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Détournement, Decolonization, and the American Indian Occupation of Alcatraz Island (1969–1971)

Casey Ryan Kelly

Abstract

On November 20, 1969, eighty-nine American Indians calling themselves the “Indians of All Tribes” (IOAT) invaded Alcatraz Island. The group’s founding proclamation was addressed to “the Great White Father and All His People,” and declared “We, the Native Americans, reclaim the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians by right of discovery” (2). Tongue-in-cheek, the IOAT offered to purchase Alcatraz Island for “twenty-four dollars in glass beads and red clothe.” In this essay, I illustrate how the IOAT engaged in a rhetoric of *détournement*, or a subversive misappropriation of dominant discourse that disassembles and imitates texts until they clearly display their oppressive qualities. I argue that the Proclamation established a textual framework that calls for a skeptical and irreverent reading of dominant discourse. I conclude that strategic *détournements* suture dominant discourses to the moniker of colonialism and invite sympathetic audiences to engage in decolonization.

On November 20, 1969 a group of eighty-nine American Indians calling themselves the “Indians of All Tribes” (IOAT) invaded the iconic island-prison of Alcatraz. Upon landing, the activists read aloud a proclamation in front of an audience of journalists and television cameras that was addressed to “the Great White Father and All His People.” The proclamation declared “We, the Native Americans, reclaim the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians by right of discovery” (2). IOAT explained that Alcatraz was an ideal location because it “resembles most Indian reservations”: it lacked running water, sanitation, transportation, minerals, industry, agriculture, and educational facilities (2); thus, the island’s restoration would be “fitting and symbolic” of “the great lands once ruled by free and noble Indians” (2). With tongue-in-cheek, the island’s new occupants offered the federal government a “fair and honorable” treaty by which the group would purchase Alcatraz Island for “twenty-four dollars in glass beads and red clothe” (2). The Proclamation’s reading was accompanied by insurrectional performances: protestors running through the cell blocks, drumming in the exercise yard, chants of “Red Power,” boatloads of Indians evading a naval blockade, and graffiti tags reading “you are on Indian land!” (Noxon). Concomitant with their reclamation of the island, the IOAT coopted and redeployed the language used by the U.S. federal government to dispossess, assimilate, or exterminate American Indians.

The occupation of Alcatraz Island (1969–1971) transformed American Indian activism by crafting a compelling image of Indian militants seizing land from the government and re-appropriating the dominant language of American colonialism.¹ As Paul Chaat Smith argues, the Alcatraz occupation “changed the rules of Indian activism” because “it showed that Indians from all walks of life were far angrier than anyone thought and more willing to use militant forms of protest previously thought to be ‘un-Indian’” (131). After Alcatraz, “street fighting, bravado, and apocalyptic rhetoric became the signature of the movement’s leaders” (131). The event attracted thousands of Indians and sympathizers nationwide.² The occupation also inspired a wave of takeovers at Plymouth Rock, Mt. Rushmore, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Fort Lawton, and Wounded Knee. This watershed event directed the political energies of a resurgent Indian community away from gradualism toward more ambitious demands, including the return of stolen lands and the preservation of Native culture (Bruynell; Smith and Warrior; Teuton).

The IOAT’s founding Proclamation exemplified the movement’s creative response to the legacy of American colonialism. The group enacted a comic parody of the Euro-American conquest of North America, claiming the island by “right of discovery” and offering to tutor Euro-Americans in the superior ways of their civilization. This essay argues that these humorous inversions invited like-minded audiences to adopt an anti-colonial stance of irreverence and suspicion toward Euro-American political discourse. I contend that the IOAT proclamation elaborates on a legacy of Native decolonization rhetoric. Scholarship on Native resistance rhetoric illustrates how American Indians have both creatively frustrated the process of colonization (Black, “Benevolence,” “Decolonization”; Dennis; Palczewski; Morris and Wander; Sanchez and Stuckey; Strickland) and enacted indigenous community (Lake “Enacting,” “Myth”). Randy Lake argues that Native resistance rhetoric is *consummatory*: a ritualistic form of community self-address that affirms American Indian worldviews. Several other scholars have shown how Native resistance rhetoric responds to Euro-American amnesia concerning Indian history and culture (Black “Decay”; Kelly “Counterinsurgency,” “Orwellian”; Meister and Burnett; Sanchez and Stuckey). Danielle Endres’s

recent examination of the Free [Leonard] Peltier movement suggests that American Indian activism is often a synthesis of consummatory and instrumental appeals and is directed at both Indian and non-Indian audiences (“Audience”). Endres implores critics to rethink explaining the function of Native resistance rhetoric through an artificial binary of internal/constitutive or external/instrumental. Instead, critics should consider how rhetorical enactments of Native community comingle with textual maneuvers that prepare audiences for radical thought and subversive action.

Taking a cue from Endres, this study examines how subversive appropriations of Euro-American texts prompts American Indian audiences to engage in the intellectual process of decolonization. Examining the IOAT founding proclamation, I argue that the group’s rhetoric invited sympathetic audiences to metaphorically “occupy” Euro-American texts in a manner that mirrored the act of physical occupation. I illustrate how the IOAT engaged in a rhetoric of *détournement*, a subversive *misappropriation* of dominant discourse designed to disassemble and imitate texts until they clearly display their oppressive qualities. I argue that the text established a framework for reading dominant discourse with deep skepticism and irreverence. Here, strategic *détournements* sutured dominant discourses to the moniker of colonialism and, therefore, invited movement adherents to engage in an ongoing process of anti-colonial critique.

The IOAT Proclamation exemplifies the radical potential of *détournement*. Leading up to the occupation, movement leaders emphasized the importance of collectively reading the key texts used in defense of colonialism to expose their contradictions (a practice used in some of the first Native American studies courses taught at Berkeley) (Talbot 106). Beyond pedagogical purposes, this practice encouraged American Indian students to think creatively about the past and future of Indian self-determination. In much the same way that occupants illegally repurposed territory, their rhetoric commandeered authoritative Euro-American texts and redirected them to make an argument against colonialism. I conclude that *détournement* is a rhetorical practice that enacts the symbolic process of decolonization, a near imperative for American Indian cultural survival in a neocolonial age. More generally, *détournement* is a subversive rhetorical device that invites audiences to adopt comic skepticism toward hegemonic texts.

