

**“INDIANS OF ALL TRIBES:’ BROWN PRIDE, RED POWER, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF  
INDIGENOUS CIVIL RIGHT ERA ACTIVISM.”**

**DYLAN AT MINER**

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF TRANSCULTURAL STUDIES  
RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE IN THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES  
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

FORTHCOMING IN CHARLES W. MCKINNEY AND DWAIN C. PRUITT, EDS.  
*LOOKING BACK: LEGACIES AND LESSONS OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT.*

**DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION**

APRIL 2008

**DRAFT**

**“Indians of All Tribes:” Brown Pride, Red Power, and the Importance of Indigenous Civil Right Era Activism**

Dylan AT Miner  
Assistant Professor of Transcultural Studies  
Residential College in Arts and Humanities  
Michigan State University

On 09 November 1969, Richard Oakes and a collective of aboriginal activists left mainland California to occupy the island of Alcatraz, an abandoned island penitentiary where America’s worst serial offenders had once been imprisoned.<sup>1</sup> This occupation was the second indigenous reclamation of the island since it was abandoned by the federal government in 1963. Less than two weeks later, approximately 90 student activists identifying themselves as the Indians of All Tribes continued this land reclamation in an act of civil disobedience by placing a critical mass on the island.<sup>2</sup> For over eighteen months, more than fifty-six thousand indigenous activists and their supporters inhabited on the island, while a core of 100 activists resided on the premises throughout the entire occupation.<sup>3</sup> According to a proclamation issued by the Indians of All Tribes, Alcatraz was the ideal site for such a performative act as it mirrored many of the social and environmental inequities present in the reservation system. They maintained that Alcatraz was “more than suitable for an Indian reservation, as determined by the white man's own standards.”<sup>4</sup>

By occupying Alcatraz, indigenous students and community activists, both enrolled tribal members and affiliated mixed-bloods and mestizos<sup>5</sup> positioned indigenous oppression into the forefront of the Anglo-American consciousness. Through this and similar activities, aboriginal activists labored to reclaim geographical and cultural

traditions destroyed through colonial settlement. The reclamation of Alcatraz operated within the political, spiritual, and discursive realm by challenging US hegemonic epistemological constructions and political practice. Since both American Indian and Chicana/o peoples were made to be “foreigners in their native land,” the issue of territory and nationhood lay at the core of the American Indian and Chicana/o struggles for social justice.<sup>6</sup> By occupying Alcatraz, Native activists performed a drama which allowed them to re-territorialize colonial constructions. Turning to Chicana/o and American Indian social justice movements, I will address indigenous struggles against Anglo-American colonialism and the ways with which this legacy may be continued within contemporary struggles, particularly in light of recent political events.

### *La Lucha Sigue*

The takeover of Alcatraz was by no means an isolated event and must be contextualized within a global framework of radical transformation. One year prior to the occupation of Alcatraz by the Indians of All Tribes the world had caught fire. In 1968 alone, students captured Paris, while hundreds of their *compadres* in Mexico City were assassinated by the Mexican government in a bloody massacre at Tlatelolco. Similarly, the Oakland-based Black Panther Party, founded in 1966, ran Eldridge Cleaver for President of the United States. Prague Spring was transpiring in Czechoslovakia, violence in Viet Nam was escalating, and Third World nations continued their liberation movements by declaring independence from their former colonial masters. These radical transformations were also seen in Indian Country.

Importantly, during the summer of '68, Anishnabe activists Dennis Banks, Clyde Bellecourt, George Mitchell, Harold Goodsky, Francis Fairbanks, and "Girly" Brown, amongst others, formed the American Indian Movement (AIM) in Minneapolis. Frequently compared to the Black Panther, AIM was one of the most important anti-colonial organizations in the twentieth century, which defended the rights of urban Indians, one of the most forgotten segments of the national population. Like radical Black groups, AIM was quickly infiltrated by the CIA's hostel COINTELPRO program.

Nonetheless, revolutionary activities continued en masse into 1969. *El Movimiento Chicano*, the Mexican American civil rights movement, came to a head that spring at the Chicano Youth Liberation conference in Denver. At this convention, thousands of activists gathered to discuss ways to combat institutionalized racism and class exploitation. Ultimately, this gathering is best known as the place where the blueprint for the Chicana/o Movement, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, was written. The anonymously written Plan used indigenous Mexica (Aztec) rhetoric as the spiritual basis for a working-class, anticapitalist movement. In contrast to the assimilationist politics of the previous Mexican-American generation, the Chicana/o movement was proud of their indigenous identity and their working-class status. Using revolutionary language, the Plan coalesced the various Mexican American organizations into a full-blown movement.

According to the Plan,

We are free and sovereign to determine those tasks which are justly called for by our house, our land, the sweat of our brows, and by our hearts. Aztlan belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops... We do not recognize capricious frontiers on the bronze continent.<sup>7</sup>

As can be seen from this primary document, the Chicana/o movement was simultaneously an ethnic and class-based movement. The “bronze continent” refers to the color of the Chicana/o body (a post-colonial amalgamation of American Indian and European), while labor figured prominently into a sense of belonging. Because of its working-class affiliation and coalition-building strategies, many non-Latinas/os were active in the movement and alliances were constructed with many other anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements. In a commonly cited article, cultural critic George Lipsitz argues that identity politics were not simply based on ethnic distinctiveness, but that working-class affiliations were in the foreground of their foundation. Lipsitz states that “the [Chicana/o] movement was an effort to convince people to draw their identity from their politics rather than their politics from their identity.”<sup>8</sup> Brown Pride and Red Power were not purely chants of racial identification, they were also affirmations of political engagement and communal autonomy.

