

WE HOLD THE ROCK:  
PLACE, PROTEST, AND AESTHETICS ON ALCATRAZ

Lois Biggs  
Art, Literature, and Contemporary European Thought  
Professors Isabelle Alfandary, Marc Crépon, and Michael Loriaux  
December 13, 2018

This is how you see me the space in which to place me

This is how to place you in the space in which to see

The space in me you see is this place

To see this space see how you place me in you

— Layli Long Soldier, Oglala Lakota, *Whereas* (2017)

## Introduction

Alcatraz Island sits on Ohlone, Coast Miwok, and Ramaytush land.<sup>1</sup> Once a seabird habitat, once a hiding place for Native people fleeing the California mission system, it served as a federal penitentiary from 1934 to 1963.<sup>2</sup>

For nineteen months beginning in November 1969, Indians of All Tribes (IAT) occupied the island. IAT's occupation gained mass media attention, strengthened intertribal ties, and laid a foundation for American Indian protest movements in the second half of the 20th century. "We came to Alcatraz with an idea," writes one occupier, "we would unite our people and show the world that the Indian spirit would live forever."<sup>3</sup> Mohawk writer and activist Peter Blue Cloud's poem "Alcatraz Visions," published in an IAT newsletter, sets the scene of the occupation and expresses a similar optimism. The poem's final stanza speaks to the protest's radical approach to the land:

Steel bridges all around this bay,  
connecting land in bumper to bumper pain,  
dreams on Alcatraz are of a different bridge,  
fashioned of sunlight and soft voices.<sup>4</sup>

Here, Blue Cloud sets up a poetic contrast between the settler modernity of San Francisco, epitomized by images of steel bridges and dense traffic, and the sovereign Indigenous space that

---

<sup>1</sup> "Native Land," Native-land.ca - Our Home on Native Land, <https://native-land.ca/> (accessed December 11, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Troy Johnson, "We Hold the Rock." National Parks Service, February 27, 2015, <https://www.nps.gov/alca/learn/historyculture/we-hold-the-rock.htm> (accessed December 11, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Blue Cloud, "Alcatraz Is Not An Island," Broadside, From Newberry Library, Special Collections, <https://webvoyage.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=887767>.

<sup>4</sup> Alcatraz Indians of All Tribes newsletter #2, 1970, From Newberry Library, Special Collections, <https://webvoyage.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=969508>, 5.

IAT created on Alcatraz, represented by an image of “sunlight and soft voices.” Settler presence on Indigenous land is painful, he acknowledges, but the occupation represents a bridge towards solidarity, resistance, and decolonization. This essay will take a closer look at this bridge, at the radically Indigenous sense of place created by Alcatraz occupiers between 1969 and 1971.

Through their visible acts of protest and placemaking, the occupiers “[changed] the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible” in ways that continue to inform Indigenous art and protest today. To contextualize my visual and political analyses, I will begin with a brief historical overview of the occupation. I will then introduce Jacques Rancière’s notion of the aesthetic break, which provides an instructive framework for considering the symbolic productions of decolonial protests such as the Alcatraz occupation, and conclude with broader reflections on decolonial art and social movements in the 21st century.

### **A History of the Alcatraz Occupation and its Symbolic Productions**

A small group of Sioux activists organized the first protest-occupation of Alcatraz on March 8, 1964. The 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, they argued, returned surplus government lands to Native people and served as legal grounds for reclamation of the island.<sup>5</sup> The occupiers, accompanied by reporters and legal counsel, spent four hours singing and drumming on Alcatraz before federal marshals removed them. However brief, their action garnered media attention and spoke to the discontents of Native people struggling under federal assimilation and relocation policies. Five years later, in the wake of a fire that destroyed San Francisco’s only Native social center, a second wave of occupiers made their way to the island. The fourteen activists, many of whom attended the University of California, Berkeley, set out from a San Francisco pier on

---

<sup>5</sup> Alex Arbuckle, "When Native American Activists Took Control of Alcatraz for 18 Months," *Mashable*, November 13, 2016, [https://mashable.com/2016/11/13/occupation-of-alcatraz/?europa=true#00w9LE\\_wDSqB](https://mashable.com/2016/11/13/occupation-of-alcatraz/?europa=true#00w9LE_wDSqB) (accessed December 11, 2018).

November 9, 1969. When their ferryman stopped short of the island, several members of the party—including prominent education activist Richard Oakes—jumped off and swam ashore anyways.<sup>6</sup> Although the Coast Guard kicked them off several hours later, their occupation gathered critical intelligence about the Island’s layout and galvanized support for the largest, most ambitious landing yet.

In the early hours of November 20, eighty-nine Native people of varied ages and tribes made their way to Alcatraz with the goal of laying the groundwork, not only for a long-term occupation, but for the island’s transformation into a Native university, museum, and community center. Calling themselves Indians of All Tribes (IAT), the group issued a proclamation that claimed the surplus federal property by invoking the “right of discovery” precedent, and offered a treaty: they would buy Alcatraz from the federal government “for 24 dollars in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man’s purchase of a similar island about 300 years ago.”<sup>7</sup> Their sardonic proclamation, addressed to “the Great White Father and his People,” drew attention to the continued impact of colonial violence and broken treaties on Native communities, and looked towards a future of Indigenous sovereignty. Through reclaiming, occupying, and reshaping Alcatraz, IAT made this sovereign future a tangible one. As word of the occupation spread through the Bay Area and eventually through the U.S. at large, thousands of Native people and allies made their way to the island to join IAT. Thousands of others supported the occupation from afar, sending much-needed food and supplies. Over the next

---

<sup>6</sup> Jose Feroso, "A Thanksgiving Bonfire at Dawn: Celebrating Native American Resistance on Alcatraz," *The Guardian*, November 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/22/thanksgiving-native-american-sunrise-ceremony-alcatraz-occupation-protest> (accessed December 11, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Indians of All Tribes, "The Alcatraz Proclamation." *The New Inquiry*. April 18, 2017, <https://thenewinquiry.com/the-alcatraz-proclamation/> (accessed December 11, 2018).

nineteen months, occupiers took up residence in former cells, held regular powwows and cleansing ceremonies, and built a fluctuating but vibrant community, all while navigating infrastructural problems and negotiating with stubborn U.S. officials. As notes from the organization's 1969 National Conference show, IAT's ambitions for the island grew in scope over time, with plans to build not just a community center but traditional dwellings, a desalination plant, and modes of non-polluting transportation.<sup>8</sup> Countless reminders of Indigenous presence surrounded the occupiers as they lived, worked, and danced on Alcatraz. "You are on Indian Land," read spray-painted block letters along the walk to the main cell house, the word "Indian" underlined for emphasis (see fig. 1).<sup>9</sup>

On January 3, 1970, Richard Oakes's thirteen-year-old stepdaughter Yvonne fell to her death, marking a tragic turning point for the occupation. The Oakes family soon left the island, as did a slew of student occupiers returning to university. The tense ensuing months, criticized by some occupiers as "a combination of powwows and of constant street fighting," were marked by dwindling resources, trouble with non-Indian arrivals (and possible infiltrators), and unsuccessful negotiations with the federal government.<sup>10</sup> U.S. officials offered the occupiers space for a cultural center at Fort Mason, a former U.S. army post next to Fisherman's Wharf, but refused to accede to the occupiers' demand for a title to the island itself.<sup>11</sup> The notion of Alcatraz as a sovereign Indigenous place, or in Grace Thorpe's words, "the first 'free' land since

---

<sup>8</sup> Alcatraz Indians of All Tribes newsletter #2, 4.