Native Resistance and “The Rock”

The American Indian protests movements of the 1960s and 1970s emerged in response to renewed assaults on tribal sovereignty. By 1953, Congress and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) abandoned New Deal-era support for self-determination and renewed their emphasis on terminating federally recognized tribes. “Termination” disbanded Indian nations, removed assistance and legal exemptions, and overrode treaty-guaranteed land rights (Fixico; Wilkinson, *Blood*). Tribal resistance was frustrated by congressional supporters who employed the rhetoric of American liberalism to redefine termination as part of a “civil rights” agenda (Kelly “Orwellian”; Phillips; Rosier). Congress and the BIA argued that Indians should be governed by the Constitution and that treaties were archaic documents that did not authorize or establish Indian sovereignty.

To facilitate assimilation, the BIA established programs to relocate Indians to major U.S. cities. San Francisco became home to the largest and most diverse Indian community in the US

(approximately 20,000 by 1964) (Albon 303). Many Indians found themselves in ghettos where most housing was substandard and employment scarce. Although the BIA did not intentionally locate tribal members in close proximity, relocation contributed to the rise of over forty pan-tribal organizations in the Bay Area by 1964 (Johnson, *Occupation* 13–14). As a result, San Francisco Indians began to identify one another and organize coordinated political activity (Nagel 118). Elsewhere, American Indian groups mobilized against termination-era policies. In 1964, Indian groups participated in a series of “fish-ins” in the Pacific Northwest to protest state encroachments on Native fishing rights (Johnson, *Occupation*). In 1968 Dennis Banks, Clyde Bellecourt, George Mitchell, and several others founded the American Indian Movement (AIM) in Minneapolis. AIM opened Indian survival schools and staged protests at abandoned military facilities, national parks, and the BIA.

Prior to 1969, most Indian protests were local or tribally oriented (Johnson, “Roots”). The struggle over Alcatraz Island was the first to garner sustained national media attention and pan-tribal support (Johnson; Champagne; and Nagel). Following the federal penitentiary’s closing in 1963, American Indian organizations submitted a series of development proposals to the General Services Administration.³ The group’s efforts were overshadowed by billionaire Lamar Hunt’s plan to turn the island into a luxury casino-resort (Smith and Warrior 11–12). From 1964 to 1969, Bay Area activists intensified their struggle over Alcatraz, transforming it from a local issue into a galvanizing symbol of resistance. During this period, they attempted two separate occupations of Alcatraz. The first occurred in 1964 when a group of Sioux Indians filed a petition with the GSA asserting title to Alcatraz based on a provision in the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty that gave the Sioux nation the right to occupy abandoned federal facilities (Johnson and Nagel). The government determined that the treaty only enumerated the rights of Red Cloud’s people on Sioux land. Spearheaded by Richard Oakes and other student leaders, Bay Area Indian organizations planned a second occupation for the summer of 1970. A fire at the San Francisco Indian center on October 10, 1969 created a sense of urgency to move up the occupation to November. On November 9, Oakes and a group of supporters chartered a boat to circle and symbolically reclaim the island. Oakes jumped off the boat and swam over two hundred yards to the island, followed by loyal supporters who spent the night on the island before being removed by police. After returning to the mainland, Oakes traveled to Los Angeles to organize a larger occupation of the island. On November 20, Oakes and the newly anointed “Indians of All Tribes” landed on Alcatraz and declared it their own.

Decolonization, *Détournement*, and Radical Irreverence

Appropriation is a rhetorical technique well documented in scholarship on Native resistance rhetoric (Black “Decolonization”; Dennis; Ganter; Strickland). Here I suggest that the IOAT elaborated on this tactic by utilizing a mocking form of *misappropriation* whereby fragments of Euro-American political texts were redeployed in a manner that not only exposed their service to colonialism but also demonstrated that such texts should not be seriously engaged. In other words, the incongruent, counterintuitive, and savvy misuse of coveted Euro-American discourses symbolically dismantled the texts most often cited as justifications for dispossession and assimilation.

For the IOAT, analyzing colonialism was essential to understanding the present dynamics of American Indians' relationship to Euro-American society. Vine Deloria Jr. explained that during this period Indian activists were "exploring the old legal doctrines, the cultural attitudes of themselves and white society, and the history of peoples of the world to find an answer to the present confusion" (*Trail* 249). Indians who developed their political ideology in the first American Indian studies programs at San Francisco State College, UC Berkeley, and UCLA constituted the IOAT leadership. Courses on Indian history and law armed the occupants with oppositional interpretations of canonical American texts, including the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and federal Indian treaties. Returning to early histories of U.S. colonialism enabled the occupants to draw parallels between nineteenth-century policies such as Indian removal and the present course of Indian affairs (Allen; Teuton). The island's oppressive history and barren features made Alcatraz an ideal staging ground for reframing American Indian resistance as part of a much larger struggle for indigenous decolonization.

As both critical praxis and methodology, decolonization maintains that the pernicious effects of colonialism continue to hinder indigenous self-determination (Alfred; Miller; Rifkin; Smith, *Decolonizing*; Smith, "Unexpected"; Wilson, *Remember*). As Jeffrey Shepard explains, colonialism is both a historically specific "material" phenomenon as well as a set of lingering "ideological manifestations," which help rationalize "the physical expropriation of resources from Indigenous lands and the controlling of Indigenous peoples themselves" (18). Neocolonialism, then, reveals this enduring yet refashioned form of colonialism, an opaque mentality masked within contemporary discourse that functions as a symbolic instrument for subjugating indigenous peoples (Buescher and Ono; Ono; Kelly, "Neocolonialism"). While colonization is exemplified by the physical appropriation of a people's land and labor and the direct suppression of Native language, religion, and culture, "rhetorical colonialism" encompasses a vast symbolic repertoire for dominating indigenous peoples (Black, "Decay"; Endres, "Nuclear"; Shome; Stuckey and Murphy). Scholarship on rhetorical colonialism suggests that dominant discourses of race and nationhood remain so saturated with implicit colonialist assumptions that they continue to justify imperialism.

