

# **“Yours in Indian Unity”: Moderate National Indigenous Organizations and the U.S.-Canada Border in the Red Power Era**

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## **Author biography**

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## **“Yours in Indian Unity”: Moderate National Indigenous Organizations and the U.S.-Canada Border in the Red Power Era**

Historiography on the Red Power era has to-date largely focused on the direct action protests of the American Indian Movement, while overlooking the continuing political lobbying and transnational work of more moderate Native rights organizations. This article argues that the National Congress of American Indians in the U.S. and the National Indian Brotherhood in Canada rhetorically challenged the U.S.-Canada border, even establishing a Joint Agreement to foster collaboration across it. However, while their leaders purported to challenge nation-state borders, in practice the collaboration between the two organizations adhered to the settler-colonial structures dominant in North America. Shaped by these federal ties, the exchange was ultimately unable to achieve its aim of working toward self-determination through mutual cooperation. Moderate Indigenous organizations remain dependent on federal structures to operate, thus limiting their ability to effectively organize across settler-state borders.

Keywords: Indigenous; political activism; Red Power; organizations; borders

Funding details: This work was supported by the Academy of Finland.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the issue editors Lucie Kýrová and György Tóth for their insight into the global Indigenous movement and Red Power, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their extensive comments. My thanks also to Benita Heiskanen, Samira Saramo, and all the attendees of the John Morton Center’s June 2019 Writing Workshop for their thorough feedback.

As the direct action protests which came to epitomize the 1970s Red Power movement burst onto the scene, the political lobbying of U.S. and Canadian moderate national Indigenous organizations appeared dated and ineffective in comparison. The Red Power occupations of Alcatraz (1969-1971), the Bureau of Indian Affairs offices (1972), and Wounded Knee (1973) in the U.S., inspired Indigenous peoples in Canada to take action. Between 1973 and 1974, militant activists took over the Department of Indian Affairs and Anicinabe Park in Kenora, Ontario, as well as organizing the Native

People's Caravan, which culminated in Ottawa with a protest on Parliament Hill, and the occupation of an island (Harper 1979; McFarlane 1993, 186–99; Rutherford 2011, 156). On both sides of the border, the emergence of these protests put pressure on existing organizations that claimed to represent Indian peoples on a national stage.<sup>1</sup> This article will demonstrate that, whilst overlooked in the historiography of Red Power, these supposedly “conservative” organizations established a historic exchange program working towards a common goal of Indigenous self-determination from 1974–76. While ultimately this collaboration was shaped and constricted by the relations of these moderate organizations to federal officials, it was grounded within a challenge to the very existence of the U.S.-Canada border.

The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) was established in 1944 to represent tribal governments across the U.S., while in Canada three national Native organizations were established in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) represented Indians with status under the Indian Act, the Native Council of Canada (NCC) acted on behalf of non-status Indians and Métis, while the Inuit Tapirisat worked for the rights of Inuit communities (Miller 1989, 109–10).<sup>2</sup> Red Power activists in both the U.S. and Canada called the leaders of these organizations “conservative,” claiming that they were out of touch with grassroots communities and cooperated with federal governments only to enrich themselves (Smith and Warrior 1996, 37–38; Harper 1979, 9). Rather than considering these “conservative,” in this article I refer to them as moderate national organizations, due to their tactics of lobbying for Native rights within the established political systems of settler-states, and their willingness to work with federal governments to advance their cause.

This article aims to complicate simplistic demarcations between “radical” and “conservative” activism by highlighting how these moderate national Indian

organizations worked to build cross-border connections and transcend settler-state boundaries. In his book on the transnational alliances of Red Power activists, György Tóth argues that in the aftermath of Wounded Knee in 1973, the “radical sovereignty movement” launched a “sustained and concentrated organizational effort to pursue the decolonization of Native America” through international recognition (2016, 6).

However, Tóth also shows that these efforts were hindered by United Nations principles and mechanisms, which transformed the quest for independence for Native nations into a search for a way to integrate Indigenous rights into established nation-state and international structures (2016, 152). Not only Red Power activists sought to build international networks of Indigenous solidarity. While American Indian Movement (AIM) members founded the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), NIB president George Manuel was at work establishing the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP) (Crossen 2017, 535). In 1974 both organizations had their founding meetings: what would become the WCIP held a preliminary meeting in Guyana in April, while the IITC undertook its first conference on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in June (Kýrová 2017, 203-211). The movement for international Indigenous solidarity, thus, blurred the supposed boundaries between Red Power activists and moderate Native political figures.

While scholars have successfully challenged the idea that the early to mid-1970s Red Power protests were the height of Native activism (Cobb and Fowler 2007), the transnational work of North American Native activists beyond AIM in this era remains predominantly overlooked. In 1974, the NCAI and the NIB signed a Joint Agreement, and for two years maintained a staff exchange program aimed at facilitating mutual understanding. This previously underexplored collaboration demonstrates that not only militant activists, but more moderate national organizations challenged the colonial

boundaries of settler-states in the Red Power era. This case study reconstructs how these more moderate organizations attempted to challenge the U.S.-Canada border, and the ways in which this attempt was constricted by their reliance on the U.S. and Canadian nation-states for their legitimacy. This article, thus, explores how settler-colonial borders have in the past shaped and constrained Native political agency, in practice inhibiting effective transnational North American Indigenous solidarity.