<sup>9</sup> SF State Bay Area Television Archives, "Alcatraz Island," Digital image, CRG@CGP, April 13, 2015, <https://classracegender.wordpress.com/2015/04/13/alcatraz-the-birthplace-of-the-native-american-red-power-movement/> (accessed December 11, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Donna Hightower Langston, "American Indian Women's Activism in the 1960s and 1970s," *Hypatia* 18, no. 2 (2003): 121.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

the white man came,” was too central to the movement for compromise.<sup>12</sup> The number of occupiers dwindled over the last few months of the occupation, a fire of unknown origin destroyed several buildings on June 1, 1971, and government officers removed the last fifteen protestors from the island at gunpoint ten days later on June 11.

Despite its conclusion, the Alcatraz occupation managed to not only draw public attention to the situation of Indigenous people in the U.S., but to spark similar demonstrations in the coming decades, many of which drew on the occupation’s symbolic power. Donna Hightower Langston describes Alcatraz as “the beginning of a new movement and of a newfound pride and racial consciousness” for Indigenous people.<sup>13</sup> This movement, pride, and consciousness paved the way for high-profile demonstrations from the American Indian Movement’s occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 to the Dakota Access Pipeline (#NoDAPL) protests on Standing Rock Sioux land in 2016. The Alcatraz occupation, however, represents not just a watershed moment in the history of U.S. Native protest, but an important milestone in a broader history of decolonial social movements. The occupation demonstrates the interplay of aesthetics and political mobilization through the visual culture it produced and Indigenous relationships to land that it reinstated. Throughout their nineteen months on Alcatraz Island, IAT occupiers employed visual strategies to recuperate Alcatraz as a decolonized place where Indigenous ways of life could be refashioned.<sup>14</sup> Drawing on ideas from critical art theory, particularly Rancière’s notion of the aesthetic break, I will show how IAT’s radical acts of placemaking opened possibilities for decolonial political construction and community building

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert A. Rundstrom, “American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969-1971,” *American Indian Culture And Research Journal* 18, no. 4 (1994): 199.

<sup>13</sup> Langston, "American Indian Women's Activism in the 1960s and 1970s," 122.

<sup>14</sup> Tuck, Eve, and K W. Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1.

on Alcatraz and beyond. To understand these visual strategies, their aims, and their outcomes, we must first explore the nature of decolonization and its entanglement with place.

### **Decolonization and the Aesthetic Break**

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's 2012 essay "Decolonization is not a metaphor" lays out a framework for comprehending both settler colonialism and the necessarily "unsettling" nature of decolonization.<sup>15</sup> Settler colonialism, they explain, "is different than other forms of colonialism in that settlers come with the intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain."<sup>16</sup> In order to maintain this sovereignty, settlers must completely possess the land they occupy. And in order to possess the land, they must transform it into a source of capital. Their drive towards possession, Tuck and Yang argue, precludes any relationships to land that do not conform to liberal modes of ownership. The epistemological, cosmological, and above, all, personal relationships of Indigenous communities to the land must be erased. "Everything within a settler colonial society," the scholars continue, "strains to destroy or assimilate the Native in order to disappear them from the land."<sup>17</sup> It follows that any decolonization must bring about "the repatriation of Indigenous land and life." As the essay's title suggests, decolonization is a concrete rather than abstract process, one that requires tangible recuperation of Indigenous land and affective relationships to it. In overturning settler colonial structures of domination and possession, it "implicates and unsettles everyone."<sup>18</sup> Revolutionary Martiniquan philosopher Frantz Fanon, one of Tuck and Yang's primary influences, comes to similar conclusions in *The Wretched of the*

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 7.



*Earth*. Fanon argues in the book's first chapter that decolonization, a process that "sets out to change the order of the world," must speak to a colonized people's desire for "bread and land."<sup>19</sup> Fanon also remarks on the affective nature of decolonization, citing its potential to "fundamentally [alter] being" against the grain of colonization.<sup>20</sup> Viewed through the lens of Tuck, Yang, and Fanon's frameworks, the Alcatraz occupation represents a decolonial act that simultaneously reclaimed land from the settler colonial state and recuperated Indigenous ways of life rooted in connection to that land. In order to achieve this end, occupiers focused their visual and political strategies on the intersection of land and affect: in other words, on place.

In "American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969-1971," Robert Rundstrom argues that on Alcatraz, Native people "came to build a new future and to create an Indian place in which a sense of pan-Indian ethnicity could be renewed."<sup>21</sup> He examines graffiti, photographs, and other archival materials to show how occupiers made this "Indian place," addressing one another through a common language of creation and visibility. Rundstrom bases his argument on the widely accepted geographical definition of place: the meeting of "physical site and situation, a tangible created environment, a social milieu, and a set of personal and shared meanings."<sup>22</sup> This definition shows that place is comprised of entangled concrete and personal elements, just as decolonization encompasses both tangible and affective repatriations of land and life. To make an Indigenous place, or, to build concrete and personal Indigenous relationships to land as the Alcatraz occupiers did, can be thus understood as an effective means of decolonization. As Peter Blue Cloud suggested in "Alcatraz Visions," relationships to land are bridges towards an

---

<sup>19</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 2, 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Rundstrom, "American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969-1971," 186-187.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 187.

Indigenous future. How, then, did these relationships manifest in the occupiers' acts of protest? To answer this question, Rundstrom links political geography to the perceptible, writing that "politics creates place when people make both the place and the political ideals and goals with which it is being invested demonstrably visible."<sup>23</sup> Tangible modes of protest, from graffiti to community gatherings to architectural redevelopment, were central to the Alcatraz occupation. These modes of protest rendered Alcatraz an Indigenous place and invested it with decolonial "political ideals and goals." A critical analysis of the Alcatraz occupation, in turn, must incorporate both political and aesthetic perspectives.

Towards this end, Rancière's notion of the aesthetic break, theorized in the *The Emancipated Spectator*, explores the relationship between politics and aesthetics as well as the revolutionary potential of art. The aesthetic break accounts for not only why but *how* the Alcatraz occupiers' visual strategies opened up decolonial possibilities on the island.

