Indigenous Ways of Knowing Capitalism in Simon Ortiz's Fight Back

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What other Native poet besides Simon Ortiz has more than glanced at the structural causes of poverty, looked closely at work culture, seen a connection between Indians and unions, and named both the causes and costs of economic exploitation? What other collection besides *Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, for the Sake of the Land* critiques capitalism as having values antithetical to Native survival? We need to read this text as a radical political document, powerful both in its language and vision. Imaginatively using a range of literary forms, Ortiz exposes capitalism’s impact on workers, their families, the Acoma community, and the United States as a whole. The poems and prose pieces depict the racial and economic exploitation Native peoples continue to experience, but they also celebrate the people’s continuance. While addressing issues of identity and tradition common to much contemporary Native literature, *Fight Back* distinguishes itself by doing this with a structural critique of economic relations and work culture.
The original 1980 edition is regretfully no longer in print. Thankfully, the 1992 Sun Tracks edition of *Woven Stone*, a collection of three books, has kept *Fight Back* in bookstores, classrooms, and in readers' hands, even if it puts a glossy veneer on it. Missed, however, is the large-font dedication to the warriors of the 1680 Pueblo Revolt. Also left out is Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz's preface, which emphasizes connections between the 1680 resistance movement and contemporary struggles addressed by the poetry and prose that followed. Dunbar Ortiz exclaims, "The real heroes of Indian resistance are portrayed here, and, we believe, they would find Popé and other revolutionaries of 1680 very much like themselves, workers fighting for freedom, for liberation and for decent, healthy lives" (n. pga.).

The cover of the 1992 volume does seem appropriate for the collection's title, *Woven Stone*. The beautiful photograph of sinuous, sensuous canyon walls looks peacefully modernist, almost abstract in the manner of Edward Weston. Yet it calls to mind the Depression era quote by photographer Cartier-Bresson: "The whole world is going to pieces and people like Adams and Weston are photographing rocks." The photo naturalizes the title's reference to a wall properly built by ancient workers ("A Story of How a Wall Stands" 145). Hard labor and traditional skills, examples of the human efforts Ortiz emphasizes in these poems, are elided as the photo celebrates the beauty of natural processes.

The original cover of *Fight Back*, as well as the other jagged illustrations by the Acoma artist and activist Maurus Chino, suggests a different idea. The drawings offer rough folk-like depictions of people who suffer and struggle to fight back. The cover illustration sketches a miner bent over, deep in a mine shaft, digging into the earth. The dark red color of the cover evokes the Red Power of Native resistance or the Red of a revolution that challenges the economic structures and the alienated life capitalism has imposed on indigenous cultures. Rather than a poetry chapbook, the original edition feels like an instruction manual for an insurgency or a strategy document hammered out late at night and carried in a worker's back pocket to a picket line.

The new edition gives no original publication date to situate this poetic report. Also, leaving out the 1980 publication date along with the dedication elides the connection between the present call to action and the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. Rather, the record is gentrified through omission, as in the concluding biographical description: "[Ortiz] eloquently expresses the living story of his people, a story often marred by social, political and economic conflicts with Anglo American society." As the poems make clear, the Acoma people and the nation have been much more than "marred." Yet the Sun Tracks edition does keep *Fight Back* alive and available for readers, provides the context of Ortiz's two earlier works, and includes an introduction by Ortiz that offers a courageous account of his life and work. Ortiz here makes a major statement on language, history, art, and politics. Part of that statement, in a section called "Being and Reality," is a dialectical investigation of uranium mining, the immediate struggle that *Fight Back* engages. This mining, Ortiz notes, brought to the area modern corporate industrialism. Because so many were facing unemployment, Pueblo workers provided an inexpensive source of labor (22). Although wage work offered an antidote to poverty, the workers became dependent not just on wages but also on "purchasable satisfaction and comfort" (23). For the Acoma Pueblo, the powerful mining system left them feeling politically eviscerated, powerless to challenge its dominance. "As a young working man... I was angry," Ortiz explains (24). Many people were angry during this time of civil rights struggle, political assassinations, wars of liberation, and oppressed people's "demand for social, economic, and political changes" (25). Linking these struggles, Ortiz sees a long history of fighting back. For Pueblo peoples, that history is embodied in the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. Yet this history, too, is enmeshed in a broader, hemispheric process of challenging "the European urge for domination, compounded by capitalism's quest for profit, which overwhelmed and submerged everything and everyone not only with language, philosophy, behavior, economy, government but with violence and brute force when rhetorical persuasion failed" (29). As a means of continuance, Ortiz in the new introduction calls for a broad vision for indigenous people: "Fighting back is fighting on. . . . It must be a part of every aspect of Native American life and outlook." (31). For his people, the United States is an inescapable context and responsibility because he hopes that Native writing can help the country "to go beyond survival." (33). This is the challenge of Ortiz's writing, *Fight Back* in particular.

