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Performing 'the Spirit of '76': U.S. Historical Memory and Counter-Commemorations for American Indian Sovereignty

"When they light the candles on the 200th year birthday cake, we will be there to blow them out."
 Unnamed leader of the American Indian Movement, February 1976.¹

At a June 1976 Congressional hearing, the United States Senate reviewed a list of potential domestic terrorist organizations. In addition to the usual suspects such as the Weatherman and the Puerto Rican independence movement, the list included an organization called the American Indian Movement (AIM). AIM had become infamous for their confrontational demonstration tactics that involved the takeover of tribal and U.S. government property, and armed standoffs with federal forces. However, the immediate impetus for the Ford Administration to officially designate AIM as a terrorist group was their fear that these Indian militants might disrupt the summer 1976 official commemorations of the Bicentennial - the 200th anniversary of the 1776 issuing of the American *Declaration of Independence*. Even more than their image as gun-toting Indians, what made AIM a threat to the U.S. government were their creative and media savvy use of sites and anniversaries of American national memory to make statements about historical grievances and the pressing need for justice for American Indians.

Approaching its topic from the intersection of History, Memory Studies and Performance Studies, this article will advance the concept of *counter-commemorations* in its investigation of the ways in which Native American activists used U.S. national historical memory to make interventions for expanded Indian sovereignty rights in the Late Cold War. In their efforts to educate the public and influence policy, American Indian activists held counter-commemorations in which they performed Native critiques of the Anglo-centered view of the American past, and used media attention to push for historical and social justice for Native Americans. Drawing on public and declassified government documents, AIM-related archival collections, newspaper

¹ "Threats to the Peaceful Observance of the Bicentennial. Hearing before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Ninety-Fourth Congress, Second Session, June 18, 1976." U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, 1976., 9, 30, Online.
<http://ia700305.us.archive.org/2/items/threatstopeacefu00unit/threatstopeacefu00unit.pdf> Accessed January 16, 2014

accounts and memoirs, this article² argues that radical Native sovereignty activists strategically used the position of Indians in the Euro-American cultural imagination and national memory as leverage to push for the recognition of enhanced sovereignty rights. Using Diana Taylor's Performance Studies concept of *scenarios*, I will analyze several Indian interventions in U.S. historical memory, and by placing them in historical context, I will establish counter-commemorations as part of a calculated strategy of the radical Indian sovereignty movement during the Late Cold War and beyond, and as a counter use of official memory by social movements, which productively complicates currently existing categories in Memory Studies.

Definitions

In his scholarship of U.S. public memory, John Bodnar distinguished two co-existing, often competing forms of culture: “vernacular” and “official.” He identified vernacular memory as sub-national, belonging to families and neighborhoods, and he also counted war veterans and their kin and social networks as vernacular figures. According to Bodnar, vernacular culture is often based on personal or family experience, and has specialized and mutable interests and stakes in ‘memory work.’ “Official” culture, on the other hand, is most often represented by national political leaders, who try to establish and maintain national unity and continuity, and loyalty to the status quo. “Public memory,” according to Bodnar, “emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions.”³ Yet such dichotomies are often complicated by cases like the fall 2006 riots in Budapest, where ultranationalists both commemorated and attempted to ‘complete’ the 1956 Hungarian uprising against the Soviet-backed Communist regime, or when in the late Cold War American Indians ‘hijacked’ U.S. commemorations of the national past to campaign for Native sovereignty rights. These cases suggest that the groups Bodnar would call “vernacular” sometimes draw on and strategically use national historical memory in an oppositional fashion for their own sociopolitical causes.

² This article is part of a project I am conducting at the Centre for Collective Memory Research (Centra pro výzkum kolektivní paměti) at the Institute of International Studies, Charles University, Prague, the Czech Republic. It writing also benefited from a research residency of the author at the International Forum for U.S. Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2014.

³ John Bodnar, “Public Memory in an American City: Commemoration in Cleveland,” In John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994.), 74-75; also John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 13-14

Because theoretical dichotomies often fail to capture the complexities of such cases, rather than defining the nature of collective memory,⁴ here I focus on its manifestations – the politics of commemorations as a social and cultural form. Accordingly, this article treats commemorations as *performances* of memory – interventions in the struggles of the present by re-enacting or challenging socially constructed categories (such as ‘race,’ ethnicity or political status) projected back in the past. Commemorations and commemorative events are bracketed in time and/or space in a way as to clearly signal that they are meant to be performances or can be interpreted as such.⁵

These Native performances of U.S. national memory of the late Cold War were protest performances for American Indian sovereignty rights. The concept of social protest as performance was introduced by Richard Schechner in the 1970s and subsequently elaborated in scholarship by Rebekah J. Kowal and others. In analyzing the 1960 civil rights sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina as “staged events,” Kowal concurs with Schechner that performances for social protest are communicative events, and are often designed as such.⁶ Kowal convincingly argues that the Greensboro student activists exercised a kind of “scenographic oversight” over their actions, taking into account their visual and verbal rhetorical impact.⁷ Thus, their “[alternative] reality was enacted as a scripted if improvised performance.”⁸ Scholarship about the American Indian sovereignty movement’s major events confirms that AIM and other activists likewise understood their performance interventions as public events by which they could communicate their messages and champion their causes through television and

⁴ The seminal works that laid down the definitions and initial theoretical framework of collective memory studies include Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Heritage of Sociology Series, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and Jan Assman, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique*, No. 65, Cultural History/Cultural Studies (Spring - Summer, 1995), pp. 125-133.

