Minnesota Unraveled

EP110 - SoulForce: Black, Brown, and Red Power in the Twin Cities

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Chantel Rodríguez:

Not too long ago, I had some extra time on my hands after I visited the Minnesota African American Heritage Museum in the Near North Side neighborhood of Minneapolis, more commonly called the North Side by residents. I started walking down Plymouth Avenue North toward the University of Minnesota's Urban Research and Outreach-Engagement Center, or UROC. I'd heard they had an exciting temporary exhibit up called Soulforce: Movements of Memory. When I walked in, I was floored. Stretching down two long corridors were panel after panel filled with collages of historical photographs and newspaper clippings.

Everywhere my eye landed was something new, a headline about, quote, racial strife, photos of National Guard members, of two kids of different races eating together, of armed men and women wearing berets and marching. Maps from the 1900s side by side with a photo of Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking to a crowd. I had expected to see mostly images depicting the Black Power movement on the North side during the 1960s, and I did, but there were surprising elements to the installation. Photos and stories about the Mexican-American and Native American communities, alongside the African-American community. Sometimes members of all three were in the same photo, fighting for freedom and equality on the North side and very much taking part in what we now call the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

I was familiar with these histories. I knew they'd happened, but I'd always thought of them as separate movements, as separate histories happening in separate places. The Mexican-American community in the west side of St. Paul, the African-American community in the North side and the native community in Franklin Avenue East. Seeing them all together like this made me wonder, "Why do they converge here on the North side of all places during the Civil Rights era?" I wanted to get more insight on the exhibit itself first, so I spoke with the curator, James Curry.

James Curry:

My name is James Curry. I consider myself an educator-artist, maybe scholar-activist. I've been a McWatt fellow and a Jerome fellow and an AFI fellow. But I guess my area of expertise might be film and its intersection with identity and race. The collages both incorporate, in the case of the prologue, a lot of Wounded Knee photos that haven't been seen by a lot of people. This is Custer's genocidal skirmish with them, murder of women and children in South Dakota, as well as some early Minneapolis Covenant.

Shout out to Mapping Prejudice for some early maps designated segregated areas of Minneapolis and St. Paul, and headlines the church burning in Hastings, which I'm personally familiar with through my family history. And that's just the prologue. Like I said, you could encounter something about the Chicano movement, you could encounter something about the Black Power movement with The Way, or any of those '66 or '67 uprisings, the Minneapolis law enforcement and racial paradox and confrontations that have happened over the course of 100 years. These photos weren't used for provocative reasons, but it was more about seeing a connective tissue.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Hearing more about the exhibit, something became clear. To make sense of all the stories included in the Soulforce exhibit, I'd need to speak with some historians who had more insight about these communities, so I reached out to Nick Estes and Jimmy Patino.

Nick Estes:

[foreign language 00:04:49] my name is Nick Estes, I am an enrolled member of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe. I'm also an Assistant Professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota, and I specialize in the history of indigenous social movements, as well as looking at indigenous views of environmental justice and social justice. I'm a historian by trade, but I am really committed to the field of American Indian studies.

Jimmy Patiño:

Hi, I'm Jimmy Patino, I am a historian. I teach at the University of Minnesota in the Department of Chicano and Latino Studies, where I'm able to do this research and get paid for it, which is great. Yeah, my expertise is in Chicano Mexican-American

history, broader Latinx history, comparative ethnic studies. I look particularly at the Civil Rights era and the Chicano movement and people power movements of that era.

Chantel Rodríguez:

I knew a bit about the Twin Cities around this time. Population survey data from the 1960s and '70s varies quite a bit. Much depended on how questions were phrased or who was asking them, but what we do know is that the African-American and Native American populations were on the rise in the Twin Cities. To begin to understand why these three movements collided on the north side at all, I needed to get a sense of what areas made up this neighborhood in the 1960s. Here's Jimmy.

Jimmy Patiño:

North Minneapolis is really a bit northwest of the city. The Mississippi River kind of splits the city and it's to the west of that in the northwest area. It's of course, the geographic markers. I used to live on the North side for several years and the geographic markers have changed through time. To think about it in the mid 20th century when these movements emerged, Plymouth Avenue was a very important east-west road that was the southern part of North Minneapolis, although if you talk to more elders, it gets even closer to downtown, the beginnings of the North side. Of course, there's been a lot of gentrification. North was the traditional North side.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Jimmy's description of the neighborhood made me think about something I'd seen in the Soulforce exhibit. There was a Twin Cities map from the 1970s tucked in the corner of one of the panels with the title, Population Distribution of Minorities. I wanted to know why these communities had come to live in concentrated areas like this. And to answer the why, I needed to understand the how. I did some digging into the history of real estate development in the Twin Cities in the early 1900s. That was a period when important decisions were being made at the city level about how to create neighborhoods and who would be allowed to own homes in them. Starting in 1910, real estate developers began to introduce something called racial covenants.