During this period, at the height of anticolonial insurrection across the globe, Robert L. Scott and Wayne Brockriede recognized the rhetorical potential inherent in the Black Power movement. Even if somewhat dismissive of the ability for mass-movements to create revolutionary change, Scott and Brockriede nonetheless assert the transformative capabilities of resistance. Their arguments may be extrapolated into indigenous resistance movements of the period. Accordingly, they recognized that

Black Power is a revolutionary force in American Life. Whatever may be the resolution of the demands and denials now spinning about the term, what it means to be an American can never again be quite the same. The results of revolutions are never what even the most clear-eyed observers predict and certainly never what any of the most deeply involved participants want. If the forces which make history are more than anyone can understand or control, they are pervasive. Man must struggle to

understand and to influence. To do less than struggle with the issues of one's own lifetime is to be less than fully human.<sup>9</sup>

Through this assertion, it becomes apparent that libratory struggles are one of the universals that connect all humanity, or at least those of us in the working and oppressed classes. In many ways, the Brown Pride and Red Power movements used equality revolutionary tactics to assert their agenda within mainstream America. Since the majority of the works in this anthology “look back” at the civil right activities within the Black community, and most citizens are much more cognizant of the social justice activities performed by African Americans, I evoke the preceding citation in hopes of demonstrating the reciprocity amongst the Chicana/o and American Indian struggles with those of the Black community. In other words, similar issues that were affecting African Americans during the late-1960s were also all too real for American Indian and Chicana/o citizens. Yet, as I will point out, there were distinct variations between these struggles.

In many ways the solidarity demonstrated amongst working-class and oppressed peoples is comprehensive. By constructing alliance networks, not only with those who share similar communal and personal histories (such as one's own ethnic or racial community), but also extending those relationships to those who struggle against a common oppressor (or oppressive system) helps otherwise marginalized communities recognize their untapped potential.

Métis intellectual Howard Adams, appreciates this relationship. He maintains that a native liberation struggle is essentially the same struggle of that of the working class and all oppressed people against a capitalist ruling class. In this way, Indians and Métis [mixed-blood Canadians] can build alliances with workers and other oppressed and colonized groups of white society.<sup>10</sup>

As such, since the mid-1960s, Third World peoples, within and without this country, have been able to find common ground with which to fight against daily oppression. However, this is not to say that all individuals and organizations see their struggles for equal rights as a common commitment against oppression. In fact, certain African American community leaders view contemporary Latina/o issues as ones that contest the objectives of African American civil rights.

Carol Swain, a political scientist and law professor at Vanderbilt University, maintains that the predominantly Latina/o immigrant rights struggles transpiring in 2006 and 2007 were antithetical to the goals of the civil rights movement and, in fact, hurt working-class Blacks. Accordingly, she states that “Most illegal immigrants have willingly left their homelands to seek their fortunes in a more prosperous nation. They were not brought in chains.”<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, Swain does not understand the complexities of transnational capitalism and the negative effects of globalization and colonialism in precipitating global diasporas. While she may, in fact, be correct that these individuals were not literally transported in shackles, a larger economic and political investigation would reveal that these individuals from Latin America are forced to migrate due to the presence of US and transnational corporations encroaching on traditional lands. In effect, various similarities can be extrapolated amongst the struggles of diverse Third World people. Although Black, American Indian, and Chicana/o civil rights are distinct and must not be collapsed into one monolithic movement, many parallels exist.

As most scholars and lay-persons attend, the Civil Rights era within the United States was a tumultuous period where centuries-long racial and class tensions rose to the

surface in an amalgam of reform and revolution. While numerous intellectuals, especially those writing for non-academic audiences, position the African American Civil Rights Movement as the driving force behind all subsequent U.S. social movements, in many ways the American Indian and Mexican American struggles developed in tandem with Black causes. Responding to claims that Chicana/o militancy was merely the mimicry of Black nationalism, sociologist Bob Blauner wrote in 1971 that “Chicano intellectuals and working people had been living their version of cultural nationalism long before black militants brought the term to public attention.”<sup>12</sup> In the United States, 1968 saw the culmination of isolated ethnic movements and the move into the “second-phase” of the Civil Rights movement. Prior to 1968 local and regional organizations were somewhat isolated. Beginning in that year, however, a truly “national” and internationalist trajectory commenced. At this time, we see the emergence of Ralph Abernathy’s Poor People’s Campaign which brought together Black, Chicana/o, Native, and working-class white community leaders. By entering into dialogue, these communities formed a stronger base to contest Anglo-American and capitalist hegemony.

In addition to the reasons outlined at the end of this chapter, there are two immediate motives for looking at Chicana/o and American Indian activism in relation to the African American civil rights movement. First, social justice movements are often discussed in isolation from one another, as opposed to outlining the commonalities and dialogue occurring amongst the various activities. By focusing on the Chicana/o and American Indian movements, while simultaneously incorporating Black histories and other anti-colonial perspectives, we will begin to reconstruct the coalitions that were paramount to the success of each respective faction. Second, recent revisionist histories

have dismissed many of the transformative activities of the Civil Rights era due to its perceived heterosexism and homophobic activities. While not dismissing these crucial shortcomings, I believe that we are obliged to reinvestigate Native and Latina/o activism, not purely for what they did (or did not) accomplish, but rather for the manner in which they transformed political discourses breaking open new and otherwise unforeseeable possibilities. In other words, by “looking back” at these radical movements, they continue to operate and enable further transformation in the present and into the future. By and large, the struggles of the civil rights movements did not end during the 1980s, but continue to transform North American society, especially in the political climate of the 2000s. As Chicana/o activists and Latin American revolutionaries used to say *la lucha sigue* (the struggle continues); and so it does. But, we must remember that our struggles are not in isolation.

### **Reclaiming Colonized Spaces: DQU, the Barrio, and the Rez**

One of the most successful strategies of aboriginal resistance during the late-1960s and early-1970s was that of reclamation. In an attempt to counter the legacy of social and economic marginalization, Native and Chicana/o activists initiated (as well as continued) the long and arduous process of decolonization.<sup>13</sup> What is important about Brown Pride and Red Power is that activists were almost entirely able to avoid instances of violence against humans.