⁵ In this article I analyze performances of the first order as defined by Diana Taylor: “‘Performance’, on one level, constitutes the object of analysis in performance studies, that is, the many practices and events - dance, theatre, ritual, political rallies, funerals - that involve theatrical, rehearsed, or conventional/event-appropriate behaviors. These practices are usually bracketed from those around them to constitute discrete objects of analysis. Sometimes, that framing is part of the event itself - a particular dance or a rally has a beginning and an end; it does not run continuously or seamlessly into other forms of cultural expression.” Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 3

⁶ Rebekah J. Kowal, “Staging the Greensboro Sit-Ins,” (*The Drama Review*, Winter 2004, Vol. 48, No. 4), 137

⁷ Ibid., 138

⁸ Ibid., 150

printed media – and that their scripts were often complemented by on-the-spot improvisation and impulsive decision-making.⁹ The fact that national commemorations and historic sites generally rely on spectacle likewise conditioned the social protest events staged by AIM and other groups.

Native sovereignty rights are historically constructed, and between the 16th and the mid-20th century they were dramatically curtailed not only in Euro-American law and federal policy, but also in the actual practices of Indian relations on the ground, which began with trading and treaty making and lasted through Indian removal, reservations and boarding schools, and reached their nadir with the Termination Policy of the World War Two Era. From the various and repeated articulations of American Indian rights over 500 years, here I am focusing on the sovereignty rights struggles in the 1970s and 1980s – the Late Cold War. In this period, Native goals included the full scope of collective rights – extending to those of fully independent countries. This struggle was spearheaded by a variety of Native American organizations, of which I am focusing on the American Indian Movement and their allies.

As a U.S. social group, American Indians continue to face a peculiar situation: their numbers are very small in the overall U.S. population (at just under 3 million, American Indians and Alaska Natives amount to less than one percent of the total US population¹⁰), which means they have little and rather localized political power. Yet the prominence of “the Indian” as an imaginary figure in U.S. culture (a topic which has been analyzed by Philip J. Deloria in his 1998 book *Playing Indian*¹¹) has provided leverage for Native activists in their relations with Euro-Americans. I argue that this cultural prominence has also meant a relatively powerful position of Indians in mainstream U.S. national memory. Because the American Indian Movement is usually remembered for their confrontational tactics (such as at Wounded Knee in 1973) and the deaths and court cases associated with their struggle (the killing of two FBI agents and one Indian in 1975 and the subsequent sentencing of AIM member Leonard Peltier to life in prison), scholars have not paid enough attention to AIM’s strategic interventions in U.S. national memory for

⁹ Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996), ix

¹⁰ US Census Bureau 2010 Census Briefs, March 2011. Online.
<http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-02.pdf> Accessed September 20, 2014.

¹¹ Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1998)

Indian sovereignty rights. These interventions involved the takeover of memorials and commemorative sites of U.S. national memory.

Scenarios in U.S. National Memory

This study makes the claim that Native activists used commemorations of the U.S. national past as scenarios for protest re-enactments of American Indian history. Native counter-commemorations relied on the scenarios of US public memory to stage their protests. Introduced by Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor, a *scenario* is “simultaneously setup and action,” which “frame and activate social dramas.”¹² A scenario is something that has precedent, but its outcome is not pre-determined – it has a range of possible outcomes.

According to Roger I. Simon, “historical representations are practices that deliberately attempt to shape social memory. Such practices seek [either] to maintain or reinterpret dominant narratives, revive marginal ones, or bring to light those formerly suppressed, unheard or unarticulated.”¹³ Shaped by the most dominant historical representations, many of the myths of US national memory can serve as scenarios for re-play: the stories of Pocahontas, Thanksgiving, the Boston Tea Party and the American Revolution, national battlefields, episodes from the lives of presidents, and others. While they are usually formulaic in their outcome, the commemorations of these events and people can still serve to re-activate their scenarios for the struggles of the present.¹⁴ It was this dramatic dimension of the commemorations of national history that the American Indian Movement used to perform critiques of Euro-American historical memory that pushed for Native sovereignty rights.

¹² Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 28.

¹³ Roger I. Simon, “Forms of Insurgency in the Production of Popular Memories: The Columbus Quincentenary and the Pedagogy of Countercommemoration.” In Henry A. Giroux, Peter McLaren, eds., *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 130

¹⁴ There is a scholarly consensus that in general, the observing parties of any commemoration make use of the past to make statements about the struggles of the present. Thus, commemorations show that historical memory itself is contested ground. For more on this, see John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), Richard Handler and Eric Gable, *The New History at an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, eds., *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), and Richard M. Fried, *The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming! Pageantry and Patriotism in Cold-War America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

In their interventions in U.S. historical memory for sovereignty rights, Native activists used what I call “counter-commemorations.” A counter-commemoration is when a group commemorates a historical event by claiming the mantle of one of the social actors who were involved in the “original” event; they usually also identify another current group as their “original” opponent; and they confrontationally attempt to carry out a political project related to the original historical event. With this, the particular group inscribes their present agendas on the past through their commemorative performance. Counter-commemorations stand out from other commemorative events in the extent and forcefulness of the group which asserts its vision of the past in the present.

Scenario I: Thanksgiving, Plymouth, 1970

In the fall of 1970, Massachusetts state officials asked descendant of the Wampanoag nation Frank James to give the keynote address at the state dinner commemorating the 350th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. When his planned speech was deemed too critical and dropped from the program, James and the United Indians of New England appealed to Native Americans across the country to join them at a demonstration in Plymouth on Thanksgiving. Among the hundreds of activists who gathered were members of the American Indian Movement as well as some from Indians of All Tribes, the group who occupied the island of Alcatraz at the time. The demonstrators declared Thanksgiving a “Day of Mourning” for American Indians. However, what was planned by the Wampanoag as a ceremony of mourning before the official state celebration soon turned more confrontational as AIM leaders like Russell Means started giving speeches from the base of the statue of Massasoit, the Wampanoag leader who played a key role in Plymouth Colony’s early survival. Asserting that Plymouth Rock was red with Indian blood, Means told tourists and demonstrators that “today you will see the Indian reclaim the *Mayflower* in a symbolic gesture to reclaim our rights in this country.” Next, Native activists buried Plymouth Rock in sand while an Indian in regalia performed an Omaha funeral dirge. After this ceremony, demonstrators climbed aboard the *Mayflower II*, the replica of the 17th century ship of the Pilgrims. As Means continued orating about current issues confronting the Native American population, activists replaced the ship’s flag with the U.S. flag upside down (an AIM trademark signaling distress). When activists threw overboard a dummy Pilgrim replica, police moved in and cleared the ship without resistance. To