These said the property could not be owned or inhabited by certain, quote unquote, objectionable people. They almost always targeted African-Americans, but could extend to other racial and ethnic communities. Racial covenants kept these communities from accessing better housing and served as a means for White

property owners to maintain segregated neighborhoods. Many White leaders thought that placing all, quote unquote, objectionable people in a few neighborhoods would contain the danger they believed these communities posed to White residents. By the 1930s, almost all new developments in the city used racial covenants. This meant non-White Minnesotans were extremely limited in where they could live, whether looking to rent or buy. Back to James.

James Curry:

But I did not know that the Black community had probably since the Great Migration, been relegated to three or four different spots, both in Minneapolis and St. Paul. You've got Rondo, you've got Seven Corners, the South side and the near North side. But I didn't know that the near North side had the peculiarity or the particular of having also a Jewish integrated community. They were business owners and along Plymouth, I had never even realized that Plymouth Avenue was full of businesses because the blight that's occurred and still remains.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The North side was what was available for African-American, Mexican and native communities. And by the late 1940s, more and more native people were moving to Minneapolis. When they did, they found themselves relegated to a handful of neighborhoods like the North side. Here's Nick.

Nick Estes:

In the postwar moment, you had a lot of native people enlist in World War II, only to return back to the United States and to their homelands, to have them threatened with termination policies or to try to get native people off reservation lands through enticement, through relocation programs. Again, Minneapolis is a little bit different because it was never a relocation city, but many people came here seeking employment and economic refuge, so to speak.

But it didn't mean that they necessarily cut their ties off from reservation communities. I think there's this kind of unhelpful binary of urban reservation, but nonetheless, they find themselves at the mercy of a system that is highly exploitative and frankly racist against American Indian people here in the city. They're concentrated into an area where there's not a lot of home ownership, it's mostly renting, the renting class and the landlord class.

Chantel Rodríguez:

In the 1950s, new federal policies terminated the special relationship between the US government and Native American tribes, in many cases, leading to the sale of tribal lands. That same decade, the North side neighborhood faced a threat of its own: highways.

Jimmy Patiño:

The 94 interstate, I'm not sure when that gets implemented. The interstate is being laid in the mid 20th century at this moment and actually is a source of conflict with communities of color because it splits them up and because they have the least power to resist where freeways are located.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Over the course of the 1960s, the construction of I-94 fractured four different neighborhoods in the Twin Cities, including Rondo, Prospect Park, Miriam Park and Seward. The interstate did not split the north side, but it did cut off access to downtown Minneapolis, limiting residents' access to good job opportunities. Just a few years later, the neighborhood did get cut in half with the widening of the Olson Memorial Highway. This isolated businesses on the south side of the street, making it difficult for customers to access their stores. I was starting to see what James meant by connective tissue. What brought all these groups together? They all lived in this neighborhood by design. They all faced similar impacts from the highway system and the lack of access to jobs. What else connected these communities? Back to James.

James Curry:

I think the main sparks tend to be brutality in law enforcement amongst the three groups. Then employment across the board, I would say. Then you seem to get into particulars, whether that's taking care of seniors in the community or health or translation in the case of the Chicano movement. And then just this sort of lack of a center to have either dances or community or gatherings, lack of space. It seems to be some of the things we now take for granted as in a community center or translated brochures, or senior care or employment outreach.

It's interesting to see them in their nascent form as basic needs being asked for and running into bureaucratic trouble that hasn't confronted this issue before. "What do you mean you want to take care of your abuela," or, "Why does this brochure need

translation?" Or, "Well, we'll give you a job in the summer, but we didn't know that you also needed jobs through the year."

Chantel Rodríguez:

Jimmy Patino identified similar shared issues to James, but Jimmy talked about it in a different way. For him, the key is to look at the issues facing the North side residents as a whole, rather than looking at one group at a time.

Jimmy Patiño:

It's a horizontal way, so instead of asking vertically, "What did the black community experience historically, what did the Mexican-American community experience historically in 1960s," we can ask, "How was housing experienced horizontally?" I mean, across different groups, across different communities, what was the same, what was different?

Chantel Rodríguez:

Putting the issue, whether housing, employment or discrimination at the center of our inquiry means that we can better see how each group and the neighborhood collectively responded. These were issues that impacted each of these three communities, African-Americans, Native-Americans and Mexican-Americans, and not just in the Twin Cities. New racial covenants were banned by the Minnesota legislature in 1953. It went on to ban discrimination on the basis of race, religion and national origin in 1962. But changing these laws did not address the underlying issues of racial injustice. The 1960s were a moment of national reckoning, too.

The Civil Rights Act had been passed in 1964, making discrimination based on race, color, religion and national origin illegal, but the act did not address the issues of racial injustice, job inequality and lack of access to education, housing and health care. President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty in the mid 1960s was one way the federal government tried to address the issue of economic inequality. Nationally, the War on Poverty succeeded in reducing the poverty rate from 22% to 13% of American families during the 1960s.