*The Emancipated Spectator*, published in 2011, engages broadly with questions of spectatorship in modern and contemporary art. Rancière is skeptical of the notion, propagated by theorists like Guy DeBord, that modern audiences are passive consumers who must be made aware of their state through artistic critiques of the spectacle. In the chapter "Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community," Rancière offers another lens through which to view the relationship between modern art and life: that of dissensus and the dissensual community. "Human beings," he writes, "are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, a certain distribution of being together" called the *sensus communis*.<sup>24</sup> Politics can be understood as the transformation of our shared sensory fabric. This structure accounts for how, in the face of the Marxian alienation

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 197.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, New York: Verso, 2011, 56.

produced by modern capitalism, human beings come to live “apart together” in a state of dissensus. In response, contemporary art projects such as Sylvie Blocher, François Daune, and Josette Faidit’s 2005 project *Campement Urbain* often aim to create a sense of community and anticipate a politically mobilized “people to come.”<sup>25</sup> Although Rancière is generally critical of these efforts, he locates modern art’s radical potential in the “aesthetic break” that accompanies dissensus. Understanding “exactly what is disconnected [in art] and what is at stake in that disconnection,” he argues, is crucial to understanding why aesthetics are politically charged.<sup>26</sup>

The aesthetic break is the separation between an author’s intentions when creating a work and a reader’s affective response when encountering it. In other words, it represents the breakdown of a “regime of concordance between sense and sense,” a regime epitomized by classical theater.<sup>27</sup> Plays such as Molière’s *Tartuffe* and Voltaire’s *Mahomet*, Rancière explains, mirrored human virtues and vices onstage with the expectation that spectators would change their behavior in response. These works assumed that *poiesis*, the act of creation, and *aisthesis*, the “forms of perception and emotion through which [a work] is felt and understood,” were entwined.<sup>28</sup> At some point, however, a dissensual gap between art and its reception arose. Rancière traces understandings of this gap back to Rousseau’s *Letter to M. D’Alembert on the Theatre*, in which the political philosopher questions the existence of a “direct line” from performance to initial audience response to subsequent behavior outside of the theatre.<sup>29</sup> Aesthetics, Rancière argues, is the very breakage of these lines, “the rupture of the harmony that

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 61.

enabled correspondence between the texture of the work and its efficacy.”<sup>30</sup> The aesthetic break can frustrate artistic attempts at political mobilization. Although it is tempting to believe “that the reproduction in resin of the commercial idol will make us resist the empire of the ‘spectacle’ or that the photography of some atrocity will mobilize us against injustice,” critical works of art are never guaranteed to change the mind and/or behavior of their viewers.<sup>31</sup> However, Rancière argues that the aesthetic break opens up radical possibilities for art that are grounded in “dis-identification” rather than *mimesis*.<sup>32</sup>

To demonstrate these possibilities, he analyzes an excerpt from *Le Tocsin des travailleurs* (The Workers’ Tocsin), an anti-capitalist newspaper published during the French Revolution of 1848. In a third-person diary entry, a joiner writes that when he works on a home with a beautiful view outside its window, he “stops his arms and glides in imagination toward the spacious view to enjoy it better than the [owners] of the neighbouring residences.”<sup>33</sup> While apolitical at first glance, the anecdote reflects the newspaper’s revolutionary goals. Being a worker under capitalism, Rancière explains, requires the alignment of one’s arms and one’s gaze. The break between the joiner’s laboring body and his distracted gaze disrupts this alignment between bodies and their functions, between cause and effect, and thus presents a challenge to the capitalist system.

In a similar vein, Rancière discusses a break between cause and effect in the joiner’s diary that centers on the disjunction between authorial intention and reader response. By recommending his comrades works by Goethe, Chateaubriand, and Senancour, the joiner infuses

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 71.

these works with radical ideas that the upper-class authors never intended to endorse. Both diary excerpts, Rancière argues, create a “new configuration” of the sensory fabric, and in doing so, open space for new social relations and revolutionary forms of community.<sup>34</sup> Altogether, the political potential of the aesthetic break rests in this capacity to reconfigure social relations. Aesthetic experience, he writes, “allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation,” all of which rest on the disjunction of cause and effect.<sup>35</sup>

A second manifestation of the aesthetic break, the rupture between a work of art’s *mise-en-scène* and its original destination, helps account for the link between aesthetic experience, everyday life, and political mobilization. To demonstrate this rupture, Rancière examines the encounter between spectators and artworks in a museum setting. An artist, for example, may intend for a work of art to be displayed in a specific context, such as a religious ceremony or a patron’s home. However, within a museum, the same work is “disconnected from any specific destination” and offered up to an audience of spectators who encounter it with an “indifferent gaze” that is applied uniformly to every other work in the gallery.<sup>36</sup> The break between destination and *mise-en-scène* mirrors the break between function and bodies expressed through the revolutionary joiner’s diary, since both are structured by the larger break between cause and effect, and both carry the potential to reconfigure the social fabric. Beyond the museum and *Le Tocsin des travailleurs*, where can these reconfigurations occur? Rancière argues that because

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 69.

aesthetic experience tears works from their original destinations, there is no such thing as a “private paradise for amateurs and aesthetes,” no art world cut off from the social world.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Aesthetic Break and Alcatraz**

Because the realm of art and the realm of everyday life are one and the same, we can use the aesthetic break to understand the revolutionary potential of not only artworks but social movements and acts of protest like the Alcatraz occupation. As Rancière shows in his analysis of the joiner’s diary, the aesthetic break “overthrows the ‘right’ relationship,” as defined by oppressive structures, “between what a body ‘can’ do and what it cannot.”<sup>38</sup> Because the function of the joiner’s body under capitalism is to work, his disruptive moment of reverie represents a challenge to capitalism itself. Alcatraz occupiers challenged settler colonialism in a similar manner, albeit on a much larger scale. As Tuck and Yang explain in “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” the function of the Indigenous body under settler colonialism is to be absent, to become a ghost, to disappear from the land.<sup>39</sup> In occupying Alcatraz, IAT protestors refused this function, making themselves as visible on the land as possible. This act, made possible by visually apparent modes of protest like graffiti, art, and community gatherings, activated the aesthetic break. In doing so, it opened space for a reconfiguration in the sensory fabric that challenged settler colonial structures and their requirement that Indigenous communities disappear. Along these lines, the aesthetic break challenged the colonial imperative to reorient relationships between people and land into those of owners and property. Thus, in order to decolonize Alcatraz, it was important for occupiers to reclaim affective, non-capitalistic relationships to land. Not only did their modes of protest make them visible on the land, they

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>39</sup> Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” 9.

reclaimed these relationships and succeeded in making Alcatraz an Indigenous place. The second rupture between destination and *mise-en-scène* accounts for this transformation. When the U.S. government constructed Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary in 1934, they invested the island's built environment with federal and carceral power. Its foreboding prison structures were meant to represent and maintain government structures. However, because aesthetic separation dislodges a work from its original destination, IAT occupiers were able to reframe the island's built environment as an Indigenous home rather than a site of colonial oppression. During a nineteen-month period on the island, their acts of placemaking invested former prison buildings with hope for an Indigenous future.

By engaging several aesthetic ruptures, the Alcatraz occupiers pursued a decolonial reconfiguration of the sensory fabric encompassing land and life. Sovereign Indigenous presence on Alcatraz, a place imbued with federal and colonial politics, represents a break between the "cause" of settler colonialism and the intended "effect" of Indigenous absence. Through visible modes of protest, the occupiers engaged with this break in order to decolonize the island and create an Indigenous place.

### **United States Indian Property**

In a 2017 interview with *The New Inquiry*, former IAT "quartermaster" Adam Fortunate Eagle discussed the occupation's use of humor, explaining that:

Satire and humor win more friends than righteous anger or indignation. . . Humor is the weapon of the downtrodden. Anger and hostility only serve to prolong the guilt complex of the dominant societies. If we'd gone 'Argh, White Man, argh!' that would have gotten us nowhere! So bring him into the story, make him laugh! [laughs]<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Stephanie Sy-Quia, "Rock of Nations," *The New Inquiry*, November 25, 2017, <https://thenewinquiry.com/rock-of-nations/> (accessed December 13, 2018).