journalists of the local and national media, Means characterized the event as “a new kind of Boston Tea Party. Only this time the Indians are for real!”¹⁵ To top off the counter-commemoration, AIM activists crashed the local period dress banquet, turning over tables full of traditional American Thanksgiving food. Meanwhile, John Trudell and his Alcatraz veterans doused Plymouth Rock in red paint.¹⁶

Media coverage, memoirs and photographs support my claim that the takeover of the 1970 Plymouth Thanksgiving celebration by American Indian rights activists was a counter-commemoration. In addition to the on-site speeches and statements to the press at Plymouth, at least two of the extant photographs of the demonstration compositionally positioned Russell Means as a descendant of Massasoit, overlapping with the statue in both visual angle and posture, thus in a sense ventriloquizing the Wampanoag leader. The difference in this counter-commemoration is not only between the statue’s Greek-inspired noble-savage near-nudity and Means’ 1970s clothing, but also in the AIM leader’s raised arm and fist, and the passion in his face, contrasting with the essentialized stoicism of Massasoit’s expression.¹⁷

The scenario of Thanksgiving in US national memory is a story of European religious arrival and taking possession of Native North America – with American Indians playing a role of passivity and the kind of magnanimous assistance as they in effect bequeath their land and heritage to the “Pilgrims.” The Native counter-commemoration of 1970 re-activated this officially sanctioned scenario of national memory, and through their active disruptions of their role and the story, they staged a commemorative intervention for social justice.

¹⁵ Summary of events synthesized from “While the Nation Feasted... Indians Bury ‘That Rock’ at Plymouth.” From *The New York Times*. *Akwesasne Notes* January-February 1971, 8-9; “National Day of Mourning,” *Akwesasne Notes* Fall 1971, 38. Underground Newspaper Collection. Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque; Dennis Banks and Richard Erdoes. *Ojibwa Warrior: Dennis Banks and the Rise of the American Indian Movement* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 111-3; Russell Means with Marvin J. Wolf. *Where White Men Fear to Tread: The Autobiography of Russell Means* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 176-7; and “The Suppressed Speech of Wamsutta (Frank B.) James, Wampanoag, to have been delivered at Plymouth, Massachusetts, 1970,” United American Indians of New England website, <http://www.uaine.org/>. Accessed January 16, 2014

¹⁶ Banks and Erdoes 113

¹⁷ Respectively, Bill Purdy, “Thanksgiving Day 1970: Russell Means Raises a Fist for Indian Power at Plymouth,” “While the Nation Feasted... Indians Bury ‘That Rock’ at Plymouth.” From *The New York Times*. *Akwesasne Notes* January-February 1971, 8-9, and AP Wide World photo of Russell Means at Thanksgiving 1970. Online. http://quezaltepeque.blogspot.com/2007_08_01_archive.html. Accessed January 16, 2014, also featured in Means and Wolf, among photographs after page 206.

One year after the events, the Native rights movement's flagship newspaper *Akwesasne Notes* again called on "Native Americans to come together at the one time out of the year when people remember that Indians gave something to this country [...] This is the one day when they will all listen."¹⁸ In addition to their Plymouth speeches, the takeover of the ship, the disruption of the state banquet, and the burying and painting of the famous rock, the newspaper's phrasing is further evidence that from U.S. national memory Native activists identified and re-appropriated the anniversary of Thanksgiving, an official public history form, to stage their own commemoration of the original events, with a different function: an intervention for American Indian rights.

Scenario II: Wounded Knee, 1973

Possibly the most dramatic event of the American Indian rights struggle was the February 1973 takeover of the village of Wounded Knee by Oglala Sioux traditionalists and the militant activists of the American Indian Movement. During the ensuing 71-day standoff, the occupiers held their ground in the face of overwhelming pressure – and firepower – from the Pine Ridge Reservation tribal police, South Dakota state troopers, the FBI, federal marshals, and the American military – the full force of the United States government.¹⁹ The demands of the occupiers – a federal investigation into the wrongdoings of tribal chairman Dick Wilson, the reinstatement of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty as the basis of relations between the U.S. government and the Sioux Indians, and amnesty for all in the village – were only partially met by a government that stalled, negotiated, hedged its bets, and tried to wear out those in the Knee by sealing the roads, imposing a media blackout, and keeping the village under withering gunfire that cost the lives of two Indians.

¹⁸ "National Day of Mourning," *Akwesasne Notes* Fall 1971, 38. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ In addition to references to history repeating itself, the occupiers, their outside allies as well as the government forces also made explicit analogies between Wounded Knee 1973 and the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, suggesting that international dimension of the Cold War also provided the participants with another scenario: that of the perimeter battles between the American military and a guerillaarmy partly made up of civilians. See, respectively, Thom Marlowe, Pacific News Service / Liberation News Service, "The Frontier Moves West: The U.S. Has Got Itself Some New Indians," in *Akwesasne Notes*, March-May 1972, 32; John Nichols, "Lieutenant William Calley, Meet Kit Carson" (originally *The New Mexican*, June-July 1971) in July-Aug 1971, 40-1; "The Fruits of Racism" in April-June 1972, 34; *Akwesasne Notes* April 1973, 43, Underground Newspaper Collection; Means and Wolf 279, Smith and Warrior 206, 207; Woody Kipp, *Viet Cong at Wounded Knee: The Trail of a Blackfeet Activist* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 126; Banks and Erdoes 163, 176