Decolonization, then, is both a critical methodology for reading texts in the context of colonialism and a strategic rhetoric adopted by subaltern resistance movements. Decolonization is part of a postcolonial project that seeks to critique and dismantle the enduring architecture of Western modernity that continues to subjugate indigenous histories, knowledge, and ways of life (Bhabha; Champagne; Hasian; Smith "Unexpected," Wanzer). Waziyatawin Angela Wilson and Michael Yellow Bird define decolonization as "the intelligent, calculated, and active resistance to the forces of colonialism that perpetuate[s] the subjugation and/or exploitation of our minds, bodies, and lands" (5). Linda Smith adds that "transforming our colonized views of our own history (as written by the West) ... requires us to revisit, site by site, our history under Western eyes. This in turn requires a theory or approach which helps us to engage with, understand and then act upon history" (*Decolonizing* 37). A decolonial approach to rhetoric positions critics to both critique imperial discourse and heed the voices of subaltern groups whose silence perpetuates colonization. This essay's turn to the rhetoric of the IOAT demonstrates how the inventional strategies and tactics

employed by subaltern communities against dominant discourses illuminates what is central to the postcolonial project: how colonialism can be “undone and redone” (Shome and Hegde 205).

In rhetorical studies, decolonization offers a significant contribution because it bridges disparate approaches to the textual criticism of social movements. First, decolonization challenges the presumed distinction between criticism that approaches texts with an emphasis on the canon of rhetorical techniques that might be used in the future production of texts (classical) and criticism that approaches texts with an eye toward interpreting their symbolic meaning (contemporary). In response to disciplinary histories that divides these two approaches, Michael Leff embraced the prospect of hermeneutical rhetoric as a conceptual bridge that “focuses upon interpretation as a source of invention and suggests how traditions can be altered without destroying their identity” (204). In other words, texts and criticism alike represent interpretive acts that simultaneously explicate meaning while they provide inventional resources for the production of future political rhetoric. This essay illustrates the value of hermeneutical rhetoric by explicating how *détournement* is both an inventional resource directed toward the production of anti-colonial texts and a reinterpretation of historic texts. Understanding *détournement* as a bridge between production and interpretation also demonstrates how decolonization functions as a mode of resistance and a critical methodology. Adopting decolonization as an interpretive strategy for Native resistance rhetoric reveals how ever-evolving rhetorical strategies of appropriation invite new ways of conceptualizing Native sovereignty.

By examining how subaltern communities have spoken back to governmental discourses, critics have elaborated a conceptual orientation useful for understanding modes of resistance (e.g., Black “Benevolence,” “Decolonization”; Dennis; Ganter; Hoxie; LaRocque; Morris “Deloria”; Strickland; Turner). In practice, rhetorics of resistance in which indigenous communities redeploy dominant discourses against colonization to expose the government’s hypocrisy exemplify a decolonizing impulse (Black “Decolonization” 71). Jason Edward Black’s study of Native anti-removal discourses reveals a long, inventive, and radical rhetorical tradition of American Indians working within and against the “master’s language.”⁴ For instance, Southeastern Indian nations appropriated and inverted discourses of territoriality, republicanism, paternalism, and godly authority to argue that removal violated the ethos of America’s founders. Demonstrating greater fidelity to paternalistic protection and divine providence, Indian nations redirected removal discourses against their Euro-American proponents. Matthew Dennis’s and Granville Ganter’s analysis of Red Jacket’s rhetoric illustrates how the Seneca (and American Indians) thwarted offers to purchase land by appropriating and subversively imitating the normative values of Euro-American public culture. Performing his best impression of George Washington, Red Jacket embodied civic virtue as he decolonized the discourses of predatory land companies and the federal government.

Of course, appropriation, parody, and juxtaposition are critical techniques familiar in rhetorical studies. Kenneth Burke’s “perspectives by incongruity” explores the rhetorical power of juxtaposing two seemingly disparate concepts or texts to reveal unsuspected connections and create new interpretations (309). Rhetorical scholarship on concepts such as appropriation (Butler; Shugart), parody (Achter; Hariman), irony (Parker; Terrill), and mimesis (Morris, “Educating”;

Wilson, “Imitation”) illustrates how subversive imitation can level poignant critiques against dominant discourses. While these are useful heuristics, the IOAT engaged in a specific kind of fragmented and defiant misappropriation of dominant discourses that invited their Indian audience to jettison a commitment to the democratic promises of America’s foundational texts. Whereas appropriation redirects dominant discourses to work in the favor of the marginalized, *misappropriation* also commits dominant discourses to counterintuitive and self-defeating purposes. *Détournement* is a “deflection, diversion, rerouting, distortion, misuse, misappropriation, hijacking, or otherwise turning something aside from its normal course or purpose” (Debord and Wolman np). *Détournement* is not appropriation per se, but a deliberate slippage of a familiar and revered artifact—such as a significant political or philosophical text—in which aspects of the original are committed to oppositional or self-defeating uses.