Martinique-born psychologist and anticolonial freedom fighter Frantz Fanon maintains that decolonization is by necessity a “violent” act, although one mediated through acts of compassion. In his seminal text *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon asserts that

“National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth: whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.”<sup>14</sup> For Fanon, the extermination of an oppressive colonial system is inevitably an antagonistic undertaking.

Although critics and partisans have long debated the signification of Fanon’s “violence,” in this context I apply it to mean a radical shift: one that utterly transforms the very nature of a racist US social order. This transformation occurs when Third World peoples are able to overthrow the yoke of colonialism and replace it with community sovereignty and self-determination.

For those in power, these acts were viewed by those in power as a “violent” act. By way of this interpretation, violence does not necessarily imply an action that results in human injury, but one where individuals collectively demand their equal rights and the ability to control their own social environment. As the Black Panthers asserted in 1968, “We do not claim the right to indiscriminate violence. We seek no bloodbath. We are not out to kill up white people.”<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, the Black Panthers were represented within the mainstream media as inarticulate, gun-toting thugs. Nothing was farther from the truth, as the Panthers were formed on a university campus and many had advanced university degrees.<sup>16</sup> For Fanon and the Black Panther Party, as well as AIM and the Brown Berets, violence was a process of anticolonial recuperation, not bodily harm. This has been obscured by mainstream historical accounts. Following in the writings of Fanon, who was instrumental in the theoretical foundation of Third World liberation movements, this reclamation was not simply a return to some fictive pre-colonial past. Rather Black,

Latina/o, and Native groups began to reconstruct and mold cultural and social systems based on the realities of their own lived experiences.

Of paramount importance was the recuperation of colonized spaces, both literal and metaphorical. After centuries of being forcefully held in racialized ghettos, *barrios*, and reservations, during the late-1960s Third World peoples decided that the time was ripe for a new mode of resistance.<sup>17</sup> Assimilation had taken its toll on aboriginal communities and during this period, a new much more radical approach was taken. In many ways, these radical movements differentiated themselves from the more mainstream Civil Rights groups operating at the time. Donna Hightower Langston, an indigenous intellectual, names these newly formed anti-colonial movements in the United States as “power groups.” She posits that

Power groups responded to the limits of civil rights groups with more radical rhetoric and actions. Numerous Power groups advocated Black Power, Brown Power, Red Power, and Radical Feminism—groups such as the Black Panthers, Brown Berets, American Indian Movement (AIM), and New York Radical Feminists.<sup>18</sup>

Although I agree with Langston in many regards, I differ from her in that I do not necessarily distinguish between the conciliatory rhetoric of civil rights groups (organizations such as Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, National Indian Youth Council, and the Community Service Organization) from the provocative direct-action of more revolutionary organizations. In many ways, each distinctive approach facilitated the accomplishments of the others. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that during this period, even within a particular ethnic group, there was regularly disagreement and dialogue about the direction and action that should occur. To borrow from Malcolm X, did the ends justify the means? This, of course, was a complex and

highly disputed discussion.

While African Americans in the South were legally relegated to spaces demarcated as those for ‘Coloreds,’ the same occurred for Mexicans across the US Southwest.

Although the subjugation of Blacks, Chicanas/os, and American Indians were ultimately distinct, they disclosed many of the same root causes and encounters. For Mexicans, forced segregation frequently turned violent through acts of mob “justice.” According to historians William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb,

the danger of lynching for a Mexican resident in the United States was nearly as great, and in some instances greater, than the specter of mob violence for a black person in the American South. Because of the smaller size of the Spanish-speaking population, the total number of Mexican victims was much lower, but the chance of being murdered by a mob was comparable for both Mexicans and African Americans.<sup>19</sup>

While Blacks and Chicanas/os were frequently violently attacked by Anglo-American mobs, the suppression of tribal communities was much more pervasive, occurring at the base of aboriginal societies: through legal, religious, and educational endeavors. The US and Canadian federal policy against First Nations people was one of complacency and manipulation. Indigenous activist Ward Churchill maintains that the federal government, backed by the rulings of the US Supreme Court, preserves the right to encroach and seize Indian land without repercussion.<sup>20</sup> In addition to the physical disenfranchisement of Native peoples, church and state-operated boarding schools, alongside the criminalization of indigenous ceremonies, advanced the policy that traditional aboriginal practices were illegal, unless Native peoples coalesced to hegemonic demands for proper behavior. When little had changed by the mid-1960s, young urban Indians saw the need for continued struggle against US hegemony. AIM and organizations with similar ideologies advocated for the basic rights of American Indian people.

Sharing analogous experiences of racialized violence in the United States, it follows that Civil Rights-era struggles amongst Blacks, Chicanas/os, and Natives would likewise share many of the same methodological approaches. The most common shared-practice was the reclamation of space and cultural identity. Various tactics were employed.

In October 1967 leaders from the Black, American Indian, and Chicana/o civil rights movements met in Albuquerque, NM at the inaugural convention of the Alianza Federal de Pueblos Libres (Alliance of Free City-States), a Northern New Mexico organization which had rose in arms to demand access to its recently appropriated communal lands. The list of attendees was substantive and demonstrates the cross-cultural alliances active during this period. Present were Tomas Benyacya (Hopi), Ralph Featherstone (SNCC), Maulana Ron Karenga (United Slaves), and Reies López Tijerina (Alianza de Pueblos Libres), amongst countless others. In the “Heart of Aztlán” much of conference was conducted in Spanish. Following suit, Ralph Featherstone led a chant for “poder negro,” while Ron Karenga made statements of solidarity in Spanish. At the conclusion of the two-day event, all the groups present signed a agreement of “Peace, Harmony, and Mutual Assistance.”<sup>21</sup> With the title outlining the main precepts of the document, it is clear that both solidarity and the recovery of a sense of belonging fueled much of this mutual aid. In addition to merely creating networks with other Third World radicals, indigenous justice is predicated on a relationship with the land.

