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Unravelling the Historical Roots to the Present in Hessay's Waiting at Wounded Knee

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Waiting at Wounded Knee (1974) by Canadian artist Carle Hessay (1911-78) illustrates how a work of art responding to a contemporary political crisis can reflect back to an earlier crisis and project meaningfully into the present. In 1973 Hessay was absorbed by the long impasse of the conflict at Wounded Knee in South Dakota between the Oglala dissidents of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the Guardians of the Oglala Nation (the "GOON squad") who were supported by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation. The deadly standoff at Wounded Knee lasted 71 days, which explains the "Waiting" in Hessay's title and elucidates the subject of the work and its evocative painting technique. The participants of the Wounded Knee Incident in 1973 re-enacted the Ghost Dance that had been performed at the Massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890. The intentional blurriness of Hessay's painting illustrates the Ghost Dance while blurring the two periods together. But the story is not over. The painting can also be seen as emblematic of the "waiting" involved in navigating the constant uncertainties and threats to sovereignty in our contemporary moment.

Introduction: The 1973 Wounded Knee Story

Waiting at Wounded Knee (1974) by Canadian artist Carle Hessay (1911-78) graphically demonstrates how political events in one time and place can have roots in the past, cross-border imprints, and ongoing repercussions. At first, Hessay's painting seems rather faint and blurry, while the figures appear too indistinct to make out who they are (Figure 1). A closer examination indicates that there is a collapsing of time periods, as well as several connected levels of meaning. For today's viewer, the Wounded Knee story is an integral part of events that continue to have wider historical repercussions and implications relating to current geopolitical landscapes.

The "Wounded Knee" of the painting's title refers to a crisis that was unfolding when Hessay began to paint

it in 1973 (as indicated by the date on the back of the painting, while the front is signed 1974). It was his direct visual and emotional response to the "Wounded Knee Incident", as it came to be known. Hessay lived at the time in Langley, a town in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia, Canada. He was closely allied to Indigenous communities who accepted him because "he put no barriers" between them (Woods 2005). Hessay was apparently rivetted by the widely broadcast news of this ongoing event.

Hostilities had broken out at the village of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota in early 1973. The spark was an attempt by the local Lakota people (a subgroup of the Sioux) to oust their corrupt tribal chief Richard Wilson, whose "Guardians of the

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Figure 1. *Waiting at Wounded Knee* (1974) by Carle Hessay. Oil on Masonite board (36 × 16 inches). Courtesy of the Carle Hessay Estate.

Oglala Nation”, or as the acronym has it, the “GOON Squad”, violently suppressed dissent (Reinhardt 1999, 230–231). Wilson was backed by forces of the federal government who besieged the town. Protestors from the local tribe were soon supported by activists from the American Indian Movement (AIM) who wanted control of reservation lands, mineral rights, and the preservation of tribal customs. During the standoff, two activists were shot and killed and many more were injured, attracting significant and divisive media coverage at the time. The incident received further attention when Hollywood celebrity Marlon Brando refused to accept the Oscar for Best Actor at the Academy Awards that spring for his role in *The Godfather* as a protest in support of the activists at Wounded Knee (Littlefeather 1973).

The dissident occupation of Wounded Knee lasted 71 days, which explains the “Waiting” in Hessay’s title. As a Canadian veteran of World War II who had previously fought against Franco’s fascists in the Spanish Civil War, Hessay was familiar with the anxieties and coping strategies of having to wait out long periods of holding on and biding time, as was the case for the besieged activists who took over the village of Wounded Knee in 1973. In a broader context, Hessay would also have been aware of the now historic Calder legal case, which dealt with the question of Aboriginal title in Canada in 1973. Nisga chief Frank Calder went into politics after graduating from the University of British Columbia following his earlier education at the Fraser Valley residential school at Sardis, a small community near Chilliwack. In 1973 he sued the provincial government of British Columbia on behalf of his tribe and four others. He argued that they had never lost title to their tribal lands (Supreme Court of Canada 1973). Land and resource

claims of Indigenous peoples were the subject of a few of Hessay’s earlier documentary paintings and reveal his thoughtful insight into the processes that led up to and enabled so many egregious injustices to occur and to be perpetuated. This background provides context for understanding *Waiting at Wounded Knee*.