Détournement offers a subtle warning: when an individual takes a hegemonic text earnestly, she or he does so at her or his own peril (Debord). Greil Marcus clarifies that *détournement* is “a politics of subversive quotation, of cutting the vocal cords of every empowered speaker, social symbols yanked through the looking glass, misappropriated worlds and pictures diverted into familiar scripts and blowing them up” (179). While *détournement* is a strategy of subversion, its purpose is not to create confusion but instead to clarify the motives concealed behind the seemingly well-intentioned statements of the powerful. It is, therefore, a fitting inventional device for enacting decolonization. First, by focusing on fragments rather than unified appropriations of apparently finished texts, *détournement* places emphasis on breaking down texts until they display their most oppressive qualities. By arranging iconic selections of sacred Western political texts in a subversive parody, the IOAT illustrated how most Euro-American political texts are quite amenable to the colonial mentality. Enacting *détournement* permanently stained colonial texts so that indigenous audiences are compelled to think about popular Euro-American discourse in the context of colonialism. Second, enacting *détournement* desacralizes the lofty political principles and stylized language used to obscure the colonial assumptions at work in dominant texts. As Mark Rifkin, Robert Williams, and David Wilkins all suggest, a stance of skepticism and irreverence is a near imperative in light of the number of exceptional legal doctrines employed throughout history to dispossess Native nations. In short, *détournement* was an essential method of fighting back against U.S. government control of land, labor, and bodies.

The Proclamation to the Great White Father

The Proclamation merits attention because many American Indian scholars consider it to be the occupation’s founding document (Allen; Bruynell; Johnson *Occupation*; Smith and Warrior). An exemplar of *détournement*, the Proclamation introduced the occupation as a comic parody of Western colonialism. Above all, the proclamation functioned as an Indian “declaration of independence” that framed the occupation as more than a seizure of an abandon island. As Richard Oakes explained, the occupation was “a move, not so much to liberate the island, but to liberate ourselves for the sake of cultural survival” (“El Grito” 1). The Proclamation embodied Oakes’s ideal that the island was a symbol that refracted a much larger struggle against colonialism, the stakes of which were Indian cultural survival in the decades to come.

Oakes delivered the Proclamation on November 20, 1969 at Alcatraz to an audience of journalists and television cameras. The document was also circulated in the group's first *Alcatraz Newsletter*.⁵ While some histories attribute authorship to a variety of sources, Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Warrior's detailed account of events maintained that the document was written by Oakes and Adam Nordwall (Fortunate Eagle), both instrumental in planning the occupation. The text unfolded in three parts. First, the introduction declared the island Indian land and offered the federal government a treaty. The proclamation began, "We, the Native Americans reclaim the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians by right of discovery. We wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with the Caucasian inhabitants of this land, and hereby offer the following treaty" (2). The second section suggested that Alcatraz was an ideal place for an Indian reservation because it lacked the features that sustain life. The third section detailed the IOAT plans to develop Alcatraz for Indian uses: centers for Native studies, education, ecology, and job training. They also demanded two museums: one to depict all American Indian cultural achievements and the other to show all "goods" given by whites to American Indians, including "disease, alcohol, poverty, and cultural decimation (as symbolized by old tin cans, barbed wire, rubber tires, plastic containers, etc.)" (3). This final section used the barren features of the island to illustrate the contradictions of colonialism; lands considered suitable for American Indians were marginal and worthless to Euro-Americans.

"We, the Native Americans"

The proclamation began by declaring the group's identity: "We, the Native Americans" (2). This statement was a partial imitation of the preamble to the Constitution, which begins "We, the people of the United States" ("Constitution" 18). Détourning fragments from the Constitution refracted the foundational text of American sovereignty from the perspective of the margins to create a new interpretation of its role in the lives of American Indians. Supplanting "the People" with "Native Americans" restaged the foundational act of national interpellation with American Indians as the active agents. The phrase "we, the Native Americans" inverted the image of the nation's founding to make visible those who were subjugated in the process. And, while the constitutional phrase was an expression of "the people" demanding to be acknowledged by others as a sovereign nation, the Proclamation was a symbolic expression of inherent sovereignty, a right to govern Alcatraz (or North America) that exists regardless of approval. Détourning the phrase "We, the People" offered an interpretation of the Constitution from the perspective of those whose sovereignty it negated.

To elaborate further, the phrase "We, the Native Americans" directed attention to the ways in which American Indians and others group were negated by the founder's conception of "the people." For instance, in his catalogue of appropriations of the U.S. Declaration of Independence by women, laborers, and racial minorities, Phillip Foner noted that as disenfranchised groups adopt the Declaration's textual form, they exposed their de facto exclusion from the promises of the original and create space for their own self-determination. The appropriated text was made to bear the weight of the disenfranchised group's experience and reflect an oppositional meaning. The same can be said for the repurposing of the Constitution's preamble. The Proclamation makes "we, the people" hail the very subjects that it was designed to negate. As Michael Warner suggests, the Constitution was written *in the name of* a "people," although certainly not by them (102). Thus,

the foundational act of national interpellation that hailed “the people” was directed at white affluent subjects who were soothed by the promise of subverting the post-revolutionary power of the demos. The Constitution is an ideological text that, in calling “the people” into being, negated and dispossessed people along the axis of race, class, and gender. “We, the Native Americans” set the two calls side-by-side, refracting the meaning adopted by those negated and silenced in the original text.

“We, the Native Americans” assumed two meanings in the text. First, through parody the IOAT enacted colonialist interpretations of the Constitution, or that “we, the people” should be interpreted to negate Indian sovereignty. The use of the phrase placed the imitation beside the original, the former indicting the latter. Indeed, the Constitution is a text that requires constant interpretation to make its application possible. In the Proclamation, the occupants approached the Constitution as a living document, enacting their interpretive agency to illustrate new and alternative ways of understanding the text. Like the Constitution, “We, the Native Americans” declared the collective will to rule derived from the early European law of nations (“right of discovery”). This expression of collective self-determination extinguished Caucasian title, requiring that their land be “held in trust by the American Indian Government” (1). This parody of “we, the people” interpreted the preamble of the Constitution as a call to a national body that implicitly excluded and subjugated Native peoples. Put differently, if “we, the Native Americans” grounded an explicit enactment of colonization, “we, the people” was implicated in the very same process. The IOAT made explicit that the expression of “we, the people” was made possible by the appropriation of Native land, by “right of discovery.”