From the armed struggles at Wounded Knee to Tierra Amarilla; from the establishment of autonomous community centers and the popularity of community murals in urban centers: a sense of place was at the core of both the Chicana/o and American Indian movements for social justice. Chicano literary historian Rafael Pérez-Torres

maintains that “land lies at the heart of the Chicano movement.”<sup>22</sup> But one’s relationship to the land was quite different for Chicanas/os in Los Angeles of Anishnabek in Minneapolis than a Chicana/o in Northern New Mexico or a Tiwa at Isleta Pueblo. How then, did the Chicana/o and Red Power movements regain their traditional lands, if at all?

First and foremost, indigenous civil rights activities took the form of self-determination. Although some communities and activists struggled to attain acceptance into hegemonic mainstream “American” society, many also labored for collective self-determination and local autonomy. All facets of communal governance, from local political decision-making to the production of alternative education systems and curricula, were recuperated as a tactic to combat the long process of Anglo-American colonialism. Donna Hightower Langston writes that the Red Power movement differed from struggles within the Black community in that American Indians were not seeking acceptance by whites, but rather requested the termination of racist federal policies that stripped them of their legal rights.<sup>23</sup> Appropriately, she writes that “One major difference was that their focus was less on integration with dominant society, and more on maintaining cultural integrity. While African Americans had been denied integration, American Indians had faced a history of forced assimilation.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, she continues arguing that a “central focus of their activism was on gaining enforcement of treaty rights, not civil rights.” As such, aboriginal rights campaigns (including Chicana/o and American Indian movements) were built not on the notion of individual civil rights, but rather on collective communal empowerment. This can be seen in the proclamation issued by the Indians of All Tribes or in *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*. For Métis

revolutionary pedagogue Howard Adams, self-determination and communal autonomy begin at the local level and subsequently develop into a national identity. He asserts that

Beginning at the neighborhood level, nationalism helps to unite the social actions of native people through mass participation, and therefore grows naturally from the struggles of the people, not from indoctrination through ruling-class ideology. Radical nationalism is created by the people, who, by participating in the struggle, make the nation a reality to everyone, and, in turn, make the nation part of their personal experience.<sup>25</sup>

While “nationalism,” especially in academic circles, conjures up notions of right-wing despots moving toward fascism. The same is not true within indigenous and anticolonial nationalisms. Mohawk political scientist Taiaiake Alfred proposes that all anticolonial resistance will take on a “nationalist” character, due to their attempts to subvert the dominant social order. Alfred writes that Native resistance seeks

to achieve self-determination not through the creation of a new state, but through the achievement of a cultural sovereignty and a political relationship based on group autonomy reflected in formal self- government arrangements in cooperation with existing state institutions.<sup>26</sup>

It was for this reason that we see the reclamation of Alcatraz and other sites seen as maintaining a considerable political, spiritual, or economic significance. For instance, urban Chicana/o communities began to reclaim abandoned and ignored community spaces through the use of mural painting. Mural painting was one way that young artists and activists could metaphorically reclaim a space, even without fiscal or political means to legally repossess it.

In addition to localized movements and the activities of the Indians of All Tribes to reclaim Alcatraz, a similar activity in Davis, California successfully reclaimed an abandoned military base for indigenous pedagogical uses. On a site initially used to train state-sponsored warriors, activists established a pan-indigenous university for American

Indian and Chicana/o students. Until its closure in 2005, Deganawidah-Quetzalcoatl University, commonly known only as DQU, was the only tribal college in California. The premise of DQU was a radical indigenist curricula based on community needs and indigenous knowledge systems. While many Chicana/o and American Indian community members saw themselves as divided nations, DQU was a pan-Indian institution that bridged the gap between the US and Mexico. Much in the manner that I attempt to interweave Chicana/o and American Indian Civil Rights history into a common narrative, so too did DQU.

In November 1970, a cohort of aboriginal activists jumped a fence at a recently abandoned US Army communications relay facility. Upon entrance the activists built a teepee and after five months of squatting on the land were given its legal title. The Native activists were acting on the little known legislation that allowed aboriginal people to reclaim any unused federal lands (similar reasons were used in the occupation of Alcatraz). In 1971, activists founded DQU and aligned the university with the radical anticolonial activities of the time. By the mid-1970s, Anishnabe leader and AIM co-founder Dennis Banks was named University Chancellor, eventhough he only held an associate's degree. Bank's selection demonstrated DQU's commitment and solidarity not just to Native peoples, but a specific strand of youth radicalism.

As the only tribal college in California, DQU was unable to shift its focus with the changing social and civic attitudes of the 1980s and 1990s. Subsequently, in 2004 the university lost its accreditation and began evicting students in the spring 2005. Just as the university was founded by activists looking for a radical site to restore and reclaim their identities within Anglo-American hegemony, so too did it remain upon its closure. When

the university closed in the spring of 2005, approximately twenty students were illegally evicted. Not willing to be denied an education, the students remained in their dorm rooms after university officials shut down electricity and gas in an attempt to force students from the premises.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, Art Apodaca, one of the students who initially squatted on an abandoned military base to help establish DQU, became the president following the loss of accreditation. The university will resume the accreditation process in January 2007. What the future holds for DQU, much like their anticolonial activities, remains unknown. What is known, however, is that by reclaiming the physical lands where DQU resides, aboriginal peoples were able to establish an autonomous educational structure built around an indigenous pedagogical structure. To this day, elders continued teaching youth in an activist setting, even without accreditation.

