

Spirit Dance

Industrial Oppression and Indigenous Resistance in *Thunderheart*

by Aimée Cree Dunn

The industrial invasion of North America has not yet ended. Many believe the dominant society came, saw and conquered centuries ago, but reality tells a different story. Neither this land, nor its first human inhabitants, have been conquered, and it is likely we never will be.

In many ways, the film *Thunderheart*, directed by Michael Apted, portrays this unconquered survival as it faces violent suppression. While the film is a Hollywood version of incidents occurring on the fictional Bear Creek reservation, the suppression and the resistance depicted in the film are based on real events found in Indian Country. While the film derives its inspiration from the 1970s events here in North America, it must be noted that similar events continue to occur in Indian Country on this continent, and, indeed, in Indigenous Country around the world.

Thunderheart depicts a fictional Native American reservation in the 1970s known as Bear Creek Reservation. Its location in the Badlands and its reference to various people and incidents directly tie it to the real reservation of Pine Ridge in South Dakota during the 1970s. In the film, an activist group, Aboriginal Rights Movement (ARM), practicing and protecting traditional ways is at odds with the tribal chairman (Jack Milton), his police force (the GOONs) and the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

ARM parallels the American Indian Movement (AIM). AIM was founded in the 1960s in Minneapolis, Minnesota as a means of combating police brutality directed at the local Native American population. It grew rapidly and initiated numerous demonstrations promoting the Red Power movement.¹ As part of its role, when asked, AIM comes to those places in Indian Country that are experiencing some sort of trouble such as the Wisconsin boatlandings in the 1980s during the Anishinaabeg fight for

treaty rights or such as the Pine Ridge Reservation in the 1970s when, as will be discussed, the people there were experiencing violent oppression.

Jack Milton, the tribal chairman in *Thunderheart*, parallels Dick Wilson the actual tribal chairman of Pine Ridge Reservation in the early 1970s. Both Milton and Wilson employed a near-private police force called GOONs (Guardians of the Oglala Nation).

The FBI (or “Federal Bureau of Intimidation” as *Thunderheart* tribal police officer, Walter Crow Horse, a traditionalist, calls this arm of the federal government) was prominent on both the fictional Bear Creek reservation of the film and the real reservation of Pine Ridge. In both instances, the FBI worked to support the tribal chairman in his activities. In the film, the FBI and the traditionalists have a showdown at the Stronghold. In reality, the FBI and the traditionalists held a several months-long stand-off at Wounded Knee in the early 1970s.

Although the film parallels actual events on the 1970s Pine Ridge reservation, the industrial oppression depicted in the film is found throughout Indian Country. Vine Deloria, Jr., in his essay “Tribal Religions and Contemporary American Culture, tells us that

the central value of Indian life – its land – is under incredible attack from all sides. Tribal councils are strapped for funds to solve pressing social problems. Leasing and development of tribal lands involves selling the major object of tribal religion for funds to solve [these] problems that are ultimately religious in nature. (314)

He goes on to cite the strip-mining of Black Mesa in Navajo and Hopi territory as one example of this, saying, “Traditional Indians of both tribes are fighting desperately against any additional strip-mining of the lands [while t]ribal councils continue to lease the lands for development to encourage employment” and fund social programs (Deloria “Tribal Religions” 314). Prominent AIM activist, Russell Means, in his autobiography *Where White Men Fear to Tread*, points to industrial impacts on the land when he writes of tribes on the West Coast: “As the white man built hydroelectric dams and raped our Grandmother the earth with toxic pollution and overfishing, the salmon, which had seemed an inexhaustible resource, became scarce” (224). Anishinaabe activist and former Green vice-presidential candidate Winona LaDuke cites numerous other instances of the industrial invasion of Indian Country including 80,000,000 acres of offshore oil drilling areas in Alaska “surrounding Native coastal villages,” “[o]ver 1,000 uranium mines [. . .] abandoned on

¹ The use of the term “Red” here is a reference to Indigenous culture and not to Communism.

Diné land, leaking radioactive contaminants” and “more than 700 atomic explosions over the past 45 years” on Western Shoshone land in Nevada making the Western Shoshone “the most bombed nation in the world” (59).