I use the term “settler-colonial borders” purposefully, to emphasize that these are not neutral demarcations of territories. Instead, borders are colonial constructs, imposed on Indigenous peoples as the burgeoning Euro-American nation-states amassed land in North America, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> The U.S.-Canada border was drawn and redrawn in several stages beginning with the 1783 Treaty of Paris, which established the post-Revolutionary War U.S.-British border. The 1794 Jay Treaty confirmed this boundary and made concessions to members of the several Indigenous nations with lands in the border region, allowing them to pass freely across the “Boundary Line” (Simpson 2014, 133). As Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson (2014, 129) demonstrates, Native nations today persist in refusing the imposition of settler-state laws involving border crossings. Cross-border solidarity must necessarily *refuse* or *refute* the legitimacy of the border itself in order to address the legitimate claims of these Native border nations. This refusal is a decolonial practice, rejecting divisions imposed through the founding of North American nation-states. In what ways, then, could moderate Indigenous organizations challenge settler-state borders while also working closely with federal governments?

This article firstly examines how moderate national Indian organizations worked within settler-colonial systems, while claiming independence from them. It then considers how members of the NCAI and the NIB conceptualized and challenged the

U.S.-Canada border, before concluding with an analysis of the achievements and limitations of the short-lived NIB-NCAI Joint Agreement. I build on extensive research with NCAI and NIB archival collections, including minutes and speeches from their conference sessions, funding applications for the staff exchange program, and reports by staff exchange members.<sup>4</sup> That the NCAI and the NIB banded together during the period of mounting Red Power protests in each county is no coincidence. Rather, their collaboration demonstrates that the goals of these tactically more moderate organizations were in fact similar to those of militant activists, in transcending settler borders and building a transnational North American “Indian” identity. However, the moderate tactics of the NCAI and NIB ultimately led to the collaboration *upholding* rather than *challenging* the U.S.-Canada border, only rhetorically representing “One People” in “Two Countries.” This article will thus demonstrate how pan-Indigenous collaboration is limited by settler-state borders and the historical and present ties to federal governments.

### **Moderate “Indian” Organizations in the Red Power Era**

In the 1970s, both the WCIP and the IITC reached out to international audiences while seeking to address grievances with the settler-state. This newfound international focus was evident at the NCAI’s 1974 annual convention in San Diego. In addition to NCAI executive and delegates, NIB President George Manuel (Secwepemec) attended as an invited guest and speaker of a workshop titled “National and International Affairs.” Similar to the 1920s protest of Gayogohono (Cayuga) leader Deskaheh’s (Levi General) 1920s appeal to the League of Nations, the IITC and WCIP both sought to gain recognition in the United Nations (Niezen 2003, 31-33; Lightfoot 2016; Tóth 2016). Led by Manuel, the NIB had achieved non-governmental organization status that

year, with the intention that the WCIP would take this over once fully established (Crossen 2017, 544). Introducing Manuel, NCAI delegate P. Sam Deloria (Lakota) referred to this, calling him the leader of the “only reasonable and realistic movement on the international scale.” (R-NCAI, Box 26) Undoubtedly aware of the IITC’s attempts to gain the same status, Deloria’s reference to Manuel as the only “*reasonable*” global leader hinted at a sense of competition with AIM’s international branch.

Manuel himself was generally sympathetic to the Red Power movement. He openly referred to demonstrations like the 1974 Native Caravan to remind the Canadian government of Native frustrations with poor living conditions, and supported his own children’s involvement in Red Power protests in Canada (McFarlane 1993, 189). Aside from Manuel, tension persisted between moderate organizations and Red Power groups despite their common aims. Following Manuel and Deloria’s speeches, Standing Rock Sioux tribal member Bob McLaughlin – who had been involved in the infamous standoff at Wounded Knee the previous spring – accused the NCAI of pocketing wealth at the expense of grassroots communities at home. While concerned that the NIB might be “to some extent a conservative organization, like the National Congress of American Indians,” McLaughlin commended Manuel for discussing reservation communities in his speech. He conceded that the NCAI at its founding had “started out not so conservative”, and hoped that through collaboration with the NIB and international networks, it might again better support the needs of Native nations (R-NCAI, Box 26).

McLaughlin’s statement reflected the criticisms that national Indian organizations often faced in the 1970s. A common moniker by Red Power activists for NCAI and tribal government leaders was “apples” – red on the outside and white on the inside, paying lip service to Native rights while pandering to the federal government (Smith and Warrior 1996, 121). Moreover, militant activists criticized moderate

organizations for representing tribal or band governments, and claimed they ignored urban Native communities. Indeed, both the NCAI and the NIB were founded to represent the needs of those on reservations or reserves and oppose destructive federal policies. But while the Red Power movement faded out, the NCAI and the NIB – renamed the Assembly of First Nations in 1982 – remain prominent to this day. The longevity of these organizations is based on their ability to utilize settler-colonial frameworks in order to build networks to represent Native peoples on a national stage. This tactic of working within established national systems distinguished these organizations from those adopting a more direct approach of protest. Representatives of both organizations were largely tribal and band leaders; for instance, the NCAI worked closely with the National Tribal Chairmen’s Association once established in 1971 (Cobb 2008, 198).