Occupiers brought the White Man into the story from the moment they released a proclamation addressed to the “Great White Father and his people” and proposed the creation of a “Bureau of Caucasian Affairs.” While their tactics were, as Fortunate Eagle suggests, subversively humorous to outsiders, they were just as important in shaping community on the island itself. As Rundstrom argues in “American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969-1971,” IAT’s proclamation marked “the beginning of the creation of an Indian place.” The ironic inversions expressed in this proclamation, he explains, “[functioned as powerful rhetorical devices]” that would inform the occupiers’ modes of protest over the next nineteen months.<sup>41</sup> These modes of protest, which often took the form of public art, signified Indigenous presence on and connection to the island through ironic engagements with aesthetic separation. A photograph of occupiers playing ball games, taken on November 26, 1969, provides an instructive example (see fig. 2).<sup>42</sup> In the image, four Native people stand on a concrete lot in front of former prison offices—one clutches a football, two look on with interest, and one, mid-jump and hands outstretched, tosses a basketball into the air. Behind and above them, in the center of the photograph’s frame, rests a graffitied sign whose jubilant, defiant tone reflects the playful scene. The sign originally marked Alcatraz as “United States Property,” forbidding non-government boats and declaring that “no one [was] allowed ashore without a pass.” Protestors crossed out “states” and added text to claim the island as “United Indian Property,” a visual act underscoring the occupation’s pan-Indian politics, and, by declaring Alcatraz “Indian Property,” its goal of land repatriation. They

---

<sup>41</sup> Rundstrom, “American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969-1971,” 189.

<sup>42</sup> AP Photo, American Indians play ball games outside the prison wall on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco, Digital image, *Indian Country Today*, September 2, 2017, <https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/voices-from-alcatraz-island-rhwndtlnwES8WRChgoRsuw/> (accessed December 11, 2018).



removed “no one” from the final sentence, resulting in a disembodied phrase—“allowed ashore without a pass”—that spoke to the movement’s inclusivity.

However, as Tuck, Yang, and Fanon’s theories suggest, decolonization requires not only struggle against colonial structures such as those represented by the original sign, but the creation of an altogether new Indigenous language and humanity. Occupiers materialized this new language and humanity through figures they painted outside the physical and semantic boundaries of the sign: “Indians welcome” and “Indian land,” the latter accompanied by a drawing of a bird of prey. Like the arms of the basketball-playing occupier, the bird’s arms stretch towards the sky in upward motion to stake out Indigenous presence on the island. IAT’s repurposing of the sign and its surroundings reflects the aesthetic break between authorial intention and audience reception. The sign quite literally circumscribed audience behavior by forbidding anyone without a pass to enter Alcatraz. But as Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “it is a known fact that under certain emotional circumstances [of colonization] an obstacle actually escalates action,” and as Rancière shows in *The Emancipated Spectator*, the direct link between performance, response, and behavior can be broken in service of protest.<sup>43</sup> By infusing the sign’s language with decolonial sentiment, an affective disposition that the federal government certainly did not intend it to inspire, the occupiers made themselves visible and their political goals legible. IAT made many other subversive plays on government-chosen places and names during the occupation, such as marking a window painted with the words “Bureau of White Affairs” and cells-turned-dwellings with the names of tribes and families.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 17.

<sup>44</sup> Rundstrom, “American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969-1971,” 189.

The power of these signs can be understood through the Situationist idea of *détournement* and gauged through Rancière's notion of critical art.

The Situationist International (SI), a leftist art organization active from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, merged anti-authoritarian Marxist principles with a French Surrealist fascination with “the unexpected, the bizarre, [and] the magical aspects” of the modern city.<sup>45</sup> Collective avant-garde action, the organization argued in “Report on the Construction of Situations,” requires a coherent political critique and revolutionary program. Concerned by emerging modernity, lagging political action, and the bourgeoisie's capacity to stupefy the proletariat through “televised imbecilities,” the organization proposed means of intervention in what Guy Debord described as *la société du spectacle*. Through constructing game-like “momentary ambiances of life”—or, situations—in the urban realm, Situationists aimed to reawaken political consciousness and desires against the grain of the spectacle. These situations took several forms. One was the *dérive*, an improvised drift through the city meant to reveal the psychogeographical forces that shape the urban environment. Another, more relevant to the Alcatraz occupation, was *détournement*, the highly visible “reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble” for the purpose of turning capitalism and other power structures against themselves.<sup>46</sup> Martha Rosler provides an example in her *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home c. 1967-72* series, which juxtaposed *LIFE Magazine* photographs of wounded Vietnamese civilians with *House Beautiful* photographs of upper-class American living rooms in order to critique media treatment of the Vietnam War.<sup>47</sup> In “Detournement As Negation and Prelude,” Debord acknowledges the long

---

<sup>45</sup> Guy Debord, “Writings from the Situationist International 1957-61,” In *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2014, 701.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 704.

<sup>47</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 75.

history of *détournement* in avant-garde art, locating the practice's power in its ease of use and its capacity for critique in a world already flooded with self-parodying images. While parody often induces laughter, he explains, *détournement* can bring us to a “parodic-serious” stage where detoured images instead induce a dissensual indifference that, like the indifference of museumgoers in *The Emancipated Spectator*, is politically charged.<sup>48</sup> In this parodic-serious stage we are confronted with the “urgent necessity and the near impossibility of bringing together and carrying out a totally innovative collective action,” a sense that, Debord argues, carries mobilizing potential.<sup>49</sup>

IAT's repurposing of government signage and buildings on Alcatraz can be understood as a reuse of existing elements in a new ensemble, as an act of *détournement* that aimed to turn U.S. settler colonialism against itself. Because *détournement* is “a negation of the value of the previous organization of expression,” this act made it possible for occupiers to negate the value of federal power and offer an Indigenous organization of expression in its place. While the aforementioned “United Indian Property” is a relatively straightforward example of *détournement* and Indigenous expression during the occupation, changes made to a seal on the main cell-house are more ambiguous and similarly revealing. Two sets of alterations to the seal, a stars-and-stripes shield guarded by an eagle with raised wings, were made. The first consisted of a sign hung from the eagle's neck reading “This Land Is My Land,” a quotation from Woody Guthrie's populist folk anthem (see fig. 3). The second consisted of the repainting of the shield to read “FREE,” the shield's vertical stripes serving as the letters of the word itself (see fig. 4). Rundstrom argues that, although outsiders read the alterations as the work of pro-government

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 705.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

infiltrators, they were instead “[strokes] of placemaking.”<sup>50</sup> The Guthrie declaration expresses an Indigenous connection to the land of Alcatraz, the addition of “FREE” refuses the island’s carceral history, and taken together, the two acts appropriate the eagle and shield’s symbolic power for revolutionary means. This example demonstrates how IAT used *détournement* as a means of placemaking and appropriation, but just how effective was this tactic in achieving the occupation’s overall goal of decolonization? In “Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community,” Rancière critiques *détournement* in terms of its political efficacy, providing a means for evaluating the occupation’s ironic rhetoric.