The 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee carried with it an acute sense of history potentially repeating itself. In a speech to his Oglala traditionalist allies that was carried by one of the television news networks, Russell Means described the planned occupation this way: “When we seize Wounded Knee, either we force the federal government to kill us all once again like they did 83 years ago at Wounded Knee – or else to come out and they negotiate and meet our demands.”²⁰ For their own part, the media amplified the commemorative dimension of the siege with sensationalistic gusto: *Time* magazine bombastically remarked that Wounded Knee felt as if “history had been hijacked by a band of revisionists armed with a time machine.”²¹ Such formulations speak to the very force of this performative intervention in U.S. national memory. To use Taylor’s framework, with their performance Native rights activists reactivated the *scenario* of the original event of Wounded Knee: the massacre of Big Foot’s band by the US 7th Cavalry in 1890. As the government issued ultimatum after ultimatum to the Indians to stand down, there was a clear sense that a gathering of traditionalist Indians may once again be massacred by the U.S. military.²² Scholars of the American Indian rights struggle Smith and Warrior point out that during the siege, the chief U.S. government negotiators wanted above all else to avoid having another massacre – to avoid having the Wounded Knee of 1890 repeated at the Wounded Knee of 1973.²³ It was this kind of performative use of U.S. national memory that provided leverage for the occupiers against the overwhelming power of the United States government: in order *not to repeat history*, the Nixon administration had to negotiate about Indian sovereignty.²⁴

²⁰ “Wounded Knee – Occupation ’73.” Online. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRcAYOIhx4Y> Accessed January 16, 2014

²¹ Smith & Warrior 207

²² Smith & Warrior 205, 207; “Wounded Knee – Occupation ’73.” Online. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRcAYOIhx4Y> Accessed January 16, 2014; See Carol Talbert, “Wounded Knee: 1973” April 1973, 15-17. Self-standing manuscript. Carol Sullivan Papers, Center for Southwest Research, The University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

²³ Smith and Warrior 205

²⁴ Scholar of post-Communist collective memory István Rév has made the same point about the imperative not to repeat the original traumatic event when he analyzed the influence of the 1956 uprising on the 1989 Hungarian transition to democracy. Panel “The Hungarian Revolution in the Shifting Mirror of Scholarship and Historical Memory.” Bard College, New York, February 16, 2007. Personal attendance and recollection.

One of the most iconic images of the 1973 siege at Wounded Knee provides further interpretive evidence that the event was a counter-commemoration.²⁵ The photograph by Cy Griffin titled “Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee” foregrounds an Indian reclining on a bunker of sandbags, propping up on his knee a copy of Dee Brown’s 1970 book of the same title. The words on the book’s cover serve to articulate the seriousness of the event. Whether deliberately or by accident, the posture of the human form lying on the ground echoes the most famous historical photograph of Wounded Knee 1890 - “Big Foot, leader of the Sioux, captured at the battle of Wounded Knee, S.D. [...] lies frozen on the snow-covered battlefield where he died, 1890.”²⁶ Through its composition, the photograph served to reactivate a scenario of U.S. national memory, and thereby recorded a performance of current ethno-political claims – Native sovereignty rights.

After its duplicitous resolution of the siege of Wounded Knee, the U.S. government prosecuted hundreds of AIM members in federal court regardless of the prospects of conviction. Yet the radical Indian sovereignty movement did not buckle under this legal assault. With help from civil rights lawyers and support from U.S. and European solidarity groups, they defended their members in court. When AIM held its first International Indian Treaty Conference in June of 1974, they adopted counter-commemorations as one of their public strategies. The minutes of the Conference’s June 12 press strategy conference feature the following exchange:

“[AUBREY] GROSSMAN: 1976 represents for whites their sovereignty, their constitution. Why can’t we bring in the Indian past in the 200th anniversary – on this anniversary, complete sovereignty for Indians[?]”

RUSS[ELL MEANS]: A coalition we were part of tried to get Bicentennial funding for Indian events. About 2 ½ years ago. I testified at hearings, etc., trying to get it to be a “red man theme bicentennial.” They had deaf ears. I sa[i]d then that if things don’t change, 1976 is going to be an unhappy birthday.

CARLSON: You should take a significant Indian date for the origin of this anniversary rather than an American one.

²⁵ “Wounded Knee, 1973. Photograph by Cy Griffin.” Richard Erdoes Papers. Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/dl_crosscollex/brbdl/oneITEM.asp?pid=2001322&iid=1004756&srctype= .
 Accessed January 16, 2014

²⁶ “Big Foot, leader of the Sioux, captured at the battle of Wounded Knee, S.D.” Here he lies frozen on the snow-covered battlefield where he died.” 1890. Records of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, 1860 – 1985. National Archives Online Public Access. Online. <http://research.archives.gov/description/530805> Accessed Dec 27, 2013

RUSS: But we can use reverse psychology on the U.S.”²⁷

When debating what kinds of anniversaries they should pick for their commemorations, these radical Indian activists articulated two possible prongs for their strategy. In Means’ logic, Native counter-commemorations of U.S. national anniversaries would have appealed to the self-image of Euro-Americans by contrasting American Indian realities with the ideals celebrated by U.S. national memory. The second method, suggested by Carlson, would pick an Indian historical or cultural anniversary to be commemorated at the same time as the U.S. Bicentennial, to simultaneously build Native pride and momentum and educate the U.S. public about historical justice for Indians. While it is not clear which approach they selected at the meeting, the radical Indian sovereignty movement soon adopted the slogan of a larger anti-imperialist commemorative coalition, “A Bicentennial without Colonies.”²⁸