Earlier attempts at creating broad representative bodies, such as the Society of American Indians (1911-1923), collapsed within a few years due to a lack of widespread support and resources (Warrior 2013, 226). Organizations like the U.S.-based Brotherhood of North American Indians (established in 1911) and League of North American Indians (established in 1953) even sought to build transnational Indian solidarity, but were hindered by controversial leaders (Crum 2006, 43). Similarly, the North American Indian Brotherhood, founded by Andy Paull (Squamish) in 1945, sought continental solidarity, but struggled with funding. The NAIB's main impact was ultimately in inspiring the briefly involved Manuel to pursue international Indigenous solidarity. (Manuel and Posluns 1974, 121)

The failure of these other organizations demonstrated the importance of resources in building national and continental networks. Regardless, the NCAI – founded by Native staff members of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in 1944 –



initially sought to establish itself as an independent organization. In its first two years it resolved to deny federal employees leadership positions and reject government funding (Cowger 1999, 42 and 53). In order to maintain financial independence, the NCAI collected annual membership payments from tribes, which were calculated based on population (R-NCAI, Box 27). Yet these tribal governments were largely established by and closely linked to the BIA, which made many NCAI delegates reluctant to openly condemn federal Indian policy (Cobb 2008, 51–52). The NCAI thus left itself open to charges of collusion with the government despite its rejection of federal funds and its recruitment of representatives from hundreds of different Native nations.

The NIB's founding and organizational structure differed from those of the NCAI. Initially established in 1968, the NIB followed directly from the collapse of the National Indian Council, a 1960s organization which purported to represent all "Indians" in Canada, including status, non-status, and Métis peoples. Ultimately, the differing goals and needs of these groups – with Métis and non-status members focused on gaining the constitutional recognition already held by "status Indians" – resulted in a split between them in 1968 (Miller 1989, 232–33). The NIB was formed following this, established as an alliance of already existing provincial and territorial status Indian organizations (McFarlane 1993, 98–99). Organizing along provincial lines aided the organization in establishing itself quickly, working with established band leaders. The extent to which the NIB represented grassroots communities was, as a result, dependent on the legitimacy of its provincial organizations.

Both organizations thus built on networks shaped by the settler-state: tribal and band governments and provincial bodies. Yet in their early years, both boldly rejected policies aimed at withdrawing the federal recognition of Native peoples. From 1953 until 1970, the NCAI battled against the U.S. policy of terminating the federal trust

status of tribes and associated BIA services (Cowger 1999, 161). The NIB's first campaign was undertaken against Canada's 1969 White Paper, which would have completely eradicated Indian status by dismantling the Indian Act. Following the NIB's coordinated protests, the White Paper was ultimately withdrawn in June 1970, winning the still infant organization significant respect from status Indian communities across Canada (Weaver 1981, 185–86). Following these protests, the organizations not only legitimacy among some reservation communities, but were henceforth recognized by their respective federal governments as officially representing Indian peoples. In Canada the NIB's success even led to the creation of a new funding scheme for Native organizations (McFarlane 1993, 127–28). The NIB accepted this funding, while also acknowledging that it was likely an attempt to smooth over relations following the disastrous White Paper.

At the 1974 NCAI convention, Manuel justified the organization's decision to accept federal funding as necessary for the NIB to function as a representative of "the poorest people" in Canada. As he put it, "It is the belief of our people in Canada that we are entitled to this money. ... They believe that they're getting it as a result of their ownership to Canada." Manuel furthermore announced that he had told the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) he would remain outspoken on policy issues "with or without your financial support" (R-NCAI, Box 26). Yet while convinced of his own ability to not be influenced by federal funding, Manuel was concerned it might corrupt later NIB leaders. In his 1974 book, *The Fourth World*, he wondered: "...will we allow the funding that has made possible some of the real growth of Indian organizations to become a program of pacification for the younger generation of leaders?" (Manuel and Posluns 1974, 211) Accepting federal funding and maintaining independence was a fine line to balance.

NCAI Executive Director Charles Trimble was impressed with this model of being “funded, but not bought,” and the NCAI did in some cases apply for federal funds (R-NCAI, Box 26). These financial links understandably sparked skepticism amongst critics of the organizations – like McLaughlin. However, Red Power organizations like AIM did in some cases accept federal grant money (Kýrová 2017, 214). Furthermore, the fervent opposition of the NCAI and NIB to terminationists policies in their early years shows that neither was *controlled* by the federal government. Instead their ties to federal structures resulted from the practical reality of establishing widespread networks within settler-states. Indeed, individual activists did not necessarily categorize themselves as either “radical” or “conservative”. For instance, McLaughlin attended both the 1974 NCAI convention *and* the 1973 Wounded Knee standoff, as well as the IITC’s founding conference. By working with established tribal governments and provincial organizations, the NCAI and the NIB secured representatives from Indigenous nations across their respective countries – something no prior association could truly claim to have done. In effect, both used the federal systems aimed to control “Indians” in order to create networks of Native collaboration and communication across the nation-state. In other words, tactically working with the BIA and DIAND allowed more effective organization. Moderate national Indian organizations purposefully and openly worked within settler-state systems to reach their goals of Indigenous self-determination, but critically positioned themselves as working *with* – not *for* – federal governments.