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In commemoration of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680
and our warrior Grandmothers and Grandfathers

With this dedication, the 1980 edition of *Fight Back* links the Pueblo Revolt to a continuance of resistance. The original preface by Dunbar Ortiz helps build the connection between the Revolt and the
uranium mine workers’ struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Dunbar Ortiz also published a book on the Revolt’s tercentennial, Roots of Resistance: Land Tenure in New Mexico, 1680–1980. Her introduction and conclusion offer a useful context for Fight Back. Dunbar Ortiz argues that although Spanish conquest had a deep impact on the Pueblos, it was U.S. capitalism that threatened their very survival. Land was the basis for the new U.S. form of colonialism (2). Having had their land turned into a commodity and sold to settlers, the Pueblo people as agricultural producers lost their means of providing for themselves. Instead, they began to serve outside agricultural interests as “a surplus, cheap labor force, dependent on capital for their existence” (5). Similarly, as Kerr-McGee and other corporations developed mines and processing plants, Navajo and Pueblo Indians, having few other options, became an important part of the uranium industry workforce.

Dunbar Ortiz recognizes that social and economic relations to the land are related. A people cannot maintain their culture without the necessary resources to sustain themselves economically. She adds that control of land and water “are related to both resistance to colonialism and cultural integrity” (Roots 128–29). This struggle against colonialism is a class struggle, Dunbar Ortiz argues: “The most powerful corporations in the world, often in collusion with elements in the federal and state governments, extract mineral and other natural resources, as well as the surplus value from cheap labor, reaping fantastic profits and destroying the delicate environment.” The fight against this exploitation has significance not just for the Southwest, Dunbar Ortiz claims, but also for “the national socioeconomic development” (131).

Using a variety of forms, Fight Back makes a similar argument. Ortiz bluntly states that to create change, people need to grasp the underlying causes of injustice. Rather than shadowboxing with superficial manifestations, “they will have to be willing to identify capitalism for what it is, that it is destructive and uncompassionate and deceptive” (361). Not surprisingly, his analysis of the 1680 revolt is in part economic. The people were “commonly impoverished” and “forced to submit to the control of the wealthy.” Their “liberation struggle” successfully expelled “the destroyers and the thieves” (347).

The theivery continued in Ortiz’s father’s generation as the railroads took water and land from the people. This forced a transformation in work and culture as people had to give up traditional agricultural production for wage labor. With the next generation, Ortiz’s, the uranium mines and processing plants became the sites of alienated labor and the cause of the land’s further destruction (343–44). Fight Back comes out of Ortiz’s own experience as a member of the Acoma people, as the son of a railroad maintenance worker, and as a blue-collar worker in the uranium industry.

In considering this work history, Ortiz reaches a broad conclusion:

The American poor and the workers and white middleclass, who are probably the most ignorant of all U.S. citizens, must understand how they, like Indian people, are forced to serve a national interest, controlled by capitalist vested interests in collusion with U.S. policy makers . . . . Only then will there be no more unnecessary sacrifices of our people and land. (361)

Only by having the courage to struggle against these exploiters “will we know what love and compassion are” (363). One of Ortiz’s great strengths is that his work integrates the present experiences of the Pueblo people with both their own history and the dominant socioeconomic structures that have impacted their history. Ortiz creates this poetic, political integration “for the sake of the people, for the sake of the land.”

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Another important strength of Ortiz’s work is the serious attention it gives to work itself and the meanings particular cultures create for it. Focusing with sympathy and respect on working-class characters, Ortiz takes seriously the hardships they experience in changing work situations. Thus he strategically links the Pueblo revolt and the railroad work to the conditions of uranium mining and processing workers. In the preface, Dunbar Ortiz extends the connections even further: “How is it then, that Indians are rarely viewed as workers? . . . [T]he war dancer at the pow wow, the singers around the drum, the Navajo woman in velvet and silver, the AIM speaker, the wise medicine man or woman, all are workers most of their waking hours and most of their lives.” Fight Back clearly presents this perspective of Indians as workers.

