>186</sup> Yvonne Swan, “The ‘Clique’ is the Minority,” *Tribal Tribune* (Nespelem, Washington), October 5, 2005, 6.

tribal member Billie Jo Bray), Colville Indian Environmental Preservation Alliance, Okanogan Highlands Alliance, SHAWLSociety, Earthworks, and Center for Science in Public Participation.<sup>187</sup> These organizers held a four day long camp-out in Keller in February of 2006 to occupy the space and mobilize community members to fight the mining proposal, which was overwhelmingly voted down on March 18, 2006.<sup>188</sup>

Nearly eight years after successfully shutting down the mining referendum, Swan continued to organize against corruption and for economic justice on the Colville reservation. In the 2013 case *Yvonne Swan and Colville Members for Justice v. Colville Business Council, et Al.*, Swan represented 2,700 tribal members who demanded that the remaining \$96.5 million from the tribes' settlement with the Federal government over the mismanagement of Tribal trust assets be distributed to all tribal members equally.<sup>189</sup> The case was dismissed on jurisdictional grounds, but for Swan, "[t]his setback is not the end of our fight for justice."<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Okanogan Highlands Alliance is a non-Native environmental organization, Kramer, SHAWLSociety "lobbies for the cleanup of closed uranium mines on the Spokane Reservation," Center for Science in Public Participation provides "research and technical advice to people impacted by mining" <http://www.csp2.org/>. Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> In 2006: "opposition from the Colvilles helped kill a proposed open-pit gold mine in nearby Okanogan County. The tribe is also involved in a lawsuit against Teck Cominco, Canadian mining firm, over the cleanup of heavy metals in Lake Roosevelt" Ibid.; Kramer, "Mountain of controversy."; Yvonne Swan, "A dead issue," *Tribal Tribune* (Nespelem, Washington), November 6, 2008, 6.

<sup>189</sup> "[O]f 70 settlements reached between tribes and the federal government over trust asset mismanagement in recent years, Colville Tribes' was the second largest," totalling at \$193 million. The Tribune, "Judge Dismisses \$69 Million Tribal Court Case," *Tribal Tribune* (Nespelem, Washington), October 2013, 10.; The Tribune, "Swan v. Sirois et Al," *Tribal Tribune* (Nespelem, Washington), October 2013, 4.

<sup>190</sup> The Tribune, "Judge Dismisses," 10.



(Image from “500 years of Indigenous Resistance” gathering in Olympia, Washington, October 10, 2017.)<sup>191</sup>

“PRAYER FOR MOTHER EARTH” by Yvonne Swan was written in 1974 two years after the start of her case, and five years before she founded the Mount Tolman Alliance. Published in the *Tribal Tribune* on December 21, 2005.<sup>192</sup>

O, Grandfather Great Spirit  
Creator of all living things,  
We honor your presence  
And thank you  
For your great smile that gave us birth  
May we always remember you  
From the first day to the last  
Grandfather, Great Spirit,  
We see your continuing smile  
In the reflections of the sun and moon

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<sup>191</sup> “Yvonne Swan // Indigenous People’s Day- Honoring Our Women,” 2017  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CU5PeOut0f4&ab\\_channel=RoxannMurray](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CU5PeOut0f4&ab_channel=RoxannMurray).

<sup>192</sup> Yvonne, Swan. “PRAYER FOR MOTHER EARTH,” *Tribal Tribune* (Nespelem, Washington), December 21, 2005. Originally written in 1974.

And we know that you are near  
May we never forget your presence  
As your light is constant  
Grandfather, Great Spirit of Love,  
We thank you for enriching the earth, our Mother  
With bountiful plant life, wild game,  
And flowing waters  
To nourish our bodies  
So we can enjoy this path of Life  
May we, who forget, be reminded  
That these were meant to remain free and natural  
O, grandfather, Great Spirit of Peace,  
Do not let the body of our Mother, the earth,  
Be tortured any longer,  
Stop those who tear off her clothing, the grass,  
To build their stadiums and subways,  
Stop those who cut off her hair, the trees,  
To build their concrete jungles,  
Stop those who contaminate her blood, the waters,  
With their motorboats and refuse,  
Stop them soon, for now they're probing for her heart  
With lethal drills  
Just for curiosity's sake  
Great Spirit of Love,  
Blow away the haze of greed  
From the eyes of your children  
So they will stop mutilating the body  
Of our mother, the earth,  
In the name of power and money

## Conclusion

While Wanrow was embraced by both the radical feminist and Native movements as a political prisoner in her fight against racialized and gendered violence (and the state's criminalization of such self-defense), other lesser known Native women's struggles against violence in the following years remained largely unaddressed.<sup>193</sup> With the hegemonic feminist

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<sup>193</sup> Victoria Law, "Sick of the Abuse," 46.

movement's reluctance to embrace intimate violence as a 'political enough' issue with which to mobilize a movement, and attention weaned from the criminalization of subversives by the US state in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Native mothers facing intimate violence (like Rita Silk-Nauni in the following section) appealed to be recognized by movements and built smaller-scale networks of support.<sup>194</sup> (Wanrow) Swan herself worked to realize justice for Silk-Nauni, whose case started the exact year of 1979 (Wanrow) Swan's ended.<sup>195</sup> What happens to those who, unlike Wanrow, fall beyond and or between these primary drivers of the Native sovereignty and feminist liberation movements, and how do these individuals build community to meet each other's needs?

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<sup>194</sup> The "battered women's movement" (late 1970s/early 1980s) insisted that interpersonal violence was just as political and 'feminist' of an issue as mobilizing around violence from strangers. By the early 1980s, grassroots efforts by women to create shelters and build safety for battered women and their children entered public discourse and the discussions were often bastardized and co-opted by carceral feminists: moving from a systems analysis (that sees battering as rooted in systemic issues of colonialism, carcerality, racism, immigration, class, etc.) to a vilification of specific perpetrators, and calling for the involvement and further entrenchment of the carceral state. Victoria Law, "Sick of the Abuse," 49.

<sup>195</sup> Spokane County Bar Association, "Challenging Systemic Racism In Our Regional Justice System: Agenda Speaker Biographies. Elder Yvonne Swan-Wanrow, Sinixt Arrow Lakes Colville. Enrolled Tribal Member Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. Advocate and Activist," Spokane County Bar Association Annual Review, 2020.  
<https://www.spokanebar.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Systemic-Racism-CLE-Speaker-Biographies.pdf>

Part II  
“In Sisterhood I will Remain Strong”<sup>196</sup>

This section explores the largely untold histories of the movements to keep alive and free three incarcerated Native women in the late 1970s to the mid 1980s: Standing Rock Sioux woman Rita Silk-Nauni, Paiute woman Angie Whiterock, and lesbian Cherokee woman Raven Darkwing. Sociologist Luana Ross writes: “Imprisoned Native women are invisible, and...invisibility allows structural arrangements of inequality to exist.”<sup>197</sup> Before and during incarceration, these Native women and the violences they were subjected to were (incompletely) invisibilized by way of geographical and discursive sequestration from society, kin, and support networks. The enactment or threat of racialized and gendered violence, solitary confinement, and prolonged indignification, furthered this silencing. To disrupt these structures of isolation, anti-prison activists on both the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ prison walls pursued what historian Dan Berger terms “strategies of visibility.” This was a tactic developed by predominantly Black prison organizers in the post-World War II era

to surpass the physical isolation of confinement...[and] make the prison and especially its captives visible to people around the world...Prisoners and their allies reasoned that if the prison’s power lay in its invisibility, its ability to remove people from view and access, thereby subjecting them to untold and untellable forms of violence, then exposure constituted a means of resistance.<sup>198</sup>

These incarcerated Native women, who were otherwise largely disappeared from the discursive production of prominent Native and feminist publications, forced their ways into the collective perceptual field. I argue that this visibility, realized through these women’s writings and facilitated by *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter* and through

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<sup>196</sup> Rita Silk-Nauni, “Open Letter from Rita Silk-Nauni,” *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, October-November 1982, 29.

<sup>197</sup> Ross, *Inventing the Savage*, 2.

<sup>198</sup> Dan Berger, *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 6, 94.

correspondences with Bay of Quinte Mohawk writer Beth Brant (published in her anthology *A Gathering of Spirit*), made possible communal and interpersonal relationships of care.<sup>199</sup>

Therefore, building spaces for incarcerated Native women alongside their friends and comrades on the outside to collectively imagine futures beyond violence, cages, and separation from kin. The histories and activist life-writings (including letters, public statements, and poetry) of political prisoners Rita Silk-Nauni, Angie Whiterock, Raven Darkwing, and their friends, serve as a form of counter-storytelling which simultaneously names and critiques their experiences of incarceration and cisheteropatriarchy as rooted in settler colonialism and genocide; subvert hegemonic and false narratives about their own lives; materially facilitate their survival; and bring to life radical forms of decolonial connecting and care through Indigenous “Sisterhood.”<sup>200</sup>

#### A. *No More Cages* and Beth Brant’s *A Gathering of Spirit*

With its intersectional and quotidian focus, lesbian feminist anti-prison publication *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter* worked to connect and share the plights and voices of these lesser-known incarcerated Native women. *No More Cages* was established in 1980 by the Women Free Women in Prison collective (WFWIP) of Brooklyn, New York, a majority white organization which engaged in grassroots women’s prisoner support in the late 1970s to the mid 1980s. Their work included organizing direct actions such as protests,

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<sup>199</sup> *No More Cages* remains a largely understudied publication and the analyses presented here are a result from my close reading of dozens of issues within the Hall-Hoag Special Collection. The chapter “Printing Abolition” in Emily Thuma’s *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence* includes a discussion of *No More Cages* as one in a set of anti-prison newsletters. I came across Krista Benson’s “Carrying Stories of Incarcerated Indigenous Women as Tools for Prison Abolition,” which looks at Brant’s letter exchanges in *A Gathering of Spirit* one week before the submission of this thesis (too late for it to inform this section). Benson’s work does not look into who these women corresponding with Brant were.

<sup>200</sup> Answering ‘why poetry?’ Brant writes: “Poetry seems to be the choice of telling for many Native women. In our capable hands, poetry is torn from the enclave of intellectuals and white, male posturing, and returned to the lyrical singing of the drum, the turtle rattle, the continuation of the Good Red Road and the balance of the Earth.” Beth Brant, *Writing as Witness: essay and talk* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1994), 12.

supporting children of incarcerated mothers, arranging pen pal communication, and facilitating legal and monetary support for women inside carceral facilities.<sup>201</sup> To sustain itself and remain free for women inside, *No More Cages* relied upon donated money and unpaid labor of New York City's lesbian community and local cooperatives.<sup>202</sup> While the collective's members listed as producers of the newsletter never exceeded six, *No More Cages* made its way into 160 prisons and jails by the fifth volume in 1984.<sup>203</sup> As historian Emily Thuma has argued, it played a key role in building "a highly decentralized, cross-regional women's prison movement" and the rise of anticarceral feminism during the 1970s and the early 1980s.<sup>204</sup> I advance that through the contributions of women on the inside, *No More Cages* built radical networks of connectivity that worked to expose and subvert the settler-colonial carceral violence of isolation, uniquely address the gendered and intersectional nature of these harms, and bring material change to incarcerated women's personal lives and legal battles to facilitate their survival.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Emily L. Thuma, *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 89, 121.

<sup>202</sup> Each issue of *No More Cages* cost either \$1 or \$1.50, "more if you can less if you can't," and all issues stated on the cover that it is free to "prisoners and poor people." Each subscription form encouraged individuals to purchase an additional \$6 subscription to sponsor an incarcerated woman for a year. An issue from the first volume names COME! Unity Press as the "cooperative where we learned to do this printing. The press does not demand \$ from us or other movement people who printer is that provide equal access to the poor." Women Free Women in Prison, "Statement of Purpose," *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter*; February-April 1980, 1.; Amanda, Chaia, Shell & Linda, "Dear Sisters Inside," *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter*; April-May 1983, 1.; Women Free Women in Prison, Statement, *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter*; April-May 1983, 0.

<sup>203</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, "Dear Sisters Inside," *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter*; April-May 1984, 1.

<sup>204</sup> Thuma, *All Our Trials*, 90.; Thuma advances the concept of anticarceral feminism, which understands the carceral state as an oppressive force directly inhibiting, rather than ever being capable of serving, feminist liberation.