But native communities and people of color on the whole did not benefit. In the Twin Cities of the 1960s, the median income for African-American men was nearly half that of White residents. The African-American, Native-American and Mexican-American communities living on the North side had to find their own solutions to inequity and a lack of resources. These groups had a long history of organizing in Minnesota. They

leaned on that knowledge in the 1960s to mobilize and create movements to confront these issues. According to Jimmy, the connective tissue across each of these communities was their commitment to self-determination.

Jimmy Patiño:

The horizontal kind of theme is this notion of self-determination or community control. Each community used that language or referenced that kind of idea, but it's usually been studied vertically, community by community, rather than what happens when we look at the practice of self-determination across different communities?

Chantel Rodríguez:

Self-determination can mean different things to different communities. In this context, we are talking broadly about the idea of self-reliance, of a community taking control and striving to meet their own needs in a world where they face discrimination and repression. This new framing brought me back to thinking about the Soulforce exhibit. I remembered two panels side by side, one titled Local Confrontation, the other, National Confrontation. Splashed across both collages are photos of protests, buildings burning and police, and headlines with words like Race Strife, Racial Troubles and Police Brutality. I wanted to understand how these headlines and photos were connected to the North side and how it played out for the communities that live there.

Jimmy Patiño:

One experience that ties these communities together is police brutality and police harassment and police mistreatment. I mean, not only in the Twin Cities, but in every urban space I've studied is a shared kind of material experience with problems with the police.

Chantel Rodríguez:

This made me wonder why police would specifically monitor groups on the North side. Here's Nick again.

Nick Estes:

Yeah, you see a lot of this and it's the social order of the day is kind of upheld by the police, Minneapolis Police Department, in patrolling a lot of these American Indian people who are out on the weekend, blowing off steam. Many of them are workers. I

think there's this idea that American Indians at this particular moment in time were drains on the social welfare system, and in fact, they were moved into low income jobs that a lot of people didn't want to work, or there were a lot of White people who moved out of the city to escape this kind of inner city poverty. I think that's a really important aspect of that time period.

Chantel Rodríguez:

What Nick is saying here is that police in the 1960s worked to uphold the status quo or the existing social order. Historians have traced this back to the Minneapolis police department's founding in 1867. For instance, in the early 1900s, the police department supported employers by breaking up labor union organizing. And in the 1910s and '20s, officers were regularly involved in preserving the social and racial order through intimidation, harassment and at times, excessive physical violence, like in 1922, when officers physically assaulted and arrested four young Black men after they'd invited White women to dance. In 1946, newly elected Minneapolis Mayor Hubert Humphrey recognized that the almost all White force of the MPD had a problem with racially targeted policing.

He announced that they'd be the first police department in the nation to receive race relations training, but this did little to address the underlying beliefs held by a significant portion of the White populace. For example, in 1947, a survey found that 60% of White Minnesotans openly favored keeping residential areas segregated. The headlines and photos I was seeing in the Soulforce exhibit implied that this race relations training had not been successful in overhauling racial policing practices.

If all of these groups had fraught relationships with police, how did they respond? According to Jimmy and Nick, they used a similar set of tactics and strategies through their implementation of patrols. I saw photos of Black patrols, Mexican-American patrols and Native patrols across the Soulforce exhibit. I needed to know, was there a specific moment, a spark that led these communities to create patrols? Did one inspire the others? According to my guests, the answer was yes, but I wanted to know more about how the first patrol came about. Jimmy told me it had to do with two important moments of the civil unrest on the North side, one in 1966 and the other in 1967.

Jimmy Patiño:

The Plymouth Avenue kind of thorough way was a major business district with many restaurants and shops and maybe stores and stuff, which tended to be White owned. And there were a lot of Jewish-American owners of those shops, which, that's important to say because what is written about the North side and about the Civil Rights era generally in the scholarship in terms of race relations is the Plymouth uprisings that occurred there. Basically, there were two eruptions of social tension on that Plymouth Avenue area, the first in 1966, a second one in 1967. The 1967 one being the more serious one that caused most damage and caused most regional, if not national attention in a context where urban strife and racial strife were blowing up all over the country.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The moment in 1966 was brief, a conflict between Black youth and Jewish business owners in the neighborhood. In its wake, the city promised change, more economic opportunities for African-American North-siders. But a year later, that change still hadn't materialized. This all came to a head in the summer of 1967 in concert with residents' fraught relationship with the police. Historians can't be sure of precisely how the three day long unrest happened, but they are sure that police played a role in the moment that sparked the unrest. Between 150 and 250 members of the National Guard were stationed on Plymouth Avenue for a week to stop further unrest. In the end, at least 20 fires had been set along a half mile stretch of the avenue.