Ortiz opens Fight Back with an invocation, “Hanoh Kutsenah/Habtse Kutsenah,” “the People’s fight back is critical” (287, see 293). What follows makes clear why. Yet, before the narrative poems and prose set forth the exploitative working conditions and land use, Ortiz offers a “Mid-America Prayer” (289–90). The title’s reference
is not to geography but to cultural values. The struggle is for the heart of the Acoma Pueblo nation, damaged by the economic values of another nation. Both nations need healing, which will only come by challenging the status quo. For Ortiz, fighting back means "standing again/within and among all things" and being responsible in that relationship (1–2, 21–22). At stake is "the continuance of life" (29). This prayer evokes a necessary cosmic context for daily struggles. Having offered this prayer, the poet rolls up his sleeves and gets to writing about work.

In the opening, Ortiz states, "The songs, stories, poems and advice will always remember/my father, mother, and my people" (287, 3–4). While the whole book can be read as advice about fighting back, the only overt advice given is the father's admonition that his sons should "never work for the railroad" (273). Ortiz followed his father's advice, instead finding work closer to home at a uranium mine and processing plant. The first and longest of the book's two sections, "Too Many Sacrifices," is interspersed with poems in which the son tells his father's story. These justify the advice against the railroad work and remind us that the uranium workers' stories are not isolated but part of a history of systemic exploitation. The fight back, as Ortiz concludes, needs to address more than just immediate grievances.

In recalling his father's experiences, Ortiz presents what Patricia Albers calls "the communicative context of labor and laboring" (112). Albers alerts us to the importance of understanding not just the material conditions of work but also the meanings people give to it; that is, individual experiences are shaped not only by the work conditions of their specific job but also by the ways their communities conceptualize work, consciously and unconsciously. The picture of blue-collar workers and their manual labor in Fight Back has little to do with what we usually see in beer or truck commercials. The "communicative context" does not focus on the camaraderie and authenticity of "real" work as opposed to white-collar office work. Characters do not talk about pride in a job well done or the masculine reassurance of physical strength. Instead, Ortiz opens the section "Too Many Sacrifices" with his father's advice against the "grueling labor" of railroad work.

This theme of alienated labor is picked up again when Ortiz returns to railroad work in "Final Solution: Jobs, Leaving" (318–20) midway through this section. Here too, physical work conditions are described as brutal, but the emphasis has changed because the point of view is no longer that of the workers themselves but of the family members left behind. Work here is a family and community affair. The poem's title and the opening leave-taking evoke the trains of Nazi Germany carrying racial outcasts to the death camps. This comparison makes a harsh indictment. The form of internment, however, is different here. "Surrounded by the United States," the men felt trapped by an increasing need to make money in order to survive (13–14). The poem describes the family consequences of wage labor as fathers traveled to "Utah/California/Idaho/Oregon" to make a so-called living. For the children, their fathers' leaving "seemed always, always, so final" (3). The paradoxical repetition emphasizes a child's limited perspective. Some, though, never did return as a result of work-related deaths or because of desertion when the silence and anger of those they left behind became too much to bear. The father's letter home reaches the lesson of "Mid-American Prayer," that the family should be "in a relationship that is responsible" (Fast 171). Yet the following lines of the poem about the father's failings make clear how difficult the separation makes this.

The poem's collage of voices and styles captures the range of emotions the wives experienced: hatred, hope, longing, and desperation—all registered in the silence of repression. "Final Solution" concludes with a short history lesson, the moral of the story: the women would wait again for weeks or months but never again for years. Ortiz brings up the theme of waiting again in Fight Back's second and final section, "No More Sacrifices." Writing about the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, he states, "It took years of tolerance before it became crucial to organize resistance—a liberation struggle—against the oppressor" (347). Yet Ortiz's point is that the waiting needs to end; it is time to fight back. The people must depend on their own strength, the poem concludes: "The woman anger and courage risen as the People's voice again" (320), "again" because it has happened before.