Scenario III: The “Dog Soldier” Uprising, 1976

In 1834, while wintering at Fort Clark (now North Dakota) with the expedition of Prussian Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied, Swiss artist Karl Bodmer painted one of the most striking and enduring images of American Indians, *Pehriska-Ruhpa of the Dog Society of the Hidatsa tribe*. After a brief period of prestige and fame in the Plains clashes of the mid-19th century,²⁹ Native warrior societies were broken up or driven underground by the Indian policies of the Reservation Era. Yet together with Bodmer’s painting, mainstream press and popular culture neatly folded the concept of the dog soldier into U.S. and to some extent European memory. For many of those involved in the radical Indian sovereignty struggle of the Late Cold War – Native activists, their Euro-American and European allies, and their opponents – the

²⁷ “Press Strategy Conference June 12, 1974, Mobridge” (Minutes and transcription by Paula Giese). Roger A. Finzel American Indian Movement Papers, Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

²⁸ *Times-Echo* Feb. 1976, 3

²⁹ For about two decades, especially among the Cheyennes, the dog society achieved prestige and political influence by opposing peaceful relations with white settlers and the U.S. government. The subsequent military conflicts with the U.S. Army gradually eclipsed the influence of the dog societies. For more on the Cheyenne dog soldiers, see B. Keith Murphy, “Dog Soldiers” in Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *The Encyclopedia of North American Indian Wars, 1607-1890* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2011), 242-243; Jean Afton, David Fritjof Halaas, and Andrew E. Masich. *Cheyenne Dog Soldiers: A Ledgerbook History of Coups and Combat* (Niwtot: University Press of Colorado, 1997), and Jeff Broome, *Dog Soldier Justice: The Ordeal of Susanna Alderice in the Kansas Indian War* (Lincoln: Lincoln County Historical Society, 2003)

figure of the warrior/dog soldier reflected a mental concept for the re-enactment of the male warrior ethos of American Indian history and cultures.

In a larger sense, the Red Power Movement of the 1960s had been a revival of traditional American Indian masculinities. In their militancy and especially in their dangerous and dramatic demonstrations, male activists of a variety of Native nations could re-enact their long eroded gender role as protectors, fighters, raiders, hunters and providers for their communities. In a more specific sense, however, the American Indian Movement as an organization explicitly modeled itself after a traditional *warrior society*, which Native communities across the U.S. could call on to come and help them in a crisis.³⁰ Similar scenarios worked across the Atlantic among European hobbyists. In the early 1980s, Peter Bolz reported that German re-enactors of the Hunkpapa Lakota “[would] use drawings and paintings by Karl Bodmer as reference and try to reproduce the articles depicted there as accurately as possible.” In the same period, the annual gatherings of West German Indianist hobbyists over the Pentecost weekend featured “men’s societies like the Dog Soldiers, who exercise[d] a kind of police power.”³¹ As late as the early 1990s, a Hungarian hobbyist explained to the author that in battle, members of the 19th century Plains dog societies would pin their sashes to the ground to signal that they will fight until they win or die – and that they would do this in order to cover the withdrawal of their people.³² It was this fascination with the (potentially secret) soldiers’ societies of the Plains Indian nations, and with the dog soldier who is willing to fight to the death for his cause that was at the core of some of the performances of the activists, allies and opponents of the radical Indian sovereignty movement.³³

³⁰ “AIM is the new warrior class of the century, bound by the bond of the drum, who vote with our bodies instead of our mouths. Our business is hope.” Birgit Kills Straight quoted in Dennis Banks and Richard Erdoes, *Ojibwa Warrior: Dennis Banks and the Rise of the American Indian Movement* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 58. Also see Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996), 137-138.

³¹ Peter Bolz, “Life Among the “Hunkpapas”: A Case Study of German Indian Lore.” In Christian F. Feest, ed., *Indians and Europe: An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays* (Aachen: Edition Herodot Rader-Verlag, 1987), 486, 487; also Friedrich von Borries and Jens-Uwe Fischer, *Sozialistische Cowboys: Der Wilde Westen Ostdeutschlands* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2008), 141.

³² Personal recollection.

³³ My analysis of the warrior ethos does not mean to say that Native women did not play a significant role in the Indian sovereignty struggle. Historians of the movement and AIM leaders have discussed women’s interventions at pivotal moments, their profound influence on the struggle’s direction, goals and strategies, their leadership, and their

Even before it classified AIM as a domestic terrorist group, the U.S. government had responded to Native counter-commemorations with alarm and mobilization of force. By early 1976, the relations between the radical Indian sovereignty movement and the U.S. government had reached a low point. Since the deadly standoff and firefights of Wounded Knee 1973, the confrontations, however sporadic, had even increased in intensity. On June 26 1975, after an FBI car drove onto the Jumping Bull Ranch of the Pine Ridge Reservation of South Dakota, a firefight ensued with Indians at the site. When the dust settled, one Indian and two FBI agents lay dead. In the following months, U.S. federal authorities arrested Dino Butler and Bob Robideau, and conducted a man hunt for AIM leader Dennis Banks on charges from Wounded Knee and previous activities. After being on the run for over 7 months, in February 1976 AIM member Leonard Peltier was finally extradited from Canada to the U.S. government.³⁴ That same month, the dead body of AIM activist Anna Mae Aquash was found on the Pine Ridge Reservation. A delayed autopsy revealed that she had been shot dead at point blank range. By early 1976, the U.S. federal government was prosecuting AIM in the courts, and hunting its leaders as armed and dangerous. Both the federal authorities and the Indian activists were on edge.