Second, appropriating the Constitution rhetorically reconstituted a new indivisible nation of “all Indians” at Alcatraz, like those nations acknowledged in the texts of treaties signed between tribes and the federal government. Replacing “we, the people” established the separate Constitution of a new nation whose sovereignty was derived from an indigenous composition. “We, the Native Americans,” implies that American Indians speak as a distinct political entity that pursues its own unique set of goals outside of and against the United States. By making demands on the “The Great White Father and All His People,” this political entity created two distinct groups and abrogated inclusion within American sovereign authority. For the protestors, supplanting “the people” with “the Native Americans” shifted the source of sovereign power from which the authority to govern is derived. This juxtaposition established the proclamation as a government-to-government communiqué between two sovereign nations, textually placing the two on equal footing.

To understand why this move is rhetorically significant, we need to appreciate how interpretations of the Constitution have impacted American Indian nations. The Constitution contains sparse references to American Indian tribes. By technically treating tribes as foreign nations, the Constitution textually acknowledges them as separate sovereign entities. Yet numerous of Supreme Court decisions have interpreted the Constitution as a justification for absorbing Native peoples against their will (Wilkinson; Williams). Nonetheless, the Constitution is inferential about the political status of American Indians. The Interstate Commerce Clause gives Congress exclusive power to regulate commerce between foreign nations, states, and tribes. Judicial constructions of the Constitution in *Johnson v. McIntosh* (1823), *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831), and

Worcester v. Georgia (1832) maintained that American Indians were not foreign nations. The inclusion of Indians into the nation-state under the Marshall Court decisions was not designed as a pluralistic vision, but a forced assimilation into “the people” (Pommersheim; Rifkin; Wilkins; Wunder). Therefore, “we, the Native Americans” indirectly challenged the constitutional interpretations that forcefully include Indians under the canopy of the former.

The subversive use of this phrase symbolically expelled American Indians from the jurisdiction established by the Supreme Court, declaring them independent from “the people” envisioned in the Constitution. The IOAT proceeded as if they were always already sovereign: a parallel nation standing side-by-side both textually and physically within the contrived boundaries of the nation-state. Rather than arguing that Alcatraz belonged to them by law, the IOAT asserted that they were themselves sovereign *regardless* of the law. This indigenous redeployment of the Constitution’s preamble—established by placing the Constitution and its negated Other side-by-side—attempted to augment the meaning of the text for Native audiences in order to symbolically accommodate two separate and independent nations. As an expression of inherent sovereignty, “We, the Native Americans” rejected the hail of the Constitution in favor of an anti-colonial national subjectivity. Imitating the founders, the IOAT revealed how American nationhood had supplanted Native nations’ right to self-determination. The IOAT reinterpreted the founder’s hail as both an indictment of their failure to acknowledge Native sovereignty and foundation for a new indigenous nation of “all tribes.”

“By Right of Discovery”

While not codified in any legal statute, the “doctrine of discovery” retains its legal power because it provides backing for extinguishing Native title despite the letter of the law.⁶ Therefore, even when Indian nations are armed with sound legal interpretations, the doctrine of discovery lies as a dormant justification subverting Indian sovereignty (Williams). The doctrine embeds a state of exception in federal Indian law, a principle within the law that provides a just cause to set aside the law whenever it is deemed necessary. So, like the Marshall court, the IOAT established their new nation on the “law of nations,” reclaiming Alcatraz “by right of discovery” (2).⁷ Employing the European “right of discovery” highlighted the dubious political basis for extinguishing Native land claims. The image of colonization reminded Native audiences that the federal government continually relied on archaic legal doctrines inherited from the archaic European “Age of Discovery.” The irony of “discovering” Alcatraz—an island already “discovered”—illuminated the farce that Europeans could discover lands already inhabited by Indians. As Glenn Morris (“Deloria”) suggests, even in the present the “doctrine of discovery comprises the foundation of the master’s house” (111–112).

In the Proclamation, the concept of “discovery” was revised to illustrate that Euro-American political rhetoric contains traces of self-serving colonialist doctrine. Note that the doctrine of discovery authorized Europeans to look past a then-existing human presence in North America. In light of this history, the doctrine’s continued presence in Western thought remained a barrier to self-determination. Seeing Alcatraz in the manner of early European explorers and colonists—seizing land without legal justification—highlighted that the concept of discovery has no textual basis in U.S. law. Moreover, the IOAT’s deliberately absurd appropriation of the “right of

discovery” illustrated that the empty doctrine was nothing more than a political cover. The IOAT Proclamation directed its audience’s attention to the ways in which the doctrine remains an unquestioned assumption that helps rationalize America’s colonialist past. Unmasking the doctrine of discovery at work in federal Indian law and utilizing it against its intended purpose highlighted for audiences the futility of working within mainstream channels. If the right of discovery was truly accessible to all, then prior occupancy of North America would have extinguished European title. This *détournement* highlighted that both Alcatraz and North America already belonged to Native peoples both within and regardless of the doctrine. Redeploying discovery removed it from its colonial scene and refurbished it as both an indictment of the United States and a powerful argument for Indian self-determination.

“A Fair and Honorable Treaty”

The proclamation *détourned* the formulaic language of the 389 Indian treaties ratified between 1788 and 1868. These treaties share a number of generic conventions including guarantees of peace and friendship, mutual respect for territorial integrity, and in some cases the provisions for the “civilization” of tribal members through education or agriculture. Tribes often exchanged territory or accommodated white settlers for promises of protection. Appropriating these conventions, the IOAT offered a “fair and honorable” treaty to “the Caucasian inhabitants of this land” by which they would purchase Alcatraz for twenty-four dollars in glass beads and red clothe (2). The proclamation further explained how American Indians would protect and tutor Euro-Americans.