Two poems near the end of "Too Many Sacrifices" offer alternative, generational responses to the call for action of "Final Solution." The poem "Mama's and Daddy's Words" (329–30) seems an earnest but muddled response. Mama's words, if we can find them, are certainly different from the "woman anger and courage" of "Final Solution." The poem reads more like the father's justification for his generation's strategy of resistance than an exhortation to the next. The list of jobs the speaker (singular) has done, combined with his words of wisdom, "But you have to fight/by working" (19–20), seem an easy and common criticism of the young for their unwillingness to work hard like their fathers. In response to "back breaking/. . . low pay[ing]" work and racist conditions, the speaker only offers more work as a solution.
The goal is "that they'll learn" (34). The "they," like the "them" earlier in the poem ("hard / to put up with them" 15-16), presumably refers to those who make the racist comments and create the harsh working conditions. By working responsibly, even if at bottom-level jobs, Indian workers will challenge stereotypes and teach people the positive truths about themselves, the poem suggests. Even if dressed up as "work[ing] for the People and the Land" (24), which the railroad job must have been for many Acoma workers, this seems a naive and passive strategy in light of the next generation's Red Power movement and AIM (American Indian Movement) confrontations. One might read "Mama's and Daddy's Words" as a gentle critique of the past generation. Yet the poem's use of the Acoma language and hortatory earnestness seems inconsistent with this interpretation. The poem's disjunction may register Ortiz's respect for the sacrifices his family and many others had to make while also questioning their strategy of resistance. Doing your best at work and then waiting for change is not enough, yet we must recognize that the blame for waiting falls much more heavily on the system that entrapped their father's generation than on the men themselves. Nevertheless, Ortiz recognizes that more direct ways of fighting back are necessary.

The following poem, "Returning It Back, You Will Go On," does actively challenge economic exploitation by presenting a Native alternative (330-31). The broad indictment of land theft and abuse reaches from corporations and companies to the people who work in them, "all of them—all of America" (20). For Ortiz, they all are guilty. In contrast to U.S. exploitation of land and people, the speaker calls for a return to traditional relationships based on reciprocity. The theme of fighting back returns as the conclusion presents the consequences of failing to change exploitative practices. In warning us of the future, this conclusion suggests an explanation for present conditions. Jails are full of Indians because they have been exploited and excluded. The implicit solution is not merely individual responsibility—although one imagines Ortiz would not deny that—but a reversal of the theft perpetrated by all Americans (26-28). Systemic problems require systemic changes. In the last lines, the city jail becomes a metaphor for the repressive regimes that control American Indians. Echoing the biblical language of resurrection to new life and using the grammatical certainty of prophecy, the poem concludes, "They will have risen" (54). Risen, that is, from their oppressor's jails to fight back. That, rather than waiting, will save the people.

With this same confident spirit, Ortiz returns to his father in the next poem, "This Song: Beating the Heartbeat" (332-33). It is the last narrative before the final incantation of "Too Many Sacrifices." These concluding poems emphasize the economic exploitation, work abuses, family struggles, and loss of land that make the fight back an economic and cultural necessity. "This Song" places the struggle in a cosmic context. No longer struggling under oppressive work conditions, the father now faces something more elemental, his journey "back north." Through the modern technology of an oscilloscope, the speaker links his father's life to his own and to the "continuing earth life." The concluding lines of this poem and the next echo the prophetic certainty of the ending to "Returning It Back." Its repetition of "They will have risen" becomes, in these poems, "We shall know living." This link also gives the title, "Returning It Back, You Will Go On," a new personal meaning as the son anticipates his father's death.

The final poem, "It Will Come; It Will Come," asserts that "we shall have victory" (18). Opening with the sacrifices made by railroad workers, "Too Many Sacrifices" closes with a song of continuance that echoes traditional chants. The poems describing the father's generation focus less on the immediate experience of hard physical labor, low wages, or bad bosses than on the effects of leaving the Acoma community because their families must participate in a money economy. The work results in anger, but from the worker's wives rather than from the workers themselves. This is the background and context for the next generation's experience of work. Uranium mining and processing exacerbated the exploitation of the Acoma land and people as work became available, for better and for worse, much closer to home. Different work situations resulted in new meanings or conceptualizations for the Indian working class who earned their living at the bottom of the uranium industry. Although Ortiz himself spent eighteen months doing this work, these poems also seldom dwell on specific work conditions. Instead, they narrate changing cultural conditions that result from the impositions of this new industry. The social context is different for this generation as well. It witnessed the traumas and victories of the civil rights movement, registered the divisive impact of the Vietnam War, and experienced the dramatic shifts taking place in U.S. culture. Yet beneath these generational experiences and changing work conditions remained the Acoma culture, changing with the times yet rooted in its tradition and its land.