### **Indigenous Cultural Memory: Art and Culture of Resistance**

In addition to attempts to re-acquire appropriated land and colonized space, the reorganization of American Indian and Chicana/o artistic and cultural projects was also a driving force for the movement. Although certain factions of the movement were retrograde in hoping to return to some fictive precolonial past, by and large anticolonial cultural projects took on contemporary forms while referencing precolonial practices. In other words, anticolonial art is a dialectic between non-Western forms and styles and modernist aesthetics. Its synthetic application of divergent systems presents us with an alternative to traditional binary distinctions between tradition and modernity.

Nearly a decade into the movement, *Anishnabe Waki-Aztlán*, an art exhibition including work by Chicana/o and American Indian artists, traveled across the Great

Lakes. Curated and funded by grass roots efforts, this exhibition was “a celebration of our indigenous heritage,” as the hand printed poster asserted. By exhibiting in non-elite spaces, such as the Uptown People’s Center in Chicago, *Anishnabe Waki-Aztlán* removed indigenous art from market forces. Carlos Cortéz Koyokuikatl, a Chicago-based labor activist and organizer of the exhibition, wrote that

In these days of rising liberation movements, another priority should be the liberation of art. Free it from those who use it as another means of differentiating themselves from those who are of the ‘lowah clahses’ and bring it back to where it originated and where it belongs, among the people.<sup>28</sup>

For Cortéz Koyokuikatl, the liberation of art signified its reclamation from capitalist (market) exploitation. To do so meant its utilization as a means to construct community sovereignty, not solely to make money. As Cortéz Koyokuikatl was known to say: “Do you want to make art for a living or make a life of art?”<sup>29</sup> Clearly he acknowledged the need for all societies to produce art, but he envisioned art that operated in solidarity with larger social movements. Connecting artistic and cultural projects to larger resistance movements, Cortéz Koyokuikatl separates culture from more simplistic and nostalgic practices such as custom. While dominant society frequently views indigenous practices as custom (and therefore static), indigenous artists understood the need to represent their contemporary realities. By doing so, they affirm the radical put forth by dramaturge Bertolt Brecht: “Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.” And with art, activists have been able to smash the colonial institutions that keep aboriginal people oppressed.

In many ways, American Indian and Chicana/o artists and activists employed a Fanonian approach to cultural expressions. According to Fanon

Culture has never the translucency of custom; it abhors all simplification. In its essence it is opposed to custom, for custom is always the deterioration of culture. The desire to attach oneself to tradition or bring abandoned traditions to life again does not only mean going against the current history but also opposing one people.<sup>30</sup>

What this indicates is that culture is a changing system of signification where meaning is given depending on its social context. Therefore, the meaning of “traditional” practices during the 1960s and 1970s was quite different than those prior to European capitalist exploitation. Artists of the period played with images to both exploit and challenge dominant reception of indigenous visual culture.

Certain symbols easily understood by the Anglo-American media as “Indian” or “Mexican” (later Hispanic) were constantly evoked, albeit tongue-in-cheek. By doing so, the meaning of these objects was likewise altered. Moreover European forms, styles, and materials were regularly incorporated into cultural expressions (such as community murals, even if the overall theme and message of the visual text a critique of Euro-American hegemony).

Trinidadian Marxist critic and *negritude* intellectual C.L.R. James understood these complexities in relationship to anticolonial art. In his groundbreaking study of James’s “critical theory of modernist art,” David Craven argues that

On the one hand, James refused to reduce art to a mere reflection of existing society (as did soviet aesthetics) or to a simple act of ‘language speaking itself’ without individual agency (as would structuralists like Barthes and the early Foucault). Yet, on the other hand, while emphasizing that ‘artistic production is essentially individual,’ James also warned that one should *not* place ‘undue emphasis on the great, master artist,’ since ‘the great artist is the product of a long and deeply rooted national tradition.’ Moreover, all things are not possible at all times, so that a great artist is most likely to appear ‘at a moment of transition in national life with results that are recognised as having significance for the whole civilised world.’”<sup>31</sup>

In addition, aboriginal anticolonial movements in North America commonly re-directed themselves to “traditional” expressions as a way to cast off colonial oppression.

However, reinterpretation of “traditional” knowledge and culture became a contested site for many activists. After all, what constitutes “tradition?” Taiaiake Alfred points out that “we must acknowledge the fact that cultures change” and were not stagnant pools which never drain.<sup>32</sup> Instead, notions of tradition, modernity, and even culture, are processes that require reflection and critique. As such, indigenous cultural reclamation must acknowledge the process of colonialism and its harmful effects on a colonized community. Even if continuing to observing “traditional” cultural practices.

Yet Native culture is not some isolated site for the expression of ethnic identity. Again, Alfred recognizes that *traditionalism* “demands cultural give and take with non-indigenous people—respect for what both sides have to contribute and share.”<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, “tradition” must always be contested and questioned. It is not some *a priori* expression that must be rediscovered through a progression called decolonization. For Howard Adams, a dismissal of modernity (and an alignment with tradition) is a failure to recognize one’s true potential.<sup>34</sup> Correspondingly, Adams asserts: “the idea that a return to traditional Indian customs and worship will free us from the shackles of colonial domination is deceptive—a return to this kind of traditional worship is a reactionary move and leads to greater oppression, rather than liberation.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, the practice of indigenous spiritual and cultural life-ways means little if not tied to a counter hegemonic political project.

On the contrary, culture must be reconstituted and reconstructed. During the 60s and 70s, the movements that artists and cultural workers were producing was not an

isolated return to precolonial purity. Inversely, it was developed entirely in response to continued exploitation. Indigenous artists used the arts as a Freire-ian pedagogical tool that could facilitate the liberation of oppressed peoples.