<sup>205</sup> It is important for this reading to remain open to this newsletter's potential failures and acknowledge that this information is limited to what WFWIP published within these select issues. While the members repeatedly encouraged the participation of readers in crafting the newsletter--writing "[t]his is your newsletter...SPEAK OUT! We need more feedback, and more dialog"--questions regarding how the publication was received by publics whose voices were not published in the newsletter linger. Another potential limitation stems from the racial power dynamic between the majority white WFWIP members and the mostly non-white makeup of the women published in *No More Cages*. The publishers shared their respective identities within each of the "Dear Sisters Inside" introductions in order to remain consistently transparent about their positionalities in relation to their work. In the 1983 April-May issue, the publishers Amanda, Chaia, Shell, and Linda wrote that they "feel a strong need to change the racial make-up of the group and welcome participation from Women of Color, from ex-prisoners and ex-psychiatric inmates," as a mostly white group of working class leftist Lesbians, with the exception of one mixed identified woman (Cherokee, Creek, and Jewish). Amanda, Chaia, Shell and Linda, "Dear Sisters Inside," 1.; Women Free



(Six *No More Cages* issue covers)<sup>206</sup>

The February-April 1980 issue within the first volume of *No More Cages* presented a statement of purpose that outlines their anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-carceral, and feminist

Women in Prison, Statement, *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter*, Winter 1984.; Chaia, Bonni, Shell & Linda, "Dear Sisters Inside," *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter*, December 1983-January 1984, 1. What I can gather from the internal decision-making processes is that the women published submissions that some of them disagreed with politically, as long as it "relates in some way to the struggles of women in prison." Women Free Women in Prison, "Statement of Purpose," 1.

<sup>206</sup> From top left to bottom right vol 1 no 6 HH675, nmc hh357 5.5, nmc hh590 1/14.3, nmc HH590 3.6, No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter. Spring 1982. HH675 W-34 John Hay Library, Brown University,, vol 5 no

platform. Asserting that as “[w]omen in prison are positioned dangerously at the intersection of a complex system of multiple oppressions, every one as deadly as the others,” they insisted that approaches to liberation must also be intersectional and fronted by multiply minoritized incarcerated women.<sup>207</sup> *No More Cages* named their explicit focus on women as shaped by three factors, the first of which being what they qualify as the uniquely gendered aspects of incarceration: such as the separation of mothers from their children, gender-based violence from prison guards and administrators, psychiatric and medical violence including sterilization, and lack of economic opportunities. Second, their focus was informed by the fact that women in prison did not receive adequate support from the white upper-class dominated women’s movement, who often dismissed poor women of color (the exact demographic which makes up the majority of incarcerated women) in their anti-violence organizing.<sup>208</sup> Third, because of the “invisibility which male supremacy” imposes onto women, incarcerated women have been wrongfully left out of the historically male-focused anti-prison movement.<sup>209</sup>

Their statement of purpose declared: “We hope that this newsletter will fight against that isolation by providing a forum where women inside can speak.”<sup>210</sup> Based on a close reading of

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<sup>207</sup> “As Third World--primarily Black--women, they bear the brunt of the genocidal colonialist policy of this government. As poor women, they are part of the oppressed masses of capitalist America. As women, simply as women, they are the targets of a patriarchal order that wants to keep them forever subjugated. As women behind bars, they face the violence of a prison system intent on punishment and revenge. Our involvement with women in prison has been shaped all along by the awareness of this awesome interrelation of systems of oppression.” Women Free Women in Prison, “Statement of Purpose,” 2. This comes nine years before the release of Black feminist thinker Kimberlé Crenshaw’s “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” in 1989.

<sup>208</sup> “In a movement where violence against women has been a primary target of organizing, women in prison should represent a major share of the struggle, for they are constantly violated...But such is not the case. The lack of attention on women in prison is directly tied in to the fact that much of the work in the women’s movement has been done from the perspective of white, middle class women, and so it has not focused on issues primary in the lives of women of color and poor women--and it is exactly these women that make up the majority of women in prison.” Women Free Women in Prison, “Statement of Purpose,” 2.

<sup>209</sup> Leaving “the fate and struggles of the thousands of unknown oppressed women...unsupported.” Women Free Women in Prison, “Statement of Purpose,” 2. *No More Cages* explicitly outlined that they primarily serve non-men, and gatekept their work from harmful behaviors of men abusing the connections formed through the service. “ATTENTION MEN: We are not a %\*\*%### dating service. STOP sending us requests for female penpals (or any). We only throw them in the trash. It is a waste of our time and we don’t have enough as it is!” Women Free Women in Prison, “Attention Men,” *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, Winter 1984, 19.

<sup>210</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, “Statement of Purpose,” 2.

dozens of issues published over four observable years, I understand that to accomplish this, *No More Cages* had a three-fold focus: centering the voices of incarcerated women through their letters and art, documenting atrocities and amplifying demands from the ‘inside’ across the globe, and directing readers to educational and action-oriented resources.<sup>211</sup> The newsletter primarily provided poor, queer, Black, Native, and other “Third World” women of color a platform to share their experiences with being incarcerated, dialog and debate with each other, and build community across bars and borders. *No More Cages* garnered submissions from ordinary and anonymous women, and from grassroots activists organizations. They also featured international contributors such as political prisoners from anti-colonial resistance movements in Palestine, Haiti, South Africa, and Northern Ireland.<sup>212</sup> In addition to spreading petitions, letter-writing campaigns, and political and legal educational materials, the newsletter created invaluable spaces for incarcerated women’s intimacy and joy. Through it, letters of love or solidarity were delivered, visual and literary art published, and even a long-running section on “Inside Jokes” thrived.<sup>213</sup>

Considering its radical potential, it is not surprising that *No More Cages* faced severe censorship by prisons hoping to stifle the dissemination of dissenting ideas and to prevent incarcerated women from building power.<sup>214</sup> After one of these frequent occurrences happened in

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<sup>211</sup> I reviewed dozens of copies from the Hay Special Collections, and the only two other issues available online through other university online archives.

<sup>212</sup> See Volume 4 Issue 4 and Volume 5 Issue 5 of *No More Cages*; EL, “‘Britain, You are the Vampire But We are the Stake! Irish Women in Armagh jail,” *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, February-April 1980, 12.

<sup>213</sup> Each issue ended with an evolving “Free to Prisoners” list of publications, accompanied by an ask for readers with the economic means to support the listed publications so that more free issues could be sent to incarcerated and poor women. Women Free Women in Prison, “Prisoners Legal Page,” *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, October-November 1982, 32.; Women Free Women in Prison, “Free to Prisoners,” *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, Winter 1984, 28.; Rita Silk-Nauni, Letter, *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, April-May 1984, 12.; Women Free Women in Prison, “Inside Jokes,” *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, October-November 1982, 35.

<sup>214</sup> *No More Cages* and its sister publication *Through the Looking Glass: A Women and Children Prison Newsletter* were confiscated from the women and the publications banned for supposedly instigating “plans for escape” and

1982 at Purdy Treatment Center for Women in Washington State, Women Free Women in Prison collective member Chaia reflected that this “violation of the Freedom of the Press...seems to be a tactic the prison administrations are using as the country moves to the right,” noting in a later issue that *No More Cages* had also been banned at Bedford Hills Prison in New York and at Marysville Prison in Ohio.<sup>215</sup> The newsletter often wrote on the increasingly “reactionary/fascist” turn the country took as the 1980s progressed.<sup>216</sup> “Because of this,” they wrote, “it is crucial for people/groups concerned with political change to strengthen our efforts...We need to let ‘them’ know that we will not be silenced!”<sup>217</sup> *No More Cages* served as a stronghold and conduit for radical anti-prison feminist organizing during a time in the early 1980s when the expansion of human caging and the carceral state was on the exponential rise, making their focus on the needs of disproportionately targeted poor Black and Native incarcerated women all the more powerful.<sup>218</sup>

In the summer of 1982, *No More Cages* spotlighted the radical lesbian publication *Sinister Wisdom*, and stated that there will be an issue on North American Indigenous women edited by Quinte Mohawk writer Beth Brant (also known as Degonwadonti). This blurb encouraged Native women to send her “any form of expression,” a call which was answered by Rita Silk-Nauni and Raven Darkwing, making their voices part of the anthology *A Gathering of Spirit*.<sup>219</sup> Brant described herself as Two-Spirit, mixed, lesbian, feminist, poor, activist, and a

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inciting violence. Chaia, “No More Cages and Through the Looking Glass Banned at Purdy Prison,” *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, Spring 1982, 16.

<sup>215</sup> Chaia, “No More Cages and Through the Looking Glass Banned at Purdy Prison,” 16.; At this final institution, women filed a lawsuit and got the newsletter back inside. Chaia, Letter to Mykki Balduff, *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, April-May 1983, 18.

<sup>216</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, Statement, *No More Cages*, Winter 1984, 0.

<sup>217</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, Statement, 0.

<sup>218</sup> The rise of mass-incarceration (which is overwhelmingly anti-Black) in this era finds its roots in the so-called War on Drugs.

<sup>219</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, *Sinister Wisdom*, *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, Summer 1982, 23.

mother, as well as a survivor of intimate violence and psychiatric institutionalization.<sup>220</sup> Her 1984 anthology *A Gathering of Spirit*--which includes poems, personal correspondences between Brant and incarcerated Native women, visual art, recipes, oral histories, and more--is widely regarded as the first collection of art and writing by exclusively North American Indigenous women.<sup>221</sup> Dedicated to “all Indian women who have survived these wars and live to tell the tales,” this book’s “humanness” allowed it “became what it had to be--a brilliant and loving weapon of change.”<sup>222</sup> Brant solicited submissions from prison organizations, tribal newspapers, and other alternative publications (including *No More Cages*), to uplift Indigenous women, specifically lesbians, whose voices were “yet unheard...[and] traditionally silenced.”<sup>223</sup>

In the introduction of *A Gathering of Spirit*, Brant boldly asserts:

I want to talk about blessings, and endurance, and facing the machine. The everyday shit. The everyday joy...[W]e are strongwilled and resisting. We have a spirit of rage. We are angry women. Angry at white men and their perversions. Their excessive greed and abuse of the earth, sky, and water... We are angry at Indian men for their refusals of us. For their limited vision of what constitutes a strong Nation. We are angry at a so-called “women/s movement” that always seems to forget we exist...we are either referred to as et ceteras in the naming of women of color, or simply not referred to at all. We are not

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<sup>220</sup> Born in Detroit to a Scottish-Irish mother and Mohawk father, Brant belonged to the Turtle Clan and the Theyingenaga reserve in Deseronto, Ontario, Canada. In addition to releasing books and poems, teaching, and organizing as an AIDS activist, Brant cofounded the organization Turtle Grandmother, which collected, shared, and celebrated Native women’s writing. Brant’s fiction and non-fiction work provide analyses on the settler-colonial origins of heteronormativity and patriarchy, and offer a queered and Indigenous feminist approach to decolonization. Brant died at the age of 74 in 2015. Beth Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit* (Rockland: Sinister Wisdom Books, 1984), 5, 204-207, 218.; Beth Brant, *Writing as Witness*, 64.; Beth Brant, *Mohawk Trail*, (Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books, 1985).; Arianne Burford, “‘Her Mouth Is Medicine’: Beth Brant and Paula Gunn Allen’s Decolonizing Queer Erotics,” *Journal of lesbian studies* 17, no. 2 (2013): 167–179.; Liz Sonneborn, “Brant, Beth,” in *A to Z of Women: American Indian Women* (Facts on File, Inc.: New York, New York, 2016).

<sup>221</sup> Sonneborn, “Brant, Beth,” 24.

<sup>222</sup> “When Natives have the opportunities to do *our own* editing and writing, a remarkable thing can happen. This thing is called *telling the truth for ourselves*--a novel idea to be sure and one that is essential to the nurturance of new voices in our communities.” In Brant’s words, the anthology caused an “earthquake” and “changed the face of Native literature forever.” Brant, *Writing as Witness*, 13, 114-115.

<sup>223</sup> Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 6.; In an article published five years after the release of her anthology, Brant wrote “if you ask why you have not read or heard of these women, ask it of yourself. The answer lies in the twin realms of racism and homophobia... We are rarely reviewed in so-called feminist newspapers or journals. So-called progressive papers do not know our names.” Beth, Brant, “Giveaway: Native Lesbian Writers,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 4 (1993): 946.

victims. We are organizers, we are freedom fighters, we are feminists, we are healers. This is not anything new. For centuries it has been so.<sup>224</sup>

Brant's expression of disillusionment and anger--with white male violence and capitalist abuse of the land, Native men's dismissal of women and exclusionary constructions of Indigenous Nationhood and belonging, and erasure from existence by the hegemonic feminist movement--is also a loving invocation of Native women as agents of change within long traditions of Indigenous feminist resistance. Through spotlighting the experiences of the "everyday shit...[and] joy," Brant's work illuminates the ways that the Native women within this section radically connected and supported each other when facing neglect and harm from others.