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Ortiz provides social context for his generation in an autobiographical essay "Always the Stories," written four years after Fight Back. Like
the other Acoma, Laguna, and Navajo uranium workers, he too was hired as “cheap labor” because his family was poor, the mines were on or near their land, and few other work options were available (67). Writing about his experience twenty years later, Ortiz explains, he created a book that “is a political statement in thrust, nature and intent. ... Its viewpoints, perceptions, ideas are expressed in the spirit of the protest, resistance, political literature of the Civil Rights–Third World–Vietnam War years” (67). In Fight Back he fulfills what he later asserts is Native writers’ “responsibility to advocate for their people’s self-government, sovereignty, and control of land and natural resources” (“Towards a Native Indian Literature” 68).

While the poems about Ortiz’s father’s work for the railroad give historical backround for the political work of Fight Back, the ones about Native uranium industry workers make up the bulk of “Too Many Sacrifices.” They engage two related issues, exploitation and resistance. Around each is a cluster of ideas addressed in the poems. The narrative poems of “Too Many Sacrifices” link economic and social exploitation, or class and race, often through stories of individual actions embedded in social structures. “Ray’s Story” is an example (299–303). By invoking the narrator rather than the protagonist, the title calls attention to its “communicative context” (Albers 112) and alerts us to the complexity of this seemingly straightforward account. In presenting within a layered narrative the details of the protagonist Lacey’s job, Ortiz reveals the competing meanings different groups give to his working conditions.

Details make clear that Lacey is stuck in a bottom rung, dead-end job that is unhealthy, dirty, and dangerous. Ray has heard the story about Lacey and is retelling it to another Indian worker who doesn’t know the details of ore processing but does understand exploitative work conditions. For example, Ray notes that the company report may or may not have stated Lacey’s cause of death, yet either way, he assumes his listener knows the real causes. He is killed while operating an ore-crushing machine because the shift foreman is driven by production demands, the safety engineer is caught in a system of complicity, the company values profits above worker safety, and because Lacey is an Indian. To the foreman and the “guys on shift afterwards,” Lacey is only identified as an Indian (152, 140). Actually he is not even that; to them he is just a good story. Their version comfortably reduces the exploitation and real suffering of Ray’s story to a crude sexual joke.

These non-Indians’ attitude toward an Indian worker’s death ironically underscores the dehumanization they themselves experience as workers. Even if some receive better pay, work structures reduce them all to parts of a crushing machine (“appendages to the machine” is Karl Marx’s telling phrase) that do the machine’s bidding. Yet, by distinguishing themselves racially, rather than as workers with interests different from the corporation’s, these non-Indian workers disguise their own oppression. Their easy racism makes it easier for them to justify their complicity and thus for the company to keep workers like Lacey at the bottom, the ones who get killed or more ruthlessly exploited.

Everyday racism, however, usually has less overtly destructive consequences in these poems. It grinds more finely. While not directly telling a story about work, “Out to Tsaille Lake” (304–6) shows that attitudes expressed at work are pervasive in society. It also suggests that Indian camaraderie can include worker solidarity. Ortiz masterfully uses ordinary details to capture everyday racism. When the speaker asks a friendly question of a couple, the woman builds a racial barrier as she calms down the “little white dog” by saying that “it’s just an Indian” (5, 8). The man then abruptly states that they saw “a terrible wreck” on the way to the lake. Assuming it was only “some Indians,” the man had felt no obligation to help, although there was “no ambulance in sight” (14, 16). “Don’t fret yourself” (23), the woman tells the dog as they continue fishing on this reservation lake.