Muralism became an exciting artform that exhibited aesthetic autonomy, while allowing communities to reclaim contested space and local history. Chicana/o artists turned to the mural because it was seen as an art form descended from *los tres grandes* (renowned Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros), while American Indian peoples in the Southwest and Northwest also had mural painting traditions. In the Mexican muralists, we can truly see the amalgamation of Pre-Columbian aesthetics with *avant garde* strategies.

Mural painting, beginning with marks on cave or cliff walls, is a rudimentary form practiced by nearly all societies. By working in this medium, indigenous artists were able to reference their collective cultural past, while simultaneously establishing an entirely new articulation. They pushed the medium to operate entirely within the public sphere. For instance, while *los tres grandes* had painted primarily interior murals for government agencies, community murals were nearly all exterior murals in the core of a community. Civil Rights murals had a unique aesthetic intended for popular audiences.

Of particular importance was the application of murals as a way to reconstruct falsified history and repossess community spaces. Alongside the development of Third World resistance throughout the globe was what many have identified as the “Community Mural Movement.” Although government agencies and private corporations possessed large amounts of capital to construct and demolish buildings at will, community murals were the attempts by local communities to redefine their own

communal spaces. While most Chicana/o and America Indian community members did not have the capital to construct new or preserve aging buildings, they did, however, have the ability to paint their creative expressions on top of the existing infrastructure. These expressions transpired both legally and extralegally.

What developed was a global network of academically trained and self-taught artists using public spaces as the site to begin reclaiming their own identities and histories. Community murals relied on little except the labor of autonomous artists and community members working under the guidance of a muralist. As has been pointed out by Victor Sorell, murals “are not, then, exclusionary landmarks either in their authorship or in their ultimate accessibility and appreciation.”<sup>36</sup> Inversely, they are forms of popular culture because they are accessibility. When emerging from within a community, murals became didactic messages proffering resistance and affirmation.<sup>37</sup>

In *Community Murals: The People’s Art*, Alan W. Barnet recognizes that the community mural movement “developed during the late sixties and early seventies mainly in the big-city ghettos and barrios throughout the nation where human creativeness struggled against racism and poverty.”<sup>38</sup> In the same way that the world caught fire during the 1960s, cultural practices, likewise, changed forever. Cultural critic T.V. Reed posits that “while Chicano movement artists worked and continue to work in many media, and while artists from many other racial and ethnic backgrounds work with murals, most historians and critics note a special affinity between the Chicano movement and the community mural movement.”<sup>39</sup> The mural was an expression of popular culture and the articulation of local autonomy.

While US racial politics were unable to deal with the complexity of “Hispanic” hybrid racial identities, Shifra Goldman demonstrates that the reclamation of indigenous heritage was foundational in the iconographic production of Chicana/o art.<sup>40</sup> Articulating *chicanidad* (the collectivity of being Chicana/o) as an indigenous sense of being was paramount to the production of an authentic anticolonial art. Writing collectively, Shifra Goldman and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto write, the use of “pre-Columbian motifs in Chicano art served to establish pride and a sense of historical identity for the artists and the communities they addressed.”<sup>41</sup>

Of particular importance to our discussion is Antonio Bernal’s 1968 untitled mural painted on the exterior of an abandoned drugstore in Del Rey, California. This site was chosen because it was near dozens of migrant farmworker camps and had been converted into a Chicana/o community theatre by Luis Valdés. It was here where Valdés found El Teatro Campesino (The Farmworker’s Theatre). El Teatro Campesino was an activist theatre troupe in the Brechtian tradition that used drama as an organizing tool.<sup>42</sup>

The Del Rey mural, as the painting is often entitled due to its location, is considered by many to be the first Chicana/o community mural. Not only did this mural reclaim an abandoned pharmacy and transform the site into a community center, but the iconography of the mural also produced a revolutionary visual language based on an indigenous reality. The mural was painted in two parts, one each to the right and left of the main entrance. The image to the left of the entrance is rarely reproduced and draws from Mesoamerican mural painting, while the right firmly positions the mural within the Civil Rights movement. On the left panels, eight Mexica figures form a procession that moves from left to right toward the community center entrance. Although seven of the

figures are male, they are being led by a woman. The linearity and composition of this panel are replicated on the opposing panel.

On the right wall, we see an analogous seven male figures also being led by a powerful woman. While the left panel connects to the relevance of the past for contemporary social justice movements, the right panels does something similar yet constructs solidarity with the Black Civil Rights movement. In this image, Bernal has painted eight figures, read right to left: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Malcolm X, wearing a Black Panther t-shirt (although historically inaccurate, this move shows the production of a broad ideological coalition); Reies López Tijerina, holding in his hands a copy of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the treaty between Mexico and the United States that entitled Mexican Americans the rights to their land, language, and culture; Joaquin Murrieta, a legendary freedom fight who fought against Anglo-American colonialism in nineteenth-century California; Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, leaders of the Mexican Revolution who have become symbols of land reformation; and finally la Adelita, the anonymous female warrior figure who fought alongside men in the Mexican Revolution of the early twentieth-century. The complexity and number of figures, drawing from Chicana/o and African American icons, expands how social justice movements are not purely interested in isolating their struggles, but aligning them with their peers to produce a coalition that has higher chances of being successful.

In an amalgamation of aboriginal historical memory and radical social change, the composition of the Chicana/o and American Indian movements remain fruitful today. By applying the arts as an organizational tool, this period recognized the importance that cultural expression played in how people saw themselves. If present movements are to

offer contemporary society the lasting impact that we see from those of the late-1960s, they must continue to evoke the arts as a truly revolutionary force.

### **¿Y que?**

In the end, what is the point of all of this? What significance do the Third World liberation, anticolonial, and Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s have for a war torn, late-capitalist, globalized society? After all, haven't people of color gained access to the institutions they once struggled against? Isn't institutional racism an antiquated notion?