The uranium drilling depicted in *Thunderheart*, then, is only one symptom of a much larger problem: the industrial invasion of North America based on the policies of environmental racism. The attitudes behind this environmental racism are portrayed in *Thunderheart* by renowned FBI agent, Frank Coutelle.

Coutelle tells Ray Levoi, the “part-Indian” FBI agent, “I feel for these people, I really do. They’re a proud people. But they are also a conquered people, and that means that their future is dictated by the nation that conquered them. Now, rightly or wrongly, that’s the way it’s been on down through history.” However, Coutelle is incorrect. Not all human societies have accepted the doctrine of conquest as legal and ethical. For example, in 1976, Gularrawuy Yunupingu and Silas Roberts, Aboriginal chairmen of the Northern Land Council of Australia, said, “The law of history says that we must not take land, fight over land, steal land, give land, and so on. My land is mine only because I came in spirit from that land and so did my ancestors of the same land” (qtd. in McLuhan 76). Coutelle relies on a cultural assumption to rationalize the abuse of Bear Creek tribal land and tribal members. As the doctrine of conquest assumes that those who are “superior” will defeat those who are “inferior,” Coutelle’s use of the doctrine as a justification for his treatment of the Bear Creek area is based on racism.

This racism is also stated blatantly. When Levoi asks if Milton “checks out” as one of the good guys, Coutelle replies, “It’s hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys. I mean, they’re all Indians.”

Coutelle also identifies James Looks Twice as “an enemy of the United States.” As Looks Twice is one of those leading the resistance to the industrial invasion of the Bear Creek reservation, Coutelle implies that Looks Twice’s interference with industrial development puts him in direct opposition to American values, plans and dreams. Indeed, Levoi cynically remarks that the FBI’s pursuit of Looks Twice is part of its mission to “[p]rotect[. . .] the integrity of the American dream.”

The covert uranium drilling at Red Deer Table is central to the conflict in *Thunderheart*. Following the visions of a Sioux² elder, Levoi

and traditionalist tribal cop Crow Horse go to Red Deer Table and discover the uranium drilling. “Goddamn, test drilling for uranium,” says Crow Horse, adding, “Our people have been voting against this mining thing for years.” Here at Red Deer Table, Levoi and Crow Horse begin to realize that those who found out about this uranium drilling, like tribal council member Leo Fast Elk, were killed. Their murders were then being pinned on ARM members, such as Looks Twice, to discredit ARM. Crow Horse and Levoi also find the body of non-violent ARM activist, Maggie Eagle Bear, at Red Deer Table. She had recently had the area’s water tested as she knew it was contaminated; Levoi and Crow Horse quickly surmise the water must have been contaminated by the uranium drilling. Eagle Bear had also found out, just that day, who it was that had truly murdered Leo Fast Elk – the murderer was a Native man who was cooperating with the FBI as part of the terms of his parole from prison.

As involved and paranoid-sounding as this plot sounds, the film’s Red Deer Table, murders and FBI complicity are all based on actual events.

Red Deer Table parallels the actual Sheep Mountain area found on Pine Ridge Reservation. Pine Ridge loaned the use of Sheep Mountain to the US Defense Department during World War II as a training range for aerial gunners (Means 303, 250; Churchill 192). The land was not returned after World War II, and, according to Ward Churchill, “during a top secret 1970 satellite-mapping exercise conducted jointly by NASA and the National Uranium Resource Evaluation Institute (NURE),” uranium was discovered on the Sheep Mountain Gunnery Range (192). The US government began agitating for “clear title” to the land in question, and, as Churchill writes, “once the resistance [to the land transfer] was considered broken, the desired land transfer was in fact concluded” (193).

The harassment of traditionals and others who opposed the land deal or the tribal chairman in the film is drawn directly from actual experience. In *Thunderheart*, vigilante squads known as the GOONS, or “Guardians of the Oglala Nation,” terrorize Bear Creek residents. There are several scenes of GOONS in large, loud pick-up trucks with various men in the pick-up beds carrying guns. Sometimes they stop to throw a family out of their home, and the family’s possessions, often pow-wow regalia, indicate they are traditionalists. Other times, such as at Eagle

² The term “Sioux” refers to several groups of people including the Oglala, Lakota, Nakota and Dakota. The film, however, except in reference to the

GOONs (Guardians of the Oglala Nation), only uses the term “Sioux” and does not specify beyond that appellation.

