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OUR FELLOW AMERICANS

PAUL CHAAT SMITH ON THE COMPLEX TRUTH OF NATIVE AMERICAN HISTORY

Nahwats, one of Paul Chaat Smith's Comanche ancestors. Date and photographer unknown.

BY MARK LEVITON

For American Indian essayist, activist, and cultural provocateur Paul Chaat Smith, there are two questions that have troubled his life: "Where are you from?" and "How much Indian are you?"

"I think my whole career as a writer," he says, "has been an attempt to figure out the answers to those questions."

Smith grew up mostly in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., where his father worked as an administrator at the University of Maryland and his mother was a schoolteacher. Both his parents were from Oklahoma. His mother was Comanche, and her father was a minister in the Comanche Reformed Church, which still held services in the Comanche language. His father's family were white farmers, but as an adult Smith learned, much to his surprise, that his paternal grandmother was Choctaw, and the family farm was Choctaw land.

In 1974, while attending Antioch College in Ohio, Smith got an internship with the American Indian Movement (AIM), which had recently made headlines with its protests against tribal-government corruption on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Approximately two hundred AIM activists had occupied the town of Wounded Knee and held it against U.S. marshals for seventy-one days. (Wounded Knee is also the site of an 1890 massacre of Lakota by the U.S. Cavalry.) Smith went to work for AIM during the legal trials that followed the occupation, and he never finished school. Later he helped found the Treaty Council News, *a publication of the International Indian Treaty Council.*

By the 1980s he'd grown disenchanted with AIM, whose popularity and influence had dwindled. Having developed an interest in art (artists, he says, "threw better parties" than activists), he became a critic and wrote for art catalogs and magazines. In 1996 he coauthored Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee *with Robert Allen Warrior, and the book went on to become a standard text in high-school and college history classes. In 2001 he joined the staff of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) while the Washington, D.C., location was still in the planning stages. Smith says the museum's founders hired him despite his lack of a college degree because "if they hired only people with advanced degrees, they'd get all white anthropologists."*

A curving limestone building designed by the Blackfoot architect Douglas Cardinal, the museum opened on the National Mall in 2004. Smith is currently associate curator and most recently curated the exhibit Americans, *which will be up through 2022 (americanindian.si.edu). Humorous, deeply researched, open-ended, and often confrontational,* Americans *powerfully demonstrates how Indians are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. Although millions of them live in the U.S. and their images and names adorn sports teams, military weapons, household products, and entire towns, they remain nearly invisible as people.*

Smith lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife, a librarian at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. In 2009 he published a collection of essays and speeches titled Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong. *He refuses to portray Indians primarily as victims and insists on pointing out uncomfortable facts — like the existence of Indian nations that fought enthusiastically for the Confederacy in the Civil War. In his written work, public appearances, and curatorial approach, Smith combines a smart-aleck, freewheeling style with thoughtful scholarship. When I asked him about his habit of making jokes, he said, "It's a defense mechanism. I'm just as scared and lonely as everyone else." Outside of his museum work and writing, he keeps up with the news, watches a lot of sports (to distract him from the news), obsesses about climate change, and leads a "normally depressing life." (paulchaatsmith.com)*

I met Smith at the Smithsonian's Cultural Resources Center, a few miles from the NMAI. As I passed through the guard gate, he explained that when the first Indian artifacts — which included human remains as well as pottery, beadwork, clothing, tools, and so on — arrived from storage in New York, every shipment was greeted with burning sage and a welcoming ceremony from Native American staff.

As we settled into his office, I noticed both the dozens of books on art and history and a poster for 1980s underground rock band the Replacements.

Leviton: Let's begin with a question about language. Should we say "Native American," or is "Indian" preferable?

Smith: In my work I use Indian and Native American interchangeably. In the United States most Native Americans actually prefer Indian, but there is a growing objection to its use. In Latin America, Indian is often used as a slur. In Canada they use First Nations and also Aboriginal — and Inuit for the arctic inhabitants — but the legislation that details the relationship of Canada's government to its native people is called the Indian Act.

