

Rights And Warriors: First Nations, Media And Identity

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IN THE SO-CALLED "Indian summer" of 1990, Québec was absorbed in what the media have labelled "the Mohawk crisis." Mohawk land claims erupted into blockades on the Kanesatake and Kahnawake reserves in Québec. Confrontations among townspeople, police, army, and Indians focussed on the immediate and local frustrations of a bridge blockade, the death of a policeman, the Canadian Army occupation of the area surrounding the reserves, and the historical and national frustrations of Native claims to sovereignty and to land. When Mohawk "Warriors" barricaded themselves in the Alcohol Treatment Centre at Kanesatake, a stand-off involving reporters, police, army, and Indians began that lasted seventy-eight days—longer than the "Indian crisis" at Wounded Knee in 1973—and deployed 4,000 Canadian soldiers over the summer to support the police at the barricades.

In the heat of the moment and the aftermath of Oka, many questions were raised about the role, nature, and function of the media in a democratic society. In Canada, academics and journalists continue to research and critique the "Mohawk crisis" in relation to issues of news, reporting, and the media itself: the role of "media events," "tele-diplomacy" and reporters as "participant-observers;" the responsibility of news backgrounding and historical context; the impact of endless, unedited coverage of events, and of censorship and the total shutdown of media coverage; and the role of differential reporting—French, English and Indian—of the issues, the personalities, the armed stand-off; and the incidents of support and attack which sustained the crisis. But writing on the media has not followed the

lead of current literary, artistic and ethnographic critique to include the meaning and role of representation and cultural appropriation. And in Québec's "Indian summer of 1990," representation and the appropriation of popular culture were—and continue to be—formative factors in media coverage and the processes of Mohawk activism and internal struggle.

The summer of crisis in Québec is remembered in startling media images of rock-throwing townspeople and scuffling Indians, staring soldiers, and crying children. But in all the media coverage, one image emerged as salient in the Mohawk crisis: the image of the "Warrior"—bandanna-masked, khaki-clad, gun-toting Indians who dominated the news accompanied by headlines of "Rough Justice: After Oka Will the Violence Spread?" (*Maclean's*, 6 Aug. 1990); "The Fury of Oka: After the Showdown, Indian Leaders Promise a Violent Autumn" (*Maclean's*, 10 Sept. 1990); "Mohawk Militancy" (*Ottawa Citizen*, 15 Sept. 1990); "The Mohawk Warriors: Heroes or Thugs?" (*Toronto Star*, 24 Nov. 1990); "The Making of a Warrior" (*Saturday Night*, April 1991); and Aislin's political cartoon of the "Mafia Warrior" (*Montreal Gazette*, 30 April 1990). With few exceptions, the media's Warriors were monolithic representations of Indian activists: the military masculine, criminalized through association with terrorism and epitomized in the ultimate warrior, Ronald Cross, code named "Lasagna" who became both the darling of the media and, in the words of one reporter, a "media slut" (Pindera).

In contrast to the majority of media images, when the Mohawk barricades came down on September 26, 1990, sixty-three people left the Treatment Centre at Kanesatake: twenty-seven Indian men of various tribes, and one non-Indian sixteen-year-old; sixteen Indian women (four from British Columbia); six children; and ten reporters. The Indians from the Treatment Centre, like the Mohawks who stood on both sides of the barricades at Akwesasne through the spring; those who blockaded the Mercier bridge and the Kahnawake reserve in the summer; the traditional women who sat in vigil in the Kanesatake pine forest through the winter, like those who run the office of the Mohawk Nation or practice the traditional Longhouse religion, are all yoked together as the media's Mohawk warriors. For the media,

there has been one dominant image, one dominate narrative: warriors and the militant story they tell.

It is easy to gloss over Mohawk warriors—like the “Lone-fighters” protesting a dam in Alberta and the spearfishing Chippewa “Ogitchidag” and “Gitchedonque” of my own reservation in Wisconsin—who spear spawning walleye in the Spring, exercising their treaty rights amid the deafening and dangerous protest of non-Indians—as obvious symbols of violent claims to visibility and identity. Edmund Carpenter writes in *They Became What They Beheld* that “[v]iolence offers immediate public recognition. This is especially true for ‘invisibles’ who thereby become—instantly—very visible. . . . Even the threat of violence is a powerful force in any quest for identity” (57).