Prelude to Conquest

In Hessay’s *Prelude to Conquest* (1968), a triad of power players command the foreground (Figure 2). This is a visualization of his analysis of the three main historical forces that, in unison, led to the conquest of the Indigenous peoples. To the left, symbolizing military power, as signified by his attention-getting yellow neckerchief, is a cavalry soldier standing at attention. He holds a sword by its hilt, ready for action. Framing the right side is a prominent layman wearing a tri-corner hat and sporting a colonial cravat at his neck. He also carries a sword, less prominently featured, the fashionable accoutrement of a gentleman adventurer. He symbolizes the secular powers that, politically and economically, were to govern America.

Between them, and kneeling in front of a makeshift tall slender cross, is a black-clad hooded figure. He symbolizes the spiritual power that sanctioned both the military and secular interests that led to the subjugation of Indigenous peoples. He is one of the “Black Robes”, as the Native Americans named the Jesuit and other missionaries who came to Christianize them, starting in the late 16th century (Eastman 2020, 35). He is kneeling, embodying and modelling submission to a higher power that presumably endorses the conquest.



Figure 2. *Prelude to Conquest* (1968) by Carle Hessay. Oil on canvas board (30 × 24 inches). Courtesy of the Carle Hessay Estate.

Standing behind and watching the colonial triad are Indigenous chiefs wearing full feathered headdresses. One figure, however, is distinguished from the rest. He has a prominent feather pendant hanging down one side of his face, and he wears what appears to be a leather breastplate with rows of silver strands. The position of his head, higher than the rest of the chiefs and right beside the crossbar of the rudimentary Christian cross, and in counterpoint to it, suggests that he might also be a shaman, representative of native spirituality.

The Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny

Justifying the colonization of all native peoples and lands under Christian jurisprudence, Pope Alexander proclaimed the Doctrine of Discovery a year after Columbus discovered America in 1492 (Pope Alexander 1493; Hele 2023). Various biblical verses about subduing the earth (e.g., Genesis 1:28) and making disciples

of all nations (Matthew 28:19–20) have been mobilized in support of this idea. The 19th-century concept of Manifest Destiny expanded on this and specifically informed the belief that it was obvious (manifest) that the Europeans were destined, or divinely ordained, to expand westward across America and to possess it. This concept was resurrected by US President Donald Trump, proclaiming in his second inaugural address, “we will pursue our manifest destiny into the stars” (Trump 2025), and going on aggressively to expand American imperialism across the Western hemisphere with threats to multiple nations.

The Business Man

Two years after his *Prelude to Conquest*, in *The Business Man*, painted in 1970 (Figure 3), Hessay singled out rapacious greed as the dominant factor that led to the conquest and devastation of American peoples and lands.



Figure 3. *The Business Man* (1970) by Carle Hessay. Oil on Masonite board (24 x 30 inches). Courtesy of the Carle Hessay Estate.

Symbolically larger than life and at the apex of a triangular configuration shaped like an arrowhead, the “Business Man” hovers menacingly over native inhabitants surging up toward him from around and below. They represent the Indigenous peoples who were enslaved wholesale, many taken back across the ocean to Europe. The transatlantic slave trade by the shipload to Europe began in 1492 and continued until at least 1900 (Goetz 2024). In Hessay’s painting, the booty includes unsuspecting women, one with a papoose (child), warriors with feathers indicating status, and multiple cultural treasures like tooth necklaces, wampum made from shell beads, and more. Hessay’s painting techniques amplify the sinister intent of the “Business Man”. Roughly executed slashes of paint surround his head like an unholy halo, emphasizing and visualizing his avarice, as do his cadaverous eyes. Spots of red highlighting in the Indigenous group serve more than a decorative purpose in that they reflect the bloody outcome many would suffer.