Some people object to the word Indian because it's inaccurate, a result of Christopher Columbus not knowing where he was when he landed in the West Indies. I get

Paul Chaat Smith

that. And some would say, "Forget 'Native American.' Call us by our specific tribal names." But most of us have more than one tribal ancestry now. And, of course, we're not always 100 percent Indian. So it gets complicated. Most of us in the United States don't consider Indian a slur, but we recognize that some non-Indians do. Of course, this is also a question of who gets to be in charge of the language. Generally it's white people.

Leviton: The section of your *Americans* exhibit titled "Indians Everywhere" demonstrates that dominant white culture has no problem using Indian names and images.

Smith: Yeah, the Washington Redskins, the Tomahawk missile, the Pontiac automobile. It's true that Indians have not had control over the use of the words that describe us. But looking for a solution is complex. It's not like Indians can just tell you what the correct words are.

Leviton: The Cleveland Indians removed their Chief Wahoo mascot from team uniforms after decades of complaints. They will still be selling some merchandise with it, in order to "keep control of the trademark," according to the owners. But Atlanta Braves baseball games still feature the "tomahawk chop," and the Washington Redskins hosted a football game on Thanksgiving.

Smith: We've included many, many sports and military mascots and logos in "Indians Everywhere." The only thing that unifies all the pieces, from Buffalo Bill Cody advertising posters to Cher's *Half-Breed* LP cover, is the idea that somehow Indians add meaning or value to a product. I don't want to tell people whether these things should be gotten rid of, but when it comes to the Washington Redskins, the museum has taken a strong stand. The team's name is a dictionary-defined slur. It's one of the most visible insults to Indians, and it's in our nation's capital. Some people have suggested changing the name to the Washington Americans, but retaining the team logo, a male Indian head. The Chicago Blackhawks logo is an Indian head, too,

and most Indians I know think it's beautiful. Outside of the logo, the Blackhawks don't use a lot of Indian-themed iconography. So maybe that excuses it?

The military uses Indian names extensively. Army helicopters are called Blackhawk, Apache, Kiowa, Comanche. The well-known "Huey" helicopter is officially an Iroquois.

Using Indian names for military equipment and sports mascots is kind of a strange phenomenon, isn't it? Shouldn't we talk about why this happens before we decide which are racist and which are not? The point we want to get across at NMAI is that there's no similar phenomenon for anyone else. Sure, there are teams called the Fighting Irish and the Celtics, but it doesn't evoke the kind of history the U.S. shares with Indians.

Even before Indians became mascots, they were wrapped up in white Europeans' ideas about what it meant to be an American. As the Jamestown settlement grew and changed throughout the 1600s, the colonists weren't just English people on a terrible, endless camping trip anymore. But if they weren't entirely English, then what were they? The presence of Indians gave them an answer of sorts. Again, Indians bring meaning.

The participants in the Boston Tea Party in 1773, the first major act of defiance of British rule, dressed up like Mohawk Indians. Why? It wasn't just to disguise themselves. Indian dress symbolically announced that these men considered themselves Americans and no longer subject to distant governance by Great Britain. On one level it's ridiculous, but on another it's an effective way of announcing the settlers' new identity, and Indians were an ineffable, mysterious part of it.

One of the first patriotic fraternities in the U.S. was the Improved Order of Red Men, founded in 1834. It modeled its rituals and clothing after Indians but allowed only white men to join. So white men were dressing up as Indians from the start of the country. They just weren't all that interested in the actual Indians living nearby. In fact, they were actively plotting the dispossession of Indians. That's some strong cognitive dissonance. White people may admire Indians and find their culture worth emulating, but that has never stopped them from trying to destroy us.

Leviton: Less than 1 percent of the U.S. population are Indians. Can you give me a general picture of Indian life right now?

Smith: I can't really answer that question. It's too broad. The National Museum of the American Indian is concerned with this entire hemisphere, half the world. Would you ask me to give you a quick summary of what's going on in Africa, Asia, *and* Europe?

We could start from the narrowest definition of "Indian," which is "a member of one of the federally recognized tribes in the U.S." As we speak, there are 573 tribes eligible for funding and services from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Then there are the tribes who are *not* federally recognized but are recognized by individual states. There are also folks who insist they are tribes and are still trying to get official recognition.