The treaty was addressed to “the Great White Father” in an effort to imitate the discourse of the treaty-making process. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Native rhetoric often referenced Euro-American political leaders such as the U.S. President or the King of England as the “Great White Father” (Prucha). While this form of address may seem obsequious, Gretchen Bataille explains that Indians often employed the phrase as a subversive mimicry of government paternalism, designed to ridicule Euro-American’s belief in their own superiority (211). On its own, this creative and disingenuous anachronism communicated the disrespect many American Indians felt was accorded to them by most Euro-Americans, particularly the federal government. But, by reversing the subject positions of the parties to the treaty, the protestors also exposed the arbitrary hierarchies such documents established while retaining their promises of territorial integrity. In the treaty proposed by the IOAT, Indians became the superior agents of action and the “Great White Father” was the object to be modified and controlled by the treaty-making process.

The IOAT treaty also imitated the rhetoric of savagery and civilization that characterizes most federal Indian treaties. For instance, in what amounts to a parody of the Marshall Court’s interpretation of the Constitution, the IOAT treaty declared that Alcatraz be “held in trust” by an Indian government:

[t]o be administered by the Bureau of Caucasian Affairs (BCA). We will further guide the inhabitants in the proper way of living. We will offer them our religion, our education, our life-ways, in order to help them achieve our level of civilization and thus raise them and all their white brothers up from their savage and unhappy states. We offer this treaty in good faith and wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with all white men. (3)

This passage reversed the hierarchy, placing American Indians in the position of the colonizer and Euro-Americans as colonized. Rearranging these subject positions illustrated the arbitrary nature

of colonial power and drew attention to the self-serving character of “assisting” the assimilation of colonial subjects. The passage discursively represented Native agency so that American Indians dictated terms to Euro-Americans. The stereotypical “savage” became the civilizer, the subject became object, and benevolence became malevolence. In the process, the IOAT presented the federal government with an image of its own arrogance and paternalism. In this instance, détournement subjected Euro-Americans to the experience of colonization and the alienation it produces in the colonized subject. While Euro-American audiences would not have likely experienced disempowerment, this turnabout provided American Indian audiences with an empowered image of Native agency.

Their critique also emphasized the countervailing belief that Euro-Americans were the true harbingers of savagery, demonstrating that civilization and savagery are not innate characteristics, but racial subject positions constructed in Western discourse. To accomplish this critique, the proclamation advanced a paradox: Alcatraz is an ideal place to establish a nation precisely because of the land’s unsuitability for life. The IOAT elaborated:

We feel that this so-called Alcatraz Island is more than suitable for an Indian reservation, as determined by the white man’s own standards. By this we mean that this place resembles most Indian reservations, in that:

1. It is isolated from modern facilities, and without adequate means of transportation.
2. It has no fresh running water.
3. It has inadequate sanitation facilities.
4. There are no oil or mineral rights.
5. There is no industry so unemployment is great.
6. There are no health care facilities.
7. The soil is rocky and non-productive; and the land does not support game.
8. There are no educational facilities.
9. The population has always exceeded the land base.
10. The population has always been held as prisoner and kept dependent upon Others. (3)

By ironically embracing the negative conditions that defined reservation life, the IOAT juxtaposed the lifeless barren prison with the actual lived conditions of Indian Country. This maneuver illuminated the inherent inequality in the federal government’s allocation of land and resources. For the IOAT, the federal government’s definition of what was acceptable treatment for Native peoples amounted to precisely what you see at Alcatraz Island. By the “white man’s own standards,” marginal, abandon, or depleted tracts of land were the only places suitable for Indians. Comparing Alcatraz’s ugliness with the present-day conditions of reservations both explained the rationale for occupation while drawing attention to the persistent neglect of tribal lands. The group highlighted the duplicity of Euro-American’s “own standards” for the treatment of Indians, inferring that Euro-Americans were, in fact, savages. Indeed, the group’s overweening

endorsement of the “white man’s” standards highlighted the contradictions in Euro-American treatment of American Indians and justified repossessing stolen lands. Juxtaposing treaty promises with their disastrous consequences also demystified the presumed superiority of Euro-American education, religion, and culture.

Finally, redeploing the treaty form in a new context highlighted the Native perspective that treaties justify Indian sovereignty in the present moment. From a Euro-American perspective, treaties were ad hoc documents intended to establish temporary zones of peace (Wilkinson; Williams). In treaty negotiations, the federal government was always assumed to be a superior party, the agent that bestowed lands upon the tribes that already inhabited them (Wilkinson 100–102). One unintended consequence of treaty negotiations was that they recognized tribes as foreign nations and tribal governments interpreted them as such (Rifkin; Wilkins). The historical special legal status of American Indians provided contemporary activists with a unique argument for self-determination unparalleled by any other oppressed group. No other ethnic minorities negotiated and ratified treaties with the federal government; therefore, resurrecting the treaty as a mode of political action—even as parody—provided crucial historical precedent for their actions.

Thus, the proclamation reframed treaties as sacred and enduring promises. They offered an open-ended guarantee to purchase Alcatraz and hold the land in trust for whites “as long as sun shall rise and the rivers go down to the sea.” Nineteenth-century treaties included guarantees of sovereignty with phrases such as “in perpetuity,” “perpetual peace,” “from this day forward,” or “forever.” The peculiar circulation of the phrases such as “as long as the grass shall grow” represented the sacred orientation held by American Indians toward treaties. Early treaties were *actual* covenants cemented by gift-giving and divine promises of peace (Williams, “Linking Arms”). By translating Euro-American political language into a sacred form, the occupants discursively renewed what were once considered archaic promises. The IOAT confronted the government with the Indian interpretation of treaties, as unending promises of *inherent* sovereignty. Such a reinterpretation exposed the self-serving nature of the treaty language and suggested that treaties should be re-imagined as the basis of the American Indian’s relationship with the federal government. In sum, the Proclamation both reclaimed the treaty as a sacred document while desacralizing Euro-American uses of the same textual form.