Estimated damages added up to somewhere between $1 million and $4 million and 24 people were injured. It's important to understand that the unrest on the North side was not unique in the nation. The summer of 1967 was known as the Long Hot Summer, so named because of the more than 150 racial unrests that were taking place across the country. Each of these was in response to the same deep-seated frustration North-siders were experiencing, a frustration with racial inequality and police brutality. From this collective dissatisfaction came a new movement, the Black Power movement. Back to Jimmy.

Jimmy Patiño:

Which we define building off of previous scholarship, of course, as an attempt for community control, so solving the problem of jobs or the problem of education or the problem with the police through a lens of Black folks controlling their own

destinies and creating their own organizations that they were at least semi-autonomous over. We see that in the Twin Cities, particularly in the North side.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The Black Power movement was born out of the Civil Rights movement, but it was distinctive in that it encompassed the ideas of self-determination and community control as a response to police brutality and racial inequality. In Minneapolis, that manifested as patrols. The national movement prioritized racial pride and a rejection of White norms. So too, did the movement in Minneapolis, but it also made space for interracial collaboration.

Jimmy Patiño:

They had for some reason, two iterations of kind of a patrol force. One was the Soul Force, which, it was Black controlled, I think, but it was integrated in a sense. The Soul Force was kind of a police negotiating effort that was staffed by a lot of White members of The Way, or White, maybe allies. And then within the same iteration, there was something called the Black Patrol, which unlike the Soul Force, was armed. These were armed, mostly Black men who would patrol the neighborhood similar to the Black Panther party and The Way leaders were. There was no Black Panther party that I've seen that existed in the Twin Cities, but they were in dialogue with them.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Back to James.

James Curry:

We tend to think that the only kind of community policing that gained national notoriety were the Panthers in Oakland, who were policing the police by utilizing the laws that were available of standing a certain distance with a weapon to observe. And an iteration of that came about up here. There's a Jewish man activist somewhat of some note, named Zev Eloni, grew up in Minneapolis, was part of core, was a Freedom Rider. Verlena said that this was kind of Zev's idea, which was to have an interracial or multiracial Soul Force patrol that was the outer circle to the Black patrol, who was utilizing the Panther technique of having legal weapons and observing. Not always weaponized, but observing the police, policing the police in community interactions, to put it lightly.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The Black patrol inspired the American Indian movement to create their own patrol. Back to Nick.

Nick Estes:

The American Indian movement was founded in 1968 here in Minneapolis, actually on the North side by a group of community members, American Indian community members, mostly Ojibwe, but there were some Dakota people involved and others from different tribal nations. But it was really founded at this critical time period in the late 1960s, the Red Power movement was in full swing. AIM didn't start the Red Power movement, the Red Power movement preceded it with organizations like National Congress of American Indian, figures such as Clyde Warrior, Vine Deloria Jr. and others. So they were really picking up this momentum that was growing nationally and globally around indigenous rights, but also general anti-war sentiment against the Vietnam War.

The conventional history is to say that the co-founders were Dennis Banks and Clyde Belcourt, which is true, but there were also 80 other people in the room who were also the co-founders, many of them women who don't get recognized as such. Clyde Belcourt, in his autobiography, Thunder Before the Storm, makes it very clear that the AIM patrols were inspired by what he calls the Soul patrols at the time where Black community patrols specifically in the wake of the riots after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., but also that were set in place to really keep neighborhoods safe.

They wore jackets that were red and they also had the red berets, and first it was called the Indian Patrol, and it was kind of not just AIM, it was just a community organization and it kind of still was. There were some people who were just not part of AIM, just on Friday nights, they would volunteer to be part of this and they had walkie-talkies. It was like they became a uniform, the Indian Patrol uniforms, red jackets, red beret and walkie-talkies, and they would film these arrests or they would intervene, sometimes they would just drive people home. Sometimes nothing would happen, but having that presence on the street was an assertion of autonomy and self-determination for the community. It also mitigated encounters with the police, which often ended in violence or arrests, or incarcerations or charges.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Just one year later in 1969, the Mexican-American community in the West side neighborhood of St. Paul founded their own iteration of community patrols, the Brown Berets. They were a chapter of a national organization founded in 1968. In the Twin Cities, the Brown Berets patrolled wherever Mexican-American communities lived, including the north side. Their work went hand-in-hand with the Chicano movement, a movement aimed at ending generations of formal and informal racial discrimination and creating support for educational employment and social opportunities for Mexican-Americans.

Jimmy Patiño:

When we interviewed Willie Dominguez, who again, was a north side Chicano, his response kind of immediately was, "Well, we had the Brown Berets. We went to them for those kinds of things." And so they emerged in St. Paul for that reason and that kind of network, and they're a militant organization. So they, in many ways are akin to the Black Panthers in that they had a uniform and they have a logo that is a cross like a Christian Cross with two bayonets.