You have to understand, different tribes don't really have a lot in common in terms of historical or present-day experience. It's grossly inaccurate to use a general term like Indian and think it explains anything about the Comanche and the Shawnee, for instance.

Leviton: You write, "We only became Indians once the armed struggle was over in 1890. . . . For thousands of years before, we were as different from one another as Greeks are from Swedes."

Smith: We became one people because of the shared legacy of colonialism and diaspora. Now we are trying to reclaim our past. That means recognizing that we're a riot of vastly different cultures. Some tribes created almost ecological utopias, with reasonable amounts of democracy; others practiced slavery both before and after contact with colonists. Sometimes we fought one another.

Our history is not just a recitation of massacres and atrocities, with Indians as the perpetual victims. Take the often-forgotten 1675 war in which the New England tribes tried to drive out English settlers, who were taking land, depleting game, and so forth. (To make it more complicated, some of the settlers had Indian allies.) Called King Philip's War, the conflict is named for the Wampanoag chief Metacomet, who took the name Philip — and the title of king — supposedly because of the friendship between his father and the early Pilgrims. During the war one out of four English towns was attacked and burned to the ground. Almost every English settler had a direct experience of the conflict. The settlers won, of course, but not all the Indians died. Some survivors were sold into slavery in the Caribbean. Others stayed put. So there were still Indians making their own way in New England when this country was founded.

King Philip's War is one example of Indians' opposition to the western expansion of the colonies. It fits into the larger story of how Indians resisted colonialism, but it also suggests a more complex story. Indians didn't just resist; they also integrated in various ways. They were not isolated or separated. They are a part of this country.

Indians were engaged with the political issues of the day. For example, the Iroquois — who were actually made up of six Indian nations — were a dominant power in New England at the start of the Revolutionary War. The Mohawks sided with the British, and their neighbors the Oneida fought alongside the colonists. These tribes had sometimes brilliant, sometimes stupid reasons for joining forces with one side or the other, but rarely was it an obvious choice, as if they all had the same relationship with settlers. There was plenty of diplomacy, and personal friendships were important. For instance, six Crow scouts guided Colonel George Custer's troops to Little Big Horn,

where they fought the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho. The Crow had been defending themselves against Sioux and Cheyenne encroachments for some time, so volunteering to help Custer was not a betrayal. It made sense.

I'm not minimizing the catastrophe that took place. But we shouldn't pretend there was always Indian solidarity, or that Indians thought exclusively in racial terms of "us against the whites," because that turns our history into a fairy tale.

And Indian culture is not the static, traditional culture many people think of. Indians were always interested in adopting new and sophisticated technologies. At the time of the first contact with Europeans in the 1500s, Indians had been on the North American continent for ten thousand years. They had established trade routes, developed medicines, and farmed extensively. They weren't all hunter-gatherers. Even the Plains Indians, the classic hunter-gatherers, were part-time farmers, not nomads.

Leviton: Would you say that a connection to the land is a characteristic of all Indian societies?

Smith: It is for all *human* societies. I do contest the idea that Indians lived in "unspoiled" nature and didn't try to alter it. The usual story is that there was this untouched Eden in North America until whitey showed up and trashed it. No. For instance, there was massive controlled burning of forests by Indians. Fires are important to the ecology of forests and grasslands, and controlled wildfires are part of the careful tending and managing of those resources. Charles Mann, in his book *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus*, writes that almost nothing is common to all Indian tribes except the ambition to reshape the land. A lot of this was done wisely, but Indians did stupid things, too. Driving hundreds of bison over cliffs to get ten of them, for example, might not have been the best hunting method. Not everything Indians did was genius; only some of it was.

My point is that, when we really study the "magical" connection to the land Indians are supposed to have had, it becomes much more nuanced, more technical, and maybe more magical than we thought.

Leviton: In your essay "Notes on a Future Reckoning" you point out that some Indians had large plantations, owned slaves, and fought for the Confederacy at the start of the Civil War.