Bear's residence, they drive up to a house of a known ARM activist and shoot into the home. In this particular instance, Eagle Bear's young son is shot in the arm and needs to be rushed to the small, understaffed hospital. In different scenes, the GOONs set up roadblocks, and, in an edited version of Levoi's words, are "armed like the f----- Marines." These roadblock scenes show the GOONs allowing FBI agents through with little comment while stopping and physically abusing those who are identified as traditionals.

The GOONs were real. GOON was a pejorative term used to describe the reservation "death-squad," as Means, a Pine Ridge tribal member, refers to them (296). The term was adapted by the tribal chair, Dick Wilson, and the acronym was then said to stand for Guardians of the Oglala Nation (Means 296). Funded largely by a 1972 block grant from the Bureau of Indian Affairs for the formation of a "Tribal Ranger Group," the GOONs propped up Wilson's regime by violently terrorizing those who opposed it (Churchill 189, 194). Means writes, "Any Indian with long hair – even women – risked being removed from car or home, taken into the countryside, and beaten with clubs, boots, or gun butts. Some were shot. Many disappeared, never to be seen again. Homes and cars were firebombed" (283).

The GOONs were not the only ones perpetrating the violence, however. According to Means, the police from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) "fortified" Pine Ridge's BIA building in 1973 "with sandbagged bunkers and .50-caliber machine guns that could spit more than six bullets a second, each weighing more than half a pound [and measuring] a half inch in diameter" (253). He goes on to say, "People were beaten to death in the countryside. Others were taken to jail to be stomped or pounded on. Some just disappeared. To this day, none of them has [sic] been found and nobody has accounted for them" (296). He later writes of other harassment saying "more than 350 [AIM activists] were shot, stabbed, stomped, burned by arson fires, beaten with tire irons or baseball bats, or seriously injured when their cars were run off the road" (304). Although there were several hundred FBI agents in the nearby area, not one murder of an AIM member or supporter was ever solved (Means 304).³ According to Bruce Johansen and Roberto Maestas in *Wasi'chu: The Continuing Indian Wars*,

³ In the film, Eagle Bear alludes to this in an early conversation with Levoi when she hands him a stack of files of unsolved murders and disappearances of ARM members.

Using only document *political* deaths, the yearly murder rate on Pine Ridge Reservation between March 1, 1973, and March 1, 1976, was 170 per 100,000. By comparison, Detroit, the reputed "murder" capital of the United States, had a rate of 20.2 per 100,000 in 1974 [. . .] In a nation of 200 million persons, a murder rate comparable with that of Pine Ridge between 1973 and 1976 would have left 340,000 persons dead for *political* reasons alone in *one* year; 1.32 million in *three*. . . . The political murder rate at Pine Ridge between March 1, 1973, and March 1, 1976, was almost equivalent to that in Chile during the three years after [. . .] the United States deposed and killed President Salvador Allende. (83-84, emphases added)

As the above details illustrate and as *Thunderheart* portrays, Pine Ridge residents faced extreme pressure to accept Wilson and his policies, such as the transferring of Sheep Mountain into the hands of the US government. Despite this pressure, however, the people of both Pine Ridge and the fictional Bear Creek reservations continued to resist.

This resistance is almost always within the context of the traditional value system as taught by the elders. These elders have managed to keep traditional practices, languages and values alive. It is precisely these practices, and especially these value systems, that Western industrial civilization finds threatening. As bountiful historical examples show, wherever such values are found, be it here in the Americas or in the Indigenous societies of Australia, Africa or Siberia, Western industrial civilization will find a way to undermine and ultimately attempt to destroy these values. As Means writes, "If Indian nations were allowed to control [our] resources [. . .] we might decide that we don't want to rape our Grandmother, the earth, by digging up minerals to sell" (249-250).