Brant reflected on a central term of this thesis, 'sister,' stating that "[t]he word comes easily to most of us [Native women]. Sisterhood. What holds us to that word is our commonness as Indians--as women. We come from different Nations. Our stories are not the same... Yet, we are the same. Can I tell you how lonely I have been for you?"<sup>225</sup> Both Brant and the contributors sought out and found community through this project, which brought together women from across forty Native nations as decolonial praxis.<sup>226</sup> Ten years after the release of *A Gathering of Spirit*, Brant asserted that this necessary process of connecting occurs *through* Native women's writing, which functions as "a generous sharing of our history and our dreams for the future. That generosity is a collective experience...[a way to form] our own circles of support."<sup>227</sup> This was particularly critical for Native women inside who faced the violences of separation brought on by settler colonialism compounded with the forced isolation of incarceration, such as Silk-Nauni and Darkwing, with whom she had correspondences with.

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<sup>224</sup> Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 7-8.

<sup>225</sup> Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 7.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>227</sup> Brant, *Writing as Witness*, 10, 16.

I chose to focus on these three women as their stories have gone either largely or entirely untold in secondary literature.<sup>228</sup> Furthermore, as these histories were reconstructable through the use of primary archival materials, which also function as historical agents themselves, such narratives also must exist and have life outside of the special collection. By bringing these stories together--as in some ways a practice of the type of emancipatory connecting I discuss within this section--I hope that it makes possible a more nuanced discussion of incarcerated Native women's built communities and world-building through their writings in the late 1970s to early 1980s.

#### B. Rita Silk-Nauni

In introducing herself and her fight for justice to the readership of the December-January 1981-1982 issue of *No More Cages*, Standing Rock Sioux woman Rita Silk-Nauni began: "The Creator blessed me with a Precious Son on November 6, 1968. I entered into Motherhood as Protectress and with a deep love I could never feel for another...On September 19, 1979 fleeing from my brutal husband, I unknowingly walked into an ordeal which separated me from my child."<sup>229</sup> I begin with Silk-Nauni's own framing of her decade-long struggle for freedom from incarceration--for defending herself and her ten-year-old son from interpersonal and police violence--as fulfilling her duties as a mother and "Protectress," to ground the hers and the following histories of other incarcerated Native women fighting for right to be free with one's kin.

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<sup>228</sup> Silk-Nauni is discussed briefly in Emily Thuma's book thurs book footnote about abolitionist article. I came across Krista Benson's "Carrying Stories of Incarcerated Indigenous Women as Tools for Prison Abolition," which looks at Brant's letter exchanges in *A Gathering of Spirit* as Indigenous decolonial abolitionist theory, one week before the submission of this thesis (too late for it to inform this chapter). Benson's work does not look into who these women were beyond a close reading of some letters.

<sup>229</sup> Rita Silk-Nauni, "Rita Silk Nauni," *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter*; December 1981-January 1982, 21.

On that September day in 1979, thirty-one-year-old Standing Rock Sioux woman Silk-Nauni and her son Derrick arrived in the Oklahoma City Airport from Los Angeles, California to flee from her abusive husband, who had threatened her and the boy's lives with a gun in his most recent attack upon them.<sup>230</sup> With hopes of finding safety with her son's father and her first husband's family, the pair continued their journey on foot in the absence of buses and taxis due to drivers on strike and expensive fares. Silk-Nauni was only four dollars short of being able to afford a taxi ride, exemplifying the severe precarity of their situation.<sup>231</sup> Silk-Nauni off-loaded some of her and Derrick's clothes out on the side of the road when the load of his bag became too heavy to carry. Soon thereafter, white airport security police officers Garland Garrison and Teresa Wells stopped them for littering.<sup>232</sup> During the confrontation, Officer Garrison violently grabbed the boy, tackled him to the ground, and threw him against the cruiser in an attempt to force him inside and take him away when he resisted. Silk-Nauni intervened and was confronted by Wells with her service gun drawn. When Silk-Nauni managed to get a hold of the weapon, Garrison moved to shoot her, and Silk-Nauni fired the gun, killing Garrison and wounding Wells.<sup>233</sup>

Silk-Nauni and her son fled in the police cruiser, only to be rammed off the road by another Oklahoma City police car shortly after.<sup>234</sup> Six to eight police officers brutally attacked the handcuffed Silk-Nauni, resulting in broken fingers, a concussion, and other severe injuries she was treated for in University Hospital's intensive care unit before being sent to Oklahoma

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<sup>230</sup> Pelican Lee and Jane Wing, "Rita Silk-Nauni vs. the State," *Off Our Backs*, February 1981, 2.

<sup>231</sup> Lee and Wing, "Rita Silk-Nauni vs. the State," 2.

<sup>232</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, "Defend Rita Silk-Nauni," *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter*; February-April 1980, 3.; Silk-Nauni, "Rita Silk Nauni," 21.

<sup>233</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, "Defend Rita Silk-Nauni," 3.; Silk-Nauni, "Rita Silk Nauni," 21. Silk-Nauni wrote "I actually thought I had been wounded. Going into shock is the reason I can't recall those unknown minutes as what my Child describes as defending myself against the male officer's threats with his drawn gun."

<sup>234</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, "Defend Rita Silk-Nauni," 3.

County Jail.<sup>235</sup> Witnesses filed police brutality reports concerning her treatment of being beaten “almost to death,” all of which were dismissed by the police.<sup>236</sup> Following the arrest, the police threatened to charge Derrick with first degree murder if he did not sign a false statement which would incriminate his mother. Derrick’s father immediately contacted the Native American Center in Oklahoma City, whose attorneys worked to successfully release the child. The Center had previously received multiple reports concerning Officers Garrison and Wells for anti-Native and other racist violences and abuses of their authority.<sup>237</sup>

This systemic corruption continued into her trial which ran from June 2nd to the 18th, 1980, after which Silk-Nauni was found guilty by an all-white middle-class jury of first degree manslaughter and assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill. On August 15th, She was sentenced to 150 years in prison, and narrowly avoided capital punishment.<sup>238</sup> Silk-Nauni’s defense committee consisted of one non-Native and seven Native women, based out of the same Native American Center in Oklahoma City that had previously freed Derrick on the day of the shooting.<sup>239</sup> Led by Wichita-Caddo woman Frances Wise, a leader in the local AIM chapter, her support and defense network brought together lawyers from across the country, spanning Indiana, California, and New York. As a result of these women’s efforts, Silk-Nauni received 195 letters of support from thirty-six states and two foreign countries during the three-week trial.<sup>240</sup>

Judge Joe Cannon overseeing her case “deliberately created a biased and prejudiced atmosphere,” ordering the Sheriff to arrest for contempt anyone in and around the courtroom

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<sup>235</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, “Defend Rita Silk-Nauni,” 3.; Lee and Wing, “Rita Silk-Nauni vs. the State,” 2.; Bonita Alexander, “Court of appeals upholds rita silk nauni’s 150 year sentence,” *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, December 1983-January 1984, 11.

<sup>236</sup> Lee and Wing, “Rita Silk-Nauni vs. the State,” 4.

<sup>237</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, “Defend Rita Silk-Nauni,” 3.

<sup>238</sup> Alexander, “Court of appeals upholds,” 11.

<sup>239</sup> Lee and Wing, “Rita Silk-Nauni vs. the State,” 4.

<sup>240</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, “Defend Rita Silk-Nauni,” 3.; Lee and Wing, “Rita Silk-Nauni vs. the State,” 4.

with “Free Rita” paraphernalia such as buttons, T-Shirts, signs, and other literature.<sup>241</sup> Judge Cannon’s “most blatant racist act” was to forcefully remove Native individuals who had brought a sacred pipe and eagle wing fan to support Silk-Nauni during the trial.<sup>242</sup> The highly militarized courtroom was also patrolled by armed FBI agents, serving as a palpable and immediate reminder of the threat of violence within the Oklahoman settler colonial legal and carceral system. Judge Cannon dismissed all claims of Silk-Nauni’s right to self-defense, which AIM activists Lois Red Elk and Hashi Hanta aiding in Silk-Nauni’s defense from California commented upon, stating that in ““a state where police are known to be racist, especially against Indian people, Rita’s act was not one of planned aggression, but the use of her inherent right as a mother to protect her child and defend herself.””<sup>243</sup> Judge Cannon violated the Wanrow Instructions previously detailed concerning gendered self-defense, refused to provide the defendant a jury of her peers, refused Silk-Nauni’s right to a public trial by dismissing all spectators, and justified the violent misconduct by the police as simply “doing their duty.”<sup>244</sup> In December of 1980, Silk Nauni wrote in Los Angeles Indian Center’s newspaper *Talking Leaf* an open letter to “the Indian community” at large that she feels “gratified” that others also see that her case “was a mockery of justice,” at that it served to “uncover racial prejudice that has been hidden under layers of polite veneer.”<sup>245</sup> This “mockery,” which continued for over a decade

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<sup>241</sup> Lee and Wing, “Rita Silk-Nauni vs. the State,” 4.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Bob Hippler, “Rita Silk-Nauni: Life sentence for self-defense,” *Freedom Socialist Party* (Seattle, Washington), Spring 1981.

<sup>244</sup> The Judge denied Silk-Nauni’s legal team’s request for people of color to serve on the jury. Lee and Wing, “Rita Silk-Nauni vs. the State,” 4.; Alexander, “Court of appeals upholds rita silk nauni’s 150 year sentence,” 11.

<sup>245</sup> “We all recognize that every parent has a right, a God-given duty, to protect and defend their children from aggressors of all kind. I see this as a central issue to be supported as long as people walk the earth. It would have been extremely difficult to have retained my serene grasp on reality and my long-standing faith in ultimate justice in my case without the ongoing support of you, my friends...My spirits are constantly lifted by letters coming in from all over the United States and other parts of the world from all the new friends. To those of you have exerted such special effort on my behalf, I give a heartfelt thank you, I have a special love for each of you an understanding of what ordeals you have gone through to further the cause a real merciful justice.” Rita Silk-Nauni, Open Letter, *Talking Leaf* (Los Angeles, California), December 1980, 2.

while she was incarcerated, was enthusiastically upheld by enforcers of the violently anti-Native and sexist settler-colonial legal and carceral systems of Oklahoma.



(Photograph of Silk-Nauni's sister Linda Silk Heck being held by Frances Wise after proceedings in court. Dated June 9, 1980.)<sup>246</sup>

During her sentencing in 1980, Judge Cannon remarked that if he could, he would have given Silk-Nauni a harsher sentence, and stated: "Someone has to defend the system...and I intend to be the one to do it."<sup>247</sup> This "system" in Oklahoma contextualized by genocide through ethnic cleansing and sterilization, land usurpation, and the attempted eradication of Indigenous sovereignties through the imposition of settler legal systems. A February 1981 article titled "Rita Silk-Nauni vs. the State" published in feminist news journal *Off Our Backs*, stated that "treatment of Indian people in the state of Oklahoma must be understood in the framework of this original genocidal pattern."<sup>248</sup> Over fifty Indigenous Nations--including Eastern Tribes such

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<sup>246</sup> David McDaniel, Photograph of Linda Silk Heck and Frances Wise, *The Daily Oklahoman*, Oklahoma Historical Society [ 2012.201.B0254.0492], June 9, 1980.

<sup>247</sup> Lee and Wing, "Rita Silk-Nauni vs. the State," 4.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

as the Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw among others--were forcibly relocated to Oklahoma, federally delineated 'Indian Territory,' following the Indian Removal Act of 1838.<sup>249</sup> The 'discovery' of oil there in the 1880s accelerated white settler expansion through homesteading and allotment (with the local implementation of the Homestead Act in 1889 and of the 1887 Dawes Act through the Curtis Act of 1898).<sup>250</sup> Shortly after this period--known as the 'Oklahoma Run'--Oklahoma gained statehood in 1907 through the unilateral dissolution of 'Indian Territory' and along with it treaty rights and land titles of almost all Indigenous nations within its new borders.<sup>251</sup> The *Off Our Backs* article stated that "[t]o ask for a sentence of death of an Indian woman in the state would almost be redundant, if one considers a slow death and quiet murders Indian people have suffered here."<sup>252</sup> The piece also addressed cultural genocide, familial separation, and murder in Oklahoma residential schools as well as cited a study published in *Akwesasne Notes* two years prior which found that "of 15,000 Native women of child-bearing age in Oklahoma City, 1,761 were sterilized over a 46-month period without their consent."<sup>253</sup> Alongside hundreds of thousands of Native women across the country in the 1960s and 1970s, Silk-Nauni's first born child was stolen from her and sent to Catholic schooling and she later survived forced sterilization. These egregious acts were once more compounded by the Oklahoma City Police's assault of her son, and the separation from him she suffered through incarceration.

Prominent Indigenous Mexican lawyer Gloria Valencia-Weber, who worked on Silk-Nauni's case under the judge who granted her appeal, noted in a 2010 interview that Indigenous peoples in Oklahoma in the years preceding Silk-Nauni's case had been

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<sup>249</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 11.

<sup>250</sup> Allotment and homesteading Indigenous land bases by three-fourths. Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*, 158, 159.