Smith: Yes, that's why I often say that I *used* to like history. Now history and I are frenemies at best. The irrefutable historical record is that what were called the Five Civilized Tribes were pro-slavery and had their own racial hierarchies. When, in 1830, those tribes were removed from the southeastern U.S. and forced to travel what's called the Trail of Tears, they reestablished slavery in the new Indian territories, rebuilt their economies with slave labor, and eventually sided with the Confederacy. The Choctaw chief Greenwood LeFlore had fifteen thousand acres in Mississippi being worked by more than four hundred enslaved people.

The hopeful story of red and black peoples rising up against their oppressors together — the story that I want to hear — didn't happen.

Leviton: What were the "Five Civilized Tribes," and why were they called that?

Smith: In the first part of the nineteenth century whites saw some tribes in the eastern U.S. — the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole — as more acculturated than others. Members of these tribes intermarried with whites, spoke English, and were sometimes Christians. They built foundries and owned newspapers. They were also quite different from one another. The Cherokee had a very successful trade in guns and slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and as Southern slavery grew, they were not at all reluctant to take part. We need to acknowledge this inconvenient fact if we are going to have an adult conversation. Sometimes I don't think we can, but you have to try anyway. [*Laughs.*]

The Cherokee and Creek are the tribes we know the most about, because they wrote and talked openly about slavery. They rejected the idea of white supremacy, but, at the same time, they accepted the white-supremacist belief about the natural inferiority of black people.

When I was coming up, I heard that the Cherokee slave owners were white, not Cherokee; and, in any case, there weren't very many of them; and some were protecting the black slaves from a worse fate. But the historical record couldn't be clearer. There was no great angst in the Cherokee community about the morality of enslaving Africans.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., the Harvard professor, hosts programs on PBS about the ancestry of well-known people. The actor Don Cheadle was on one episode. Cheadle's DNA tests showed that one of his ancestors was an enslaved person owned by a Chickasaw Indian. Cheadle is very sophisticated and politically aware, but he just couldn't wrap his head around this. The persistent romanticizing of Indian life creates a willful ignorance about history and disguises the fact that we Indians are quite like other people. Greenwood LeFlore did not think all men are brothers.

Humans are incredibly fucked up and wonderful and idiotic. To assume otherwise, to believe that Indians are inherently good, is to deny our humanity.

Leviton: You say that Indians are "shape-shifters in the national consciousness," because they are often viewed as both "new-age forest bunnies" and drunks and liars.

Smith: For a long time Indians were seen as brutal savages, inferior to white people. When some white people began to doubt that, they swung to the opposite view: that Indians are pure and good and unchanging. To see the full picture of Indians — as people who have had a continuing, complex relationship with all aspects of American culture — is just too much for some people. They want to

put Indians in a box.

Leviton: You write that Indian artists should be "interrogators, not cheerleaders." I see this idea embodied in your curation of the *Americans* exhibit, which asks a lot of questions and doesn't provide a lot of answers. I can't think of another museum show I've seen that is so open-ended, so challenging to the viewer.

Smith: The world is a confusing place. With this exhibit I wanted to push back against easy answers. I didn't try to explain everything. When we started the NMAI, we thought we were going to teach people about the hundreds of Indian cultures and how they were different from one another, but it's absurd to think we could do that kind of education when people are struggling with basic American history. Look where the U.S. is right now — still debating the Civil War. It turns out a lot of our fellow citizens think the wrong side won, or they believe the preposterous idea that enslaved people *liked* being enslaved. If our country can't reach a consensus on something like the Civil War, it makes me think our goals for the museum were pretty naive.

Compared to African Americans, Indians have a low profile in this country. It's hard to live in the U.S., no matter who you are, and not appreciate the contributions of African Americans. Their experience is pretty central to the culture. Some of the most famous people in the world are black. We had a black president! But there aren't any Indian A-list celebrities, politicians, or business tycoons. If you came to an exhibit that told you only about the terrible history of the Indian genocide, you'd leave feeling bad but also feeling that it had nothing to do with you. Most people show up at the museum already thinking Indians suffered genocide.

The thing I've learned from working at this museum is that visitors must feel the experience is about *them*, because they're American. *Americans* is only partly an exhibit about Indians; it's also about what each visitor brings to it. It's about how all our lives are inextricably entangled in American history.

Leviton: The conventional narrative is that Indians are essentially a traumatized people.

Smith: Yes, and people who believe that want it affirmed. It's something for white people to feel bad about. But what does that guilt do for us?