There's really cool images, and this was depicted in the Soulforce exhibit, of maybe about 20 Brown Beret men marching down the street in downtown St. Paul with rifles, carrying a Virgen de Guadalupe, the patron saint of the Mexican people, carrying a statue of her in the front. And then marching army style in the middle of St. Paul. That must've been a sight in 1960s, 1970s St. Paul, where the depiction of Mexicans by the mainstream were that they were transitional, that they were transient, that they were new immigrants, which, they're not.

Chantel Rodríguez:

All of these patrols were community-led and community-run. They each focused on community safety. That meant protecting community members from potential dangers, but also observing law enforcement itself. Here's Nick and Jimmy.

Nick Estes:

Yeah, at one of these initial meetings of the American Indian movement, a lot of people were just frustrated that this was happening to their relatives. I mean, Dennis Banks talks about being arrested on the weekend, just literally the paddy wagon would pull up by a bar and the police would go in and just funnel all the people, the

patrons of the bar into the back of this paddy wagon. Then they would go and work day labor for the jail over the weekend and then be let out on Monday.

Jimmy Patiño:

I met one elder who was a member of the Black Patrol, and he told me a story about a police convention that was happening in the late '60s, early '70s, a national gathering of policemen. And somehow during this convention, it took place in Minneapolis, some off-duty police officers were in the North side, looking to engage prostitution, is the way that he described it. And the Black Patrol had a community presence where something like that going on was reported to them, where community members went to The Way and told them that was happening.

And he described them finding this car full of police officers looking for prostitution, to access prostitution services and surrounded them. And there was maybe a standoff, an armed standoff. He mentioned the Minneapolis police coming and they had policemen telling him, the member of the Black Patrol, "You guys better stand down because these are officers and they're armed." And the response from the Black Patrol leader was, "We're armed, too." And so there was kind of a standoff and he talked about it as a victory, that they eventually stood down and the visiting police officers left the North side. That was an interesting side story that I think gives some insight into the role that the Black Patrol played.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Patrols were only one strategy used by these communities to respond to racial inequalities and police harassment. Other strategies dealt more with issues of poverty and economic opportunity. Solutions for those were founded in those ideas of self-determination Jimmy was talking about. It looked like being involved in community programs and creating brick-and-mortar community centers.

Jimmy Patiño:

The other part I'll say is the cultural front of these movements. Some of them describe them as kind of de-colonial, recognizing and really challenging assimilation as practiced in primarily the schools. Basically, that your cultural context is inferior and that you need to conform and become like the majority, both on the cultural front and the engaging kind of really just life-affirming resources that were not as accessible to Black and Brown communities were part of what these entities did to

kind of engage the larger society and express the Chicano movement ideology or the Black Power ideology that they were kind of formulating.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The Brown Berets were a patrol, but they also took on the role of supporting community youth. They were heavily invested in this type of cultural work and engaging the broader community.

Jimmy Patiño:

And the Brown Berets emerged from that community in response to primarily police violence, but also really concerned with youth. The Brown Berets not only serve as kind of a patrol force and a kind of defense, so any marches, the Berets would be there and they were in charge of security, more or less. But also, they paid a lot of attention to youth programming to intervene in kind of gang activity and redirect youth to, an example I give is they had a camping trip they did yearly. And while that may sound kind of mundane, it was actually part of a larger ideological framework to address safety and to intervene in gang violence and redirect those energies to things more positive to get urban kids to relax and chill out in the beautiful rural areas of Minnesota.

That's another example where they also said there were some Black and Native youth who they'd also took on these trips, so there's some more overlap there. I began talking about community safety in a broader way beyond just, sure, they're concerned with the police beating them up and harassing them, but also they were attuned to the roots of, quote unquote, crime that are in structural conditions that, high dropout rates of their youth, low wage jobs, exploitative jobs or high unemployment, which is what leads to inter-residential violence and inter-residential crime. So to me, The Way, they had a program where they were addressing these on different levels.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The Brown Berets were doing work with Mexican-Americans, but also with other racial groups. The Black community did something similar. In response to the 1967 civil unrest on Plymouth Avenue, they created a community youth center called The Way. Though the center was geared towards Black youth, The Way operated for the benefit of the whole of the North side, not just its African-American residents. Here are James and Jimmy.

James Curry:

I think they had been discussing forming some kind of community center on the South side, and then the uprising happened and they shifted gears and moved to the North side or moved the idea to the North side. So it seemed like a real kind of authentic engagement with wanting to solve these issues.

Jimmy Patiño:

The existence of the organization, The Way, or The New Way as it was referred to, a kind of social service community organization led by, Syl Davis was the founder, was on Plymouth Avenue as well. The role of many of those leaders was to mediate some of those tensions and whatnot. That's kind of a primary story, and so this uprising led to city and state government attention to the area and dialogue between Civil Rights leaders in the Twin Cities and government officials, and maybe some concessions, I mean some address of the underlying causes of the strife or the tension, particularly around accessibility for African-American youth to have access to jobs and of course, social services and whatnot. That's a very important kind of context.