It is in these questions that I find the most stimulating reasons to engage with Civil Rights activities, particularly the reciprocity amongst movements. While many of us appreciate the substance of social justice history and events, others are little impressed with deciphering the past unless it maintains its significance in contemporary society. Social history must operate somewhere in the middle. We are obliged to study our collective past, but only inasmuch as it remains relevant and tangible today. As such, how and why do the Chicana/o and American Indian movements remain essential? What relevance do they have today?

First and foremost, two recent events point out the need for continued efforts in the eternal struggle for mutual and equal rights. First, the immigrant rights struggles make clear that economic forces alter a society's political climate. While immigration has been a controversial issue for many years, the need for cheap expendable labor makes those in power rethink their desire to deport millions of Mexican and Central American workers. The collective voice of undocumented immigrants, their descendents and

family with legal status, on top of their allies made lawmakers take note at the ferocity of their claims. With millions involved in mass demonstrations, they could not be dismissed. Through coalition building and grass roots efforts to organize a “voiceless” community, the United States saw some of the largest manifestations in this country’s history. By “looking back” at Chicana/o and American Indian movements more closely, we will be better suited to meet the demands of the twenty-first century.

Secondly, the 24 July termination of American Indian activist and tenured Professor Ward Churchill lays bare the fact that dissidence will not be tolerated. While the University of Colorado’s Board of Regents placed accusations of plagiarism at the forefront of their decision, the subtext of this entire situation was his “Anti-American” views and radical indigenism. In a climate that borders on fascism, extreme views such as those held by Churchill, are marginalized and their spokespeople are expendable. We must remain engaged with the Civil Rights movement so that we do not allow a return to an alienating climate of fear and segregation (unfortunately, we may have already arrived).

As such, little has changed since the provocative days of the late-1960s, when AIM and the Brown Berets were physically reclaiming their rights as US citizens. Although there exists a small (but vehement) upwardly mobile African American, Latina/o, and Native American “middle class,” their presence in the United States is enabled by the outsourcing of jobs and subsequent fragmentation of US (and global) economic structures. What this means is that certain sectors are allowed access to previously unattainable positions, but they do so at the expense of others. Historian Elsa Barkley Brown profoundly articulates the fact that each and every member of society

lives his or her privilege and/or subjugation at the expense of someone else. My ability to teach in a university is enabled because others are laboring on the assembly line, in the sweat shop, or harvesting food in the *campo*.

Brown writes that history is about the process of “differences but also the relational nature of those differences.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, we all live our lives in a network of connectivity. Accordingly, Chicana/o and American Indian subjugation only exists in relationship to White privilege and its negation through Blackness. By attempting to disengage the relational nature of the various anticolonial and Civil Rights movements operating within and without this country, we are failing to properly understand the collective nature of those struggles. In fact, we are actually counteracting the achievements of these movements by attempting to narrate their stories as separate and distinct. By inserting American Indian and Chicana/o stories of liberation into those of Black social justice, I am acknowledging the old adage that “noone is free while others are still in chains.”

By building coalitions, as Civil Rights activists did, critical mass may be constructed and truth may be spoken to power. By reclaiming spaces, both legally and metaphorically, Native and Chicana/o activists rewrote history and altered the trajectory of their respective communities. Through the use of murals (and other cultural expressions) the Civil Rights movements enabled the creation of “free spaces” in a society where they were allowed little freedoms. As Stephen Duncombe writes, through combined cultural resistance and political action, communities “create new language, meanings, and visions of the future,” as well as a “place to build community, networks, and organizational models.”<sup>44</sup>

From these models, contemporary organizations and communities may learn from the past in a way that facilitates further collective advancement. Although the dialogue between Black, Chicana/o, and American Indian struggle was at times conflictive, it demonstrates that true revolutions may in fact be reformative. But the relevance lies not in the successes and failures of this era, but in the maintenance of the struggles of our foremothers and forefathers. As many may have chanted or heard booming from recent mass manifestations, “¡El pueblo, unido, jamás sera vencido!” The people, united, will never be defeated. It is in this unity that our strength is held.

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this text I use a variety of nomenclature to identify certain groups of people. Chicana/o and Mexican American are used to describe people of “Mexican” living in the United States, while Latina/o refers to people living in the Americas colonized by the Spanish. The gender inclusive –a/o ending counters the dominant masculine form (–o). American Indian and Native American coordinate the peoples still aligned with the hundreds of tribal identities in the United States and Canada. When discussing both groups together, I apply the common appellation indigenous, as well as aboriginal. While all of these signifiers are contentious, I apply these terms as many were the preferred categories used during the late-1960s and 1970s and were predominantly self-determined. As always, self-identification is a complex and personal one.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Fortunate Eagle. *Alcatraz! Alcatraz!* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1992), 71.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Winton. “Alcatraz changed everything.” *News from Indian Country* Mid-November 1999: 8–11 and Donna Hightower Langston. “American Indian Women’s Activism in the 1960s and 1970s.” *Hypatia* 18:2 (Spring 2003): 114-132.

<sup>4</sup> From the Proclamation of Indians of All Tribes. Reprinted in Peter Bluecloud, ed., *Alcatraz is not an Island* (Berkeley: Wingbow Press, 1972), 40-42. They also asserted that

It is isolated from modern facilities, and without adequate means of transportation.

It has no fresh running water.

It has inadequate sanitation facilities.

There are no oil or mineral rights.

There is no industry so unemployment is very great.

There are no health care facilities.

The soil is rocky and non-productive; and the land does not support game.

There are no educational facilities.

The population has always exceeded the land base.

---

The population has always been held as prisoners and kept dependent upon others.

<sup>5</sup> Mestizo is Spanish for a person of mixed Native and European ancestry. During this period, many Chicanos/os countered white privilege by asserting their indigenous identities. Throughout this chapter, I will use Mexican American, Chicana/o, and mestizo interchangeably, although I give preference to the term Chicana/o.