### **“A Phony Border”**

The NCAI and the NIB, thus, found common ground in both aims and tactics. However, contact between the organizations was based on more than practical goals,

involving instead the identification of a shared “*Indian*” identity that transcended settler-state borders. This North American solidarity involved – in a sense – both rejecting externally imposed international borders *and* drawing on shared histories of marginalization within the settler-state. Inherent within any broad “Indian” identity, then, there is necessarily a tension between challenging the legitimacy of settler-states and being shaped by their existence. Communications between the NIB and the NCAI in the early 1970s demonstrates that these moderate organizations rhetorically rejected the legitimacy of the U.S.-Canada border, while recognizing its impact on Indigenous communities.

The NIB first reached out to the U.S. American Indian Press Association in August 1971, suggesting an exchange of reports and expressing interest in meeting (R-NCAI, Box 151). Following two years of occasional contact, the NIB and the NCAI finally agreed to collaborate after a June 1973 visit of George Manuel and NIB Executive Director Clive Linklater (Anishinabe-Salteaux) to Washington D.C. (R-NCAI, Box 151). Executive staff again met in the U.S. capital in January 1974. The idea of a staff exchange program gained enthusiastic support, resulting in NCAI President Mel Tonasket (Colville) and Manuel signing a brief one-page Joint Agreement (R-NCAI, Box 151). The Agreement called for collaboration between the organizations and highlighted the impact of existing U.S.-Canadian arrangements, like the Migratory Birds Convention Act and the Jay Treaty, on Indigenous peoples.<sup>5</sup> However, it primarily advocated a *comparative* approach to studying Native-federal relations, stating that “knowledge and understanding of the common problems affecting the Indian peoples of the United States and Canada will enhance the possibilities of devising solutions to these problems.” (R-NCAI, Box 151) As such, the leaders of these organizations recognized a shared position within the settler-state, and hoped to together

advance Native self-determination in both countries.

In February 1974, Manuel wrote to Tonasket, “We are anxious to work out the details of our staff exchange and to explore in detail the other areas of mutual concern.” Signing off “Yours in Indian Unity,” Manuel presented a recognition of a common identity – not as *Indigenous* or *aboriginal*, but specifically as “*Indian*.” (R-NCAI, Box 151) These references to “Indian unity” or “brotherhood” were not just a phase in the gradual conceptualization of international “Indigenous” rights. The term “Indigenous” was only beginning to emerge from international collaboration in the mid-1970s (Kýrová 2017, 243). The use of the word “Indian” instead conveyed an understanding of a shared, *North American* Native struggle. At the 1974 NCAI conference Manuel identified common issues caused by the U.S. and Canadian settler-states:

...I think our relationship had to develop into other fields, into economic development, into health services, into the border situation, the Jay Treaty, into the education treaties, aboriginal rights. ...[W]e can learn a lot from you, but I think you can learn a lot from us. (R-NCAI, Box 26)

The term “Indian,” as such, carried the implication of deeper ties between Native peoples in the U.S. and Canada. Tonasket spoke of his relationship with Manuel not only in terms of being “Indian,” but by further referring to a kinship split by the U.S.-Canada border. Introducing Manuel at the 1974 NCAI convention banquet, Tonasket described the NIB president as being from “the same tribe that I am,” and joked about the border:

...some dummy put a line in between us, and he’s called a Canadian, and I’m called an American. We don’t recognize it too much at home, and I know that sometimes in New York and other places, they don’t recognize it too much, either, that line. (R-NCAI, Box 24)

Indeed, the Colville and Secwepemc homelands are less than 500 kilometers apart on either side of the border. Having homelands in the border region undoubtedly fueled

Tonasket and Manuel's personal interest in collaborating transnationally. Manuel addressed related issues at the convention, referring to "a phoney [sic] border." "The border wasn't created by us..." Manuel continued, "[I]t's my principle that this whole North America is ours as Indian people." (R-NCAI, Box 26) Manuel thus offered a symbolic rejection of the U.S.-Canada border, questioning the very legitimacy of North American nation-states, while also recognizing their current existence and impact on Native peoples in both Canada and the U.S.

This collective "Indian" identity did not replace identification with specific Native nations - rather it allowed for a recognition of the shared challenges of living within the confines of a settler-colonial nation-state (Kýrová 2017, 241). Anthropologist Ronald Niezen (2003, 22) argues that such collective regional identities fed into the emergence of a broader, international Indigenous identity, which moved beyond state definitions. From the early 1970s onwards this collective Indigenous identity emerged as Native individuals from North America built connections with groups overseas, including Maori, Aboriginal, and Sámi communities (Kýrová 2017, 240-44). However, the NIB-NCAI partnership – despite each organization's entanglements with their respective federal governments – demonstrates that identifying as "Indian" was not just a "regional" identity based on geographic proximity. Rather, it was also proactively constructed and employed by these organizations to challenge the legitimacy of settler borders.