Violence, of course, attracts the media and creates visibility—and some Indians today use the spin-offs of violence as a strategy to demand a voice in the larger society in which they live, a process which can reinforce Native identity. But this approach, like traditional sociological and psychological approaches to communication and identity, tells us little about the emergence, persistence, and meaning of warriors in Indian popular culture and social formation; about what warriors mean to the political and cultural identity of Indian people and their communities; or about the role the media play in these processes.

Media images of violent Indians are, like representations in other Indian cultural products which the media reproduce and make available, a double-edged sword for Indians. From dime novels to “Dances With Wolves,” Indians have struggled with who they are and the nature of their interaction with Others in relation to media constructions, popular representations of, in the words of Margaret Atwood (102), the Indian as both tormenter and sufferer; the villain and the victim. Like the companion myths of the frontier or the pioneer, neither of these representations drawn from social imaginaries of the savage as noble or evil allows newcomers to identify Native peoples as “real inhabitants of a land” (Atwood 105), as sovereign nations absorbed in the struggle of their tenuous position within a nation-state carved out in companies and charters, proclamations and promises.

For Mohawks, the incongruity of these representations is best expressed in James Fennimore Cooper’s famous novel *The Last of*

the Mohicans. Cooper refers to the plight of the noble (and vanishing) Mohicans at the hands of the horrible Iroquois Mingoes, of whom it is said, "no act of violence or depravity is beyond them" (Atwood 91). As Gary Mauser suggests, these constructed and contradictory images, removed from the social meaning of lived experience in Native communities—and appropriated by non-Indians in everything from tourist brochures to the New Age White Warrior Society—are intrinsic to the media coverage of the Oka crisis:

The standoff at the Mohawk reserve in Quebec posed a basic problem for the media; who should be portrayed as the "bad guy" and who should be shown as the innocent victim? (12)

But images of warriors pose even greater problems for Indians themselves. From sports teams to the "Indian Joe" banner and American Indian Movement armbands and berets, to T-shirt images of armed warriors at the barricades and photos of "Lasagna," warriors have been appropriated into the discourse of First Nations peoples. As Native people struggle over claiming and disclaiming the warriors—over the threats and promises of appropriated identity and power—the factionalism in their communities raises questions about the role these figures of popular culture play in the formation of Indian identity, community, and political activism. Who are these Warriors, Lonefighters, spear-fishing Chippewa? What do these images and the narratives they involve signify to Indians whose identity is grounded in historical experience and current practice? And what role does the media play in the formation of contemporary Indian identity?

Until recently, our understanding of the relationship between communication and identity has drawn from writing in psychology and sociology. This work has focussed on the connection between individual identity and the identification of social groups, analyzing how identity is constructed in conceptions of the self and examining the role of symbols in interaction (Rota). Recent writing in communication studies has begun to frame the relationship between communication and identity in the context of culture (Carey). Cultural Studies has linked communication and cultural formation to identity through the analysis of lived experience and public text: the discourse of everyday action,

discourse and events—individual and collective, dynamic and diachronic, interactional and mediated—all integral to the formation of social subjects and all embedded in political process. Particularly in the work of Stuart Hall, this perspective moves toward an understanding of the relationship of media representation to the identity and the political struggle of Native North Americans.

For Stuart Hall, social subjects are formed in discourse, a process which involves an individual's identification with the constructed images and cultural narratives that dominate our ways of seeing and representing the world. As discursive constructions with different ideologies and meanings, representations are central sites of struggle in the formation of collective identities forged in the hierarchical relations of power which articulate social relations. Identity is not constructed in internal conceptions of the self, but in the adoption of transforming, open-ended representations. These narratives are articulated in the processes of experiencing and forming community within the power relations of different groups and interests. Like the terrain of social struggle in which it is articulated, identity is continually contested and reconstructed. Cradled in the social formation of cultural history and heritage, identity is built and rebuilt in the discursive negotiation of complex alliances and relations within the heterogeneity of community; in discourse which is based not on unity or belonging, but on transformation and difference. As Marilyn Burgess writes in her paper on representation and western Canadian regional identity, Hall's conception of social formation allows us to speak of a "politics of identity: of unities of difference with contingent closures of articulation" (6). And this approach, which locates media representation and the dynamic construction of collective and individual identity within the ideological struggle of power relations, points towards the role and meaning of Mohawk warriors within the political and cultural ferment of Indian communities today.