And then we see Black Power operating through this organization, The Way, and kind of negotiating the tensions, intervening, pressuring the city to provide these services. And this is where we see The Way had already had a kind of full-blown social service and really more through a lens of, we talked about self-determination and Black Power and not simply social services provided by the city, but social services controlled by African-American leaders and community members. They addressed everything from job training to addiction issues, they intervened in education. They made this kind of argument that, "Racism in schools is a White people problem, so we'll offer to do workshops or whatnot to go into White schools and teach White folks how to mediate the racism that's coming from their community. It's not us, it's a mainstream problem. And we'll work on teaching folks about that through that lens."

Chantel Rodríguez:

The Black Power movement in Minneapolis drew from the national one, but something set it apart. It went beyond racial solidarity and focused on neighborhood solidarity. The Way was inclusive of all communities within the North side.

James Curry:

Folks would come from, folks meaning educators, and their students would come from small towns and larger towns across America, maybe even the world briefly, to

learn what was happening here at The Way, which seemed Pan-African and seemed like a community center that had sort of a nationalistic approach, but was really teasing out and trying to redefine schooling and community centers and what they could be. Yes, there were pinball machines and pool tables and ping pong, and folks like Prince were coming there to learn music along with other musicians, so it's just this huge cultural mecca that we had right after the rebellion.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Mexican-American North-siders used the resources The Way provided, but their community also had their own unique issues that The Way was not equipped to address, like language issues. To meet their community-specific needs, Mexican-Americans founded El Centro Cultural Chicano in 1974.

Jimmy Patiño:

It came from an organization called Chicanos Venceran, Chicanos dominating or Chicanos conquering, I think is the translation. And these were folks, one of the issues that they were addressing were, like The Way, access to healthcare services and particularly access for elders to have all the needs that they have addressed and provided for. This is an issue across the board. One thing I'm thinking about it is that the Minnesota broadly as a kind of liberal progressive place, had a lot of resources for social services as such.

But the way I'm describing it is it was a White supremacist hoarding of those resources and many of the expressions of these people power movements began and were really invested in just pushing to get access to these resources that were being hoarded, being concentrated for mainly White Minnesotans. And that's Chicanos Venceran and eventually The Centro seems to have been successful in getting Spanish-language translators or Spanish-language officials so that elders and community members could get access to these health concerns. And then of course, that developed into political contestation, going to City Hall and negotiating with political leaders and whatnot. So The Way and The Centro are both existing in the same space, doing those very similar things.

Chantel Rodríguez:

AIM's strategy was a bit different. Rather than a community center, their focus was education. There were a couple of factors that made this issue particularly urgent for the Native community. This was an era of government-sanctioned family separation

policies. In the 1960s, the dropout rate for Native students hovered between 60% and 80%. These students were often labeled as, quote, truant by social welfare agencies, heightening the risk they'd be removed from their families.

Nick Estes:

The American Indian movement was very much a social movement. It wasn't a traditional sort of political party as we saw in organizations like the Black Panthers, it was more created by and for American Indian families. Madonna Thunderhawk summed it up best to me. She's a Lakota member of the American Indian Movement. She said the American Indian movement is a movement of families, which has multiple meetings, but I think in general, it's about the idea of the right to have a Native family, because at that time, Native families were broken up by these state and federal policies of child removal.

Parents were not allowed to be parents, children were not... Many of the members of the American Indian Movement were survivors of the federal Indian boarding school system, something that is only really being acknowledged and addressed nationally within the last several years of the Biden administration. So the things that they were talking about were pretty revolutionary at the time, things that we may take for granted today. It was the state welfare practice to take native children away from their families. The American Indian movement intervened in a lot of those cases. They don't get a lot of credit for it, but that's how they gained a lot of legitimacy within the community, while also looking comprehensively at housing, as well as employment. But out of this larger campaign to combat Indian child removal, we see the formation of survival schools, but also legal advocacy.

Chantel Rodríguez:

These survival schools offered an alternative to the public school system. They centered Native culture. The curriculums featured things like wild rice gathering, maple syrup harvesting and indigenous languages.

Nick Estes:

I spoke with Charlene Day, whose mother, Charlotte, was one of the founders of the Red Schoolhouse, an AIM-run survival school in St. Paul. There was also just the AIM Survival School that was formed in Minneapolis, but she tells the story of how this survival school came about. It's not like today where we have all these Native-run nonprofits and entrepreneurs who are raising money to create alternative education,

it was literally just families. And at that time in the 1970s, there was a social worker who came to Charlene's home and basically threatened her mother, Charlotte, that her children were going to be taken away from her. And so she enlisted the help of Eddie Benton-Benet and Billy Blackwell, who were both fluent Ojibwe speakers, because their mother, Charlotte, didn't speak English very well.

English was her second language and she didn't quite understand the legalese that was being employed. So they went and defended her in a child court and she kept her children. That again, won over a lot of the Native community who were facing these kind of child removal processes. So she, Charlotte, got together with other American Indian women and families and they pooled together their resources, literally. They were poor people, they weren't wealthy people, and she decided that she was going to be a cook at the school.