As Debord explains in “Détournement as Negation and Prelude,” *détournement* reflects the meeting of the parodic and the serious, which in turn expresses the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of revolution. The SI hoped to inspire a “revolution in everyday life” through the construction of situations, but they acknowledged that these situations, and their entire program, were “essentially transitory.” Using the aesthetic break, Rancière gives a possible explanation as to why lasting revolution is so difficult to achieve through Situationist means. The break between cause and effect which itself makes aesthetics political, he explains, “stands in the way of all strategies for ‘politicizing art.’”<sup>51</sup> Critical art, the category through which the politics of art are generally understood, seeks to mobilize spectators towards action by making them aware of political situations. By creating a clash between heterogeneous forms, such as Rosler’s bourgeois interiors and graphic war photographs, critical art “[produces] a sensory form of strangeness,” provoking spectators to examine the cause of the strangeness and, in turn, to see the work’s political subject matter in a new way.<sup>52</sup> *Détournement*, which aims to

---

<sup>50</sup> Rundstrom, “American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969-1971,” 191.

<sup>51</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 74.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 74.

spark political mobilization through juxtaposing old and new forms, is a form of critical art and thus subject to the same aesthetic limit. Rancière cites the *House Beautiful* series in order to frame this limit: even as art absorbs the aesthetic break into representation, its own political goals face the same rupture. “There is no reason why the sensory oddity produced by the clash of heterogeneous elements should bring about an understanding of the state of the world. . . [there is] no direct road from intellectual awareness to political action,” he writes, recalling Rousseau’s *Letter to M. D’Alembert on the Theatre*.<sup>53</sup>

Despite its goals, a work of critical art cannot guarantee that its audience will respond with changes in their behavior. Because of this disjunction, critical art as practiced by the Situationists often comes to “[revolve] around itself” rather than produce a revolution in everyday life.<sup>54</sup> Of course, the aesthetic break does open space for political reconfigurations in the sensory fabric, but this effect cannot be calculated—not by artists and, in the case of Alcatraz, not by protestors marking their presence through ironic graffiti. While IAT’s *détournement* of government signs may have engaged one aesthetic rupture between settler power and Indigenous placemaking, it is challenged by the break between visibility and mobilization. The White Man may be laughing, but is he ready to confront the settler colonial system in which he’s implicated? Rancière argues that the distance between critical art and its efficacy can persist “so long as there [are] patterns of intelligibility and forms of mobilization strong enough to sustain the artistic procedures that were supposed to produce them,” so long as concrete action accompanies the visible.<sup>55</sup> In the case of Alcatraz, occupiers’ acts of detourning the island’s built environment were accompanied by strong “patterns of intelligibility and forms of mobilization,” demonstrated

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 75.

in part by their engagement with its architecture. This engagement shows how IAT staked out not only presence on but affective relations to the land they reclaimed.

### **Deconstructing colonial traces**

In “*Towards a Situationist International*,” Guy Debord describes the Situationist program as an “essentially transitory” one, stating that “eternity is the grossest idea a person can conceive of in connection with his acts.”<sup>56</sup> An occupier’s comment on plans for Alcatraz’s future, recorded in the minutes of IAT’s 1969 National Conference, stands in stark contrast: “it is important. . . to use contemporary architecture, knowledge, and art skills to express [traditional Indian art ideas] in a way to say that *this must last forever*” (emphasis in original).<sup>57</sup> This section will explore the reasons why and strategies through which IAT aimed to build Alcatraz towards “eternity.”

Although little construction actually occurred during the Alcatraz occupation, occupiers made extensive long-term plans for the construction of an Indian university, community center, and museum on the island. Understood through the aesthetic break and through Derrida’s concept of the trace, these plans represent a concrete means of decolonizing Alcatraz while dealing with its carceral-colonial history. Because the Alcatraz occupation comprises a break between the “cause” of settler colonialism, expressed by government space, and the “effect” of Indigenous absence, challenged by Indigenous presence and placemaking, any acts of placemaking and visible protest must go against the grain of government space. IAT addressed this immediate need in part through its *détournement* of government signage. In order to secure the island’s long-term decolonial future, however, it needed to replace government space with something new, something Indigenous, something with the capacity to *last forever*. As Woeha Cloud North

---

<sup>56</sup> Guy Debord, “Writings from the Situationist International 1957-61,” 702.

<sup>57</sup> Rundstrom, “American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969-1971,” 193.

writes in her recap of the 1969 National Conference, published in the occupation's second newsletter, "it was better to start fresh than to make do" with the island's existing built environment.<sup>58</sup> Before an analysis of IAT's plans to develop Alcatraz, a discussion of Frantz Fanon and Eyal Weizman's writings on decolonization and physical space can help contextualize their decision to start anew.

In the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes that "to destroy the colonial world means nothing less than demolishing the colonist's sector," emphasizing the necessarily transformative, often violent nature of decolonization.<sup>59</sup> While "demolishing the colonist's sector" can be a rhetorical or psychological act, it must also be a physical one, especially when it comes to dealing with colonial spaces and their symbolic power—to borrow a phrase from Tuck and Yang, decolonization is not a metaphor. On one hand, Fanon views physical symbols of colonialism like flags, signs, and military barracks, as "not only inhibitors, but stimulants" with the capacity to escalate action amongst colonial subjects.<sup>60</sup> But what happens to these symbols after the advent of action? Israeli architect and spatial theorist Eyal Weizman draws on Fanon's ideas to answer this question in his 2007 book *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*. Israeli forces, he writes at the beginning of the chapter "Evacuations: De-Colonizing Architecture," withdrew from the Gaza Strip on September 12, 2005.<sup>61</sup> They left behind the rubble of over 3,000 buildings, including public buildings, schools, military installations, and industrial and agricultural facilities built to sustain Israeli settlements and military forces.

---

<sup>58</sup> Alcatraz Indians of All Tribes newsletter #2, 3.

<sup>59</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 6.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>61</sup> Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2017), 221.

Later that year, Palestine rejected proposals to re-inhabit the evacuated settlements, resisting what Weizman calls a “strong temptation. . . throughout the history of decolonization” to reappropriate colonial infrastructure.<sup>62</sup> Weizman argues that such reappropriation “[tends] to reproduce colonial power relations in space,” frustrating decolonial efforts to build a new society.<sup>63</sup> He quotes Fanon’s warning, given amidst the Algerian liberation struggle of the 1960s, that recuperating physical and territorial manifestations of the colonial world could once again “mark out the lines on which a colonized society will be organized.”<sup>64</sup> Colonial villas and palaces, Weizman explains, can become homes for a new elite class, and military installations can become centers for new and similarly power-hungry national regimes. Because “politics creates place” in this manner, place must preemptively create politics.<sup>65</sup> Just as Rancière shows that critical art cannot be effective without coherent forms of mobilization to sustain it, Fanon and Weizman’s theories show that a decolonial program cannot be effective without coherent plans to handle and supplant colonial space. Although the occupation ended before they could bring their plans to fruition, IAT occupiers understood the necessity of leaving colonial space behind in order to build a lasting Indigenous place. They supplemented their critical acts of *détournement* with altogether new physical, and by extension, political structures grounded in Indigenous ways of being and relating to land. However, they also developed subversive means through which to preserve and reckon with the island’s colonial physicality, means which can be understood through Jacques Derrida’s concept of the trace.

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 232.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Rundstrom, “American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969-1971,” 197.