<sup>251</sup> With the exception of the Osage Nation. Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Lee and Wing, "Rita Silk-Nauni vs. the State," 4.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 2.

disproportionately targeted for incarceration and state-sanctioned killings, in ways that “hint[ed] of what was to come” and of what “was happening nationally.”<sup>254</sup> Organizers working to free Silk-Nauni contextualized Silk-Nauni’s case as coming “at a time of escalating attacks on Native American people as well as on women throughout the country,” and frequently invoked Yvonne Wanrow as “[a]nother Native American woman [who] went through a similar case a few years back also involving a woman’s right to defend herself and her child,” to stress the severity of mobilizing public support for Native women defending themselves from violence, ensuring such a movement did not fizzle out after the Wanrow decision.<sup>255</sup> Wanrow participated in the movement to free Silk-Nauni, and although the extent of their relationship is unclear, their voices appeared in close physical proximity to each other in activist literatures at the time such as in *No More Cages* and academic production by Native women scholars at the time.<sup>256</sup> From her time on the case, it was clear to Valencia-Weber that Silk-Nauni’s was a “completely flawed trial lacking due process and all the core rights every individual...is entitled to...[and that] the Indianness of Rita Silk-Nauni unleashed other forces.”<sup>257</sup> These “other” forces of the settler legal system insisted on either killing or keeping Silk-Nauni locked up indefinitely.

The circumstances surrounding Silk-Nauni’s bail procedures further explicate the void promise of procedural justice for Native women. Coordinator of Silk-Nauni’s defense committee

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<sup>254</sup> Jennifer Paustenbaugh, “Oral History Interview with Gloria Valencia-Weber,” Spotighting Oklahoma Oral History Project, October 23, 2010, 11.

<sup>255</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, “Defend Rita Silk-Nauni,” 3.

<sup>256</sup> Spokane County Bar Association, “Challenging Systemic Racism In Our Regional Justice System: Agenda Speaker Biographies. Elder Yvonne Swan-Wanrow, Sinixt Arrow Lakes Colville. Enrolled Tribal Member Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. Advocate and Activist,” Spokane County Bar Association Annual Review, 2020. Native scholars and activists at the time placed the case of Wanrow and Silk-Nauni together. See Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan, “Native American Women: Our Voice, the Air,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 6, no. 3 (1981): 1.; Yvonne Wanrow Swan, “Native Brothers Framed,” *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, December 1981-January 1982, 20.

<sup>257</sup> “I mean you have the usual ‘Don’t kill a cop,’ but because she was Indian, and there was obviously this DA machine against her.” Paustenbaugh, “Oral History Interview,” 44, 45.; Valencia-Weber stressed the severity of Silk-Nauni’s poor mental health at the beginning of the case and described it as the “awful case of Rita Silk-Nauni.” She stated at times in the interview that she did not fully believe Silk-Nauni’s account of events with a phrases like: “so she claims.” Paustenbaugh, “Oral History Interview,” 42.

Frances Wise reflected that Silk-Nauni's exceptionally high bail--initially \$150,000 and later reduced to \$100,000--was set by Judge Cannon who "never intended for Rita to be free while waiting for her appeal...[with the incorrect] assumption that her supporters could never raise that much money."<sup>258</sup> The New York Ecumenical Minority Bail Bond Fund, who raised the majority of the funds, asserted that her bail amount and the length of her sentence of more than 100 years longer than the average for her crimes, was plainly "punitive [and] based on prejudice."<sup>259</sup> Through *No More Cages*, the WFWIP collective organized and amplified solidarity events--such as marches, benefits, and powwows--being held in Oklahoma City and New York City to support Silk-Nauni and help fund her bail and defense.<sup>260</sup> Having been in prison for three years by the winter of 1981, Silk-Nauni wrote her main concern had been "missing the everyday learning experiences and growth of my Child. I desperately need to be free to care for my Child while waiting for the appeal trial," urging readers to contribute to her bail fund so that she may participate in the life of her child.<sup>261</sup> Silk-Nauni was released on bail in the Spring of 1981 while Judge Cannon was out of town, and upon his return, he went on a "manhunt" for her, illegally locking her back up.<sup>262</sup> Her bond was shortly reinstated, only for a similar instance to occur again two years later in the Summer of 1983. While out on bail, her likely involvement in Indigenous community organizing (see photo of Silk-Nauni wearing T-shirt "...Youth & Elders Conference")

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<sup>258</sup> Thuma, *All Our Trials*, 108.; Frederique Delacoste and Felice Newman, *Fight Back: Feminist Resistance to Male Violence*, (Jersey City: Cleis Press, 1981), 166.

<sup>259</sup> "Indian Woman Appeals Conviction Charges," *Navajo Times* (Rock, Arizona), April 9, 1981, 16.

<sup>260</sup> "Defend Rita Silk-Nauni," February-April 1980, 3.

<sup>261</sup> Rita Silk-Nauni, "Rita Silk Nauni," 21.; In her January 28, 1983 letter to Brant, Rita wrote about seeing her son: "I'm really looking forward to that special day. I've waited so long it seems I've waited a lifetime." Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 85-6.

<sup>262</sup> Hippler, "Rita Silk-Nauni." Judge Cannon had even requested to be put on her case to ensure her unfreedom.

below) and the “company she kept--a Black family” constituted the so-called justification for her reincarceration.<sup>263</sup>

A retrial was called on the basis of thirty-six procedural judicial errors in 1981. However, without consulting her and due to the limited definition of self-defense in Oklahoma, Silk-Nauni’s defense attorney presented an insanity plea.<sup>264</sup> Member of her defense committee Bonita Alexander, wrote in *No More Cages* that Silk-Nauni was “terribly down about” this plea, and not insane.<sup>265</sup> While Alexander does not expand on Silk-Nauni’s reaction in this letter, Silk-Nauni’s frustrations are potentially rooted in a series of possible explanations. The first being that she had never faltered in the assertion of her innocence. She claimed to be acting in justified self-defense, therefore protecting her child is not a crime she could ever admit to for a bargain. Secondly, Silk-Nauni was a survivor of psychiatric incarceration which was largely “brought on by extended abuse” during her two years with her second husband. This plea deal depoliticized her case and ‘blamed’ her actions on her supposedly insanity which had constituted grounds for her previous incarceration.<sup>266</sup> Thirdly, ‘Battered Woman’s Syndrome’ and carceral feminist outlooks were taking hold in public discourse in the early 1980s, shifting efforts to support women like Silk-Nauni who were facing interpersonal violence away from addressing the structures of oppression which make battering possible in the first place, to an anti-systems analysis that saw the further involvement of the psychiatric and carceral state as solutions (rather than causes) to such violence.<sup>267</sup> This plea ultimately failed, and her 150 year sentence was

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<sup>263</sup> The T-Shirt partially reads “...Youth & Elders Conference Muskogee Indian Round House Okemah, Oklahoma June 17-20, 1981.” Delacoste and Newman, *Fight Back*, 166.; “Defend Rita Silk Nauni,” *Freedom Socialist Party* (Seattle, Washington), Summer 1983.

<sup>264</sup> “Oklahoma law forbids introducing evidence of an impaired mental state when the plea is self-defense, and her lawyers needed to present both her husband’s recent abuse and the officers’ violence as contributing circumstances” Hippler, “Rita Silk-Nauni.”; Lee and Wing, “Rita Silk-Nauni vs. the State,” 2, 4.

<sup>265</sup> Alexander, “Court of appeals upholds,” 11.

<sup>266</sup> Lee and Wing, “Rita Silk-Nauni vs. the State,” 2, 4.

<sup>267</sup> “Violence became discussed as a problem rooted in individual behaviors and pathologies rather than analyses of domination, power, and societal structure...Battered Woman’s Syndrome reflected an emphasis on victimization

upheld on September 20th, 1983.<sup>268</sup> However, this decision galvanized, rather than discouraged, the persistent battle for Silk-Nauni's freedom and right to fair treatment while incarcerated.



(Photograph of Silk-Nauni in 1981, T-shirt partially reads: "...Youth & Elders Conference Muskogee Indian Round House Okemah, Oklahoma)<sup>269</sup>

Following the upholding of her sentence, Silk-Nauni and the Women Free Women in Prison collective members wrote to readers of *No More Cages* in the April-May 1984 issue, urging them to "flood" the new Judge hearing her Post-Conviction Relief with letters demanding

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rather than agency, and the diluting of feminist ideology through psychological rather than political explanations." Victoria Law, "Sick of the Abuse," 50.

<sup>268</sup> Alexander, "Court of appeals upholds," 11.

<sup>269</sup> Photo "[Photograph 2012.201.B0927.0023]" "Photograph used for a story in the Daily Oklahoman newspaper. Caption: "Rita Silk Nauni, convicted 10 years ago of fatally shooting an Oklahoma City airport policeman and wounding his partner, has been released from prison, corrections officials confirmed Monday." Tullous, Don May 11, 1981.

her freedom.<sup>270</sup> A statement run in *Big Mama Rag* from Bonita Alexander of her support network remarked that due to readers' letters to prison officials, "[s]ome of the mistreatment of Rita has been halted. Your letters have helped give Rita strength. She's been able to see her son for the first time in three years. As long as letters keep coming in, prison guards will think twice about repeating their past brutalities."<sup>271</sup> This statement of thanks to public supporters was also one of hope, positioning Silk-Nauni's continuing fight for freedom as one which furthers long-standing legacies of Native women's resistances to injustice everywhere. This sentiment is most clearly embodied in an 1980 statement accompanying Silk-Nauni's open letter in *Talking Leaf*, which her defense committee wrote:

The system is persecuting Rita, but to the system Rita is symbolic of all womanhood and of all people of color. Truly, Rita Silk-Nauni is a special woman. Out of her despair and suffering, we have come to know one another and to unite our strengths and energies in an effort that will not only benefit Rita, but that can and will benefit the future generations. We must work continuously for the future of our children, for they are our future. We can make positive changes during our lifetime, but more importantly we can lay solid foundation upon which our children can build. As people of the Four Holy Colors stand together in spirituality and solidarity against oppression, we can come closer to a day of freedom.<sup>272</sup>

In rallying the Native-majority readership of *Talking Leaf*, Silk-Nauni's defense committee stressed the nature of her prosecution as "symbolic" of the unjust treatment of "all" people of color and women, bridging these two groups and (seemingly at the time) disparate movements together. Therefore, as much as Silk-Nauni's "despair and suffering" represented a manifestation of the racist and sexist state's wrath, she also served as an axis upon which the fight for intersectional liberation can, and must, occur. Silk-Nauni's resistances to state and interpersonal violence served to physically and politically "unite" people, in ways that her defense committee noted would continue to affect positive material change for future generations to come. The final

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<sup>270</sup> Rita Silk-Nauni, Letter, 12.

<sup>271</sup> "Continually in danger from U.S. 'Justice,'" *Big Mama Rag* (Denver, Colorado), January 1984, 8.

<sup>272</sup> Rita Silk-Nauni, Open Letter, 2.

line invokes the four colors of the medicine wheel--which became symbolic of Red Power in the previous decade--which are standardly yellow, red, white, and black, to make a call to all nations and peoples towards a collective realization of freedom.

### Organizing and Connecting from Inside

For over four years, *No More Cages* successfully connected Silk-Nauni with people across the nation and world to form not only her legal, but also personal support networks, frequently writing that “Rita is very far from her home and family in Fort Yates, North Dakota and would appreciate any communication from you that she can get, especially from the Native American community.”<sup>273</sup> Such a connection was spurred from a *No More Cages*’ advertising of Beth Brant’s forthcoming and yet unnamed issue in *Sinister Wisdom* as was mentioned above.<sup>274</sup> Excerpts from four letters Silk-Nauni wrote to Brant were included in this *Sinister Wisdom* anthology *A Gathering of Spirit: North American Indian Women’s Issue*, providing a vulnerable insight into their relationship, Silk-Nauni’s life before and during her incarceration, as well as her hopes for a free future.

“It’s letters like yours that keep me going,” Silk-Nauni wrote to Brant.<sup>275</sup> Silk-Nauni shared that she was born and raised on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in Fort Yates, North Dakota, and that her dream had always been to have a big family.<sup>276</sup> As was mentioned previously, Silk-Nauni was a survivor of repeated familial separations and forced sterilization, a violence identified as genocidal and centered in activism by Native women at the time. At age

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<sup>273</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, “Defend Rita Silk-Nauni,” 3.

<sup>274</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, *Sinister Wisdom*, *No More Cages*, Summer 1982, 23.

<sup>275</sup> In *A Gathering of Spirit*, Rita’s letters are accompanied by a scan of the No More Cages ad, directing readers to the newsletter in a relational cycle. Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 83.