In this climate of mutual suspicion often bordering on paranoia, in late May 1976 the director of the FBI sent a memorandum to major government agencies. The memo warned that according to an unnamed source, so-called “dog soldiers” affiliated with AIM had been training to engage in guerilla warfare against non-Indians and the government after gathering at the sun dance and the International Indian Treaty Conference, to be held on the Yankton Sioux Reservation of South Dakota in June of that year.³⁵

supreme sacrifice for the cause. Female members of AIM and other Indian rights organizations, including Mary Crow Dog / Brave Bird and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz have also articulated a Native feminism that trenchantly critiques the male-dominant character of the movement even as it supports its goals and members. For more, see Mary Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), Mary Brave Bird with Richard Erdoes, *Ohitika Woman* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Blood on the Border: A Memoir of the Contra War*. (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2005)

³⁴ In 1977 Peltier was convicted for killing the two FBI agents, and given two consecutive life sentences. Over the following 3 decades, one of the major campaigns of the International Indian Treaty Council was to raise international support for the release of Leonard Peltier as a political prisoner of the U.S. justice system.

³⁵ “American Indian Movement.” May 1976 telegram from the Director of the FBI to Deputy Attorney General’s Analysis and Evaluation Unit, the Attorney General’s sections of General Crimes and Internal Security, the U.S.

If read as a script for a performance, the document projects a scenario of domestic terrorism. After receiving their specific assignments, the “dog soldiers” would wreak havoc across the state of South Dakota. They would blow up the Lakes Andes Court House and the Fort Randall Dam; hit the Sioux Falls State Penitentiary to kill an inmate; attack farmers, shoot up equipment, and blow up the Bureau of Indian Affairs buildings in the Wagner area; invade Mount Rushmore and the State Capitol in Pierre; attempt to assassinate the governor of South Dakota; and put out snipers to shoot tourists along the South Dakota interstate highway.³⁶

However, this scenario is also reminiscent of the popular accounts of Indian raids against white settlers on the American frontier. Under the pretense of the traditional cultural and spiritual event of the Sioux sun dance and the Indian treaty conference, the crazed “dog soldiers” of the radical Indian sovereignty movement were reported to be preparing to turn the region’s Bicentennial celebrations into chaos, sabotage, and bloodbath. Here, the FBI memo relied on the mental image of the “dog soldiers” to re-activate the scenario of an Indian uprising familiar from Euro-American historical memory. By implication, the document does not allow for further verification; it easily suggests that the only way to respond to this information is by a preventative performance – ‘hit them before they strike.’ Acquired by and published in the press, among Euro-Americans this 1976 telegram likely evoked the same kind of terror that had in the previous centuries swept the frontier whenever Native groups gathered to observe their own cultural events – the kind of terror which led to the U.S. Army’s massacre of the Indian ghost dancers at Wounded Knee in 1890.³⁷

Marshals Service, the U.S Secret Service, and the Department of the Interior. 1-3. Roger A. Finzel American Indian Movement Papers. Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

³⁶ “American Indian Movement.” May 1976 telegram from the Director of the FBI to Deputy Attorney General’s Analysis and Evaluation Unit, the Attorney General’s sections of General Crimes and Internal Security, the U.S. Marshals Service, the U.S Secret Service, and the Department of the Interior. 3. Roger A. Finzel American Indian Movement Papers. Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

³⁷ It may not be far-fetched to suggest that there is a continuity between Euro-American panics and policy about Indian gatherings such as those at Wounded Knee in 1890, 1973, 1976, and the fact that after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, several U.S. government legal briefs were based on strategies used by the U.S. military against the Seminoles in Florida. “Andrew Jackson’s Actions Model Anti-Speech, Perpetual War Legislation.” By Gale Courey Toensing, *Indian Country Today Media Network*, June 7, 2011. Online: <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2011/06/07/andrew-jacksons-actions-model-anti-speech-perpetual-war-legislation-37239> ; “Welcome to the United Police State of America.” By Gale Courey Toensing, *Indian Country Today Media Network*, December 8, 2011. Online:

Whose ‘Spirit of ‘76’?: Native Counter-Commemorations of the Bi/Centennial

Even as several Indian rights organizations issued their own press statements to refute the charges made in the FBI’s “dog soldiers” memo, the federal government moved to classify the radical Indian sovereignty movement as an enemy of the state. On June 18 1976, the U.S. Senate’s Committee on the Judiciary held a hearing in its “Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws.” Resulting in a 168-page document titled “Threats to the Peaceful Observance of the Bicentennial,”³⁸ their quasi-judicial performance was recognition that the symbolic significance of the U.S. Bicentennial commemorations made them a stage for performances of ethno-political rights. The U.S. government had learned from the radical civil rights guerilla theater and the recent counter-commemorative performances of the radical Indian sovereignty movement, and was now determined to prevent the disruptions of the Bicentennial by Native critiques of Euro-American historical memory and Indian policy.

More than the hearing’s specific testimonies, the documents submitted, including newspaper articles, press releases, letters, and fliers, enabled the Subcommittee to link various organizations in the radical Indian sovereignty movement to a larger coalition of U.S. and foreign radical groups, some of which had advocated violent action or had engaged in it. Through their leaders and activists like Clyde and Vernon Bellecourt and Jimmie Durham, the American Indian Movement, its International Indian Treaty Council, and the recently established Native American Solidarity Committee were shown to be cooperating with the so-called “July 4 Coalition.” As a larger solidarity alliance of a variety of leftist and radical organizations including the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the Puerto Rican Solidarity Committee, the July 4 Coalition was organizing counterdemonstrations for the period of the official U.S. governmental commemorations of the Bicentennial. One of the Coalition’s member organizations was the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, which may have been linked to the

<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2011/12/08/welcome-united-police-state-america-66376> Accessed January 16, 2014

³⁸ “Threats to the Peaceful Observance of the Bicentennial. Hearing before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Ninety-Fourth Congress, Second Session, June 18, 1976.” U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, 1976. Online. <http://ia700305.us.archive.org/2/items/threatstopeacefu00unit/threatstopeacefu00unit.pdf> Accessed January 16, 2014

Weatherman / Weather Underground, a group that had engaged in violence including the bombing of government buildings to protest the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. The Subcommittee specifically used these ties to include AIM, the Treaty Council, and the Solidarity Committee in its list of organizations that were potentially planning terrorist acts over the Bicentennial season.³⁹ Even though the hearing was ostensibly convened to prevent the disruption of the commemorations by informing the general public,⁴⁰ its performance and the resulting document in effect classified the radical Indian sovereignty movement as a terrorist threat to the internal security of the U.S. nation state.