In *Thunderheart*, the traditionals are seen by the FBI as dangerous, and there are several scenes where traditionals are harassed and abused. In one instance, the FBI, on a manhunt for Looks Twice, invade an *inipi* or sweat lodge ceremony. Participants of this ceremony would believe in traditional values (unless, of course, any of them are undercover agents). The FBI's disrespecting the sanctity of this ceremony is one indication of how little the FBI values such ceremonies. As Looks Twice says when they arrest him, "Would you drag people out of their churches while they're praying?"

In another scene, at Grandpa Reaches's trailer where Looks Twice is arrested for the second time in the film, the FBI heckles Grandpa. One agent shakes Grandpa's centuries-old turtle rattle in his face and asks Grandpa if he was going to do a rain dance. He then throws the sacred rattle on the ground and crushes it under the heel of his boot while accusing the elder of being afraid the FBI will find peyote on him, a tradition foreign to North American Indians.⁴

Such suppression, disrespect and misrepresentation of Native American traditions is nothing new. For centuries, many Euro-Americans have seen Native American traditions as backward, strange, ridiculous and, most telling of all, subversive and dangerous. Various official policies were used to undermine and eliminate these traditions and values: coerced attendance of "Americanizing" boarding schools, the allotment system, the restructuring of tribal governing bodies, broken treaties and the subsequent denial of subsistence rights, termination attempts and the more velvet-gloved but no less destructive relocation programs. Indeed, Native traditional values and practices were seen as so subversive and dangerous, Native Americans were not recognized in the US Constitution as having the right to the free exercise of religion until 1978. Because of this, religious practices such as the Plains Sun Dance, the Anishinaabe Midewiwin and the widespread Ghost Dance were outlawed directly or were forced to go underground.

The Euro-American fear of the Ghost Dance led to the first Wounded Knee in 1890. In *Thunderheart*, Levoi has several visions pertaining to Wounded Knee. Sometimes a stone monument appears in his visions, the camera scans a list of names, and the vision ends as the grass is parted just before it reveals the names on the monument. A more powerful vision has him, in Crow Horse's words, "running with the Old Ones at the Knee" as a US Cavalry soldier attempts to shoot him and the women and children who are fleeing with him as they run for the protection of the stronghold. The last of Levoi's visions shown in the film revisits the stone monument and reveals the names engraved there. One of the last ones on the monument is the name, Thunderheart. Levoi later learns this stone monument is an actual memorial erected to commemorate those massacred at Wounded Knee.

Wounded Knee 1890 happened because hysteria over the Ghost Dance swept through Euro-American society. This hysteria is evident in the writings of nineteenth-century Euro-American anthropologist, James Mooney. He wrote in his book *The Ghost Dance Religion and Wounded Knee*,

The great underlying principle of the Ghost Dance doctrine is that the time will come when *the whole Indian race, living and dead, will be reunited* upon a regenerated earth, to live a life of aboriginal happiness, forever free from death, disease, and misery [. . .] The white race, being alien and secondary and hardly real, has no part in this scheme of aboriginal regeneration, and will be left behind with the other things of earth that have served their temporary purpose, or else will cease entirely to exist. (777, emphasis added)

Due to "both old and recent grievances," Mooney writes, among the people he refers to as the Sioux, "more lately brought to the edge of starvation by a reduction of rations, the [ghost dance] doctrine speedily assumed a hostile meaning and developed some peculiar features" (787). Indian agent, James McLaughlin, in Mooney's words, described the Sioux as "greatly excited" about the "predicted Indian millennium or '*return of the ghosts*,'" when the white man would be annihilated and the Indian again supreme" (787, emphasis added).