Let me tell you a story about white guilt: The Indian Removal Act became law in May 1830, forcing well-established Indian communities in the Southeast to travel the Trail of Tears to land west of the Mississippi. The most popular stage play in the country in 1830 was *Metamora: or, The Last of the Wampanoags*, by John Augustus Stone. The play is a fictionalized version of King Philip's War, with the Indians as the heroic victims, and it ends with white people being cursed by the noble Metamora. It was a huge sensation, the *Cats* of its day. So there was white guilt in 1830, but it didn't prevent the Trail of Tears.

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At NMAI we are looking for ways to push past the guilt and not make the whole institution be about placing blame and feeling sorry for Indians.

Leviton: You point out that Indians are often viewed as weak, susceptible to disease and alcoholism, and feminized in their traditional dress and rituals — but also as fierce and skillful warriors who'll fight against daunting odds.

Smith: Yep. Elevate your opponent, and it makes you more heroic. That's why the Plains Indians became the apotheosis of Indian culture: they are the most fantastic opponents you could have. The fight over land between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains in the nineteenth century is the setting for so many classic Hollywood westerns: *The Searchers*, *Fort Apache*, *How the West Was Won*, and so forth.

Leviton: Let's talk about tribal governance. As you've said, there are advantages to being a recognized tribe.

Smith: There are some Indians who want nothing to do with the federal government's recognition, though in general tribes want it. At one point in the nineteenth century it was thought that Indians would just be absorbed into the broader American culture, but at the turn of the twentieth century they were still a distinct political entity. That was a choice. They wanted to remain Indians not just culturally, with dances and ceremonies and holidays, but with some sort of self-governance, and they fought for that. That makes us different from any other ethnic group in the U.S. No other group has rights that descend, in one way or another, from formal treaties, obligations, and agreements. Most Indians don't want to give that up.

Leviton: I want to ask about one legal settlement in 1980, in the Supreme Court case *United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians*. The court ruled that the Lakota were entitled to $106 million for the "taking of tribal property" — the Black Hills, which are considered sacred land — but

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the tribe refused to accept the money. It's still in a government account, accruing interest, and is now over a billion dollars. Why won't the Lakota take it?

Smith: Because the Supreme Court case did not unambiguously return the land, which had been guaranteed to the Sioux in the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie. The Sioux refuse to accept any amount of money for the Black Hills. It's a controversial position. There are some activists who want to take the money and use it for development. Shannon County, South Dakota (renamed Oglala Lakota County in 2015), is one of the poorest counties in the country. People at that level of poverty refusing to take the government's money — that shows you the profound depth of feeling.

Overall, though, tribal governments' attitudes are wide-ranging. For a long time the Bureau of Indian Affairs managed the tribal governments and had approval over their leaders, but that changed in the middle of the twentieth century. Now tribal governments are responsible for determining taxation, education, courts, law enforcement, health care, infrastructure, environmental protection, and especially tribal membership. What can I say? Tribal governments are deeply imperfect, in the same way other governments are. Some are well run; others are not. Some tribes throw out their leadership pretty often. Sometimes we say that nepotism is an Indian value.

Leviton: In the exhibits you've curated about the Battle of Little Big Horn and the Trail of Tears, you point out that there were strong economic reasons for the U.S. government's treatment of Indians. But that story is neglected in favor of the standard one about undying antipathy between whites and Indians.

Smith: Custer's Last Stand at Little Big Horn occurred in the context of incursions by whites looking for gold. You could say the whole white-Indian conflict was a dispute over land, rather than racism or a cultural conflict. It's a trite thing to say and doesn't really explain what's going on, but in those two cases the economics *are* central.

When it comes to the Trail of Tears, most visitors to the NMAI know exactly two things: that President Andrew Jackson was a bad guy, and that the forced marches killed thousands of Indians. That's the story. That's why we put a big sign at the entrance to that section reading, TRAIL OF TEARS: NOT WHAT YOU THINK. NOT EVEN CLOSE.