And it just started at a very grassroots level that they were going to form this school that was going to be an alternative to the public education system to prevent these child removals. At one point in time, there were dozens of survival schools that were founded not only in the United States, but also in Canada. There was one in Toronto that was operational. There were several on the reservation, the most famous of which is the We Will Remember survival school that was created in Rapid City, but then also it moved down to Porcupine. But the two in the Twin Cities were Heart of the Earth and Red Schoolhouse.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Over the course of its 35 years in existence, Heart of the Earth graduated more native students than all the Minneapolis public schools combined. There are so many threads woven together in this history. Looking at the main panel in the Soulforce exhibit, I realized there was yet another part of the story I had yet to consider, the second half of the exhibit title, Movements of Memory. The relationship between memory and history is quite complicated but it made me wonder about the many ways from old photographs to physical buildings to oral histories, we learn about this moment in history. How do we know what we know? How do some things get forgotten? Back to James.

James Curry:

There was a short game and a long game to undermine The Way and to make sure that it didn't achieve its full fruition that it was starting out to have, and then ultimately replaced by the fourth precinct, which is a historical erasure incarnate by,

of all things, a police brick and mortar replacing what was once there, or maybe that I think it was bulldozed before it was replaced. And that sends a message across generations and really obliterates the history in a physical way so that you can't, even though there's very little written about The Way, you also then don't have a place to make incarnate for oneself to give it the credence that so many other people do.

Chantel Rodríguez:

So much of the work of a historian is using the sources that are available to piece together the past, but it is equally important to consider who created the sources and what were their larger goals in creating them to begin with? How does this limit the kind of stories we can tell about the past? Men tend to be the face of AIM, right? Especially on the national scale. But as you mentioned, there are women that were part of AIM and played really important roles. And I'm wondering, why is it that women in AIM haven't really been brought to the fore and the kind of activism or the roles that they played in the organization, especially at the local level here in the Twin Cities?

Nick Estes:

Yeah, there's three factors that you could name, and I'll name the most obvious ones, but also they're probably not the most intuitive to people when they think about this history. But the first is the police. If you look at FBI files, and I've looked at thousands of pages of FBI files, they clearly identify only men as leaders, and they clearly went after only men as leaders of the American Indian movement. This went hand in hand with how the media portrayed the movement itself. They only spoke to men when it came to interviewing them about actions or initiatives because they only saw men as leaders. So women in some ways, didn't get the limelight in the media, but also, they were persecuted by the FBI in many of these cases, but not to the same degree as men. They weren't as visible, they just weren't seen.

In some instances you can even read the FBI documents where they don't even name the women in the room, they just name the men. So when we repeat these kind of narratives, I think we have to be really critical about where are we getting this information from, what source is it coming from? Because typically, it's just coming from White guys who are writing FBI 302 reports or surveillance reports, who are working with informants, or they're White journalists who have written the history of the American Indian movement. This goes up until the present, it's not like a new phenomenon. And just because an AIM leader was put in prison or was persecuted, doesn't mean that the operations of the day-to-day stop or the schools shuttered

their doors. There were always women, many who didn't get credit in terms of keeping these movements alive.

Jimmy Patiño:

Good friend of mine, Louis Alamayou, African-American leader in the Twin Cities community, from Chicago, he's been here since the '60s, had a lot of personal connections to the American Indian movement himself, basically tipped me that, "Hey, there used to be a Chicano cultural center in the North side. And this woman, Anita Irvina Davis, is a former member or a leader of that, and you should talk to her sometime." And so this research allowed me to finally track down Anita and gather more information and interview her about the existence of something called Centro Cultural Chicano, the Chicano Cultural Center, which literally existed blocks away from The Way, from The New Way site.

Those oral histories with Anita were very useful to kind of getting more texture to what that Mexican American community looked like and how Mexican Americans in the North side began to assert themselves politically and culturally and whatnot. One thing I think that's important that she relayed was experiencing the Plymouth uprisings. At the time she was a girl, she was a teenager, maybe younger, but she remembered it, getting a Mexican-American perspective of what was always imagined and talked about this geography as a conflict between Black community members and the White power structure. The way that she relayed it was a really pivotal moment for her politically and ideologically, even as young as she was, because she knew she could smell the smoke, she could see the fires, and so she relays it in a really rich way.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Clearly, these communities were deeply interconnected in the North side during the 1960s. Hearing this from James, Jimmy and Nick helped me to fully appreciate the title of the exhibit, Soulforce. African-Americans, Native Americans and Mexican-Americans living in the North side faced shared forms of racial inequality and discrimination. More often than not, they learned from one another and shared resources in places like The Way.

This is the philosophy of Soulforce. In James' words, it is a way of describing how people or an entire community comes together as dynamic groups to share resources and knowledge. This is why Jimmy's way of thinking about the experiences of these three communities horizontally or in relation to one another is useful for

expanding our understanding of the past. It is an approach that goes beyond simply comparing, that lets us see new dimensions of the history.