Other accounts of the ghost dance, however, offer a less militaristic tone. According to Sioux elder, John (Fire) Lame Deer, the ghost dance vision Wovoka had involved "a new and beautiful land [. . .] covered with lush, high grass. It was as the land had been before the white man came, full of buffalo, deer and antelope [. . .] In it lived all the Indians who had been killed by the white man or by his diseases. They were all alive again in that beautiful land" (226). Lame Deer says Wovoka told people, "My ghost dance is a dance of peace" (227). Of those Sioux who visited Wovoka, Lame Deer says,

They said, "The spirits of the dead will live again on this earth. The ghost dance will bring back our dead relations. It will bring back the buffalo. Everything will be good and pure again. There will be no killing. The white men will be rolled up, disappear, go back to their own continent. There might be a few good ones [. . .] they could come too, be a part of the new world, live like Indians [. . . *W*]e'll be reborn. (228, emphasis added)

⁴ The Native American Church, formed in the early 1900s, merged Christianity with various Indian traditions, including the Mexican Indian sacramental use of peyote. Many Euro-Americans have since mistaken peyote and other drug use as a traditional North American Indian "sacrament."

These visions essentially describe an ecologically healthy place, one where wilderness thrives and the industrial invasion of North America is no longer evident. For Western industrial civilization, this is a threatening vision, and it sought to destroy it. The 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre is one vivid illustration of this: one Indian agent, according to anthropologist Edward Spicer, interpreted the Ghost Dance as “an Indian uprising” and called for US troops (92). In doing so, he initiated the massacre of 300 men, women and children (Spicer 92). In the film, the Sioux spiritual leader, Thunderheart, is one of these 300 people.

Thunderheart is the pivotal element around which the meaning of the film is built. As one of the victims of Wounded Knee I, he is a symbol of all Native American victims of oppression and genocide. This alone is enough to fruitfully tie Wounded Knee I to the oppressions of the Bear Creek reservation depicted in the film. As Crow Horse told the FBI, “You’re just the coming of the same old calvary.” However, there is possibly an additional element to Thunderheart that could expand the meaning of the film into even deeper waters.

In the film 1970s spiritual leader Grandpa Reaches, himself a Wounded Knee survivor, tells Levoi, Thunderheart has been “sent here to a troubled place to help his people. That’s what I’m told.” He adds, “It is his [Thunderheart’s] blood, *the same blood* that was spilled in the grass and snow at Wounded Knee, that runs through your heart like a buffalo” (emphasis added). Although Thunderheart may have died at Wounded Knee in the film, the film seems to say he has returned as Levoi. That is, the film seems to imply that Levoi is the *reincarnation* of Thunderheart. As Thunderheart, Levoi, guided by Grandpa’s visions, goes on to risk his life at the Stronghold in a showdown with Western industrial society (symbolized by Frank Coutelle and Jack Milton). The traditionalists and ARM activists, led by Grandpa Reaches, back up Thunderheart/Levoi and end the industrial invasion of the Bear Creek Reservation.

While this interpretation of *Thunderheart* may seem strange to some, it adds many more layers to the film than are already there. For example, as the hero that helps save the day, Levoi’s physical appearance (The Great White Savior) could be troubling. However, his physical appearance may also be seen, although perhaps controversially, as representing yet another theme in the movie: skin color is not necessarily an indication of inner spirit. As mentioned earlier, Australian Aboriginal leaders Gularrawuy Yunupingu and Silas Roberts said spirit comes from the land. That is, the spirit is tied to a particular land. The blood may not be tied to the land, as Jack Milton illustrates with his lack of caring for his

home, although he may also be an example of how one’s spirit can become corrupted. After all, Looks Twice tells Levoi he has to listen to Grandpa Reaches because “it’s in our DNA.”

Levoi is not only associated with Wounded Knee; he is also intimately associated with the Ghost Dance in the film in two ways. For one, after his plane lands, taking him from Washington D.C. to South Dakota, he enters an airport terminal. One of the first images the audience sees of this new place is a display case of ghost dancer’s regalia. For another, several of Levoi’s “mirage visions” involve people dancing the ghost dance. If we suppose Levoi is Thunderheart reincarnated, the film’s possible reincarnation theme, given the above mentioned images and visions, offers a powerful interpretation of the Ghost Dance: that of an Indigenous resistance to Western/industrial society wherein the spirits return, that is reincarnate, in order to protect the land.