The speaker of “Out to Tsaille Lake” recognizes the conventional racism of the couple; he has apparently heard it all before and makes no response. His silence is his form of resistance. The Indian speaker in “First Hard Core” (306) experiences silence differently because he still has lessons to learn about confronting this country’s racism. He has no answer to the racist assertions of his fellow worker Herb. He concludes his monologue by saying, “I just felt powerless to answer. /I just said I didn’t know” (59–60). Knowledge, however, is not the speaker’s problem since he knows that he wants to tell Herb that their mining jobs depend on his people’s land having been stolen. Rather, the speaker is silenced, Ortiz implies, because behind Herb’s hard-core racism is a whole system to be attacked. The racist and exploitative structures that give Herb the unconscious confidence, the assumed sense of superiority, to ask his questions are the forces that silence the young Indian speaker.

We see manifestations of the same cultural assumptions in “To Change in a Good Way” (308–16), which links Kerr-McGee’s “screw[ing] those folks in New Mexico” to colonialist stories about folks in the past doing their duty “fighting off Indians to build
homes/on new land so we could live the way/we are right now, advanced and safe” (286, 262–67). The resistance against corporate exploitation is complicated by the fact that the folks back home do not see the connection between racial and economic exploitation, just as the non-Indian workers at the uranium processing plant didn’t in “Ray’s Story.” In fact Indians too, Ortiz acknowledges, can be blinded by stereotypes. “Stuff: Chickens and Bombs” makes this clear as the narrator is smartly awakened from his assumptions about backcountry whites (320).

One of the most powerful poems in the book, “What I Mean” also engages the struggle to express oneself while facing racial and economic exploitation (326). “Agee, I don’t mean that Agee,” is Ortiz’s sly opening line. With it he brings in the irony of James Agee’s title *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*, along with the memory of Walker Evans’s photographs of destitute Alabama sharecroppers, trapped and exploited by a different version of the same economic system. Maybe because the Agee of the poem is a dropout from a “real American way” high school (18) and so did not have his spirit crushed by it, he is not afraid to speak out in the heart of white working-class country. Inconuously named Grandma’s Café, this place is avoided by the speaker, an apparent high school graduate. To him the café was not a safe place for Indians. With a sharp jab at an old stereotype, Ortiz’s speaker states:

We didn’t talk much.
Some people say Indians are like that,
Shy and reserved and polite,
But that’s mostly crap. Lots of times
We were just plain scared
And we kept our mouths shut. (48–53)

They had a lot to say about stolen Acoma land, the poem explains, but they feared for their safety.

In the introduction to the 1992 Sun Tracks edition, Ortiz offers a biographical explanation of this silence: the power of the dominant society’s hegemony to silence the people it exploits. Eviscerating the resistance of the oppressed, this hegemony creates in them a belief that they lack control over their lives. Ortiz returns to this problem of control throughout the essay. As a young person, he found the outside world intimidating. “It was a Mexicano world where people were well off and in control,” while the Acoma people were poor and, so they were told, had to be taken care of by the government (11). An outsider to the world of power and plenty, Ortiz grew up dreaming of “being respected and looked up to, being successful and rich” (16). He came to know the colonizing society better than his own colonized, indigenous culture (20); it was the only way of satisfying “this hunger for a semblance of control” (23). The speaker’s fear in “What I Mean,” his avoidance of the non-Indian workers at Grandma’s Café, results from this systemic repression: “In an America . . . overwhelmingly present every day, in every social, political, cultural, economic psychological way, it’s hard not to feel as if you’re confronting a reality that’s so powerful you can’t expect it to recognize you” (26).

And yet as Agee’s experiences suggest, hegemonic power is not absolute. Ortiz situates the poem during the uranium workers’ strike of 1961. The “hero” is talking to the workers in the café about a union contract. Agee is the one who sees beyond the individual job that pays the bills. Because this makes him dangerous to the company, “they” have him killed. This is an Indian version of the Joe Hill story, and the message is similar. “What I Mean” becomes “what we mean” (105, 114) as the speaker sees a common structure of exploitation in workers’ and Indians’ struggles, in the resistance of “just another worker, just another Indian” (101–2).

Similar to “What I Mean,” many of the poems about uranium workers recognize that Indians are part of a larger workforce caught up in a common struggle. However, Ortiz does not minimize differences. “Starting at the Bottom” exposes the economically useful discrimination that keeps Indians in that position, just as “Ray’s Story” did. Ortiz also recognizes that unions did not care any more than the company about Indian workers or issues (8–12). Yet, if that alienation leads to arrests for drunkenness and disorderly conduct so that the city jails become full of Indians, “Affirmative Action” suggests that the problems have broadened to oppressed workers from many ethnic groups (303). “Indians Sure Came in Handy” (296–97), Ortiz explains, as the mining corporations, in collaboration with the legal system, used jailed Indians to beat the unions and avoid the expense of creating safe working conditions. These Indians are part of the workforce Agee tries to organize during the strike of 1961. Without worker solidarity that included Indians, the town “just kept on booming” while workers were trampled.