However, neither Manuel nor Tonasket challenged borders as a political construct *in practice*. During the workshop, Deloria rushed through an important question brought up by two Tohono O'odham delegates, who requested assistance in dealing with the U.S.-Mexico border that divided their nation. Constrained by time, Deloria offered only "hopes" that an international organization might be able to address

border issues, and quipped that “with that big oil strike down in Mexico, the U.S. might just invade and take the place over anyway, so then you won’t have that problem anymore.” (R-NCAI, Box 26) Notably the NCAI and the NIB spoke of North American Indian unity, but did not seek to include Mexican Indigenous organizations in their partnership. In part, this focus reflected the perceived historical and contemporary similarities between colonization within the U.S. and Canada. It was also likely influenced by the additional language barrier between Indigenous peoples in English and Spanish-speaking settler-states.

Nevertheless, delegates of both organizations described the Joint Agreement as a “historic” phenomenon, marking the beginning of unprecedented cross-border collaboration. At the 1974 workshop, Oren Lyons, an Onondaga leader and traditionalist from near the U.S.-Canada border, both commended the partnership and located it within a longer trajectory of pre-colonial Indigenous confederacies:

Our councils have been mighty, our councils have been many, long before our white brothers got here. ... I think this is so important, that we understand and respect the differences of one another and sit in council like we used to, you know, in mutual respect. (R-NCAI, Box 26)

Lyons also recognized the hurdles created by settler-states, describing his own unsuccessful attempts at bringing the Wounded Knee occupation to the UN’s attention the previous year. According to Lyons, the UN was reluctant to become involved, and he noted that “...the job of organizing all the aboriginal people of the world is large, naturally, and I think that we should first begin with ourselves.” (R-NCAI, Box 26) Moreover, he referred to member states as “principally colonizers,” pointedly reminding his audience of the limitations of the UN as an international body made up of the very settler-colonial nation-states which Indigenous peoples were now globally seeking to challenge. Lyons particularly welcomed cross-border collaboration in North America as a step towards building this international movement, a process he hoped would lead to

decolonization. Transnational collaboration was, thus, supported by moderate organizations, militant groups, *and* traditionalists like Lyons.

Manuel, Trimble, and Deloria all agreed with Lyons that mutual respect was needed. Critically, Lyons, who had worked with AIM activists at Wounded Knee, did not explicitly distinguish between more moderate national organizations and the Red Power movement. But when audience members suggested working with AIM, the NIB and NCAI representatives were less than enthusiastic. Towards the end of the workshop, McLaughlin mentioned that Trimble had himself spoken at the first IITC conference at the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in June, and pledged the NCAI's support. McLaughlin questioned why the NIB and NCAI did not just join the IITC (R-NCAI, Box 26). No one responded or commented; instead, Deloria, as chair of the workshop, moved swiftly on, asking for more questions from the audience. This was not down to a divergence in goals – the NCAI-NIB collaborators aimed for many of the same things as the IITC, particularly the protection of treaty rights and international recognition of Indian sovereignty. Rather, their reluctance to associate with the IITC was likely due not only to AIM's outspoken critiques of the NCAI, but also AIM's increasingly controversial reputation and ongoing FBI investigations (Tóth 2016, 174). In addition, the NIB had already secured NGO status with the United Nations, and thus was arguably further along in achieving its aims. Evidently, the delegates of these moderate organizations saw little benefit to collaborating with Red Power activists, despite seeking the same goals.

### **The NCAI-NIB Staff Exchange, 1974-1976**

Manuel and Trimble's statements on the "phony border" and solidarity between Indigenous people in the U.S. and Canada resonated with the varied audience of the



workshop. Yet the Joint Agreement itself included little practical challenge to settler-state legitimacy. Neither did their talk of “phony borders” and “Indian unity” surface in the work that the Joint Agreement actually led to. In practice, the NCAI-NIB staff exchange was constrained from the start by problems with securing funding, and as a result, the partnership could not move past *comparative* work to the next intended stage of *cross-border* work – together advancing Native self-determination. Instead, the exchange was strongly shaped by the NCAI and NIB’s existing strong relationships with governments, becoming a medium not only for Native exchange, but collaboration between *federal* officials in both countries.



Figure 1. Anita Gordon, undated. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (010\_pht\_044\_001)

The NCAI and the NIB appointed exchange delegates in early 1974, and the program was initially scheduled to begin that July. Remarkably, the predominantly male organizations selected two young *women* from nations near the U.S.-Canada border as

staff exchange liaisons: Anita Gordon (Saulteaux) from the NIB and Victoria Santana (Blackfeet) from the NCAI. Though Gordon and Santana did not apparently have problems securing work visas, federal bureaucracy complicated the staff exchange in other ways. Each organization agreed to pay their own delegate, but the NIB's lawyers instead advised them to pay the U.S. staff member resident in Canada and treat her "the same as you do your non-Indian employees." (R-NCAI, Box 151) While the organizations themselves recognized each other as "Indian," an Indigenous person from across the border was not recognized as such by either the U.S. or Canadian governments. These federal governments asserted the right to define who legally counted as "Indian," denying recognition and self-determination across national borders. It is unclear how tax issues were resolved, as the organizations maintained their method of paying staff liaisons. This may, in fact, have been a small act of resistance, refusing federal requirements to treat staff from the other country as "non-Indians."