<sup>276</sup> Beth Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 83-4.

fourteen,<sup>277</sup> Silk-Nauni was forcibly separated from her first child by her father who sent her to a home for unwed mothers. The child was placed in a Catholic orphanage that denied Silk-Nauni from ever making contact with her daughter. “A part of me died,” she wrote in a letter to Brant on December 4, 1982, “[t]hat hurt me more than anything else could have.”<sup>278</sup> In 1968 she gave birth to her son Derrick and hoped to have more kids but was unable to, later learning that she “had been fixed” when she birthed him.<sup>279</sup> The surgery needed in order to conceive again, she told Brant, was far too expensive and beyond her means. Silk-Nauni shared that she though she “could make a way even if I had to work 24 hours a day. Now that I’m here [in prison], I know I’ll never have that chance.”<sup>280</sup> As was mentioned in the opening of this section, serving her duty as a mother and “Protectress” was at the forefront of Silk-Nauni’s narrations of the events on September 19th 1980 and her reflections on incarceration.<sup>281</sup> In this way, she saw arriving in Oklahoma as the “beginning of [her] quest for freedom,” connecting freeing herself from her “brutal husband” to fighting her unjust incarceration.<sup>282</sup> In every public correspondence without fail, Silk-Nauni mentioned the deep pain of missing her son, making being separated from him the greatest violence she faced.

Throughout her ten years of incarceration, Silk-Nauni frequently was transferred between different institutions in Oklahoma and units within these prisons, both involuntarily and by her own choice. Historian Dan Berger writes how incarcerated Peoples and non-incarcerated comrades in the post-WWII era exploited prisons’ “fundamental contradiction,” that incarceration simultaneously depends upon stasis and constant movement which ultimately

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<sup>277</sup> Throughout her life, Silk-Nauni faced familial separation in the form of her parents’ divorce and her mother’s death in 1973 from cancer. She started drinking at the age of thirteen, at which time she was involved in break-ins and placed on federal probation. Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 84.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Silk-Nauni, “Rita Silk Nauni,” 21.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

makes prison “not nearly as remote and impenetrable as it may seem.”<sup>283</sup> Incarcerated individuals, such as Silk-Nauni, perceived by prison administration as subversive, are commonly transferred to different locations within and between facilities in an effort to punish and preemptively quell dissent. However, as “prisoners are moved from unit to unit and facility to facility, they trade information and build or tap into networks of solidarity.”<sup>284</sup> These connections--made possible by the very systems of confinement and displacement created to terminate such a reality--allow for skills, knowledge, and movements to spread and take hold. This was the case with Silk-Nauni, as each forced movement simultaneously disrupted her support networks and provided her with the opportunity to carry struggles between institutions and forge new relationships of solidarity on the inside.

Silk-Nauni was first transferred from Oklahoma County Jail to the Oklahoma State Penitentiary at McAlester on September 5, 1980.<sup>285</sup> In December of that same year, she wrote to the feminist publication *Big Mama Rag* asking for a resubscription due to her change of address.<sup>286</sup> During this time, “[m]any women lost track of her...and Oklahoma does not forward mail between their prisons,” meaning Rita had to struggle to reconnect ties that these colonial state policies of displacement had attempted to sever.<sup>287</sup> Another record of a forced relocation shows up in a late Spring 1982 issue of *No More Cages* which notes her transfer to maximum-security Penitentiary Mabel Bassett Institute back in Oklahoma city, the State Institution for Women.<sup>288</sup> Mabel Bassett was a “smaller facility with stricter rules. Rita is now only permitted to write two letters a week which is really limiting because she’s doing school

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<sup>283</sup> As Berger argues, “physical movement often generates social movement.” Berger, *Captive Nation*, 2.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> Rita Silk-Nauni, Open Letter, 2.

<sup>286</sup> Rita Silk-Nauni, Letter, *Big Mama Rag* (Denver, Colorado), December 1980, 11.

<sup>287</sup> Lee and Wing, “Rita Silk-Nauni vs. the State,” 4.

<sup>288</sup> Shell, “Rita Transferred,” *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, Spring 1982, 21.

through correspondence.”<sup>289</sup> With no clothing to wear at the Institute and a lack of other basic needs, *No More Cages* aided Silk-Nauni’s transition by encouraging readers to write to her and send clothes and funds to her new Post Office box.<sup>290</sup>

While incarcerated at Mabel Bassett, Silk-Nauni worked to build power with her sisters by making demands for just treatment and encouraging others to write to *No More Cages* to seek personal support as well as legal and financial recourse. On November 9th, 1982, Silk-Nauni wrote to Beth Brant that the prison administration put her “on lock for defending a young girl that was being used and abused.” Being on Closed Custody meant that she was only allowed to spend two hours outside of her cell.<sup>291</sup> This punishment of severe isolation for coming to the aid of a fellow woman facing violence did not dissuade Silk-Nauni from continuing to agitate against power structures while inside. In February-March 1984, *No More Cages* released a statement from the “concerned sisters at Mab[el] Bassett” asking for readers to put pressure on the institution and demand treatment for fellow incarcerated women who suffered from medical neglect.<sup>292</sup> In the following issue, Silk-Nauni asked readers to support her “close friend” inside Sharon Clark, who wrote to *No More Cages* to seek support upon Silk-Nauni’s encouragement.<sup>293</sup> Clark framed her ask for help within the context of having a case “similar” to Silk-Nauni’s (both being mothers incarcerated for protecting their sons), in a smaller-scale mirroring of Silk-Nauni’s defense’s comparison her case to that of Yvonne (Wanrow) Swan’s.<sup>294</sup> Silk-Nauni’s collectivizing with friends inside, as well as the relatively minor yet notable

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<sup>289</sup> Shell, “Rita Transferred,” 21.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 83.

<sup>292</sup> The woman’s name was Cindy Sanders. Concerned Sisters at Mable Bassett, “HELP!” *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, February-March 1984, 15.

<sup>293</sup> Silk-Nauni, Letter, April-May 1984, 12.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

publicity of her case, allowed her and her “sisters” to make demands and tap into grassroots support networks like *No More Cages*.

At times, Silk-Nauni and those she was incarcerated with chose to go into increased security units to be together. In a December 4, 1982 letter to Brant she shared “I’m over here on segregation cause I feel I’m unable to cope with all the confusion and going on’s in the other units. Its not really all that bad over here. This is also the unit where they have the women come when they break one of the prison rules. But there’s six of us staying here cause we choose to.”<sup>295</sup> One of these women in the unit with Silk-Nauni in Mabel Bassett, Twenty-one year old Indigenous woman by the name of Yellow Eagle, wrote to *No More Cages* in the Winter of 1984 after she “enjoyed reading my friends [presumably Silk-Nauni’s] copy of your newsletter too much to just pass it up!”<sup>296</sup> Providing an analysis of her experiences as a Native woman incarcerated in Oklahoma which exposes the obsolescence of prisons and nuances conceptions of women prisoners’ solidarities.<sup>297</sup>

I’m real fed up with being discriminated against by some of the officers[,]...[and w]omen in this crazy place don’t stick together for nothing!...I’m on segregation status because I choose to be...They say prisons are supposed to rehabilitate a person, that’s bulshit! There has been so many changes made within the system that it’s not getting any better! And is taking numerous bad effect among the inmates... What will ever become of Oklahoma’s prison system?...To all of you sisters inside; Keep your spirits high! Remain strong! We’ll all be free someday - Freedom is Everything!<sup>298</sup>

Yellow Eagle called “bulshit” on both the prison’s facade as a “supposed” place of “rehabilit[ion],” and of the “many changes made within the system” as not only failures but as explicitly entrenching the violence of incarceration and “taking numerous bad effect among the inmates.” Yellow Eagle’s sharing of her lived experiences as an incarcerated Indigenous woman,

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Yellow Eagle does not share her specific tribal identity. Yellow Eagle, Dear Sisters Letter, *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, December 1983-January 1984, 4.

<sup>297</sup> Here I am invoking Black feminist and scholar-activist Angela Y. Davis’s categorization of prisons as obsolete in her call for their abolition. Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).

<sup>298</sup> Yellow Eagle, Dear Sisters Letter, 4.

her critique of reform, and calling into question the very existence of the Oklahoma prison system, is a salient theorization of abolition. Furthermore, her frustration with the failed solidarity of women on the inside, who “don’t stick together for nothing,” makes all the more powerful her choice to go on segregation status. This choice allows her to find and give support in her prevailing friendships with Silk-Nauni and the other four women, as well as remain hopeful for realizing freedom with all “you sisters inside” through the very networks of liberatory sisterhood birthed and lived in spaces like the Mabel Bassett segregation unit.<sup>299</sup>



(Photograph of Silk-Nauni at 1987 hearing)<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> While I do not include it in this chapter, another woman in Mabel Basset’s Segregation Unit, Jackie Graham, wrote the poem “My Rose” for Silk-Nauni in July of 1982, and sent it to her through *No More Cages*. This poem writes of the beauty and uniqueness of her and her struggle which brought many people together. Jackie Graham, “My Rose,” *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, July 27, 1982, 28.

<sup>300</sup> [Photograph 2012.201.B0927.0064] Photograph used for a story in the Daily Oklahoman newspaper. Caption: “Rita Silk Nauni faces a new preliminary hearing Jan. 29 on a charge she killed an Oklahoma City airport police officer and wounded his partner in 1979.” Beckel, Jim December 28, 1987.

*The Oklahoman* reported Silk-Nauni's release from prison on December 6th 1990 after her sentence was overturned in November of 1987 due to prosecutorial misconduct. An investigation into the trial revealed that the Assistant Attorney General for the State of Oklahoma at the time had coached key witness Officer Teresa Wells to give false testimony (a fact which she later admitted to), in an "absolute, total abuse of his authority."<sup>301</sup> In 1988, Silk-Nauni plead guilty to her 'crimes,' potentially with the hopes of an earlier release after years of separation from her family, and received a twenty year long sentence which she completed two years later with credits that she accumulated while serving time.<sup>302</sup> Silk-Nauni passed away in 2009 and is survived by her two children.<sup>303</sup> Important note on Silk-Nauni as a political prisoner.<sup>304</sup>

### C. Angie Tsetum Whiterock

*I send out a special prayer and greeting to my sister Angie whiterock...to my [Native] brothers and sisters being held in...the numerous prisoners across the nation...In sisterhood I will remain strong. Together one.*<sup>305</sup> (1982 open letter of love and solidarity in *No More Cages* from Silk-Nauni while in segregation).

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<sup>301</sup> Don Mecoy, "Woman Convicted Of Killing Officer Freed From Prison," *The Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma) December 11, 1990.; Nolan Clay, "Nauni Prosecutor Worked 9 Years In County Post," *The Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma) January 1, 1988.

<sup>302</sup> Mecoy, "Woman Convicted Of Killing."

<sup>303</sup> "Rita Silk," *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, North Dakota), January 12, 2009.

<sup>304</sup> A fantastic source I located the day of my submission and unfortunately could not include: During her final two years of incarceration, records from two West Coast radical feminist organizations--Revolting Lesbians and Sheila Medina from the Women's Commission of the Westcoast Freedom Now--indicate that there was a push for Silk-Nauni to be recognized as a political prisoner in her fight for freedom from her wrongful incarceration for her self-defense from interpersonal and state violence. Medina, a Taina Puerto Rican woman, demanded in July of 1989 that Silk-Nauni be recognized as a political prisoner by her organization, stating "Rita's act was not only a woman protecting her child, it was also an act to preserve her people...To say that Rita's acts are not political is an insult to Native Americans and to colonized women...[and signifies] internalized racism and internalized sexism [in the activist community]...Rita is a role model to all indigenous people fighting against the extermination of her people." Revolting Lesbians, "Political women prisoners in the U.S. May 1988," Bay Area, California, 1988. Silk-Nauni is listed under "women who faught back against physical and sexual abuse." Sheila Medina, "Argument in favor of making Rita Silk Nauni an official political prisoner of Freedom Now," Women's Commission of the Westcoast Freedom Now, July 1989, 1-2.

<sup>305</sup> Silk-Nauni, "Open Letter from Rita Silk-Nauni," 29.

Paiute woman Angie Whiterock was a political prisoner fighting to practice her traditional religious rights and realize just treatment for herself and others while incarcerated at the Oregon Women's Correctional Center (OWOC). After her incarceration in 1977 for assault at the age of thirty-two, Whiterock became politically active and built power with other Native and non-Native women inside, as well as worked to support other incarcerated Native people similarly fighting the attempted erasure of their cultural practices and sovereignties across the the US.<sup>306</sup> The telling of this history proceeds with what Luana Ross has argued: that the production of Native criminality--through making illegal and pathologizing Indigenous cultural and religious practices--is inextricably linked to the loss of sovereignty and functions as a form of cultural genocide.<sup>307</sup> Whiterock's struggle follows in a long legacy of Indigenous resistance to--in this case the particularly gendered--criminalization by the US settler state, through the very practice of Paiute traditions exercises of sovereignty.