Agee’s death, or murder one might say, suggests the difficulty of creating organized, multiethnic resistance to the dominant power. Yet “To Change in a Good Way” offers hope for solidarity on a personal level, which is a beginning. Based on friendship, support, and
merely for a more equitable capitalism offering a higher economic standard of living. Libretti explains, “Here we can see the overlap of Marx and Ortiz in their valorizing of a qualitative wealth over quantitative monetary wealth and in their focus on imagining a world that genuinely serves people, in a way capitalism clearly does not, by recognizing their connection with both the land and others” (177).

Both Marx and Ortiz help us imagine alternatives to the status quo. Native people, too often unrecognized as part of the working class, can offer others “the historical memory of an unalienated relationship with the land.” Ortiz provides this in the poem’s descriptions of the “material well being and spiritual integrity” of traditional Acoma society (Libretti 183). This vision is not an ideal projected into the future but a historical memory. Ortiz’s presentation of that memory offers a “catalog of what the American poor and working class need to see, understand, and do” (183).

In presenting histories of water and of labor that represent a double-edged alienation, “No More Sacrifices” offers an elaboration of the narratives making up the first section of Fight Back. It provides historical analysis of the changes Acoma people have experienced. Structural causes are presented for the more individualized experiences described earlier. The “otherness” the speaker feels has its source in a series of representative social dislocations: foreign geographical names mark outsiders’ claims to Indian land, museums and parks colonize Indian culture, natural springs that are now dry wells represent the depletion of life-sustaining resources, and strangers welcomed to the community have exploited the hospitality offered.

In the face of these different forms of destruction, Ortiz courageously raises the troubling question: Why haven’t the people revolted against the U.S. intruders as they did against the Spanish (348)? Since change has always been part of Acoma culture, why have “the people [become] bewildered and often helpless and, at best, [are] only able to cope inadequately” with this new colonial power (351)? Ortiz explains that instead of revolting, they “blamed themselves” (347). The problem is that the people “could not name an enemy” (348). He, however, does name names as he analyzes this new colonialism: “The Aacquumeh hano [Acoma people] had never seen thieves like the Mericano before. They were so shrewd, talkative, even helpful, and so friendly they didn’t look like thieves. . . . This Aacquumeh hano like other Indians across the nation were in the hands of a ruthless, monopolistic U.S. empire” (347-48).
Similarly, Dunbar Ortiz states, “The US was the first and perhaps the only state ever formed for the sole purpose of capital accumulation” (*Indians* 278), and that this “accumulation” was dependent on land as a commodity (*Indians*, *Roots* 2). The reservation system, the Allotment Act, and the Indian Wars were all part of the process of “claim[ing] eminent domain,” Ortiz writes (350). The economics of land as a commodity, embedded in capitalism’s relentless drive for profit, has been the basis for expropriation and exploitation of Indian land. Whether it was the railroads, the Atomic Energy Commission, or the mining corporations who took the land, the U.S. government has been in collusion with them (354–55). This continuing appropriation of Indian land and resources left less and less room for traditional subsistence agriculture and the culture it sustained. As a result, wage labor became increasingly necessary for the Acoma people, with farreaching, disorienting, and destructive consequences (351). The earlier poems offer specific examples of these consequences. Here Ortiz generalizes the personal and communal consequences of taking jobs in the uranium industry (357–58). In the *Woven Stone* Sun Tracks edition of *Fight Back*, Ortiz extends this story by a decade; as the uranium market dropped, workers were laid off. Downstream from the mines, people lacked water for the little agriculture that remained and had only contaminated drinking water for themselves (363).

