

## The Restorative Power of Songs

Songs are the lifeblood of modern indigenous cultures. They connect those of us who are left, sustaining the ties we have to each other while nourishing our relationship with culture.

Language was our resistance to assimilation practices in the 19th and 20th centuries. As the U.S. government attempted to exterminate indigenous ways of life, tribes responded with the creation of powwows. Separated on different plots of land, clans and tribes could reunite throughout the year to express their culture in dance, song, and games. Powwows became a form of self-preservation, and they still carry that weight.

Contemporary powwows reconcile dwindling tribal membership by creating space for youth to hear and sing our languages. During my teenage search for identity, I began attending local powwows to reconnect with my Choctaw heritage and culture. However, the first song I heard consistently was the Osage Children's Song. Powwows, as I've come to learn, are multicultural events; over the decades, they've provided a place for intertribal dialogue between historical rivals. This exchange has allowed the Osage Children's Song to be played for Choctaw children like myself, as it commands all parents to "look upon [their] children" (Shadlow 2023).

Within its few but powerful lyrics, the Children's Song reveres children - an attitude not often adopted toward youth in western culture. It evokes feelings of our shared historical trauma, of the boarding schools which stole the dignity of indigenous children. To "kill the Indian and save the child," a common perspective espoused by boarding school authorities, was to amputate these children from their family history and tradition. These wounds are healing as my generation hears the Children's Song, as we reclaim what these children lost.

Naming these events "history" obscures how close they are to our lives. It was my generation's grandparents who lived through the many civil rights movements of the 1960's and

70's. The Osage Children's Song, although sung to honor children, exists alongside other tribes' Children's Songs that were and can still be sung in memoriam. Songs written by indigenous people often have darker, historical undertones - especially music written in the decades of social revolution. Redbone, a multi-tribal Native American group known for *Come and Get Your Love*, also wrote songs like *Wovoka* and *We Were All Wounded at Wounded Knee* (A History of Redbone n.d.). The latter two allude to the Wounded Knee Massacre, wherein hundreds of Lakota were slaughtered by US troops. Violence encroached on the tribe for their belief in the Ghost Dance, a practice led by Wovoka which heralded the end of American colonization. Redbone's overt lyrics in *We Were all Wounded* led to its censorship at American radio stations, but *Wovoka* became a cult classic for its upbeat instrumental and lyrics commanding its listeners to dance and sing.

The American Indian Movement followed Redbone's calls in *Wovoka*, "to keep on singing for the good times to come." These cultural forces catalyzed social change for Native Americans; as Redbone advocated for indigenous issues in its subtle poetry, it financially supported AIM's 1973 Occupation of Wounded Knee (Burr 23). Similar to its other protests, the occupation intended to thrust systemic discrimination against and erasure of indigenous people into the limelight (Treisman 23). There stood the ghosts of Wovoka's followers and their descendants, both confronted with military suppression. Their bravery influenced legislators to draft Native Americans' own civil rights legislation, securing our right to freedom of religion and protecting our children from illegal seizure by child protective services. AIM's "song and dance" is why I can learn the Choctaw language, wear my regalia in public, and grow up with my heritage - they are why we can sing the Children's Song in celebration.

Indigenous peoples clutch their languages for life. They sustain our traditions, remind us of our shared history, and grant the children of my generation the humanity of culture. Our way of life is spelled out in these songs, mnemonic devices to restore our memories.

(657 words)

## Work Cited

Burr, Ashe. "A War of Words: 'We Were All Wounded at Wounded Knee' by Redbone."

*FM*, Nov. 2023,

[impact89fm.org/120200/music/a-war-of-words-we-were-all-wounded-at-wounded-knee-by-redbone/](https://www.impact89fm.org/120200/music/a-war-of-words-we-were-all-wounded-at-wounded-knee-by-redbone/).

"History of the Native American Band Redbone." *Redbone*, [redbone-band.com/bio](https://redbone-band.com/bio).

Accessed 26 Apr. 2024.

Shadlow, Noah. "ᏊᏍᏗᏍᏗ ᏊᏍᏗᏍᏗ ᏊᏍᏗᏍᏗ ᏊᏍᏗᏍᏗ (Osage Children's Song), Translated by

Noah Shadlow." *As Seeds We Grow Student Reflections on Resilience Exhibit Catalog*,

Fort Lewis College Digital Press, 5 Apr. 2023,

[pressbooks.fortlewis.edu/asseedswegrow/front-matter/%F0%90%93%B7%F0%90%93%98%F0%90%93%BB%F0%90%93%98%F0%90%93%BB%F0%90%93%9F-%F0%90%93%BB%F0%90%93%A3%CD%98%F0%90%93%A4%F0%90%93%98%F0%90%93%B%F0%90%93%A3%CD%98-%F0%90%93%98%F0%90%93%AC%F0%90%93%98/](https://pressbooks.fortlewis.edu/asseedswegrow/front-matter/%F0%90%93%B7%F0%90%93%98%F0%90%93%BB%F0%90%93%98%F0%90%93%BB%F0%90%93%9F-%F0%90%93%BB%F0%90%93%A3%CD%98%F0%90%93%A4%F0%90%93%98%F0%90%93%B%F0%90%93%A3%CD%98-%F0%90%93%98%F0%90%93%AC%F0%90%93%98/).

Treisman, Rachel. "Native Americans Seized Wounded Knee 50 Years Ago. Here's What 1

Reporter Remembers." *NPR*, NPR, 27 Feb. 2023,

[www.npr.org/2023/02/27/1159630250/wounded-knee-occupation-50th-anniversary#:~:text=The%20activists%20set%20out%20to,civil%20disorder%22%20in%20its%20history.](https://www.npr.org/2023/02/27/1159630250/wounded-knee-occupation-50th-anniversary#:~:text=The%20activists%20set%20out%20to,civil%20disorder%22%20in%20its%20history.)