Warriors have long been an important social force in Mohawk society. Historically, Warriors were peacekeepers, the men of the nation, drawn from communities cemented in matrilineal clans and common culture, to police a threat to "The Great Peace."

Within the Iroquois Confederacy or League formed by the Deganawida and the orator Hiawatha about the middle of the fifteenth century, all men became warriors upon the decision of the Confederacy Chiefs, the political "heads of state," and were called to act under the direction of an elected War Chief (Hale 19). A. C. Parker writes of Deganawida's *Constitution of the Five Nations* or *The Iroquois Book of the Great Law*, recorded in wampum belts and strings and carried through time in oral tradition:

When the Confederate Council of the Five Nations has for its object the establishment of the Great Peace among the people of an outside nation and that nation refuses to accept the Great Peace, then by such refusal, they bring a declaration of war upon themselves from the Five Nations. Then shall the Five Nations seek to establish the Great Peace by a conquest of the rebellious nation. When the men of the Five Nations, now called forth to become warriors, are ready for battle with the obstinate opposing nation that has refused to accept the Great Peace, then one of the five War Chiefs shall be chosen by the warriors of the Five Nations to lead the warriors into battle. (52)

It is clear that throughout the early history of Quebec, Iroquois were often engaged in battle as warriors to enforce the "Great Peace." Inter-tribal warfare expanded as newcomers established the fur trade in eastern Canada; and "for most of the seventeenth century there was war between the Iroquois and the French" (Hall qtd. in Maclaine 21). The animosity between these nations continued as the Iroquois allied with the British throughout the battles which eventually established Quebec and positioned Canada within the British Empire; and to some extent, it continues today, voiced in the competing claims to self-determination of Elijah Harper, the Manitoba Indian legislator who, in the Spring of 1990, orchestrated the failure of Canada's Meech Lake Accord, the constitutional reform proposal designed to entrench Quebec as a "distinct society" without recognizing Aboriginal rights. Few Mohawks speak French and virtually none identify as Québécois. And while Québécois may feel affinity with some Indian nations, their relationship with Mohawks has always been strained.

What are today the "Mohawk reserves" in Quebec were largely established through grants of land from the King of France to Catholic orders for the purpose of harbouring Christian Indians

drawn from the Six Confederacy Nations. They have been historical sites of external strife with surrounding governments and internal struggle between conflicting political bodies and religious factions: Catholics, Protestants, and those who follow two traditions of the Longhouse religion embodied in Deganawida's "Great Law," and the more recent, somewhat Christianized version of the "Handsome Lake Code." The political dimensions of this struggle have been particularly difficult and divisive because "Indian activism has always been an annoyance to the federal government, and for most of the twentieth century Ottawa worked hard to suppress it. Every possible tactic, from financial pressure to police intervention, was used to block the development of Indian organizations" (York 246), including imposing colonial political process upon the Haudenosaunee, or traditional Mohawks. In Kanesatake, the people were placed under the Indian Act elective system of Band Councils in 1899, a move they and other reserves resisted. "At St. Regis (Akwasasne), traditional chiefs were arrested in 1899 and five held in prison for one year," a repression which was repeated at Ohsweken, Ontario (Six Nations) in 1924 (Hughes 3). Edmund Wilson wrote of the St. Regis reserve (Akwasasne) in 1959:

You have at St. Regis the regular chiefs appointed by their clan mothers, who are supposed to be functioning in conformity with the provisions of the old constitution and upholding the claims of the Confederacy that derived from the original treaties. But you have also a board of three "state chiefs" or "elected" or "elective chiefs," as they are variously called, ostensibly chosen by popular vote but actually, according to the Confederacy chiefs, selected by the white authorities and subservient to white interests. The election of these chiefs took place in a Catholic Youth Centre outside the reservation. Two candidates for each office were nominated, but there were only about twenty votes cast. These "chiefs" are, in any case, however, the representatives with whom the state deals. And there has also been a third group of chiefs—which is said to have ceased to be active—known as the Council of Twelve, who were originally set up by the French in the middle of the eighteenth century. This departed from the Iroquois system and followed that of the French nobility by making the rank of chief the inheritance of the eldest son in the patrilineal line.