First, it wasn't done in the dark of night. There was a huge national debate about the Indian Removal Act. John Ross, the Cherokee leader, traveled the country as a spokesman for Indian rights. He'd been a principal negotiator with the federal government since 1816 and had done a good job of building political support in the nation's capital on behalf of the Cherokee and other tribes. Some Indians wanted to accept relocation and cut the best possible deal, but Ross opposed that. There was also substantial opposition to the Act from powerful white clergy and Whig politicians, just as there was opposition to slavery from the abolitionist movement. The idea of moving Indians out of the South was debated for decades before Andrew Jackson made it an urgent matter.

Leviton: What were the economic factors?

Smith: The problem for the U.S. government was that Indians — who considered themselves separate nations within the country — were in the way of building the railroads and roads. That situation became intolerable to the southern states, for whom Indians were the last barrier to the development of a cotton kingdom. The Indians' removal boosted the South's economy, which depended on slave labor. In the exhibit we argue the removal was perhaps the most significant event between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War.

We're trying to correct the historical record, because the stories people believe influence the culture. Judges can make rulings based on incorrect "facts." Our director, Kevin Gover, who was assistant secretary for Indian affairs in the Department of the Interior during the Clinton administration and helped overhaul the Bureau of Indian Affairs, points out some misguided legal decisions that were catastrophic for Indians. Judges who ruled in favor of removal accepted the argument that Indians weren't really settled: being intrinsically hunter-gatherers, they didn't have a real claim to the land, regardless of what the treaties said. How can you argue that people who owned plantations weren't "settled"? If we can bring forward the facts, we can influence future decision-makers and legal opinions.

Leviton: You've said that the experience of being an Indian in the U.S. in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries brings with it a lot of contradictions, questions, and insecurities. Some people talk about "walking in two worlds": modern society and indigenous society. What would make someone an "authentic Indian"?

Smith: A lot of people would say it's knowing the native language, the tribal histories, the religious rituals, the dances. I would question that, because it assumes

GINA EASLEY

authentic Indians are mostly unaffected by the modern world. By the 1830s most Indian groups in the eastern U.S. had changed radically since their first contact with white settlers. They couldn't exist without trade goods from Europeans. Indian life is changing all the time; it is never just one thing.

I came of age in the 1970s, when a new type of Indian life was coming into existence. AIM and other pockets of like-minded Indians around the country wanted to reconnect to an Indian culture that had been diluted or lost. My mother could speak Comanche into her twenties, but she eventually lost the ability, because it fell out of use. Her family no longer felt it was important. She was forbidden to attend powwows.

In the seventies we Indians started to tell ourselves a wonderful lie: that we had always been traditional, always right and true, and always fighting the government. I call it the "mandatory retraditionalization program." There was a great impulse to become a "real Indian" as it was defined in that period. I certainly felt that impulse. I was critiquing myself, telling myself I wasn't authentic, and wondering how I could become authentic. And, in a sense, retraditionalization worked. By the eighties and nineties this version of Indian culture had become the new normal.

Leviton: AIM was founded to support Indians' rights and renew their spiritual connection to one another. It was responsible for many high-profile events, including the occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969, the Trail of Broken Treaties protests in 1972 (which led to the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs offices in Washington, D.C.), and the seventy-one-day standoff at the Pine Ridge Reservation in 1973 — now known as the Wounded Knee incident — which set hundreds of Indians against the FBI, U.S. marshals, and the National Guard. Did most Indians support AIM?

Smith: There were a few AIM people at Alcatraz, but they weren't responsible for the occupation. That was organized by an activist group called Indians of All Tribes, which was also part of the new militancy.

There were plenty of Indians at Pine Ridge who hated AIM and wanted no part of it, but AIM certainly knew how to attract attention to Indian affairs. Thousands of people were involved at Pine Ridge. Supporters, both Indian and non-Indian, brought in food and supplies, crossing government lines at great personal risk. There were also fundraising events all over the country.

The whole thing started as a dispute among Indians. The Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization tried and failed to remove elected tribal chairman Richard Wilson, who'd been accused of corruption. Oglala traditionalists were

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opposed in general to the elected tribal governments, whose authority had been established by the U.S. government. In addition to calls for Wilson to step down, protesters demanded the reopening of treaty negotiations with the federal government. Around two hundred people, including many members of AIM, occupied the town of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation. They picked that town for its symbolic value, having been the site of a massacre in 1890 in which hundreds of Lakota had been killed by the U.S. military, an event newly remembered by the American people because of the best-selling book *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. The government siege against the two hundred activists at Wounded Knee lasted ten weeks and left two dead Indians, a paralyzed U.S. marshal, no winners, and a lot of losers.