From the beginning, money was the most significant hurdle for the NCAI-NIB collaboration. While the NIB's federal funding provided their half of the exchange budget, the NCAI struggled for months to secure funds, submitting several unsuccessful applications to various foundations. The exchange was eventually launched after the 1974 NCAI convention, but by March 1975 the NCAI was still only able to pay Santana on a daily, rather than annual, basis (R-NCAI, Box 151). Despite these funding issues both Santana and Gordon, stationed at their new headquarters in Ottawa and Washington D.C., respectively, each played a part in shaping the relationship between the organizations. According to a 1976 report by Gordon, the program's stated aim was, first and foremost, to "initiate contact and facilitate information exchange between North American Indians so that they could come to a better understanding of, and collaborate on workable solutions to, their common concerns." (FGF, Box 15) Gordon

and Santana were effectively working in support of a collective identity amongst peoples on both sides of the border. In addition to circulating information leaflets, this involved visiting regional organizations and Native nations to speak about the exchange program and the work of each partner organization.

Gordon and Santana's 1975-1976 travel reports largely reflect the aim of sharing information. Gordon spent much of her time visiting various reservations and regional meetings across the U.S., including attending a United South Eastern Tribes health meeting on the Cherokee reservation, North Carolina, and a Northwest Affiliated Tribes meeting in Portland (FGF, Box 15). Santana, a recent law graduate, became heavily involved in the NIB's plans for renegotiating the Indian Act with the Canadian government, travelling across the country to attend provincial meetings on potential amendments (FGF, Box 15). At these meetings, Santana provided perspective on how matters such as tribal lands and treaty rights, as well as the relationship between Native nations and federal and state governments, were handled in the U.S. In January 1975, Santana even prepared a report on a government study document of the Indian Act, including a personal commentary, comparing the constitutional positions of Native people in Canada and the U.S. In it, she concluded that "Tribal Sovereignty," a concept she was used to employing in the U.S., was inappropriate in relation to the Indian Act, as it only "grants specific powers from the federal government to the tribes." (R-NCAI, Box 151). Santana's assistance to the NIB was critical: even after the staff exchange ended in 1976, the NIB paid Santana for a few extra weeks to finish her work on the project (FGF, Box 15).

Gordon and Santana took care not to conflate policies or experiences across the border, instead making careful comparisons. In some cases, these comparisons led to the respective organizations borrowing ideas from one another. For instance, the NIB's

librarian travelled to Washington D.C. in 1975 to help the NCAI set up a library and establish a cataloguing system (FGF, Box 15). According to Gordon's final report, in 1975 and 1976 the exchange also included meetings between "Indian leaders" and government officials to discuss issues including Native housing, water and trust law (FGF, Box 15). Occasionally, exchange staff attended meetings related to border issues; for instance, Gordon reported on a Tohono O'odham tribal meeting in Arizona which addressed issues related to the U.S.-Mexico border (FGF, Box 15). In 1975, the staff exchange also facilitated a meeting between "leaders of the Dakota-Ojibway Tribe in Southern Manitoba" and U.S. officials to discuss ecological damage caused by the U.S. Garrison Water Division (FGF, Box 15). As this case attests, contact between the NIB and the NCAI could function to aid Native nations in communicating across the border, and addressing transnational grievances.

These cases indicate the direction the staff exchange program hoped to move toward – finding solutions to common issues. In preparation, the main goal of the initial two-year term was to complete a comparative report titled *One People, Two Countries*. The report's title harked back to Manuel and Tonasket's statements on the U.S.-Canada border at the 1974 NCAI conference, implying an artificial split between Indigenous peoples by settler-states. Its planned focus was a point-by-point comparison of the situation and status of Native peoples in each nation-state, covering population statistics, land and resources, federal Indian policies, education, health, and economic development. Like these moderate organizations themselves, the staff exchange program predominantly focused on improving the position of Native peoples within the nation-state and relations with their respective federal governments. Unfortunately, funding was not secured for the completion of the study (R-NCAI, Box 151). If this comparative report had been completed, it could have paved the way for a deeper

understanding of the complexities of the specific situations facing Native peoples in the U.S. and Canada, and may have allowed the two organizations to mount greater challenges to the impositions of borders on Native peoples in North America.