Derrida believes that language is a site of power, and that deconstruction is a means through which to unsettle it.<sup>66</sup> His theories are grounded in the notion that *différance*, or the unstable relation between words and their presence in our minds, is a fact of language. Différance can be demonstrated by examining a phrase as outwardly simple as IAT's rallying cry "We Hold The Rock," which, read through a Derridean lens, raises major questions. Who comprises the group indicated by "we?" What does it mean to "hold" something? And what is "The Rock?" A place, a boulder, a pebble picked up from the ground? We know based on the context of this paper that the phrase denotes the occupation of Alcatraz Island by a coalition of Indigenous activists. But Derrida sees revolutionary potential in the semantic instability—the *différance*—of sentences like these. *Différance* pushes us to ask questions about contexts and to examine the traces present in all language. Traces, or "fleeting images" that run through our heads as we read and may or may not become significant, are another concept central to Derridean deconstruction. For instance, pop culture mavens may associate the phrase "The Rock" with professional actor and wrestler Dwayne Johnson, while prison history buffs will recognize it as an appellation for Alcatraz Island—each association represents one of the phrase's traces. By locating, following, and clarifying traces, Derrida argues, we can move towards the truth of the language that structures our world, and through truth, towards justice. He acknowledges that this process of deconstruction creates an infinite loop in which language must be used to deconstruct language (in turn requiring further deconstruction), and thus can never reach its goal. Despite this flaw, he believes that following traces is a radical and necessary process, and can push us towards justice even if it cannot help us grasp it. IAT's plan to deal

---

<sup>66</sup> Michael Loriaux, "Avant-garde Art and the Ghost of Marx," *Critical Studies in World Politics: Art, War, and Decadence in the Twentieth Century* (class lecture, Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris, FR, November 21, 2018).

with colonial space, which encourages Alcatraz visitors to deconstruct carceral architecture, reflects a similar belief in the power of the trace.

Cloud North gives an overview of IAT's ideas for the island's design and layout in her recap of the 1969 National Conference. After relating their decision to "start anew," she writes in parentheses that conference participants "were aware of the need of a museum [arrangement]" that would, through preserving fragments of carceral architecture like "masonry so arranged with iron bars, rusting barbed wire, [and] cramped spaces suggestive of masses of men herded about by armed guards," remind visitors of "social practices in American society of the twentieth century."<sup>67</sup> Although this proposal echoes the ironic *détournements* set forth in the IAT proclamation, critiquing the detached lens through which U.S. museums often discuss Indigenous culture, it can be read as a different way of engaging the aesthetic break between settler power and Indigenous presence, or here, between settler architecture and Indigenous re-occupation. IAT occupiers recognized the near-impossibility of removing all colonial traces from the idea "Alcatraz," particularly in the broader cultural and political spheres. In response, plans to rebuild the island could incorporate means of reckoning with these traces on the organization's own terms. By preserving fragments of Alcatraz's carceral architecture, re-contextualizing them as part of a public exhibition, and linking them to a critique of 20th century American social practices, IAT could encourage visitors to the island, Indigenous people and settlers alike, to deconstruct the notion of "Alcatraz" as a site of colonial power. This plan, however subversive, is still frustrated by the aesthetic break: although the imagined exhibition could aspire towards decolonial justice through deconstruction, it could not calculate audience reaction or audience behavior. In practice, it would function as a form of critical art, aspiring towards a political

---

<sup>67</sup> Alcatraz Indians of All Tribes newsletter #2, 3.

outcome but requiring supplemental methods to achieve it. IAT's plans to reckon with and deconstruct traces of colonial architecture laid the groundwork for a strategy that could effectively accompany its *détournement* of government signage: the creation of a new Indigenous environment. The organization's plans to create this environment, which speak to Rancière's proposition for work that "presents itself as the anticipated reality of what it evokes," represent a way of not only manifesting but sustaining Indigenous land and life on Alcatraz.<sup>68</sup>

### **The Idea and the Island in Harmony**

Rancière concludes his critique of critical art with a summary of its failure in relation to other forms of contemporary activist art. Critical art's inability to mediate the "'being apart' of the work and the 'being together' of a new community" through producing awareness, he writes, led some artists to conclude that art requires no mediation whatsoever.<sup>69</sup> These artists create work that is the "direct presentation" of the community they wish to create, a community in which artists and their subjects "directly [fashion] new social bonds."<sup>70</sup> Rancière describes the work of contemporary Cuban artist René Francisco as an example of this community-anticipating activist art. After receiving a grant to create work focused on Havana's poor suburbs, Francisco chose to partner with an elderly woman, refurbishing her home alongside a crew of artists who worked as masons, plumbers, and painters. He filmed the work and screened it at the Havana and Sao Paulo biennials, projecting the woman's face on one wall and a feed of the refurbishment directly opposite. Altogether, artistic interventions such as these, which "[appear] as a metaphor for [their] own 'extra-artistic' outcome" and represent one means of effectively incorporating the aesthetic break, make use of the fluid boundary between art and

---

<sup>68</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 77.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

everyday life in order to imagine another, more cooperative world. In a similar sense, IAT's plan to rebuild Alcatraz anticipates the reality of a decolonized community on the island. It does so by centering Indigenous relationships to land, by offering concrete methods of placemaking to reify those first expressed in IAT's proclamation.

The occupation's second newsletter contains a pencil sketch of Native figures carved "Rushmore-like" into the island's cliffs; cliffs whose faces, like many of the island's detoured signs, are marked with the phrase "Indian Land."<sup>71</sup> The sketch accompanies an editorial that ends with an injunction: "Alcatraz the Idea and Alcatraz the Island Must Always Be in Harmony."<sup>72</sup> Both the sketch and this closing line reflect the ethos of IAT's plans for reconstruction. By infusing the island's layout and architecture with Indigenous knowledge and traditions, occupiers sought to place "Alcatraz the Idea and Alcatraz the Island" in harmony, blending affect with land to create an Indigenous place. Cloud North's 1969 National Conference summary lists seven key ideas for the island's redesign, which were meant to "express the unique purpose that Alcatraz Island is dedicated to the American Indian."<sup>73</sup> The ideas, which range from calls to build a lighthouse and roundhouse decorated in traditional Indian style to a suggestion that "it would be more appropriate if Alcatraz were given an American Indian name," combine Indigenous traditions and built forms with 20th century technological capacities.<sup>74</sup>

The second references two symbols central to the teachings of many tribes, proposing that "decoration of the main building [should] include the universal eagle symbol," and that "other traditional shaped buildings [should] surround the main building in the four directions."<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Rundstrom, "American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969-1971," 200.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Alcatraz Indians of All Tribes newsletter #2, 3.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

The universal eagle—visible behind the basketball players in fig. 2—expresses the widely held Indigenous belief that eagles “represent strength, protection, and above all, good wisdom.”<sup>76</sup> The exact meanings of the Four Directions, expressed in a Medicine Wheel, vary between tribes, but they generally represent dimensions of well-being and the cycles of life.<sup>77</sup> IAT’s plan to incorporate these teachings into architecture works on several levels. On one, it draws on their symbolic power to give the new construction affective meaning that reflect the shared Indigenous values of a future, decolonized Alcatraz. On another, it secures the island’s decolonized future by projecting Indigenous ways of life onto its land, thus rejecting the capitalist modes of land ownership enshrined by settler colonialism. Altogether, occupiers planned to invest Alcatraz with the visible political ideal and goal of a sovereign Indigenous community. IAT’s plan to rebuild the island represents a “pattern of intelligibility and form of mobilization” to accompany their critical acts of *détournement* and deconstruction.<sup>78</sup>

Because decolonization strives for the repatriation of Indigenous land and life, Tuck and Yang argue, it requires the relinquishment of settler futurity in favor of Indigenous futurity.<sup>79</sup> The 1969 National Conference comment that new construction must be built to “*last forever*” signifies a commitment to Indigenous futurity, which IAT sought to secure through short-term and long-term methods of placemaking. The occupation, however, came to an end on June 11, 1971, precluding fulfillment of the occupiers’ decolonial dreams. One month later, under watch

---

<sup>76</sup> Alysa Landry, “Native History: Sacred Bald Eagle Becomes U.S. National Emblem,” *Indian Country Today*, June 20, 2014, [https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/native-history-sacred-bald-eagle-becomes-u-s-national-emblem-nxW8y7QE0mV\\_EC2oh5GyA/](https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/native-history-sacred-bald-eagle-becomes-u-s-national-emblem-nxW8y7QE0mV_EC2oh5GyA/) (accessed December 11, 2018).