In *Waiting at Wounded Knee* (Figure 1) Hessay visualizes the Indigenous countermove against the enslavement of their people and the taking of their lands. Ken Huff, a *Times* correspondent who was at the encampment, wrote that a Sioux spiritual leader started to chant in the Lakota language and “as each warrior passed by, he blessed him and painted a slash or circle of red under the left eye” (Waxman 2023). Perhaps this slash of red signifies an initiation into the Red Power Movement. That began in the 1960s when other militant revolutionary groups like the Black Power Movement became active (Estes 2023, 194). In a defiant move, both groups appear to have taken their name from the colour of their skin, as perceived by common racial stereotypes. Hessay’s use of red in his *Wounded Knee* painting, is however, layered. Mixed reds serve as the background for the whole scene. The use of this colour has primal cultural associations with blood, especially blood spilled in battle, and in this case, the “red” blood of the Indigenous warriors. Psychologically, it is also a colour linked to anger and “seeing red”, which has a galvanizing effect when strong emotions are incited by inflammatory speeches or stories serving as and fueling a call to action. The disturbing effect of the indistinct black figures emanating from all that red captures Hessay’s response to the “Wounded Knee Incident”. But does the painting depict only the contemporary event?

The Massacre at Wounded Knee: 1890

The incident of 1890 was not the only such historical event at Wounded Knee. It also resonates with the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890, whose legacy and parallels would have been evident to all those involved in 1973. The issues surrounding these events have been examined by Indigenous scholar Nick Estes in the aptly titled: *Our History Is the Future* (Estes 2023). In the original “Massacre” on December 29, 1890, and its immediate aftermath in the Wounded Knee Creek area of the Pine Ridge Reservation, the US army killed hundreds of Lakota people.

Estimates of the dead, comprising mostly unarmed men, women, and children, vary from 150 to 370 (Potter 2024). On the army side, 25 US Cavalry soldiers died (Brown 1970, 538). How the dead were disposed of was dispassionately photographed immediately after the event (Figure 4). Near the top of the photograph, rows of soldiers seem to pose for the camera as the bodies of the victims are dumped into a mass grave below.

The revived “Ghost Dance movement” was blamed for the uprising, resulting in the 1890 Massacre. The Ghost Dance was inspired by Wovoka, a spiritual leader



Figure 4. "Burial of the dead at the Battle of Wounded Knee, S.D." Photo, Trager and Kuhn, circa December 29, 1890. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2007681010>.

who had a vision during a solar eclipse on January 1, 1889, that the performance of the Ghost Dance would reunite the dead warriors (ghosts) with the living to restore the land to Indigenous peoples (Britannica Editors 2025). This idea spread. An early portrayal of the Ghost Dance *before* the massacre shows the dancers from behind (Figure 5). The figures are not holding weapons, suggesting that the battle is a spiritual one. In the foreground a figure dances impulsively outside the group. To the left of this figure is a woman looking in the direction of the viewer and to the right are two more women.

In Hessay's *Waiting at Wounded Knee* (Figure 1), the figures likewise do not wear feathers on their heads, which would have designated their status as male warriors, as in his other paintings. Was he aware that many of the 1890 ghost dancers were widows (Brown 1970, 527)? A digital image of the "Ghost Dance" of the Sioux, based on a wood carving of 1891 (Figure 6) *after* the massacre, depicts a few of the dancers with upraised arms holding crude weapons.

Hessay's *Waiting* artfully references the 1973 hostilities at Wounded Knee, while simultaneously conjuring up of those of 1890 at the same site. A few straight black lines seem to suggest raised weapons, in a sense, collapsing time periods. The painting flashes back to the Ghost Dance of 1890 and forward to 1973. A contemporary sign attached to the Wounded Knee trading post stated that there would be a "Ghost Dance at Dawn" (Hedin & Estes 2023). This conveys and reinforces the surreal, otherworldly impression that these are indeed "ghosts" performing a war dance. All the various shapes in Hessay's *Waiting at Wounded Knee* are only suggestively defined by layers of diffused blacks appearing to emerge out of and/or recede back into the background reds to create that blurry soft focus that characterizes the painting. This technique allows for a temporal disjunction of time, in this case quite literally, for the "ghosts" of the past to "haunt" or reappear in the present and even to anticipate the future. In discussing the concept of "hauntology", a term he coined, Derrida observed that "a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come back" (Derrida 1994, 123).