In a public statement carried by the Spring 1982 issue of *No More Cages*, the Support Committee for Angie Whiterock stressed the importance of understanding her case within the context of the historical injustices faced by Native women and peoples across the nation and in Oregon specifically. In addition to the overrepresentation of Native peoples in the prison and psychiatric institutions--with Oregon having the second highest incarceration rate for Native peoples in the US--the committee named the removal of Native children from their people as a central crisis faced by Native families.<sup>308</sup> Labeled a "woman ripped from her culture," Whiterock

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<sup>306</sup> Support Committee for Angie Whiterock, "No Religious Freedom for Native People," *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter*, Spring 1982, 17. I have not been able to locate her case online, and do not know the circumstances of her incarceration or her release.

<sup>307</sup> Luana Ross, "Resistance and Survivance: Cultural Genocide and Imprisoned Native Women," *Race, Gender & Class* 3, no. 2 (1996): 125-41.; Ross, *Inventing the Savage*, 5.

<sup>308</sup> Support Committee for Angie Whiterock, "No Religious Freedom for Native People," 18.; "'Of the Indian children in foster care in Oregon, 95% are in non-Indian homes. In the Portland area, there is only one Indian'" WARN publication citing a study on Oregon's Children's Services Division (CSD) by Aileen Red Bird and Patrick Melendy "A Book Review The Genocide of Native American Children in 1977" 17, 18.

was a survivor of such familial separation, as she lived in twenty-three foster homes throughout her youth and was “under the control of various state institutions” since the age of sixteen.<sup>309</sup> In the wake of such a traumatic series of removals and forced imposition of “alien” religious practices unto her in state-run institutions, Whiterock faced a compounding of these same cultural genocidal violences once incarcerated at Oregon Women’s Correctional Center OWOC. However, as has been the case for many others, Whiterock’s time inside was radicalizing, and she “was able to regain an identity and culture...[and] began to practice and live a traditional lifestyle.”<sup>310</sup> For this return to her peoples’ traditions, Whiterock became a target for repeated punishment and brutalization at the hands of OWOC administrators and guards.



(Support Committee for Angie Whiterock, “No Religious Freedom for Native People,” *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*; Spring 1982, 17.)

This manifested through the prison administration’s refusal to allow her to attend sweathouse rites and be isolated from men and purified during the powerful time of her “moon,” or menstrual period.<sup>311</sup> Not only had her requests been denied, prison guards intentionally

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<sup>309</sup> Whiterock was a survivor of domestic violence, furthering the precarity of repeatedly uprooted youth. Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

violated her practices and consent on many occasions. The committee reported that for months, a male guard repeatedly entered Whiterock's room on days he knew she was to be isolated from men, and in July of 1981, four female officers dragged Whiterock to an optional disciplinary hearing before a male officer after she had requested it be postponed.<sup>312</sup> Alongside other women at OWOC, Whiterock's medical needs were ignored. In October of 1981, Whiterock, who is a borderline diabetic, was forced onto the regular institution diet whereas she was previously on a specialized diet prescribed by a physician.<sup>313</sup> As punishment for fighting against an abusive male guard in January of 1980 and for her commitment to her traditional beliefs, the prison administration placed her in disciplinary segregation for an entire year and unilaterally extended it to include another year of administrative segregation as "preemptive detainment" for a fictitious crime she "might commit."<sup>314</sup> Whiterock was locked in a six-by-twelve foot room for twenty-three hours a day for two years as of February 23, 1982.<sup>315</sup> This anticipatory strike against Whiterock exposes the deeply subversive nature of her insistence on practicing Paiute religious traditions, and the disturbing level to which the settler carceral system will go to preempt, criminalize and eradicate Indigenous practices. Whiterock was designated a political prisoner by the predominantly Indigenous women-run International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) in October of 1981 as a result of the violations of her religious freedom she faced.<sup>316</sup>

In July of 1982, the Washington Prison News Service carried news--in a letter sent from women at Purdy prison in Washington State despite the severe censorship they faced as mentioned above--of Whiterock's initiation of a hunger strike to realize her rights. Making her

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid. Underline in original.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.; During this time, other non-Native prisoners in segregation were granted the freedom to practice their religious and basic rights while Whiterock was barred from doing so.

<sup>316</sup> The IITC was founded in 1974 in the wake of the Wounded Knee crackdown, and was a predominantly Indigenous women-run organization. Support Committee for Angie Whiterock, "No Religious Freedom for Native People," 17.

asks even more urgent due to her borderline diabetic condition, Whiterock's demands were: to have the right to attend the sweat lodge and Native ceremonies at OWOC as is allowed with, and at the same frequency of, Christian practices; to allow Native spiritual and cultural leaders to enter OWOC under supervision for special ceremonies; and allow Native cultural and spiritual practices to be carried out with regards to food offerings and isolation from men during menstruation.<sup>317</sup> Whiterock's defense committee coordinator Susan Thompson encouraged *No More Cages*' readers to write to the prison's administration and to Whiterock directly, asserting that:

Angie Whiterock represents all Native Americans. She symbolizes the pursuit of people seeking religious freedom--and the right to practice her religion. She also represents all women who stand tall and say, 'This far and no farther.' How long can she continue to live under these conditions? She will not bend from her principles, so the prison will try to break her. (Support Committee for Angie Whiterock, "No Religious Freedom for Native People," 18).<sup>318</sup>

These attempts to suppress Whiterock's exercise of Paiute sovereignty, in the face of her refusal to "bend" or stray from the practice of her religious and traditional rights, are ultimately incapable of terminating it. In response to this inability to realize the complete subjugation and erasure of Whiterock's "practice...[and] principles," the prison system turned to brutality in an attempt to physically "try to break her." By appealing to the broader struggles of the fight for religious, Native, and women's rights, Whiterock's refusal to capitulate becomes symbolic of all fights for justice.

A personal letter from Thompson accompanies this statement, in which she reflects on the importance of *No More Cages*' particular attention to Whiterock, presented the case as one which is both unique in its own right and emblematic of a larger system of injustice. In it, she

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<sup>317</sup> "Paiute Woman Fasts for Her Rights," Washington Prison News Service, Washington State Penitentiary Report #31, July 18, 1982, 4.

<sup>318</sup> Support Committee for Angie Whiterock, "No Religious Freedom for Native People," 18. Underline in original.

writes to the Women Free Women in Prison collective that recently finding their Winter 1981 issue of *No More Cages* encouraged her to send in the aforementioned brochure on Whiterock whose “case is the most extreme example of OWCC’s tactics but, of course, there are many other cases.”<sup>319</sup> She continues that the women prisoners “understand very well that what is happening in Oregon is part of a nationwide trend to build more cages and to incarcerate many more people” exemplifying how mobilizing for Whiterock’s liberation both exposes the systemic injustices of incarceration and is materially part of the urgent fight against the expansion of the carceral state.<sup>320</sup> Thompson’s analysis also brings to the fore the simultaneously unexceptional and exceptional nature of Whiterock’s case: unexceptional because like hers, there are countless untold stories of injustices caused by the classed, gendered, and racialized colonial violence of incarceration. Exceptional because the unique specificities of Whiterock’s struggles and hopes, like all of these women’s, can never be collapsed into any other’s.

OWOC administration’s abuse of Whiterock and violent frontlash against her must be understood not only within the context of her politicized identity as a Paiute woman practicing her religious rights, but also as an activist fighting against prison’s isolations, class oppression, and for Indigenous sovereignty: as a dissenter relentlessly agitating power and building connections amongst other incarcerated Native folks since the beginning of her time inside.<sup>321</sup>

In a May 5th 1978 letter to the editor in the *Native Nevadan*, Whiterock wrote of her membership in the intertribal Ms. Lakota Club at OWOC, and called upon Native readers to participate in a pen-pal exchange with Club members. Whiterock wrote that the Ms. Lakota Club was associated with a similar club for men at the Oregon State Prison, both of which received aid

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> The term ‘Frontlash’ was put forward by political scientist Vesla M. Weaver in “Frontlash Frontlash: Race and the Development of Punitive Crime Policy,” which describes state counterinsurgency efforts to preemptively criminalize seemingly subversive peoples and movements.

from previously incarcerated Native folks working towards the healthy return of members to their respective communities and society at large.<sup>322</sup> The thirteen incarcerated Indigenous women participating in the pen pal exchange alongside Whiterock hailed from diverse tribal backgrounds from across Turtle Island--including members who were Chicano, Afro-Sioux, Blackfoot, Cherokee-Seminole, and Osage, among others--and sought to build relationships and connections of support from across the nation. From inside, Whiterock wrote: "We want to reach out and help our Indian people who are in the same predicament we are and were in. We need the support of all Indian people on this continent."<sup>323</sup> This declaration of, and call for, pan-Indigenous unity and support by Whiterock's 'sisterhood' of incarcerated Native women exemplifies the necessity of connecting as an anticolonial strategy for incarcerated Native peoples' (and specifically women's) survival.

Such a connection appears in another public letter from Whiterock in the *Native Nevadan* on August 3rd 1979, through which she organized to realize the religious freedom of incarcerated Native man Dave Brady as well as publicly criticized the limitations of legislative and legal reform within the settler state.<sup>324</sup> The prison administration of the Massachusetts Correctional Institution withheld from Brady a Sacred Pipe that he had been given to pray, and labeled it "CONTRABAND" in an overt illustration of the criminalization of Indigenous religious practices as subversive to the settler state.<sup>325</sup> With the sanctity of the pipe and Brady's right to access it as her first priorities, Whiterock sought advice from medicine men on what possible alterations could be made to the Sacred Pipe so that it may meet the prison administration's arbitrary stipulations on its return without desecrating it. Whiterock writes that Congress'

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<sup>322</sup> The organization supporting the club is listed as Lakota Inc. I have not been able to find more information.

<sup>323</sup> Angie Whiterock, "Pen Pals?" *The Native Nevadan* (Carson City, Nevada), May 5, 1978, 2.

<sup>324</sup> Angie Whiterock, "Medicine men are asked to comment," *The Native Nevadan* (Carson City, Nevada), August 3, 1979, 3. Three Feathers Society. Unclear if that is a coincident on the archiving practices or if she had a preference for them.

<sup>325</sup> Whiterock, "Medicine men are asked to comment," 3.

passage of a bill guaranteeing the right of Indigenous peoples to practice their religions in the year prior (referring to the momentous American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978) had thus far been “to no avail,” as a result of prisons’ refusal to implement it and heed global public outrage.<sup>326</sup> While making no mention of her own case, Whiterock’s commentary on Brady’s treatment provides insight into how she understands her own anti-reformist strategies of resistance to the same settler-carceral system which has unjustly treated her.

Such resistance often took the form of direct action, and in a letter written in *No More Cages* four years later on October 30, 1983, Whiterock updated the public that she was engaging in a “work stoppage” to demand equal pay for the same work as the men at Oregon State Penitentiary.<sup>327</sup> In response, Whiterock was placed “back on lock up” for seven days and an additional fifteen on restriction, receiving a “write-up for refusal” each day of her strike.<sup>328</sup> She continued to organize alongside other incarcerated women on the inside to fight the prison’s oppressive structures, and continued her fight for the right to practice Paiute traditions until her set release date in October of 1986.<sup>329</sup>

Untitled poem by Whiteerock published August 1983.<sup>330</sup>

Yesterday Indian Child  
you were born to a world of hunger and despair  
but you were determined  
you wanted so much to survive  
with strong will/ you fought, you wanted to win!

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<sup>326</sup> Whiterock, “Medicine men are asked to comment,” 3.; Monique Fordham, “Within the Iron Houses: The Struggle for Native American Religious Freedom in American Prisons,” *Social Justice* (San Francisco, California) 20, no. 1-2 (1993): 165–165.

<sup>327</sup> It is unclear if this was a collective strike or an individual endeavor. Whiterock asserted that the state of Oregon is exploiting prisoners to pay off its debt by taking a quarter of the incarcerated women’s money and “put it in a restricted saving so they (state) won’t have to pay us our gate money upon release!” Angie Whiterock, Letter, *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women’s Prison Newsletter*, October 30, 1983, 8.

<sup>328</sup> Whiterock, Letter, 8.

<sup>329</sup> Whiterock, Letter, 8.; Support Committee for Angie Whiterock, “No Religious Freedom for Native People,” 17.

<sup>330</sup> Should be analyzed in future research.

Today lonely Indian womin/man  
you live in a prison cell  
your world consists of  
doubtful, listless apathetic feelings  
you feel the weight of the world of upon  
you[r] shoulders  
you are being punished for  
being born Indian  
yet you want so much to survive  
you are fighting, you are winning!