(92-93)

But if Mohawk warriors are historically-situated, they are to an

equal extent, products of the struggle for Native control which dominates contemporary Indian political process. Modern Indian warriors were established as leaders of what were labelled the "New Indians" who emerged in the United States in the reconstructed identity—tribal and pan-Indian—of urban Indian communities in the 1960s. These new claims to sovereignty emerged at a time when, within reserve communities, "definite political positions had been drawn between the traditionalists and the other Indians in the tribe" (Deloria 234). In this period when Canada was moving toward the dissolution of Indian rights represented in (then Minister of Indian Affairs) Jean Chrétien's 1969 White Paper on Indian Policy, Indian traditionalism and activism gained a voice south of the border through the formation of the National Indian Youth Council in 1963 and the American Indian Movement (AIM) in 1968 (Deloria 236-37). In Canada, the discourse of the New Indians was expressed in the British Columbia Native Alliance for Red Power. And "though opinions may differ as to which gathering or event crystallised the new consciousness, few would doubt the importance of the early 1960's Mohawk blockade of the New York State/Canadian border (in 1968), or the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969" (Moody 2: 29).

In the years that followed, this increasingly strident Indian political stance climaxed in the long and bloody standoff at Wounded Knee in 1973. To outsiders, the American Indian Movement (AIM) seemed to disintegrate in the court trials and prison sentences and deaths surrounding the incident. But AIM is a movement not an organization, and the spirit of AIM expressed in the words of Leonard Peltier writing from Oakalla Prison in 1976 has endured in re-constructed calls for Indian tradition and sovereignty in Indian communities, urban and reserve:

I am the collective Indian voice
and I cry out from a million graves of unresting souls
and another million cries that ask the questions:
where does my future belong and to whom:
Does it belong to my people? (Moody I: 57)

In Canada, the tenuous connection to the American Indian Movement was expressed in the involvement of the Red Power

movement in British Columbia, and the deaths of Richard Oakes and his daughter, Nelson Small Legs, Jr., and Anna-Mae Aqwash. But the spirit of the movement found deeper roots in Mohawk territory, about which Edmund Wilson wrote in 1959: "To the stranger, the most obvious sign of Iroquois patriotism is the fashion of wearing 'scalplocks' on the part of the boys and young men" (72). This transformation of Mohawk nationalism was voiced in the occupations at Ganiенkeh, Racket Point, and the Akwesasne bridge blockade. With the exception of Ganiенkeh, these were actions led largely by Mohawks who, if they ever identified as warriors, are today Mohawk "traditionalists," fiercely anti-warrior, pro-Band Council or Iroquois Confederacy Indians of Akwesasne and Kahnawake who support Indian sovereignty and land rights with the same voracity they did then.

Today Mohawks associate warriors with The Warrior Society, a term which Louis Hall, the Kahnawake artist and writer behind much of the warrior rhetoric, tells us in what the media calls the "warrior manifesto," was "supplied by the white man" but "seems to fit nicely" (35). For Louis Hall, today's Warrior Society draws its re-constructed form—including women warriors—and modern mandate from the Great Law of Degawida and the nature of the Indian experience, historical and current:

There have been some objections by some well meaning Indians against having a Warrior Society. "There is no war," they say. Nothing can be further from the truth. There has been a constant psychological warfare waged against the natives of America right from the start of the European occupation of Red man's land and it's as deadly as the one with guns. It's war against the minds of the people and the casualties are the drug addicts, drunks and suicides which are at the highest among the Indians. . . . Oppression is an act of war against the people. Legislating the Indians into extinction by way of assimilation is an act of war against the Indians. Legal extermination of the Indians as a distinct people is an act of aggression. Genocide as practiced against the Indians is an act of war and the Indians must act in self-defense. The answer is the Warrior Society whose task is charged with finding ways to protect the people from every form of aggression being waged against them. (37)

The Warrior Society found ways and resources to protect the people that many Mohawks see as disturbing and problematic: casinos in Akwesasne, bingo in Ganiенkeh, Kanesatake, and