Notably, in referring to one people in *two* countries, the NCAI-NIB staff exchange reflected the deep connection between Native peoples in the U.S. and Canada referred to at the 1974 NCAI convention. This title, thus, reflected a perception amongst NCAI and NIB members that shared U.S. and Canadian histories shaped Native experiences in particular ways, distinguishing them from Indigenous populations in, for instance, Mexico and the Caribbean. Statements related to Indigenous peoples from other regions attests to this. For instance, Santana attended an academic conference in Florida in February 1975 with the intention of finding further Central and South American contacts for the WCIP. Following the conference, Santana reported to Manuel that:

“There are some obvious differences between Indians in the U.S. and Canada and Indians in Latin America. In Latin America, the vast majority of Indian people live thru [sic] subsistence agriculture, their countries are still in, or just coming out of, a feudal stage and their countries have not had stable governments. There was little talk of self-determination except from Mexico and Chile... Except for Panama and Chile, I heard no discussion about self-government.” (R-NCAI, Box 151)

According to Santana, other Indigenous peoples did not *yet* share the aim of self-determination that united U.S. and Canadian Native peoples. In her view, this was due to the underdevelopment of Latin American settler-states. Furthermore, Santana was discouraged by the international audience’s excitement over AIM leader Russell Means’ appearance at the event. “Dressed in typical AIM regalia,” Santana wrote, “he opened with his version of the Oglala prayer, with full rhetorical cadence. He said all Traditional Indians were with AIM.” (R-NCAI, Box 151). Santana left the conference early, attempting to dissociate the NCAI and the NIB from the activities of Red Power

activists, and frustrated with the lack of common ground found with Indigenous representatives outside Anglophone North America.

Santana's report attests to the fact that the NCAI-NIB collaboration was strongly shaped by the organizations' relations with their respective federal governments. It is, as such, unsurprising that by the spring of 1975 Gordon and Santana were coordinating visits between government officials. The first of these was a comparative budget meeting held in Ottawa in 1975, requested by BIA Deputy Director of Financial Management, Jack Sykes, and attended by various Canadian DIAND officials. Santana reported to Manuel on the meeting, remarking that much time was spent discussing "the American system" and that "some of this discussion was unnecessary to the purposes of the meeting." (R-NCAI, Box 151) Santana's report indicated some disappointment with government officials co-opting the meeting for the purposes of the U.S. and Canadian Indian Affairs departments. Nevertheless, the staff liaisons organized further meetings, and Gordon's 1976 final report listed collaboration with the BIA and DIAND as one of the program's three primary achievements. According to Gordon, the NCAI-NIB exchange initiated "discussion and working relationships between Indian people, Federal agencies and special interest groups on the administration and programs of the Department of Indian Affairs in Canada and the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the United States." (FGF, Box 15) Rather than challenging settler-states, the staff exchange program ultimately ended up working with the U.S. and Canadian federal governments. While this was not originally intended, the exchange succeeded in increasing communication across the border and pushing officials to communicate on issues that the NCAI and the NIB prioritized.

Cooperating with federal officials was not just an extension of the NCAI and the NIB's usual tactics, but a practical response to continuous funding challenges.

Arranging staff meetings between the BIA and DIAND facilitated discussion on policy issues without requiring substantial funds from either of the organizations themselves. Throughout 1974 and 1975, Gordon and Santana worked on funding proposals, including a detailed bid to the Donner Foundation, titled *Project Inter/Native* (R-NCAI, Box 151). The project would have facilitated sending “Canadian and United States Indians to each other’s countries for workshops, seminars, and other meetings” and the completion of the *One People, Two Countries* comparative study. None of these major bids were successful, and funding ran out before the initial two-year term could be completed.

Unable to establish a broader and more permanent system of exchange across the border, the impact of the NCAI-NIB Joint Agreement was severely limited. It also failed to fully gain the support of the broad membership of the organizations. Staff liaisons reported directly to the president of their host organization, and otherwise were largely only in contact with executive members. Though present at annual conventions and occasionally contributing to bulletins and newsletters, Gordon and Santana did not have a strong public presence in either the NIB or the NCAI. In 1974 and 1975 representatives from the NCAI and the NIB attended each other’s respective national conventions, but the collaboration was not generally prioritized when other, *national* concerns - such as revisions to the Indian Act in Canada or the introduction of federal self-determination legislation in the U.S – demanded attention (R-NCAI, Box 151).

Another workshop on international relations was held at the NCAI’s 1975 annual convention, the minutes of which have not been retained in the NCAI’s archives. International affairs were briefly mentioned in the General Assembly, when Santana put forward a resolution to endorse the WCIP. During this discussion, Joe DeLaCruz (Quinault) questioned why Manuel had not been invited to address the whole

conference, claiming it was “discourteous to our brother from Canada” to relegate the discussion to a workshop (R-NCAI, Box 28). Notably, while Santana and Gordon coordinated the cross-border collaboration, it was Manuel who DeLaCruz felt had been slighted. The work of the female staff exchange delegates remained largely behind-the-scenes. This raises questions not only about how *valued* the NIB-NCAI collaboration was, but the extent to which the broader membership of the two organizations even *knew about it*. Following the failure to secure funding, limited operations, and lack of endorsement, the staff exchange program was quietly phased out in spring 1976.