Tomorrow old Indian womin/man  
they will come to take you home  
to your wickiup and warm fire  
a feast will be prepared and a/ big celebration  
the world of hunger and despair  
the world of prison cells  
the world of doubtful, listless apathetic  
feelings are in another world a lifetime  
gone past, affect memory  
you survived it all/ with strong will  
you fought, you won!<sup>331</sup>

#### D. Raven Darkwing

*"Raven: (Doris Ann Foster) (Cherokee) I am twenty-eight and love living free. I am serving a life term in Jessup, Maryland. I would like to correspond with my Indian sisters."*<sup>332</sup>

Doris Raven Darkwing Foster, a lesbian Cherokee woman in her late 20s, was sentenced to death in 1981 for a murder that she did not commit. On January 29, 1981, Darkwing's husband Tommy Foster murdered Josephine Dietrich, the manager of the couple's motel by stabbing her

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<sup>331</sup> Angie Tstum Whiterock, Untitled Poem, *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter*, August 1983, 8.

<sup>332</sup> This is Darkwing's contributor's biography in *A Gathering of Spirit*. Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 220.

seven times in the heart with a screwdriver.<sup>333</sup> On three separate occasions with law enforcement, Foster admitted to this crime, yet Darkwing was still found guilty. She was incarcerated in the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women in Jessup, Maryland, under maximum security in severe isolation from the outside and from other incarcerated folks on the inside.<sup>334</sup> Darkwing's history elucidates the necessities, and emancipatory potentials, of self-narration and "sisterhood" between Indigenous women. The history of her fight for freedom, which continues to this day, asserts that realizing justice for incarcerated Indigenous women and others requires the complete abolition of the settler (in)justice system. Darkwing's writings, lived experiences, and friendships, exemplify the necessity and power of her self-representation and interpersonal connections made possible through *No More Cages* and Brant's *A Gathering of Spirit*.



(Raven Darkwing, Letter, *No More Cages*, February-March 1984, 13)

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<sup>333</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, "Doris Raven Dark Wing Foster," *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter*, February-March 1984, 13.; "The Death Penalty: I Want to Die, Doris Foster," *Time*, January 24, 1983.; Foster and his daughter proceeded to then rob Dietrich as a cover-up and attempted to disappear her body in a ditch.

<sup>334</sup> Women Free Women in Prison, "Doris Raven Dark Wing Foster," 13.; "The Death Penalty: I Want to Die, Doris Foster," 1983.

Like Silk-Nauni, Darkwing shared a correspondence with Brant, through which the two built a powerful friendship. On December 10th, 1982, Darkwing (using only the name “Raven”) wrote to Brant for the first time with the hopes of connecting with other Native women. As a mixed white and Cherokee woman from North Carolina, she had been “raised in white man’s world and was forbade more or less to converse with Indian people...I lived a life of loneliness. Today I am desperate to know my people. Ms. Brant, I would appreciate anything you can or will do, that will aid me in my need of my people.”<sup>335</sup> The calamitous nature of the isolation Darkwing faced as a result of this forced separation, and that of being locked up in maximum security solitary for 23½ hours a day, had her reflect, “I’m dying slowly. I need to feel the earth under my feet. This place resembles a tomb. I’m sealed away from the things that make living, living.”<sup>336</sup> Seeking to break through the captivity which “sealed” her in the space literal and figurative “dieing” of the prison as “a tomb,” these correspondences provided Darkwing a connection to the “living” of the outside. Brant sent Darkwing supplies such as stamps and cards to materially continue this connection, and most importantly, Brant provided Darkwing with indispensable companionship, for which Darkwing frequently thanked her: “Thanks for the ear...Thanks for listening to me.”<sup>337</sup> This connection went both ways, and Darkwing was an ear to listen and a sister to have for Brant as well. Darkwing wrote: “Beth, thank you for entrusting me enough to speak to me of your pain,” as well as her lived experiences with lesbianism, motherhood, and Indigeneity.<sup>338</sup> These vulnerable correspondences allowed these two mixed lesbian Native women to forge a powerful trusting relationship indispensable to Darkwing’s material survival and her spirits while inside.

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<sup>335</sup> In her next letter nine days later, Darkwing expanded on her estrangement from her closest relatives who ignore her and have not visited her once, stating that “[t]hey are not my people, ‘they are white,’” using scare quotes. Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 204.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 207.

Darkwing's letters detail her unique trust for Brant, "With you I feel comfortable" and "I do not trust anyone [not even the lawyers]. I talk to you." in reference to frustrations with desiring to get her experiences out to the public, yet repeatedly being wronged by the Press.<sup>339</sup> She spent hours speaking with mostly female reporters who would promise to run a truthful story and was lied to each time, draining her hope. She frequently wrote how "[m]any people asking questions, but printing falseness," and that "[v]ery little of what I said was printed" with regards to her critiques of Maryland's injustice systems.<sup>340</sup> In a letter to Brant on January 26, 1983, Darkwing wrote that these reporters have

not printed my words. All these articles that I've seen say that I want to die because I can't stand this place. But the articles don't say that I say I'm innocent and do not have faith in the same court system to free me...Its not so important that people know I wish to die, but it is important that the reasons be brought to life. I can die easier for a cause...my sister I'm proof of the corruption[.]<sup>341</sup>

Referring to a January 24, 1983 *Time* article on her, Darkwing continued: "I know how reporters like to write about our pain, but they print lies."<sup>342</sup> This story on Darkwing--which erased her Native name--spotlighted her as the first woman to ever be potentially executed by the state of Maryland and, according to Darkwing, fabricated falsehoods which made her "so ashamed."<sup>343</sup> Without much hope for progress on her case, Darkwing viewed her life and potential unjust murder at the hands of the state as "proof" of the delusion that "the same court system" which was trying to kill her could ever bring her freedom, proclaiming "I stand innocent, but there's no

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<sup>339</sup> Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 207-8.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 208.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

<sup>343</sup> I do not include her legal name, as she did not use it to refer to herself. In it, the magazine claims she sent a letter to court of appeals asking them to void her lawyer's attempts to fight for a different sentence, quoting her saying "death is my only route to freedom." They also reported that she frequently corresponded with her husband along with thirty-five pen-pals, "including some Indians on death rows elsewhere." "The Death Penalty: I Want to Die, Doris Foster," 1983.; Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 205. From a letter on December 19, 1982: "Beth, I am giving serious thought to asking the state to drop my appeals and set a date for the gas chamber for me. I do not want a life sentence or to fight years of appeals. The state says I killed a elderly lady. I won't even kill a dog. I am so ashamed by this."

justice in white man's courts."<sup>344</sup> If she "should have to die," Darkwing wrote to Brant, "somehow the country just should be aware of this lousy justice system."<sup>345</sup> Disillusioned with settler society and its legal system and to value her life and see her case as the heinous injustice it was, Darkwing turned to Brant, *No More Cages* and other alternative feminist publications, and her sisters on the inside to relentlessly push for their release and dignified treatment.

Darkwing's conviction was overturned in June of 1983 by the Maryland Court of appeals, and her case was granted a retrial due to the withholding of the key evidence of her husband's confession. During this time, like Silk-Nauni and Whiterock, Darkwing engaged in direct action on the inside with her sisters to receive just treatment and continue their fight for freedom. The February-March 1984 issue of *No More Cages* carried a public letter from Darkwing and fellow incarcerated woman Annette L. Stebbing to their warden, announcing that the two women initiated a hunger strike.<sup>346</sup> Their decision to take this serious step was in part due to the fact that letters from supporters on the outside were being ignored by the prison administration, and their conditions continued to deteriorate, highlighting the limits that such petitioning from the outside had on a carceral system determined to erase its prisoners. The demands of Darkwing and the other women in the maximum security solitary confinement included access to basic medical care, clean quarters not infested with cockroaches and covered with waste, a stop to the harassment from guards, and an end to the censorship of their mail.<sup>347</sup> Darkwing wrote that two weeks prior, she had been unjustly strip-searched by the guards and feared for her life because of

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<sup>344</sup> Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 204.

<sup>345</sup> Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 208.; "I do not think much about this up-coming event [the execution]. I simply await it. My dream would be to have a medicine man with me and a couple of my own people." This is from a January 6, 1983 letter. Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 207. *A Gathering of Spirit* was published in 1984, and Brant's other publications does not note if their correspondence continued.

<sup>346</sup> Doris Raven Darkwing Foster and Annette L. Stebbing, "Hunger Strike on Death Row," *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter*, February-March 1984, 11.

<sup>347</sup> Another woman, Marion Reid, detailed these horrors in her letter to *No More Cages* published in the same February-March 1984 issue.; Doris Raven Darkwing Foster and Annette L. Stebbing, "Hunger Strike on Death Row," 11.

the severity of the isolation and misconduct from the guards (there were no fire detectors, and guards intentionally ignored calls for help that could only be made by banging their bodies against their cages).<sup>348</sup> “We have a right to be recognized as human beings,” she stated, “We need your love and concern.”<sup>349</sup>

On March 1, 1984, Darkwing wrote in *No More Cages* that she was again found guilty of murder during the retrial and received the same death sentence.<sup>350</sup> In this deeply emotional letter, Darkwing details how the deterioration of her case paralleled and furthered the brutality she experienced inside, explaining how no justice for her would come from the state and only, if even then, through the action and outrage of her supporters. During and following her retrial, Darkwing was forced into the “total isolation” of the ‘hole’ (solitary confinement), and subjected to violent sexist, racist, and homophobic attacks from the prison guards and administration. The administration, who she remarks were “very good friends” and colluding with her judge, perversely justified their actions by repeatedly gaslighting Darkwing. The director claimed that she threatened a guard (a lie which Darkwing adamantly denied in the letter) and then proceeded to violate a previously set sentencing of twenty days in the hole: “today he told me, that he is not going to let me out at all, and he called me a cunt loving whore.”<sup>351</sup> For simply questioning why she was being forced into isolation, Darkwing was hit twice by a male guard. Subsequently, the administration directly threatened to murder her if she attempted to seek official recourse for their attacks upon her: that she would “die in this hole, and it will look like I fell off my bunk and broke my neck...One of the male guards said many here are worried about my safety.”<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> Raven Darkwing, Letter, *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter*, April-May 1984, 13.

<sup>351</sup> Darkwing, Letter, 13.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

Darkwing's powerful testimony spread her truths to counter the emotional and physical violence of being lied about and to, of being isolated, and attempted silenced. Beyond detailing the names and words of her perpetrators, this letter indicts the intersecting oppressive systems which tried to break her body and spirits, making her voice and her relationships ammunition for realizing justice. "[H]elp from the public," Darkwing believed, was the only force which could change her dire situation, as her "lawyer was not experienced and we didn't have a chance in this county."<sup>353</sup> Faced with the seemingly insurmountable nature of her situation, Darkwing reified her place in a self-declared collective struggle for justice, signing off with "Power to the sisters. In Total Resistance...Raven Darkwing."<sup>354</sup>

In the eyes of Darkwing and her support committee, her freedom relied upon the complete abolition of the settler (in)justice system. They named this system as a tool of social control incapable of not only bringing about justice, but also not even allowing Darkwing to stay alive. In April of 1984, members of her support committee wrote in the *Big Mama Rag* that "[m]aintaining imperialism, racism, classism & sexism...[and] control of...all oppressed peoples is the true role/purpose of our 'legal system'...Raven's case is no exception and it is important that we work to overthrow the system to work towards Ravens release."<sup>355</sup> Two months later, Darkwing wrote for help in *Off Our Backs*, stating that her "words come to you in hopes that you will read them, and act...I'm an American Indian Lesbian, for this I stand sentenced to die, not because I killed."<sup>356</sup> Her very existence constituted grounds for eradication by the settler state.

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

<sup>355</sup> Marianne Stewart, Amanda Bull, and Survival Network Information Center, "Doris Raven Darkwing Foster," *Big Mama Rag* (Denver, Colorado), April 1984, 5, 9.

<sup>356</sup> Raven Darkwing, "Raven Darkwing Sentenced to Die," *Off Our Backs*, June 1984, 33.; This reflection on her identity expands upon the indifference that she shared to Brant in years prior: "[the prison's chaplain] says I shouldn't smoke and he talked of homos (his word). We got into a heated rap. I'm not into women, or at least, I haven't been, but if I am or if I'm not, I do not feel he should judge. What difference does it make whom we love??" It is possible that given their intimate connection, Brant's bold declaration of her own lesbianism played a role in inspiring Darkwing to do the same. (My underline, Brant, *A Gathering of Spirit*, 208).