The government's response to the 1973 occupation was to indict everybody it could, whether they were accused of violent crimes or cattle rustling. Its goal was to tie up the movement, which was already disorganized and partly broken. Those court cases were the biggest mass political trials in U.S. history, but the national press didn't cover them. Instead the news coverage focused on the eight-month trial of the two AIM leaders, Russell Means and Dennis Banks, for conspiracy and assault. They were acquitted, with the judge saying that government misconduct in the case was "aggravated." But AIM never really recovered.

Leviton: Are these AIM actions of the sixties and seventies still viewed as important in the Indian community?

Smith: There is a recognition that AIM brought changes. For the most part they weren't policy changes; those were already underway and had their own trajectory. But AIM did spearhead a change in consciousness. Before AIM, Indians weren't militant; we were peaceful. Until the late 1960s it would have been laughable to think that Indians would do something as aggressive as take over Alcatraz Island and hold it for more than a year.

One of the reasons Robert Warrior and I published *Like a Hurricane* in 1996 was that there was so little decent scholarship out there. People were looking to Hollywood movies like *Dances with Wolves* and *Last of the Mohicans* to learn about Indians. And, as I've said, Indian history is messy. Few events have the kind of clean narrative lines and moral purity you'll find in the history of the Freedom Riders or the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Yet even those weren't so simple. Rosa Parks, the humble seamstress who'd had enough of standing on the bus, was a seasoned activist who revered Malcolm X.

Leviton: In that book, you write about the lack of control AIM showed during their protests: inviting anybody to show up, decentralizing leadership, allowing events to be on the edge of anarchy much of the time, and being clumsy with the media. That's a far cry from the careful way Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy planned for and designed the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Smith: AIM's attitude was "Come on down!" It was like a poorly organized motorcycle gang. Dennis Banks was a former Honeywell executive, and Russell Means was an accountant. African Americans had a number of well-established civil-rights organizations, and their activists were trained in nonviolence and how to present themselves to the media. Indians had nothing like that. The closest AIM came to a clear statement of intent was the twenty-point proposal it brought to D.C. in 1972, which was mostly about treaties and land restoration but also demanded that the Bureau of Indian Affairs be abolished no later than July 4, 1976.

With all its shortcomings, I don't see how AIM could have been different. In an alternate universe, where AIM had different leaders with a more sophisticated skill set, what program could it have put forward? What is it that all Indians have in common? Laws like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the Fair Housing Act of 1968 affected all African Americans pretty much equally, but I'd be hard-pressed to point to a piece of legislation that had the same effect on all Indians, in both the East and the West, whether they lived on reservations or not. The legal mechanisms are complex, and the histories of individual tribes are quite different. There's no one Indian issue that has the moral clarity of, for instance, eliminating school segregation.

Maybe the one thing all Indians have in common is their invisibility. We're like wallpaper: we're all around, but most white people don't see us. And yet whites and Indians seem to be endlessly fascinated with one another — "locked in an endless embrace of love and hate and narcissism" is how I've put it.

Leviton: I suppose when most Americans think of Indians, they think of the ubiquitous casinos and bingo halls on reservations. Gambling licenses are kind of viewed as reparations for past injuries.

Smith: There are hundreds of casinos, generating nearly $30 billion in revenue. I guess you could look at the federal money spent on the NMAI as reparations, too, if you want. At least we're letting people know about Indian history

and the relationship between the federal government and the tribes. I've done my share of yelling at white people. It gets boring after a while.

I'm not worried anymore about maintaining the complexity and vibrancy of Indian life. Young Indians seem enthusiastic about the project of figuring out what twenty-first-century Indian life should look like, and they have their own version of retraditionalization. I no longer think Indians are going to disappear or lose our cultural identity.