To back up a bit, Mooney tells us that the phrase “ghost dance” has been translated differently in various Indigenous languages. For the Paiutes, he says, “it is called *Nänigükwa*, ‘dance in a circle’” (791). As most traditional dances involve a circle, it is unlikely the name refers to the dancers’ actual movement in physical space as such a name would not distinguish it from most other traditional dances. Mooney also says for “the Sioux, Arapaho, and most other prairie tribes it is called the ‘*spirit*’ or ‘ghost’ *dance*” (791, emphasis added). Other Indigenous American nations, such as the Comanche, translated the name of the dance to mean “with joined hands.” The Kiowa translated it as “dance with clasped hands.” From descriptions of the Ghost Dance, however, it seems the dancers dance without necessarily being physically connected. From these translations, then, we get several interesting phrases. The spirit dance. A dance involving a circle. A dance involving the joining of hands (although, apparently, the actual dancers did not join hands).

Given these translations and within the context of *Thunderheart*’s potential thematic elements, the Ghost Dance can be seen as a circular dance of the spirits wherein those who have walked on (i.e. “died”) are reborn to help in fighting the incursions and corruptions of industrial society.

This interpretation is corroborated by Looks Twice’s monologue minutes before his second arrest by the FBI. Levoi, by this time aware of the corruption within the FBI and the tribal government, asks Looks Twice why the federal agents are so anxious to capture him. “What makes you such a threat?” Levoi asks Looks Twice. Looks Twice replies, “We choose the right to be who we are. We know the difference between

the reality of freedom, and the illusion of freedom. There's a way to live with earth, and a way not to live with earth. We choose the way of earth." Earlier Looks Twice tells Levoi, "It's in our DNA [. . .] Sometimes they have to kill us. They have to kill us. Because they can't break our spirit."

On one level of interpretation, Looks Twice's conviction that "they can't break our spirit" functions as a hearth-warming, rousing speech from a resistance leader who refuses to give up the fight no matter how bad it gets. This is a great and much needed sentiment. However, there seems to be a deeper meaning underlying his words. Taken within the context of any interpretation of the Ghost Dance, Looks Twice's statement becomes profound: it seems meant to be a demonstration of the enduring spiritual power that maintains the resistance to Western industrial civilization. In his monologue, as shown in the excerpts above, Looks Twice establishes that this resistance is a fight for the earth. Earlier in the film, he says that this resistance "is a 500-year resistance," meaning it has been on-going since Columbus landed.⁵ Finally, and most meaningfully for the reincarnation theme, he suggests that death is not a barrier. The threat of death not only does not intimidate the resistance, but it does not, and cannot, block it either.

The Ghost Dance is used in various Indigenous stories today. Native author Linda Hogan, in her novel *Solar Storms*, describes the Cree and the Innu in their resistance to massive hydro-electric projects threatening the land and their ways of life. "Sometimes," she writes, "I think the ghost dancers were right, that we would return, that we are still returning. Even now" (Hogan 325). Although this statement is ambiguous, and the surrounding text does little to offer more illumination on the intended interpretation, the narrator here could be referring to a return of the spirits, or she could be referring to a revitalization of Indigenous culture. Lame Deer himself feels the Ghost Dance has been misunderstood. He writes,

I am trying to bring the ghost dance back, but interpret it in a new way. I think it has been misunderstood, but after eighty years I believe that more and more people are sensing what we meant when we prayed for a new earth and that now not only the Indians but everybody has become an 'endangered species.' (235)

⁵ There's a new slogan in Indian Country today: "Homeland Security: Fighting Terrorism Since 1492."

Whether or not the Ghost Dance can be interpreted as a metaphor for reincarnation, it is certain that modern stories of Indigenous resistance feel that the power of Indigenous resistance comes from the spirit world and is centered around protecting the earth. According to LaDuke, the fight for the earth is fought by "common people with uncommon courage and the whispers of their ancestors in their ears" (64). It may be that when Looks Twice says "they can't break our spirit," he means it literally. Perhaps, no matter the intimidations, murders and abuse, the spirits keep returning, coming back again and again to protect the earth. However, even if this interpretation of the Ghost Dance and of the film is invalid, it is evident that those who are part of Indigenous resistance to Western/industrial society feel strong support from those in the spirit world. And this is a power that truly cannot be broken by human design.

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