<sup>77</sup> “The Medicine Wheel and the Four Directions,” U.S. National Library of Medicine, <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/exhibition/healing-ways/medicine-ways/medicine-wheel.html> (accessed December 11, 2018).

<sup>78</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 75.

<sup>79</sup> Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” 36.

of armed patrols and guard dogs, government forces razed a cluster of apartment buildings on the island's southern terrace, ostensibly for safety reasons. Rundstrom, however, argues that because the demolition focused on occupier residences marked with graffiti, it should be understood as “an unambiguous assertion of federal authority and an unmaking of place no less powerful in its message” than the June 11th removal.<sup>80</sup> How should we understand the outcomes of the occupation in the face of its forcible end and this “unmaking of place?” As discussed earlier in the section, IAT's visual strategies can be understood as the direct presentation of a decolonized community to come. Although occupiers did not gain title to Alcatraz or carry out their plans to rebuild it, their engagements with the aesthetic break sparked a process of community building that continues to serve as a model for contemporary decolonial social movements. Applied to poems written by occupiers, Rancière's notion of art-as-monument and his proposal for an art grounded in “sensory riches” can explain how and towards what this process worked.

**“And a tribe is an island, and a tribe is a people”**

Directly presenting an envisioned community to come is one way of incorporating the aesthetic break into art, but Rancière finds further, more sustainable political hope in artworks that “[explore] the potential of community entailed in separation itself.”<sup>81</sup> He introduces the films of Portuguese artist Pedro Costa, whose work explores life in Portuguese slums, as an example of work that does so. Costa's 2006 film *Colossal Youth* follows an elderly Cape Verdean immigrant named Ventura as he wanders between his demolished former neighborhood and the housing project he now calls home. The film returns several times to a love letter that “talks about a separation and about working on building sites far away from one's beloved,” and blends

---

<sup>80</sup> Rundstrom, “American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969-1971,” 191.

<sup>81</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 78.

an array of poetic images from letters written by Cape Verdean immigrants and by imprisoned French poet Robert Desnos.<sup>82</sup> Works like this letter, Rancière explains, amass the “sensory riches” of marginalized lives and arrange them in a form that affirms marginalized existences.<sup>83</sup> They constitute a democratic approach to art “in which the form is not split off from the construction of a social relation or from the realization of a capacity that belongs to everyone.”<sup>84</sup> Rancière contrasts this approach with relational art, which, he believes, relies too often on “fancy,” unsustained interventions in daily life.<sup>85</sup> However, he undermines his argument by insisting that “[art] cannot be the equivalent of the love letter or music of the poor,” and that an outside artist can present the “sensory riches” of a marginalized community to greater political effect than members of that community themselves.<sup>86</sup> His understanding of art, community, and separation can be applied to social movements in which marginalized people gather the “sensory riches” of their community to create art that affirms it. In the case of Alcatraz, these sensory riches consist of the teachings, symbols, and words that occupiers wove into their graffiti and plans for reconstruction, into their acts of placemaking. Altogether, the visual strategies employed by IAT occupiers reflect both Rancière’s notion of relational, community-anticipating art *and* his notion of art that locates community in separation itself. Regardless of their approach to separation, however, all of these visual strategies strive towards the shared goal of a decolonized community.

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 82.

Settler colonialism is generally understood as a structure, not an event.<sup>87</sup> It requires an ongoing commitment to disappearing Indigenous people from the land. In response, decolonial movements must continually provide alternate structures and alternate communities that center Indigenous relationships to land. Even though the Alcatraz occupation did not result in lasting land repatriation, it presented—in some cases literal—blueprints for decolonial structures and communities. Rancière’s discussion of political artworks as “monuments” explains how a path from placemaking to decolonization emerged from the occupation’s visual culture. As Rancière demonstrates in the first half of “Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community,” both politics and artistic practice hold the capacity to reconfigure our shared sensory fabric. And because of the rupture between destination and *mise-en-scène*, politics and artistic practice can and often do occupy the same spheres and manifest in the same visual actions. When visual actions—such as those employed by IAT occupiers—reconfigure the sensory fabric to achieve political goals, they mediate and substitute for a future community. Or, in Rancière’s words: “the artwork is the people to come and it is a monument to its expectation, a monument to its absence.”<sup>88</sup> Applied to Alcatraz, his notion of art-as-monument to community speaks to the close relationship between the occupation’s visual productions and its affective ones. IAT’s artworks engaged the aesthetic break in order to make Alcatraz an Indian place, and in doing so, created monuments to a future community in which “Indigenous land and life” could be fully repatriated. The effects of the aesthetic break “dis-identified” occupiers from settler colonial structures, sparked decolonial political mobilization, and, altogether, created what Rancière calls a “community of dis-identified persons.”<sup>89</sup> Poems written and published by occupiers, several of which frame

---

<sup>87</sup> Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” 5.

<sup>88</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 59.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.



relationships between occupiers in terms of land, offer a glimpse into what this community could look like.

One such poem is Peter Blue Cloud's "Alcatraz," published in IAT's January 1970 newsletter. The poem, like "Alcatraz Visions," frames scenes from the occupation, such as "a Navajo child [whimpering] the tides pull" as "Sioux and Cheyenne dance lowly the ground," with broader reflections on community and resilience. Just as Costa's *Colossal Youth* amassed the stories of immigrants and prisoners to describe an experience of emotional separation, "Alcatraz" gathered traditional Indigenous symbols and practices in order to describe a community whose silhouettes are "katchina dancers" and whose members "[dream] in eagles. . . in the shadow of Coyote's Mountain."<sup>90</sup> The poem combines the "sensory riches" of various tribes to illustrate the occupation's pan-Indian politics and speak to the intertribal nature of a decolonized community to come. It also speaks to the centrality of place to decolonization and to the community that IAT anticipates. Blue Cloud weaves the phrase "and a tribe is an island" throughout the poem, even repeating it twice in the second stanza's second line. Aside from heightening the poem's emotional impact, this repetition underscores the inextricable relationship between Indigenous identity and Indigenous place, a relationship that the Alcatraz occupation sought to recognize, celebrate, and protect.

As Tuck and Yang state in "Decolonization is not a metaphor," Indigenous people are "those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how we/they came to be in a place - indeed how we/they came to *be* a place."<sup>91</sup> Above all, the goal of decolonization is "to *be*

---

<sup>90</sup> Alcatraz Indians of All Tribes newsletter #1, Jan. 1970, From Newberry Library, Special Collections, <https://webvoyage.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=969508>, 6.