Figure 5. "The Ghost Dance by the Ogallala Sioux at Pine Ridge Agency..." Frederic Remington, drawing "from sketches taken on the spot": Harper's Weekly (December 6, 1890). <https://www.loc.gov/item/90707734/>

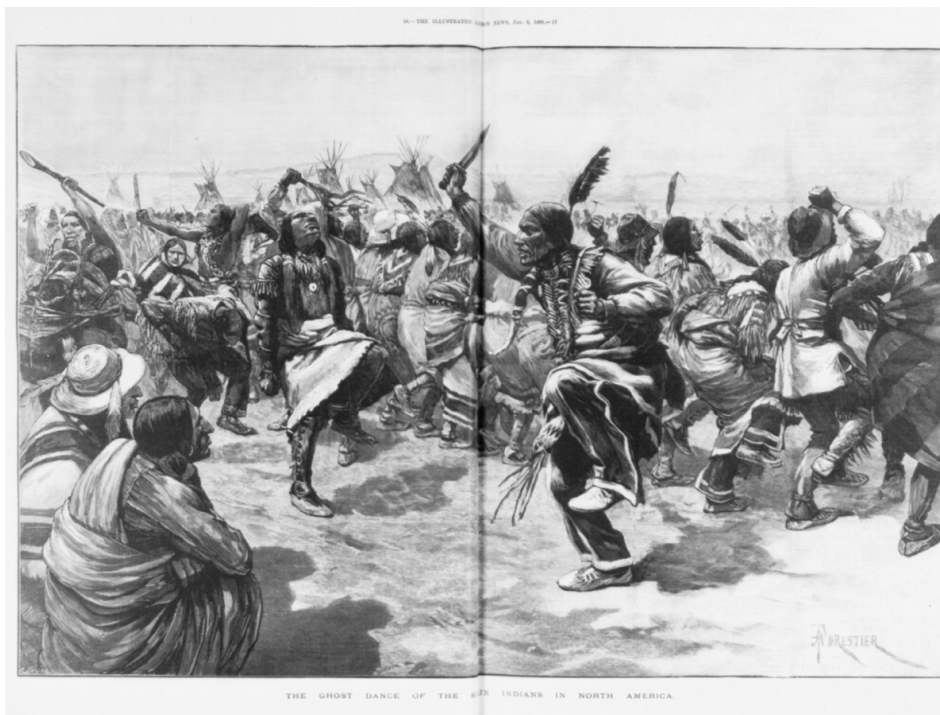


Figure 6. "The Ghost Dance of the Sioux Indians of North America". A. Forestier, print, wood engraving: The Illustrated London News (January 3, 1891: 15-16). <https://www.loc.gov/item/2006683523/>

Rather than being positioned further away in a comfortable middle ground, the figures in Hessay's painting take up almost the whole of the picture space. Facing the viewer directly and flanked by a ghostly army is the central figure at the top whose face is undefined and who is surrounded by a sort of corolla that is shot through with what appears to be a spear. One

might, momentarily, be tempted to think that this is the Red Son with the ghosts of dead warriors, as described in Wovoka's vision (Estes 2023, 16-17, 122), returning to obliterate colonialism and restore the earth. The momentum to reclaim Indigenous land rights has continued and accelerated in the present century.

The Wounded Knee Legacy: Remediation vs. Dissolving Borders and Sovereignties

Carle Hessay, who described himself as a world citizen, died dancing at a New Year’s party at the Sasquatch Inn in Spuzzum, British Columbia on January 1, 1978, but the issues he documented in his art had a long afterlife and many consequences, including changes of official attitude in terms of reconciliation and re-education.

If, as Estes observes, “Indigenous peoples once constituted the tree of the Americas, whose roots deeply entwined the land”, then the “tree of resistance” would regrow and “blossom into revolt decades later” (Estes 2023, 206–207). Wounded Knee was, in a sense, the Mother Tree. Just how entangled these roots would become is evident in recent history. The actual location of the original Wounded Knee Massacre site has recently been protected by the “Wounded Knee Memorial and Sacred Site Act” of December 2025, by which the Secretary of the Interior is to “complete all actions necessary for certain land to be held in restricted fee status by the Oglala Sioux Tribe and Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe” within one year (Congress.gov 2025). It remains to be seen if this will be accomplished.