Jimmy Patiño:

I think maybe there's a comparative frame where we can, "Well, this happened to Mexican-Americans, this happened to African-Americans and this happened to Native-Americans." But I think a relational frame considers how, say, the Chicano movement emerges, how the Black freedom struggle was related to that emergence in some ways. Rather than just a separate thing that's happening separately and that's siloed, its emergence in close proximity, not to mention the national relevance that the Black freedom struggle had, we can think about it together. In fact, we learn more if we do that. I'm thinking of the protest activities that led to the founding of the Department of Chicano Studies at the University of Minnesota.

In 1970, '71, Chicano students occupied the president's office basically, and demanded that they create a Chicano Studies Department. I mean, that's the narrative and they pressured the administration and eventually the administration kind of concedes. Well, if you look at the picture of the students negotiating that existed in the newspaper, there's an African-American woman there in the room. And if you look at the documents, they were in dialogue with the Afro-American Student Alliance.

And if you contextualize that actually, African-American students did the same thing in 1969, then we are doing relational history, like we're acknowledging the shared space of the university that both these movements are at. And then there were relationships. If not just overt inspiration from what was done before, I mean, there are examples of talking to each other, of working with one another, of supporting each other's struggles and whatnot. I think relational history asks, "How is the experience of other racialized communities central to understanding the constitutive of understanding the experience of a particular racial community?" Which I think is different than just comparing.

Chantel Rodríguez:

What can we take away from thinking about the history of the North side in this way? Here's Nick, James and Jimmy.

Nick Estes:

If you ask anyone in the Indian country, their opinion on AIM, they're going to give you a strong opinion, whether they dislike it or they're for it. And I think AIM itself also has some of its own history of itself, has fallen victim to some of this misconceptions of it. But I think what is acknowledged by the people that I've spoken with is that this was not a new thing for them. Thinking relationally, inter-generationally, for example, the Native community was organizing before the American Indian movement formed in the Twin Cities in 1968, there were urban movements that were happening. It was the same in South Dakota. AIM just became a vehicle to articulate those struggles.

James Curry:

The takeaway is that they are still here, all those movements are still here, the elders are still here. I've had a couple community gatherings that had some elders speak to this in the moment and the moment we're in now. In a way, it's a strategy that you can take lessons from. I'd like to think anticipate roadblocks, see the train coming before it arrives, which isn't the greatest metaphor, but there's a 24/7 agenda to keep folks in line, and there's a long game and a short game and you can see the lessons.

Jimmy Patiño:

I hope folks come away with knowing the origins of these movements and these entities, because many of these entities still exist today. The Centro Cultural Chicano today is the Centro Tyrone Guzman, which is renamed after one of the directors and leaders of that organization. And it's now located in South Minneapolis, which is a location of the Latinx community there. The American Indian movement and The Way created a legal rights center, I think The People's Legal Center or something like that, which also still exists.

And of course, I work at the University of Minnesota, so the Department of Chicano Latino Studies, Afro-American Studies and American Indian Studies all still exist and were products of this moment, too. So yeah, I'd like people to walk away with knowing that these movements all existed and overlapped, had similar goals, and that they planted seeds that are still available and with us today. We can still define those areas as primary sites of African-American culture and community and call them multi-ethnic at the same time. It's not mutually exclusive, I think that's important to remember.

Chantel Rodríguez:

I started out thinking I'd learn about these three movements from the 1960s and '70s, each in their own silo. Between the Soulforce exhibit and my conversations with Nick, James and Jimmy, I now realize that thinking that way doesn't give me the full picture.

James Curry:

If you're familiar with collage, you can have layers of opacity. So sometimes titles bleed through over interesting counterpoints and interesting interactions with the photos. Yeah, it's a semi-artistic, I think, and enough text to give those who want to learn more about it. You certainly could take a little square section of any of the collage and dig into probably three or four stories within that five inch square.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Viewing the history of the North side neighborhood as a collage completely changed my concept of this place and the communities that have made it what it is today. The North side has been and still is, a center of Black culture, but viewed through the lens of this horizontal thinking, it's also so much more. The North side was one of the few neighborhoods that was available to African-Americans, Native-Americans and Mexican-Americans due to racial housing restrictions. It was a place where each of these groups created a community and experienced shared forms of oppression and discrimination. They built on previous generations' organizing and created their own movements specific to their own histories.

But at the same time, they shared knowledge and resources when building these movements and responding to issues they all faced as residents of the North side. All of this became clear when I began to think about history horizontally, about the experiences of the Black, Brown and Red power movements in relation to one another. But doing this history is not without its challenges. It is important to interrogate where the sources come from and to identify others that can provide insight to voices that are often overlooked. And finally, doing relational history means not losing sight of the fact that each community has their own unique history and relationship to self-determination.

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