Like all treaties, the proclamation blended eloquent proclamations of peace and friendship with a list of principles and policies to be enacted to fulfill its obligations. The proclamation closed with a proposal to “Indianize” the island by establishing centers for Native American Studies, spiritual beliefs, and ecology as well as an Indian university and museum. The museum would “present some of the things the white man has given to the Indians, in return for the land and life he took: disease, alcohol, poverty, and cultural decimation” (4). In this critique of Euro-American history, the museum would “remain a dungeon, to symbolize both Indian captives who were incarcerated for challenging white authority, and those who were imprisoned on reservations” (4). While the facilities were discussed in serious yet utopian terms, the IOAT sought to establish a museum to represent their own radical interpretation of American history. They proposed that this dungeon would “show the noble and the tragic events of Indian history, including the broken treaties, the documentary of the Trail of Tears, the Massacre of Wounded Knee, as well as the victory over

Yellow Hair Custer and his army” (4). The museums would decolonize conventional history by portraying Indians as the victors who, despite adversity, conquered and civilized North America. The island’s university would advance this knowledge and perpetuate Indian ways of life into the future. Thus, the proclamation concluded “In the name of all Indians, therefore, we reclaim this island for our Indian nations, for all these reasons. We feel this claim is just and proper, and that this land should rightfully be granted to us for as long as the rivers run and the sun shall shine.”

Conclusion: Beyond Alcatraz

This analysis suggests that *détournement* is an inventional resource for enacting anti-colonial critique. By parodying Western colonial discourse, the IOAT Proclamation exposed how political texts such as the Constitution, the doctrine of discovery, and federal Indian treaties served only the dominant culture. Strategic *détournements* of Euro-American political texts enabled the protestors to craft an empowered hermeneutic through which American Indians might read the official communiqués of federal officials. For American Indian audiences, placing fragments of sacred political promises in an intentionally perverse and colonialist declaration helped reframe the promises of federal Indian administrators, Congress, and the President as duplicitous and hypocritical. Moreover, *détournement* illustrated the audience’s power to use fragments of Euro-American culture to invent a new nation—the blueprint of which existed within the very concepts used to dispossess them.

In assessing both the Proclamation and its tactic of speaking back, it is important to distinguish between the rhetorical and political success of Native protest rhetoric. As I explain below, the IOAT was not able to achieve its short-term goal of attaining the title to Alcatraz. But, as Lake argues, Native resistance rhetoric is often less concerned about winning strategic political victories than it is about consummating Native worldviews and coalescing movement adherents. Moreover, Endres’s recent scholarship illustrates how the instrumental and consummatory functions of Native protest rhetoric are not always mutually opposed. This essay further notes how Native resistance rhetoric might also serve an interpretive function. That is to say that *détournement* is a tactic in Native resistance rhetoric that invites an activist, anti-colonial perspective toward Euro-American political and legal discourses. In other words, *détournement* provides a model or inventional resource for enacting anti-colonial critique. This essay demonstrates that regardless of policy success, Alcatraz was also a staging ground for reaching sympathetic audiences, finding new ways to dramatize the struggle for self-determination and introducing radical perspectives into activist communities. In this symbolic sense, the IOAT successfully brought their hermeneutical practices out of the college classroom and into the public. Without explicit direction, they invited skeptical interrogation of Euro-American political discourses. The group’s Proclamation modeled an irreverent stance toward dominant discourse that invited audiences to view seemingly benevolent Euro-American texts as masks for colonialism. Through misappropriation, the IOAT offered mockery and ironic distance as alternatives to earnestness and literal engagement with Euro-American discourse. Like Red Jacket, the Southeastern Indian Nations, and countless others, the IOAT elaborated on and advanced a long and radical rhetorical tradition of frustrating and subverting the discourses of the “Great White Father.” Of course, using the “masters tools” can be fraught with risks of reifying the language of oppression. This essay acknowledges the limitations

of détournement, but suggests that it is a necessary risk when the colonizers' politics and culture confront the marginalized at every turn. In the context of colonialism, committing dominant discourse to humorous, misdirected, and self-defeating uses is a strategy for appropriating language without reifying it.

This essay's case study identifies ways that the Alcatraz Occupation's rhetoric shaped the demands and strategies of future Indian political protest. From 1969 through the summer of 1971, the IOAT held the island while negotiating with federal officials. The group failed to retain control of the island for a number of reasons. The island was dangerous and not well maintained. In fact, occupants' spirits were dampened when Oakes's daughter Yvonne fell down an open stairwell (Findley A4). After President Nixon ordered the electricity shut off, the occupants became dependent on dwindling assistance from the mainland ("Alcatraz War" A4). Even those willing to endure were tried by life circumstances. Federal officials adopted diversionary approaches in the hope that occupation would eventually wane. In response to the IOAT proposal to establish an Indian university, the government proposed an Indian monument managed by the National Park Service ("US Takes" A18). The park was completely unacceptable to the group (IOAT "Reply" 7). After months of unsuccessful negotiations, on June 11, 1971 the occupation came to an end when 30 federal marshals escorted a handful of remaining occupants off the island ("Federal Marshals" A14).

Maintaining control of the island would have certainly established that the occupation was a political success. Yet, movement leaders suggested that there was something more significant in the group's demand. Oakes explained that "a small group of Indians—each from a different part of the country, started a movement that was later called Alcatraz. Since that historic moment, we are convinced that Alcatraz is not an island—but an idea" ("Comment" 1). Taking Oakes at his word, the movement that began at Alcatraz was conceptual, directed at constructing new visions of community empowerment. Many scholars have written about the occupation's pivotal role in catalyzing more empowered and irreverent strategies for Indian activism (Johnson; Strange and Loo). For example, Vine Deloria Jr. explains that "many Indians regarded the capture of Alcatraz as the beginning of a new movement to recapture the continent and assert tribal independence from the United States, and it was finally this issue that Alcatraz came to symbolize" (37–38). Activists' subsequent reflections demonstrate the rhetoric's significance to Indian communities. LaNada Means (Boyer) reflected that "we did not get the island, but we aroused the consciousness of all people, including ourselves, to our plight. Every individual and every nation still has a story to be told" (100). Other accounts confirm that Alcatraz transformed how many, particularly young urban Indians, related to politics and history (Blue Cloud). Wilma Mankiller, the first female chief of the Western Cherokee Nation, explained in her autobiography that the radical ideals expressed at Alcatraz became common sense among mainstream tribal leaders (*Mankiller*).