It took over twenty years for formal collaboration to resume between the two organizations. In July 1999 the presidents of the NCAI and the Assembly of First Nations signed the Declaration of Kinship and Cooperation among the Indigenous Peoples and Nations of North America. Much longer than the 1974 Joint Agreement, this Declaration critiqued the U.S.-Canada border: “Others’ hands have drawn boundaries between the Canada and the United States. These arbitrary lines have not severed, and never will, the ties of kinship among our peoples.” (Declaration of Kinship and Cooperation, 1999) The Declaration took a strong rhetorical stand in favor of Indigenous “self-determination,” “life ways,” and “social justice.” However, it included no formal steps for collaboration, merely stating that the national organizations could “choose to enter into specific bilateral agreements in accordance with our respective constitutions” and “seek to strengthen the relationship among our peoples by facilitating exchanges among the representatives of our constituent peoples, groups and associations, and individual citizens.” (Declaration of Kinship and Cooperation, 1999) The Declaration expressed support for the idea of cross-border solidarity without making any specific commitments, thus essentially providing a more poetic version of the 1974 Joint Agreement.



## **Conclusion**

While the protests coordinated by AIM and other militant Indigenous activists across North America gained more media attention and historiographic focus, moderate Indigenous organizations operating in the Red Power era – while continuing to work with federal governments – did rhetorically challenge settler-colonial borders. However, this case study of the short-lived NCAI-NIB collaboration demonstrates that this challenge was limited in practice, and that their attempts of building Indigenous solidarity across the U.S.-Canada border was strongly shaped the strong ties maintained with their respective federal governments. Fifty years on from the best-known protests of the Red Power era, scholarship must continue to explicate the ways in which settler-states necessarily shape and inhibit Native activism. These ties and tactics proved more decisive than whether an organizations was supposedly “radical” or “conservative.”

As the NCAI-NIB partnership shows, while organizations could build extensive Native networks by working within federal structures, having close ties to federal officials steered the focus of collaboration away from meetings of Native representatives towards coordinating meetings between government officials. A reliance on federal funds or lack of external funding, the focus on nationally-specific concerns, and the need to maintain effective ties to the BIA and DIAND limited the exchange. The NCAI and the NIB were, as a result, largely not able to meet their aim of finding workable solutions to problems shared across the “phony border”, such as maintaining treaty rights, securing further self-determination and self-government, and protecting Native land bases.

Nevertheless, both were involved in the growing global Indigenous movement through the WCIP. References to “Indian unity” demonstrate that while representatives of moderate national organizations did challenge nation-state borders in the Red Power

era, they tactically continued to operate within settler-colonial systems rather than openly challenging them. The approach of working within federal frameworks ultimately limited the kinds and extent of cross-border collaboration that they could engage in. However, as young women and recent graduates working within male-dominated organizations, the achievements of Gordon and Santana must be recognized. While their work was cut short, for an important period these women built an understanding of the mutual problems faced by Native people in the U.S. and Canada in working toward self-determination. Though the promise of this exchange ultimately went unrealized, Gordon and Santana's work marked unprecedented collaboration between organizations across the U.S.-Canada border.

In recent years, grassroots Native North American solidarity has drawn increasing attention to the marginalization of Indigenous peoples by settler-states. For instance, direct action protests against oil pipelines – such as the ongoing protests at Wet'suwet'en and those at Standing Rock in 2016 – and the movement for justice for missing and murdered Indigenous women, have brought together Indigenous communities from both sides of the border. The unprecedented *global* attention that these issues have gained demonstrates the significance of cross-border solidarity in driving forward Indigenous issues. Regardless, moderate national organizations today still work with federal governments and continue to focus on political lobbying, dealing with issues ranging from educational and health provisions to treaty rights and legal status. While these organizations may recognize the U.S.-Canada border as an external imposition, they choose to operate within settler-colonial confines. While the Red Power era and the emerging international Indigenous movement may have encouraged the NIB and the NCAI to experiment with challenging those nation-state boundaries, it

did not result in a move away from their chosen moderate tactics, meaning the challenge remained rhetorical rather than practical.

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- <sup>1</sup> A note on terminology: “Indian” is today considered a derogatory term in Canada, so I avoid it in referring to the present. I mostly use “Native” or “Indigenous,” to be inclusive of Native American, First Nation, Métis, and Inuit groups. I chose to capitalize these words out of respect, and because they refer to identities rather than adjectives. I use ‘Indian’ in the historical context, as this was commonly used in the Red Power era, and denotes a specific legal status.
- <sup>2</sup> First passed in 1850 and amended several times, the Indian Act defines who has ‘Indian status’ in Canada, with rights including land protections.
- <sup>3</sup> While the focus here is on the U.S. and Canada, this is also true of the U.S.-Mexico border, which crosses over Tohono O’ohdam lands, a point I return to later in this article.
- <sup>4</sup> Records of the National Congress of American Indians, 1933-1990 (NMAI.AC.010. Series 1 and Series 5), held by the National Museum of the American Indian, Washington DC and the Fred Gladstone fonds (M6049. Box 15), held at the Glenbow Archives, Calgary. Cited hereafter as R-NCAI and FGF, respectively.
- <sup>5</sup> The Jay Treaty allows members of ‘Indians dwelling on either side of the boundary line’ to cross the border. The Migratory Birds Convention regulates the hunting of migratory birds and thus risks endangering Native treaty rights.