Kahnawake and tax-free cigarettes smuggled over the U.S.–Canada border and sold on the Canadian reserves. These enterprises benefit individual Indians and the Mohawk Nation or Warrior Society rather than all tribal members. And monies from these sources both expand the gap between the rich and the poor on the reserves and provide the guns and butter for the work of the Warrior Society. Some traditional Mohawks are ideologically opposed to the Warrior Society—which is disallowed within the Handsome Lake Code of the Longhouse religion—and the trade in illegal cigarettes and gambling on the reserves. Other Indians fear the growing vigilantism of activists in the Warrior Society, a somewhat amorphous group which includes young men who, whatever their principles or historical rhetoric, do not exhibit the discipline or control of a military unit. On May 11, 1991, when warriors surrounded the Kahnawake Peacekeepers police station demanding the release of a fellow Warrior arrested for impaired driving, neither War Chief Alan Delaronde nor Band Council Grand Chief Joe Norton could dissuade them from the Mohawk-against-Mohawk melee that followed. This incident was reminiscent of the Spring of 1990 when Mohawk killed Mohawk across the barricades at Akwesasne—the Warrior Society and their opposition in the ultimate cultural struggle.

The Mohawk struggle, like the warriors, the traditionalists, and the Band Councillors who oppose them, is not, of course, unidimensional or monolithic. The Warrior Society is itself fragmented into intertwined groups of Mohawks with different ideological and practical commitments. Warriors include Mohawks like Louis Hall who believe deeply that armed self defense is the only option left for Indians in the struggle for sovereignty and self-determination. Others are recognized as “money warriors,” who benefit from the lucrative businesses of cigarettes and gambling under protection of the Warrior Society or warriors for hire. And then there are the young warriors who identify with the movement and are, in the words of one spokesman, Mike Myers, “the biggest thing since Rice Krispies” (Henton 1990), a position which they have acquired in large part by re-appropriating the media’s monolithic representation of the bandanna-masked, khaki-clad, gun-toting warrior.

This image is far removed from the Gitchedon warriors of the Was-wa-gon Treaty Association of my own reservation in Wisconsin, who have stood in the controlled silence of six spring spearing seasons, absorbing the racism and rock-throwing of hundreds of non-Indians who protest their legal right to spear spawning fish. The Gitchedon warriors have won this battle over the exercise of treaty rights through their activism at the boat landings and in the courts, where they obtained an injunction against harassment. For Indians, these conflicting representations of warriors blur the distinction between the activism of protecting the sovereignty of Indian land and treaty rights and the action of initiating para-military confrontation. And the media have dissolved the difference between protecting Indian land from an invasion of the police, the army, or businessmen and warriors barricading the Mercier Bridge in unified images of scuffling, stone-throwing, and gun-bearing Mohawks.

In continually headlining one facet of the prism which constitutes the new Native social imaginary of the warrior, the media have played a central role in creating a powerful fictive identity in which the disproportionately large number of Indian youth who are not in school and unemployed are invested. And through the media, too, this social imaginary of the monolithic warrior is a force in the nature of the activism adopted by Indians across Canada and the United States who are frustrated with the endless battle over land rights, treaty rights, sovereignty, and self-determination. In the failed negotiation of two hundred years of land claims and four constitutional conferences to entrench Aboriginal rights, Mohawk warriors have become figures of Indian popular culture, dominating representations of guns and muscle, articulating closures of ideology and identity about which Billy Diamond, a Chief of the James Bay Cree, says, the "young people of my community think that what the warriors are doing is correct." They say, we "believe what the warriors are saying is right and we intend to do the same thing" (Henton). As the public text of media representations plays an increasing role in the identities and narratives Indians adopt, there is growing political struggle in Indian communities over contested ideology and identity and their contingent closures of articulation: be-

tween Mohawks who support Band Councils and those who endorse the traditional government of the Mohawk Nation or the Iroquois Confederacy; between traditionalists who support the Degandawida's Great Law and those who follow the more recent Handsome Lake Code; between Mohawks who promote the concept of warriors and those who advocate peaceful, legal, or traditional methods to achieve land and treaty rights, sovereignty and self-determination; between Mohawks who support economic development through gambling and cigarette sales and those who reject these enterprises.

But the contestation of ideologies and the diversity of Indian identities can only be understood in the unity of common culture and history, experience, and political purpose: that is, in collective memory and the continual formation of community. It is the negotiation of relations of power articulated in contested ideology and identity, and the continuous unity in diversity, which both fractures and binds Indian communities in their struggle with an oppressive past and an uncertain future. And it is the recognition of this unity in difference—continually reconstructed in collective memory and culture—and constituted and adopted today in the struggle over representation which harbours the meaning and clarifies the importance of media images and Indian identity today.

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