The US government had initially honoured the soldiers of the Seventh Cavalry who committed the Massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890 with Medals of Honor. Since then, there have been repeated calls over many decades by Indigenous and other groups for these medals to be rescinded, including several times by Senator Elizabeth Warren, most recently on May 22, 2025 (Warren 2025). On September 25, Pete Hegseth, the U.S. Secretary of War, announced via a post on X (formerly Twitter) that “the soldiers who fought at the Battle of Wounded Knee in 1890 will keep their medals” (Hegseth 2025).

While the official political position of the White House regarding the medals has reverted back again, on religious grounds for its previous colonialist policies, Pope Francis, on March 30, 2023, repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery for not respecting “the inherent rights” of Indigenous Peoples (Hele 2023). Somewhat modifying the stance taken by Pope Francis, on October 8, 2025, the new Pope Leo “invited Indigenous groups to forgive as he recognized both ‘the light and the wounds’ in the history of the evangelization of their peoples” (Martínez-Bordiú 2025).

Other related stories warrant update. Leonard Peltier, an activist who “represented the Red Power movement” (Estes 2023, 65) and had gone to help at the Wounded Knee village on the Pine Ridge reservation in 1975, was allegedly involved in the killing of two FBI agents. After being charged with murder he managed to escape and to cross the border into Canada. He was arrested by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Hinton, Alberta, and extradited back across the border to the US, where he

was sentenced in 1977 to life in prison. In his autobiography, he described his life as a sun dance (see Rickert & Bardwell 2025; Peltier 1999). In July 2024, he was denied parole, but President Joe Biden, in one of his last acts, on February 20, 2025, commuted the 80-year-old Peltier’s two consecutive life sentences to house confinement (Rickert & Bardwell 2025; Ortiz 2025).

And the efforts of Frank Calder, the chief who set things in motion in British Columbia in 1973, led to the Treaty in 2000 granting the Nisga self-government based on occupancy (Cruikshank 2006). A 50th anniversary tribute and tour at Ross Bay Cemetery in Victoria, B.C. was advertised in Victoria’s *Times Colonist* in 2023 (“Frank Calder Tribute” 2023) for the man who chose to be buried there rather than on Nisga territory so that people would look at his memorial and ask “Who is that, what did he do?” (Indigenous Corporate Training 2020).

The significant and controversial concepts of self-government and land title have had far-reaching consequences with respect to other Indigenous nations. On February 17, 2025, the Government of Canada, under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, announced an agreement recognizing Aboriginal title on Haida Gwaii, formerly the Queen Charlotte Islands (National Newcomer Collective for Truth & Reconciliation 2025). The practicalities of land ownership have become increasingly complicated (Gupta 2025). This was borne out recently when the Supreme Court of British Columbia granted title on August 7, 2025 to large portions of land in Richmond to the Cowichan Nations (Supreme Court of British Columbia 2025). The City launched an appeal on September 4, 2025 (Richmond 2025) because this judgment could invalidate the titles of the present owners, while a corporate landowner wants to have the entire landmark case reopened (Shen 2025). Similar challenges for land title are occurring across Canada, Quebec being a recent example (Lafontaine 2025).

As shown by the ongoing history and the repercussions of the Wounded Knee battles of 1890 and 1973, the story is not over—nor is the “border blur” that is sweeping across sovereign nations in light of many new imperialist ambitions threatening their territorial integrity. *Waiting at Wounded Knee* is representative of what is occurring on a larger scale within nations and globally during the current disruptions to borders and international order. By conflating the 1973 and 1890 events at Wounded Knee, Hessay’s highly evocative painting is a reminder of the long legacy and future ramifications of such iconic conflicts. Artistically, Hessay’s painting techniques, especially his employment of colour and perspective, create a kind of time warp, taking the viewer into multiple periods in the history of the Wounded Knee story and beyond—while we continue “waiting” to see how it all plays out.

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