I do think it's a problem that, because of intermarriage, many of us don't look like Indians anymore. People ask us, "How can you be Indian if you don't *look* Indian?" But a lot of American families are ethnically mixed now, right? It's the same with Indian families. If we're not in charge of deciding who's an Indian, and instead it becomes a question of who *looks* like an Indian or whose DNA test detects Indian ancestry, we're doomed.

Leviton: A friend of mine said her Indian relatives in San Diego have always tried to pass as Latino, because they found that ethnic identity easier to negotiate in that region.

Smith: And in the East, Indians sometimes pass as white, hoping to avoid being identified as mixed-race African Americans. Of course, centuries of race mixing makes any talk of racial purity a joke. But that doesn't stop people from claiming to be "full-blooded" Indians. That's something I like about being Comanche: at the height of our power we saw it as a good thing to intermarry with captives. Anyone could be made a Comanche. It's like a blow against racism.

Leviton: You say it's still difficult to get major media outlets to cover Native American stories. The last few we've seen have been the Keystone XL Pipeline protests at Standing Rock; Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren's claim to Indian heritage; and the confrontation in D.C. between a high-school kid in a Make America Great Again hat and the sixty-four-year-old Native American activist Nathan Phillips. Why do some incidents involving Indians get coverage and others don't?

Smith: The pipeline protests fit neatly into a formula described by Vine Deloria Jr., the author of *Custer Died for Your Sins*, who says that every twenty years or so the country becomes interested in Indians, and then it all goes away. I think the effort to stop the pipeline drew media attention because it involved both environmental issues and concerns about violations of Indian sovereignty and desecration of sacred sites. It also spanned the 2016 presidential campaign and the transition from Barack Obama, who had at least some level of environmental sensitivity, to Donald Trump, who complained about the "incredibly cumbersome, long, horrible permitting process" and wanted to fast-track the pipeline project.

The other two news stories both set us back. The video of the Covington Catholic High School kids taunting Phillips, who was there for an Indigenous Peoples rally, was depressing and disturbing. As much of a cynic as I am, I never would have predicted that the story would end up with the white kid being portrayed on national TV as the victim and suing *The Washington Post* for $250 million.

The Elizabeth Warren controversy is both depressing and stupid. Some of my colleagues see Warren as an enemy of native peoples because her taking a DNA test supported the idea that blood, not cultural kinship and tribal sovereignty, determines who's an Indian. Countless white people in Oklahoma, Virginia, and other parts of the country claim Indian ancestry, and sometimes there's a genetic basis for it, but that doesn't make you a tribe member. Only the tribe can determine that.

Warren eventually apologized — privately — to the Cherokee Nation. She shouldn't have made the claims she did. But I thought it was a bit over the top the way she was vilified. The American public doesn't understand all the nuances of tribal citizenship, and they really don't care much about the issue. Warren also never claimed to be a tribal citizen. It was a misdemeanor treated like a felony.

This is where the country is right now: instead of viewing these moments as opportunities for dialogue and explanation, we place blame so fast that there's no real discussion.

Leviton: What role has religion and spirituality played in your own life?

Smith: I haven't officially come out, but I think I might be an atheist. I've been reluctant to admit it because for a long time you couldn't be perceived as an Indian without embracing traditional religion. When you picture Native American religion, you're probably thinking of peyote ceremonies, which lots of white people know about, and not about all the Indians who are practicing Christians. Many parts of Oklahoma with big Indian populations went for Trump in 2016. Indians there are wearing MAGA hats, and not ironically.

Leviton: I can't imagine what Indians think Donald Trump might do for them that Hillary Clinton wouldn't have.

Smith: Indians are complicated. A lot of them live in red states and have red-state values. They resent coastal people like you and me. You wouldn't believe the Facebook posts from my Oklahoma cousins. They make Fox News look like MSNBC.

Look, some people support Trump, and some of those people are going to be Indians. There are two newly elected Native American women in the House of Representatives, from Kansas and New Mexico. Both are Democrats, but the two Native American men who've been there a number of years are both Tea Party Republicans from Oklahoma. They reliably support Trump and are very much in line with their constituents, while still being Chickasaw and Cherokee. We need to abandon this idea that Indians must be a particular way or believe certain things. We're messy. We're complicated. We're human. ▪