To be sure, the Native sovereignty movement planned to participate in what Bodnar would call a “vernacular” form of historical memory. According to the “National Work Plan” of the July 4th Coalition,

“The government is claiming that the bicentennial is a celebration of the great things it has done and of the great individuals who have led the government. It is an analysis absent of any popular content, of any historical vision; it is not true.

Our analysis concentrates not on dates, nor individuals, nor, for that matter, the government. It concentrates on the people who have lived and fought in this country – who have built this country and who have been robbed over hundreds of years, of the benefits of their work. Ours is a history of struggle.

The government would like to represent unity behind its policies in the bicentennial celebration.

In our action we want to show unity in struggle.

So, while the government will feature Gerald Ford, the Pope and the Queen of England, followed by a march of the states and a giant carnival in Philadelphia, we will do what we have to.

Our march will also be a march of the various geographical sectors of this country, contingent by contingent, with banners identifying them and, when possible, with some kind of impressive production – perhaps a float, small marching band... whatever.

The march could also contain specific contingents from specific organizations and should be led by the large contingent which we hope will be mobilized by the American Indian Movement.⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁰ It is likely that in light of the recent scandal over the FBI “dog soldiers” memo, the Subcommittee toned down its rhetoric to appease South Dakota Senator James Abourezk, whose son Charles had been implicated, and who sat on the Senate Committee on the Judiciary. See Senator Thurmond’s opening statement, and also Martha Roundtree’s testimony. Ibid., 2, 3-4.

⁴¹ Ibid., 85

The July 4th Coalition planned to counter the government's official bicentennial celebrations with vernacular commemorations. As their Marxist-inflected movement discourse reveals, the organizers both aimed to expand the regional representation of the commemorations (from the Eastern Seaboard to "various [other] geographical sectors of this country") and to enshrine the historical experiences of non-dominant ethnicities, "races" and classes. They hoped to shift the focus from the kind of memory that privileged the political history made by triumphant individuals to a memory of groups struggling to develop, access and keep resources, a share of the nation's wealth – working people, minorities, immigrants, and Native Americans. In this, the Coalition aimed to re-activate the Bicentennial's scenario of a group of aggrieved North American colonists declaring independence from the oppressive rule of the British Empire – to articulate the claims for rights of other marginalized groups in U.S. history and the present. Even though it was to make similar statements about Americanness, what would have distinguished this counter-commemoration from the age-old practice of Euro-Americans "playing Indian"⁴² was the participation of an actual Native delegation as the vanguard of the march.

While the measures of the U.S. government outlined above seriously hindered the alternative vernacular commemorations of the Bicentennial, some American Indian activists did hold their own observations of 'the spirit of '76'. Back in 1972, as part of the national Trail of Broken Treaties march on Washington, D.C. timed for the presidential elections, three Native caravans crossed the United States, visiting Indian reservations, as well as indigenous sacred and historic sites. One of these Indian caravans stopped at the Little Big Horn national battlefield of Montana, where the marchers attempted to erect an alternative monument to their heroes of the famous battle. While on this occasion they were prevented from completing their plan by the National Park Service,⁴³ the mere participation in such a project likely strengthened their pan-Indian identity and sense of shared purpose.

As a result of this earlier attempt at a counter-memorial, even though the Custer Centennial Committee hoped to hold a large and well-publicized ceremony, the National Park

⁴² Phrasing and conceptual framework from Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1998)

⁴³ Dennis Banks and Richard Erdoes, *Ojibwa Warrior: Dennis Banks and the Rise of the American Indian Movement* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 128-129

Service downgraded both the size and the fanfare of the planned observation of the battle's anniversary in 1976. Professedly aimed at providing a more balanced account of the original event, the centennial commemoration began in the shadow of the 1881 granite pillar featuring the names of 200 of the U.S. soldiers who fell on the battlefield. The commemoration was interrupted by the unscheduled appearance of a hundred Native American demonstrators led by AIM's Russell Means, who marched in singing and drumming, and carried an upside-down U.S. flag, AIM's symbol of an America in national distress. While they allowed the ceremony to continue,⁴⁴ the Native demonstrators nevertheless provided a poignant reminder of the defiant presence of one of the parties involved in the original event.

Now under a president who had first made a name for himself by acting in Westerns (filmic commemorations of the Euro-American conquest of Native land), the Indian demonstrators returned to the Little Big Horn in 1988. After participating in the annual Indian peace ceremony on the battlefield, a crowd of Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho and Crow planted a metal plaque memorial to "the Indian Patriots who fought and defeated" General Custer's 7th Cavalry troops in an attempt "to save our women and children from mass murder", and thereby protected Indian "rights to our Homelands, Treaties, and Sovereignty." Located on Last Stand Hill next to the granite pillar commemorating Custer and his men, the Indian plaque was objected to but nevertheless left in place by the National Park Service,⁴⁵ and remained the only Native marker at the site until a more permanent Indian memorial was erected in 2003.⁴⁶

In their 1972, 1976 and 1988 counter-commemorations, Native sovereignty activists re-activated the scenario of the 1876 Battle at the Little Big Horn, which in officially sanctioned US

⁴⁴ Tim Lehman, *Bloodshed at Little Bighorn: Sitting Bull, Custer, and the Destinies of Nations* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 186; Russell Means with Marvin J. Wolf, *Where White Men Fear to Tread: The Autobiography of Russell Means* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 357