The lesson Ortiz presents is not just for the Acoma people or Southwestern Indians. The same system of “economic, social, and political forces” that threaten Indian survival and quality of life “will surely destroy others” (360). In a sense, Indians are canaries in the U.S. mine. Because their widespread poverty and special political status make them particularly vulnerable, Native peoples provide an early warning of a broader systems failure. Thus, as Ortiz asserts, all U.S. people need to understand that their own fate is bound up with the fate of Native peoples. In order to fight back, all must recognize the economic structures of capitalism, “destructive and uncompassionate and deceptive,” with their profound social and cultural effects. They must see that so-called national interests are actually capitalist interests that exploit rather than support them (361). For recognizing this, Native people’s historical memory is crucial in providing both a lesson in what our capitalist system can do to all of us and an example of a lived alternative. By understanding and then accepting responsibility for our understanding, Ortiz insists, we make the decision to fight back (363).

* * *

While *Fight Back* has been recognized as Ortiz’s most overtly political work, its politics have received little specific attention from critics. Their analysis has tended to do for the book what the *Woven Stone* edition does—make it more respectable and less provocative. Recognizing the political limits of much criticism of Native literature, Eric Cheyfitz uses Robert M. Nelson’s essay in the *Handbook of Native American Literature* as an example of critics’ failure to see Ortiz as an “anticolonialist” writer. Nelson “explicitly separat[es] the political from the cultural, centering the latter while marginalizing the former” (97). This typical strategy begins with the false contrast Nelson creates between Dunbar Ortiz’s preface, “an ideologically Marxist reading,” and Ortiz’s resistance, which Nelson sees as “maintaining and promulgating the old ways, of preserving life in the oral traditional way” (Nelson 486). Cheyfitz rightly argues that Nelson is separating (and thus distorting) “two forces that Ortiz unites, oral tradition and contemporary politics” (98).

Reacting against Nelson’s type of criticism, Craig Womack states in *Red on Red*: “I will seek a literary criticism that emphasizes Native resistance movements against colonialism, confronts racism, discusses sovereignty and Native nationalism, seeks connections between literature and liberation struggles, and, finally, roots literature in land and culture” (11). This criticism refuses to draw a line between Native traditions and politics: “[S]pirituality without politics appropriates belief systems without taking responsibility for human liberation” (53). Robert Warrior makes a similar demand, explaining that while Indian literature has engaged the wider world and “continues to push the boundaries of creativity, ... criticism has remained, by and large, content with the narrowest, most parochializing foci” (xx).

*Fight Back* exemplifies that expanded literary horizon. Our reading must engage the political themes Ortiz addresses through narratives, analysis, self-reflection, and prophetic pronouncement. The struggle for the land and the people is, Ortiz explains in his next book, “very spiritual and its manifestation is economic, political, and social” (*from Sand Creek* 54). In *Fight Back* Ortiz emphasizes economic structures. As Dunbar Ortiz explains in her work on land tenure, “Without economic viability there is no assured social and cultural integrity” (*Roots* 28). It is a necessary part of the “our struggle ... for the continuance of life” (“Mid-American Prayer,” *Fight Back* 290).

**Notes**

1. Ortiz in this work uses “Aacqu” rather than “Acoma.” The biography at the end of *Woven Stone* describes him as “a native of Acoma Pueblo.” In *Acoma: Pueblo in the Sky*, a semiofficial history, Ward Alan Minge explains, “the elders claim that the word ‘Acoma’—along with
other spellings that are equally correct and historically applicable, including Acoma, Acro, Acro, Acue, and Ako—all denote a “place that always was” (1). For the sake of simplicity, I use the most common term “Acoma” throughout the article.

2. Unless otherwise noted, references to Fight Back are from Woven Stone, the most readily available edition of this work, and are cited by page number in the text.

3. Richard Naizinger’s “Transnational Energy Corporations and American Development”; Peter H. Eichstaedt’s If You Poison Us: Uranium and Native Americans; and Ward Churchill’s “A Breach of Trust: The Radioactive Colonization of Native North America” are useful sources of information about Native Americans and the uranium industry.

4. Indian Country Today ran an editorial on Felix Cohen’s “famous comparison of American Indians to ‘miner’s canary.’” Cohen wrote, “It is a pity that so many Americans today think of the Indian as a romantic or comic figure in American history without contemporary significance. In fact, the Indian plays much the same role in our society that the Jews played in Germany.”

5. Another exception, along with Libretti’s essay, is Norma C. Wilson’s chapter on Ortiz.

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Eichstaedt, Peter H. If You Poison Us: Uranium and Native Americans. Santa Fe, NM: Red Crane, 1994.