There is also evidence that the IOAT rhetorical strategy influenced the later politics of Indian activism. After the occupation, Indian activists began employing direct action strategies and occupied surplus federal land, abandon military bases, and national monuments. In 1970, the "United Indians of All Tribes" attempted an occupation of Fort Lawton in Seattle, Washington (Hannula A1). Their "Manifesto" reads: "the occupation of Alcatraz has seen the beginnings of a

concept of unity long dreamed of by all our people” (*Alcatraz Newsletter* 18). In the Midwest, AIM absorbed many members involved in the occupation and embraced the tactics of occupation on a national stage. Banks and Erdoes explains, “our time on Alcatraz had woken us up to the realization that we were part of a larger movement and that reclaiming of tribal land had to be on AIM’s agenda” (108). In 1972 AIM organized a caravan beginning on the West Coast and moving east to Washington, D.C. The climax of the “Trail of Broken Treaties” was an improvised occupation of the BIA headquarters, during which the group flew the American flag upside down in front of the building’s entrance. The caravan’s founding document, “The Twenty Points,” also demanded a new framework for evaluating existing treaty commitments and the status of federal–tribal relations. A remarkable document, it extended the nascent demands of the IOAT to place treaties at the center of federal–tribal relations. The document demonstrated clear legal acumen and embodied a holistic notion that treaties had to be reconceptualized to forge a just relationship between the federal government and Indian nations. With what began at Alcatraz, the architects of “The Trail of Broken Treaties” advanced a more nuanced reading of federal treaty law.

Two recent examples of Native resistance rhetoric further illustrate how *détournement* invites new and creative ways of engaging dominant discourses. First, American Indian activists introduced Native perspectives on living as part of “the 99%” by appropriating the rhetoric of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement. American Indian participants in the Albuquerque branch of OWS successfully lobbied to change the group’s name to (Un)occupy Albuquerque in order to reframe and connect economic injustice to an enduring legacy of colonization (Rickett). In demanding the de-occupation of “colonized spaces,” the group inverted the demands of OWS to make the movement address the concerns of American Indians and people of color (“Why (Un)occupy”). Similar to the IOAT use of the “right of discovery,” the Albuquerque group’s renaming draws attention to the redundancies and contradictions of occupying spaces already occupied by a settler-nation, and before that, indigenous peoples. While both movements attempt to decolonize Euro-American discourse, the (Un)occupy movement adopted a different approach to occupation as protest strategy. Unlike the IOAT, (Un)occupy enacts decolonization by evacuating rather than infiltrating space.

In a recent presentation, Mary Stuckey explored what I would characterize as a second example of contemporary Native *détournement*. Stuckey analyzed the online videos of “The 1491s,” a sketch comedy group that performs on college campuses and produces satirical youtube videos about Indian stereotypes and the (often sexual) commodification of Native culture (Stuckey).⁸ The group’s musical parodies of country western and disco feature images of young Indians dancing in public space, dressed in scantily clad and stereotypical Native outfits. Stuckey suggests that the 1491s confront stereotypes by “arguing sideways,” satirically embodying the commodified image of Indians. A kind of *détournement*, the group’s subversive redeployment of stereotypes deprives them of their descriptive power. The group’s irreverent stance is also reflected in their facebook page’s welcome statement: “Welcome to the Native hall of mirrors, the sacred clown catastrophe, where the jokes are on us and/or you.” Stuckey’s analysis of the 1491s suggests that misappropriation and diversion remain a viable rhetorical strategy. In an ever-changing manner, contemporary Native resistance rhetoric still enacts subversion, misdirection, and even guerilla tactics to dislodge and decolonize dominant discourse.

Notes

¹ The IOAT chose Alcatraz because of its indigenous history and iconic stature (Strange and Loo). The first European contact was in 1775 when Lieutenant Juan Manuel de Ayala named the island *Isla de los Alcatrazes*. It remained a bird refuge until Pio Pico, the last Mexican governor of California, sold Alcatraz to Julian Workman, who in turn resold it to General John Charles Fremont for \$5,000. The U.S. federal government took control of the island and converted to a military fort in 1854. After the island was converted to a military stockade in 1854, American Indians were the first people imprisoned at Alcatraz (Flynn; Fortunate Eagle *Heart* 13).

² I use the term “American Indian” in the place of other descriptors. Given that the subject matter of this essay concerns pan-Indian ethnic identification, collective descriptors are appropriate.

³ The General Services Administration was placed in charge of the island and a presidential commission (Public Law 88-138) was established in 1963 to evaluate thirty-three development proposals.

⁴ The phrase “masters language” is derived from Audre Lorde (Moraga and Anzadula 94–101).

⁵ Copies of the *Alcatraz Newsletter* were retrieved from the Alcatraz File in the Special Collections at the San Francisco Public Library.

⁶ The textual source of the doctrine comes from papal bull *Romanus Pontifex*, issued by Pope Nicholas V to King Afonso of Portugal in 1455. The doctrine evolved as customary international law during the European “age of discovery” to mediate land claims between discovering nations. The discovering nation retained the right to extinguish indigenous title, which could only translate into a right of occupancy. American Indian legal scholar Robert Williams argues that the doctrine is taken-for-granted in Euro-American legal discourse. Chief Justice Marshall set a precedent by citing the “right of discovery” in *Johnson v. McIntosh* (1823): “to the government by whose subjects, or by whose authority, it was made, against all other European governments, which title might be consummated by possession” (573).

⁷ On September 24, 1973 Adam Nordwall (Fortunate Eagle) arrived in Rome to also claim Italy by “right of discovery.”

⁸ The 1491s’ welcome statement is available at <http://1491s.com/facebook-is-not-a-ceremony/>

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