⁴⁵ Tim Lehman, *Bloodshed at Little Bighorn: Sitting Bull, Custer, and the Destinies of Nations* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 186; Frank Del Olmo, "Activists' Plaque at Little Bighorn Honors 'Patriots' Who Beat Custer," *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 1988. No pagination. Online. http://articles.latimes.com/1988-07-04/news/mn-3871_1_american-indian-activists Accessed January 11, 2014

⁴⁶ According to the U.S. National Park Service, the battlefield was designated as a national cemetery in 1879, and a memorial to the U.S. Army was set up in 1881. The National Park Service took over custody of the battlefield in 1940. According to the NPS website, "These early interpretations were largely mono-cultural, honoring only the U.S. Army's perspective, with headstones marking where each fell. [...] No memorial honor[ed] the Native Americans who struggled to preserve and defend their homeland and traditional way of life. Their heroic sacrifice was never formally recognized – until" 2003. "Indian Memorial at Little Bighorn." National Park Service website. Online. <http://www.nps.gov/libi/indian-memorial-at-little-bighorn.htm> Accessed January 11, 2014

national memory is the story of the heroic last stand of a handful of white cavalymen against a multitude of bloodthirsty savage Indians. This time, American Indians assumed honored their ancestors who fought in the battle, forcefully inserted Native perspectives into the memory narrative, and to some extent assumed the mantle of the united tribes of 1876 to wage the current battles for American Indian sovereignty rights.

At the 1988 counter-commemoration, in his characteristically assertive style Russell Means warned the Custerphiles in his audience that if “you remove our monument, [...] we’ll remove yours,” and explained that the Custer memorial had meant to Indians what a memorial to Hitler and his SS storm troopers erected in Jerusalem would mean to Israelis. “Archeologists, anthropologists and historians have produced a monument like that - a monument that was named for him, named for a mass murderer. Custer’s road to the White House was going to be paved with our blood.”⁴⁷ In his speech Russell Means in effect indicted the official memorialization of the Battle of the Little Big Horn, indirectly criticized President Ronald Reagan, forcefully providing a vernacular critique of the Anglo-American historical memory of the military conflicts between the U.S. government and American Indians.

The Native counter-commemorations in 1976 and 1988 indeed performed ‘the spirit of ’76’ – a vernacular and revolutionary tradition, but not always that of 1776. Rather, they used official forms of memorialization to commemorate the Indian involvement in U.S. historical events with a focus on the geography and chronology of Native America. The planned Indian participation in the July 4 Coalition’s “People’s Bicentennial” was to legitimize the vernacular commemoration and dramatize the struggle of the continent’s native inhabitants against colonization, thus in a sense re-appropriating the revolutionary spirit of 1776. The Native demonstrations at the Little Big Horn national battlefield commemorated the pan-Indian military resistance to Euro-American colonization – the spirit of 1876. Importantly, both events were *counter-commemorations*, forms which use official memory culture to articulate a marginal group’s critique of the status quo.

⁴⁷ Tim Lehman, *Bloodshed at Little Bighorn: Sitting Bull, Custer, and the Destinies of Nations* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 186-187; Frank Del Olmo, “Activists’ Plaque at Little Bighorn Honors ‘Patriots’ Who Beat Custer,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 1988. No pagination. Online. http://articles.latimes.com/1988-07-04/news/mn-3871_1_american-indian-activists Accessed January 11, 2014

Conclusion

These and other cases prove that, far from being haphazard events, Native counter-commemorations were strategically calculated interventions in U.S. national memory for Indian sovereignty rights. By the time AIM was classified as a potential terrorist organization in 1976, they had ‘hijacked’ the Thanksgiving commemoration ceremonies at Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1970; they had camped out on Mount Rushmore, South Dakota in the same year; they had occupied and held the village of Wounded Knee in South Dakota for over two months in 1973; and they had been planning to conduct their own commemoration ceremony at the Little Big Horn battlefield in Montana in the summer of 1976. Native counter-commemorations continued after the end of the Cold War. Since the 1970s, AIM has been trying to redefine the U.S. national festivals of Thanksgiving and Columbus Day, the latter of which also included disruptions of the Columbus Day marches in Denver since the 1990s.⁴⁸ One of the fruits of such Native interventions in Euro-American (and European) historical memory was the United Nations’ International Year of the World's Indigenous People in 1993, itself a kind of counter-commemoration of Columbus’ voyage in 1492.

The final corollary of this analysis is a proposal to identify a *counter* use of memory for social justice and political causes. Counter-commemorations are an example of how marginalized groups can creatively use national public memory to campaign for political rights and social justice. On a more theoretical level, the concept of *counter-commemorations* reminds us that manifestations of memory do not fall into neat categories, but are often relational: social groups creatively use national memory to promote their own causes. Out of the American indigenous counter-commemorations of the Columbus Quincentenary of 1992, Roger I. Simon issued a call for scholars and practitioners to engage in a sustained pedagogy of an “insurgen[t] production of popular memories.”⁴⁹ Increased attention to the forms and functions of counter-

⁴⁸ Among the scholars working on this topic is Sam Hitchmough of Canterbury Christ Church University, who has been studying the Columbus Day Native counter-commemorations. See Sam Hitchmough, “‘It’s Not Your Country Any More’: Contested National Narratives and the Columbus Day Parade Protests in Denver.” *European Journal of American Culture*, Volume 32 Issue 3. (September 2013), 263-283

⁴⁹ See Roger I. Simon, “Forms of Insurgency in the Production of Popular Memories: The Columbus Quincentenary and the Pedagogy of Countercommemoration.” In Henry A. Giroux, Peter McLaren, eds., *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 127-143

commemorations may enrich scholarly analyses, and it may add much to the practitioner's tool kit of strategies for social justice.