She asked for letters of support to be sent to the court of appeals demanding another retrial, and for people to write to her and she goes through this ordeal.<sup>357</sup>

In 1986, her death sentence was commuted and she was given life in prison without the possibility of parole by Maryland Governor Harry Hughes due to the case's unique "mitigating circumstances," never explicitly naming its racist, sexist, and colonial nature.<sup>358</sup> Darkwing remains incarcerated as of 2020, and continues to fight for her humane treatment and her freedom.<sup>359</sup>

## Conclusion

In the Winter 1984 issue of *No More Cages*, Silk-Nauni wrote to the Women Free Women in Prison collective to thank them for "the outlet" they provided, stating: "Sometimes we become so frustrated because no one listens to us, or cares that we are truly fighting for our lives and struggling for our futures... You at N.M.C. are contributing so much to alleviate our problems and our distress. Thank you for being there for us... Still struggling, Rita."<sup>360</sup> *No More Cages* persisted despite and co-opted violent carceral tactics to expose the realities of systemic violence and then mobilize for the collective agitation of such structures of power. This space of constant dialog was collective, diverse, decentralized, and therefore, deeply emancipatory. This was ultimately possible through the newsletter's capacity to become a vehicle for women like Darkwing, Whiterock, and Silk-Nauni, to forge and sustain necessary relationships through their writing. Alongside these histories, looking to *A Gathering of Spirit* elucidates the importance

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<sup>357</sup> Darkwing, "Raven Darkwing Sentenced to Die," 33.; "Linda Parks of Woman to Woman...is trying to show the public how an innocent sister is sentenced to die. Please write to Linda, she will send you copies of the confessions, and all information.... Stand tall and proud, my sisters. In struggle, Raven Darkwing #904158."

<sup>358</sup> David V. Baker, *Women and Capital Punishment in the United States: An Analytical History*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2015) e-book 1,222-1,224.

<sup>359</sup> *Foster v. Chippendale*, Civil Action No. PX 19-1623 (D. Md. Aug. 21, 2020).

<sup>360</sup> Rita, Letter, *No More Cages: A Bi-Monthly Women's Prison Newsletter*, Winter 1984, 5.

friendship, sisterhood, and love--which upend and transcend heteronormative settler constructions of kinship on the one hand and solidarity or coalition thinking which can be impersonal and contingent on expectations of perfect reciprocity--as necessary liberatory political practices which decolonially brings peoples together. Turning to each other for care that could not be provided elsewhere, these women forged radical relations which upended the supposed separation between the political and the personal. Beyond serving as 'damage control,' these practices of relationality and of Indigenous "Sisterhood," imagine and forge more free futures.

## Epilogue

### “Free Maddesyn George”

*“What we’re seeing now is the love of Indigenous communities and women’s advocates and other groups coming to wrap their arms around these families...Despite all of this violence, not only have we survived, but we are thriving and we will continue to do so. It’s in our thriving that this fight for justice will never end. We will ensure that our women are safe.”<sup>361</sup>*

Twenty-seven-year-old mother, survivor, and Colville tribal member Maddesyn George killed Kristopher Graber, a white man who raped her, in self-defense on July 12, 2020.<sup>362</sup> George’s defense of her life and subsequent fight against her wrongful incarceration has galvanized a grassroots movement of Indigenous and anti-violence organizers to demand her freedom, including Yvonne Swan, now a tribal elder. In a historical echo of Swan’s case nearly fifty years later, the movement to free George simultaneously illustrates the continued criminalization of Native women’s self-defense from white-male settler violence as well as the persisting impacts of Indigenous women’s collective and intergenerational visions for organizing against colonial violence since the 1970s and beyond.

As a Native survivor of domestic and sexual violence, as well as a young mother grappling with drug addiction, supporters have argued that George’s life is being devalued by a settler (in)justice system inherently formulated to further, rather than remediate, harm towards her.<sup>363</sup> After the rape which occurred at Graber’s house, George fled with drugs, cash, and the gun he threatened her with during the assault. Hours later, Graber violently confronted George as she sat in a parked car on the Colville reservation. When he moved to hit her, she shot and killed

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<sup>361</sup> Pawnee researcher and activist Abigail Echo-Hawk commenting on the movement to free Maddesyn George. Luna Reyna, “Colville mother’s conviction raises justice issues facing Native women,” December 7, 2021, <https://crosscut.com/equity/2021/12/colville-mothers-conviction-raises-justice-issues-facing-native-women>.

<sup>362</sup> Victoria Law, “Maddesyn George Killed Her Alleged Rapist. Prosecutors Blocked Her Self-Defense Claims,” *The Intercept*, October 8, 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2021/10/08/maddesyn-george-self-defense-rape/>.

<sup>363</sup> In the wake of her rape and the killing, George knew “that she could not expect help from the police.” Law, “Maddesyn George Killed Her Alleged Rapist,” October 8, 2021.

him with his gun. George was taken directly to Spokane County Jail--without the option of receiving a rape exam--by police officers who she felt blatantly did not believe her testimony of the events. Sharing her frustration with being silenced in an interview with Chinese-American abolitionist activist-writer Victoria Law for *The Intercept*, George stated “I didn’t feel they would listen because of the life I was living.”<sup>364</sup> In the wake of her rape and the killing, George also faced the trauma of interacting with the carceral state, sharing that her uncle was killed by police after he had asked them for aid, and that a deputy in the Okanogan sheriff’s office has sexually harassed her on multiple occasions.<sup>365</sup>

Supporting her is the Campaign to Free Maddesyn George, a coalition of family and tribal members, survivors of gender-based and sexual violence, abolitionist and anti-violence activists, as well as participants in the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples movement.<sup>366</sup> Exemplifying the continuing importance of turning to the home and family as the site for political mobilization, the movement to free George was established by her mother, Jody George. Also involved is Colville tribal member Earth-Feather Sovereign, who is also a founder of the grassroots organization Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Washington as well as Yvonne Swan’s niece. Her work follows that of her mothers, who was part of the movement explored in Part I to keep Swan free in the 1970s. Sovereign shared that while Swan’s case “had been a huge step forward” for Native and all women, including George, the fight did not end there.<sup>367</sup>

Under the threat of a murder charge that had the potential to incarcerate her for decades in a facility nearly a thousand miles away from her home, George accepted a plea deal rather

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<sup>364</sup> Law, “Maddesyn George Killed Her Alleged Rapist,” October 8, 2021.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Free Maddesyn George, “Free Maddesyn George,” <https://www.freemaddesyn.com/>. The movement to address the ongoing Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, Two Spirit, and Relatives (MMIWG2SR) crisis is one that works at the intersection of Indigenous sovereignty and anti-violence organizing.

<sup>367</sup> Law, “Maddesyn George Killed Her Alleged Rapist,” October 8, 2021.

than further prolong the separation from her family and infant daughter, Shynne. On November 17, 2021, the Eastern District of Washington Federal Court sentenced George to six and a half years in prison for possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute and voluntary manslaughter.<sup>368</sup> Her Defense Committee argues that while it is rare, it is possible and necessary for the federal prosecutor to drop the charges against George, and established a global online campaign in order to do so.<sup>369</sup> Nearly 10,000 individuals and over ninety organizations--covering a broad base of concerns including abolition, disability justice, Indigenous liberation, and supporting survivors of sexual violence--have publicly called for George's immediate release from her unjust incarceration.<sup>370</sup> The campaign states that George's story is "emblematic of the ways U.S. criminal legal systems all too often neglect or exacerbate harm against Indigenous victims and survivors of violence. The targeting of Native women for violence is a fundamental aspect of settler colonialism both historically and today."<sup>371</sup> This salient analysis mobilizes supporters to disrupt a system of violence (rather than treat George's case as stand-alone), as well as invokes the necessity of turning to long-standing traditions of Native women's resistances to settler-colonial violence as tools to grapple with the present moment.

In urging the public to support George's freedom, Swan stated that George's case "is part of a spiral of violence that Native women live through," and that much like her own experience decades ago, "[t]hey're condemning [George] because she's Indian, because she's a

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<sup>368</sup> Free Maddesyn George, "Defense Committee Statement on Sentencing," November 22, 2021, <https://www.freemaddesyn.com/sentencing>.

<sup>369</sup> Criminalizing her survival while on her own lands, the US government has the power to prosecute George because of the 1885 Major Crimes Act (and its upholding in the 1978 Supreme Court ruling *Oliphant v. Suquamish*) which imposes federal jurisdiction on 'crimes' committed by Indigenous people on reservations unto non-Native individuals.

<sup>370</sup> Sign the petition demanding her release here: "Drop the Charges Against Incarcerated Survivor Maddesyn George," November 22, 2021, [https://www.change.org/p/freedom-for-incarcerated-survivor-maddesyn-george?utm\\_source=share\\_petition&utm\\_medium=custom\\_url&recruited\\_by\\_id=ed1398d0-94b4-0130-42ea-3c764e044905](https://www.change.org/p/freedom-for-incarcerated-survivor-maddesyn-george?utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=custom_url&recruited_by_id=ed1398d0-94b4-0130-42ea-3c764e044905); Free Maddesyn George, "Endorse The Campaign To Free Maddesyn," <https://www.freemaddesyn.com/endorse>.

<sup>371</sup> Free Maddesyn George, "Endorse The Campaign To Free Maddesyn," <https://www.freemaddesyn.com/endorse>.

woman... We have a right to defend the sacred life that our Creator gave us.”<sup>372</sup> This protection of the sacred is at the core of Swan and other Indigenous women’s anti-violence organizing, and points to the importance of rooting resistance to the structural violences of settler colonialism in personal, spiritual, and embodied ways. Furthermore, Swan’s indictment of the settler-carceral system as targeting George because of the simultaneity of her womanhood and Indigeneity reinforces the necessity of an intersectional approach.

George’s Committee argued that “[i]ncarceration is a tool of Indigenous removal, and Maddesyn is now missing from her community,” and therefore, building personal connections with George is an essential anti-colonial and anti-carceral tactic toward providing care and realizing her freedom.<sup>373</sup> In a direct continuation of the strategies employed by Native women political prisoners and their relations and comrades on the outside throughout this thesis, The Campaign to Free Maddesyn George has encouraged people to “[h]elp break the isolation of incarceration” by writing to her.<sup>374</sup> Such connections would also allow George’s voice and truth to be highlighted, which has been a central concern of hers--“My hope is that they’ll listen to me and understand that he did this to me”--in her continuing fight to be heard and believed.<sup>375</sup>

Lead organizer of the campaign Stephanie Lumsden (Hupa) asserted that: “Our collective organizing is an act of love that counters the cruelty of the case...Organizing together for

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<sup>372</sup> Emma Epperly and Amber D. Dodd, “Maddesyn George case: Colville tribal woman to be sentenced in mid-November for controversial killing,” *The Spokesman-Review*, October 19, 2021. <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2021/oct/19/maddesyn-george-case-colville-tribal-woman-to-be-s/>. In testimony to the Judge overseeing her case, Swan declared “I, too, was threatened with decades in prison for fighting back against a white rapist...If she and I were affluent white women, and our rapists were Native men, would the police and prosecutors have treated us so badly?” Reyna, “Colville mother’s conviction raises justice issues facing Native women,” December 7, 2021.; Free Maddesyn George Campaign, “Yvonne Swan Quote.” Instagram, November 3, 2021. [https://www.instagram.com/p/CV1hn\\_JpM23/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CV1hn_JpM23/)

<sup>373</sup> Free Maddesyn George, “Defense Committee Statement on Sentencing.”

<sup>374</sup> Letter writing instructions are available here <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vhdfRaUUQGF2XJRzyJBkSSgEmHCK8KAHUgGIMlIrBoA/edit>. While incarcerated at Spokane County Jail she has experienced more limited stricter visiting regulations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>375</sup> Law, “Maddesyn George Killed Her Alleged Rapist,” October 8, 2021.

Maddesyn's freedom reminds us that there are others who are willing to face the structures that cause us harm, and reimagine the world without them so life is livable for all of us."<sup>376</sup>

Lumsden's remarks illustrate the importance of embodied collective practices of love as praxis which can simultaneously disrupt structures of violence and mend the fractures they cleave. The practice of organizing for George's release is itself, as this thesis has argued, a practice of collectively imagining and bringing into existence radical visions for just and livable futures.



(Illustration from the Campaign to Free Maddesyn George Homepage)<sup>377</sup>

## Conclusion

Through the lives and writings of four radical Indigenous women of the late 1970s, this thesis shows that the attempted silencing of individuals and movements resisting settler-colonial violence and fighting for liberation was ultimately, and will always be, an incomplete project. The very telling of these stories continues the fight against the violence of abstraction, which

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<sup>376</sup> Campaign to Free Maddesyn George, "#FreeMaddesyn 11/8/21 Press Conference," November 8, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/644101654>.

<sup>377</sup> Free Maddesyn George, "Free Maddesyn George."

must be disrupted in ways that account for the inextricability of the epistemic and the material. Relations and traditions of resistance persist, and the fights for liberation are collective and long-standing.<sup>378</sup> This project reminds us that there are countless others which are silenced and untold, and therefore, require both our scholarly and political attention. Scholars of history have a responsibility to ground their work in and alongside canonically devalued and actively silenced historical materials, agents, and times. It has been an honor to participate in the telling of these ongoing histories, and the work continues.

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<sup>378</sup> Simpson Leanne Betasamosake, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

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