<sup>6</sup> The idea of being a “foreigner in one’s native land” comes from the mid-nineteenth century writing of Juan Nepomuceno Seguín, former mayor of San Antonio. This quotation then became the title of David J. Weber, ed. *Foreigners in Their Native Land: Historical Roots of the Mexican American* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous, *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, various citations.

<sup>8</sup> George Lipsitz, “Not Just Another Social Movement: Poster Art and the Movimiento Chicano”, ed. Chon A. Noriega. *¿Just Another Poster?: Chicano Graphic Arts in California* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2001), 79.

<sup>9</sup> Robert L. Scott and Wayne Brockriede, eds. *The Rhetoric of Black Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), vii.

<sup>10</sup> Howard Adams. *Prison of Grass: Canada from the Native Point of View* (Toronto: General Publishing), 194-195.

<sup>11</sup> Carol Swain as quoted in “Illegal immigration hurts African Americans; Vanderbilt professor believes Congressional Black Caucus is ignoring the issue.” *News from Vanderbilt University*, 4-30-2007. <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/news/releases/2007/4/30/illegal-immigration-hurts-african-americans-vanderbilt-professor-believes-congressional-black-caucus-is-ignoring-the-issue>

<sup>12</sup> Bob Blauner. “The Chicano Sensibility.” Originally published in *Trans-Action* (February 1971). Reprinted in Bob Blauner. *Still the Big News: Oppression in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 166.

<sup>13</sup> This is not to insinuate that decolonial expressions and movements had not been ongoing since the beginning of colonial expansion. Inversely, I believe that this period is marked with a high level of resistance and solidarity amongst previously separate groups. I maintain that it is due to these intra-class and inter-ethnic alliances that facilitate the success of each respective movement.

<sup>14</sup> Frantz Fanon. *Les damnés de la terre [The Wretched of the Earth]* (New York: Grove, 1963 [1961]), 35.

<sup>15</sup> Philip S. Foner, ed. *The Black Panthers Speak* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970); 19.

<sup>16</sup> Based on comments made by David Hilliard, Elaine Brown, Erick Huggins, Fredrika Newton during a five-day colloquium honoring the fortieth anniversary of the Black Panther Party. The University of New Mexico, February 16-21, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> In this context, I apply the term “Third World peoples” to name the historically oppressed and colonized peoples, living both within and without the United States. I choose this phrase because it was commonly used in an act of solidarity by Chicana/o, Native, Black, and Asian-American intellectuals during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The term was particularly privileged by Bay Area activists. Although outside the

---

specifics on this paper, it has a specific relationship to the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF). The TWLF staged student strikes at the University of California, Berkeley and San Francisco State University in 1968-69. Since the occupation of Alcatraz and the foundation of DQU were both in the Bay area, cross-over, ideologically as well as in terms of membership, was certain. Therefore, by applying the idiom “Third World peoples,” I posit a reciprocity amongst diverse ethnic groups that identifying them individually would not distinguish.

<sup>18</sup> Donna Hightower Langston. “American Indian Women’s Activism in the 1960s and 1970s.” *Hypatia* 18:2 (Spring 2003); 114.

<sup>19</sup> William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb. “The Lynchings of Persons of Mexican Origin or Descent in the United States, 1848 to 1928.” *Journal of Social History* 37:2 (Winter 2003); 414.

<sup>20</sup> Ward Churchill. *Struggle for the Land: Indigenous Resistance to Genocide, Ecocide, and Expropriation in Contemporary North America*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage, 1993.

<sup>21</sup> George Mariscal. *Brown-eyed Children of the Sun: Lessons from the Chicano Movement, 1965-1975* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2005); 193.

<sup>22</sup> Rafael Pérez-Torres. *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006), 115.

<sup>23</sup> Donna Hightower Langston. “American Indian Women’s Activism in the 1960s and 1970s.” *Hypatia* 18:2 (Spring 2003); 115.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Adams, 194.

<sup>26</sup> Gerald R. (Taiaiake) Alfred. *Heeding the Voices of our Ancestors: Kahnawake Mohawk Politics and the Rise of Native Nationalism*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1995. 14.

<sup>27</sup> Brenda Norrell. “D-Q University Students Left in the Cold.” *Indian Country Today* 04 March 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Carlos Cortéz [Koyokuikatl]. “El Machetazo.” *ABRAZO* 1;1 (1976), 25.

<sup>29</sup> Conversations with Carlos Cortéz Koyokuikatl between 1999 and 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Fanon, 224.

<sup>31</sup> David Craven. “C.L.R. James as a Critical Theorist of Modernist Art.” In *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, edited by Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2005), 150.

<sup>32</sup> Taiaiake Alfred. *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999), xviii.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Adams, 196.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Victor A. Sorell. “Articulate Signs of Resistance and Affirmation in Chicano Public Art. In Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, Yvonne, Yarbrow-Bejarano, eds. *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles), 148

---

<sup>37</sup> It is for this reason that the most successful exhibition of art curated during this period was called *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*.

<sup>38</sup> Alan W. Barnet. *Community Murals: The People's Art* (Philadelphia: Art Alliance Press, 1984), 11.

<sup>39</sup> T.V. Reed. *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005), 105.

<sup>40</sup> Shifra Goldman. "The Iconography of Chicano Self-Determination: Race, Ethnicity, and Class." *Art Journal* (Summer 1990), 167-173.

<sup>41</sup> Goldman and Ybarra-Frausto, *Arte Chicano*, 40.

<sup>42</sup> Here I am referring to the work of radical dramaturge Bertolt Brecht. See Carol Martin and Henry Bial, eds. *Brecht Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>43</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown. "Polyrhythms and Improvisation: Lessons from Women's History." *History Workshop* 31 (Spring 1990); 86.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Duncombe, ed. *Cultural Resistance Reader* (New York: New Press, 2002), 8.