<sup>91</sup> Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," 6.

a place.” In making Alcatraz a place, IAT aimed towards this goal, towards concrete repatriation of Indigenous land and life, towards a decolonial community. Their visual strategies and means of contesting settler colonial relationships to land continue to influence Indigenous protest today, especially in cases where places and the people they encompass are threatened with violence. In 2016, the Standing Rock Sioux mounted a months-long protest against construction of the proposed Dakota Access Pipeline on their land, construction that would disturb sacred sites and pose a serious health and environmental threat.<sup>92</sup> These protests, broadly known through the hashtag #NoDAPL, drew nationwide media attention and employed modes of radical placemaking similar to those employed by IAT. Protestors, known as Water Protectors, lived and built communities on the site of the proposed construction. Onaman Collective, an art collective founded by Ojibway, Michif, and Métis/Cree artists Christi Belcourt, Isaac Murdoch and Erin Koonsmo, produced one of the most well-known images from the protests: a print of a bird figure, arms stretched towards the sky, declaring simply that “water is life.”<sup>93</sup> Variations on the poster spread throughout the #NoDAPL frontlines and across social media, always accompanied by the same text. Water is life, a tribe is an island—the contexts differ, but the words express the same relationship between Indigenous people and Indigenous land, the relationship that decolonization must reclaim. By making these relationships visible, by commandeering the break between settler colonialism and Indigenous disappearance, Native people anticipate the reality of a decolonial community to come.

---

<sup>92</sup> Rebecca Hersher, "Key Moments In The Dakota Access Pipeline Fight," *NPR*, February 22, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/02/22/514988040/key-moments-in-the-dakota-access-pipeline-fight> (accessed December 13, 2018).

<sup>93</sup> Christi Belcourt, Isaac Murdoch, and Erin Koonsmo, "BANNER IMAGES FOR LAND & WATER PROTECTORS," Onaman Collective, <http://onamancollective.com/murdoch-belcourt-banner-downloads/> (accessed December 13, 2018).

## Conclusion

Thinkers like Rancière, Debord, and Derrida sought to break down art's complicity with oppressive institutions, to suggest visual and poetic means of moving towards justice.<sup>94</sup> With the exception of Debord's Situationist program, which played a notable role in Paris's 1968 student uprisings, their theories focus more on artistic and academic spheres and less on large-scale social movements. My attempt to understand the Alcatraz occupation through these theories is more than an intellectual exercise, it seeks concrete possibilities for resistance at the intersection of artmaking and protest led by marginalized groups. As Rancière shows in *The Emancipated Spectator*, the visible and the political are inextricably linked. Understanding their entanglement—and the ways in which social movements engage with this entanglement—can help us to both make sense of this world and, like IAT, envision a more just one.

In late 2012, the National Parks Service (NPS) oversaw a partial restoration of IAT graffiti, citing the occupation's importance to the history of Alcatraz.<sup>95</sup> NPS employees partnered with Native communities to replicate, trace out and paint the words "Peace and Freedom. Welcome. Home of the Free Indian Land" on the island's restored water tower (see fig. 4).<sup>96</sup> The *New York Times* framed their coverage of the event with a pithy headline—"Antigovernment Graffiti Restored, Courtesy of Government"—that underscores its vexing politics. It is a radical act for an Indigenous occupier to write "Indian Land" on government property, an act that, in

---

<sup>94</sup> Michael Loriaux, "Avant-garde Art and the Ghost of Marx."

<sup>95</sup> Malia Wollan, "Alcatraz American Indian Occupation Graffiti Preserved," *The New York Times*, December 24, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/25/us/alcatraz-american-indian-occupation-graffiti-preserved.html> (accessed December 11, 2018).

<sup>96</sup> Ramin Rahimian, The newly rebuilt water tower with the restored graffiti, Digital image, *The New York Times*, December 24, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/25/us/alcatraz-american-indian-occupation-graffiti-preserved.html> (accessed December 13, 2018).

creating a break between settler colonialism and Indigenous presence, affirms the artist's connection to the land and her intention to reclaim it. The U.S. government's choice to re-write her words decades later, however, is a more ambiguous act that demonstrates the aesthetic break's incalculable nature. It marks an affective response to IAT's visual strategies, but not the change in behavior or shift in decolonial policy that occupiers sought. Whether the restoration served to re-make place or to co-opt the narrative of the occupation remains open to debate, but government-led projects are not the only markers of Indigenous presence on Alcatraz today, and the radical possibilities created by IAT's acts of placemaking remain open. Echoes of the occupation's dissensual, sovereign community are discernible every November, when thousands of Native people and allies gather on the island for a sunrise ceremony. Their "Unthanksgiving" celebration commemorates the occupation, links it to contemporary political struggles, and, if only for a morning, re-marks Indigenous presence on the land.<sup>97</sup> Next year's Unthanksgiving gathering will mark 50 years since IAT landed on Alcatraz. In the meantime, as the #NoDAPL protests show, Indigenous people will continue to locate possibilities in the break between settler colonialism and Indigenous disappearance, to build visible communities rooted in place, and above all to envision a decolonized world.

One photo of the 2018 sunrise ceremony, taken from a raised angle and published in *The Guardian*, shows crowds of attendees gathered around a bonfire (see fig. 5)<sup>98</sup> Several carry tribal flags, several stare out over the harbor, all prepare for a day of dancing, singing, speaking and

---

<sup>97</sup> Feroso, "A Thanksgiving Bonfire at Dawn: Celebrating Native American Resistance on Alcatraz."

<sup>98</sup> Talia Herman, "The Crowd This Year Was More than 5,000," Digital image, *The Guardian*, November 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/22/thanksgiving-native-american-sunrise-ceremony-alcatraz-occupation-protest#img-3> (accessed December 11, 2018).

remembering. The San Francisco skyline is visible in the background, as is the silhouette of a bridge linking Oakland with the city's Financial District—land connected, as Peter Blue Cloud wrote in “Alcatraz Visions,” in bumper-to-bumper pain. But in the foreground of it all stands a community, visible against all odds in the early morning light, reconstructing a bridge built by Indians of All Tribes 49 years earlier. Sunlight and soft voices, growing louder.

### Bibliography

Alcatraz Indians of All Tribes newsletter #1. Jan. 1970. From Newberry Library, Special Collections. <https://webvoyage.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=969508>.

Alcatraz Indians of All Tribes newsletter #2. 1970. From Newberry Library, Special Collections. <https://webvoyage.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=969508>.

AP Photo. American Indians play ball games outside the prison wall on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco. Digital image. *Indian Country Today*. September 2, 2017. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/voices-from-alcatraz-island-rhwnhdlnwES8WRChgoRsuw/>.

Arbuckle, Alex. "When Native American Activists Took Control of Alcatraz for 18 Months."

*Mashable*. November 13, 2016. Accessed December 11, 2018.

[https://mashable.com/2016/11/13/occupation-of-alcatraz/?europa=true#00w9LE\\_wDSqB](https://mashable.com/2016/11/13/occupation-of-alcatraz/?europa=true#00w9LE_wDSqB).

Belcourt, Christi, Isaac Murdoch, and Erin Konsmo. " BANNER IMAGES FOR LAND & WATER PROTECTORS." Onaman Collective. Accessed December 13, 2018.

<http://onamancollective.com/murdoch-belcourt-banner-downloads/>.

Blue Cloud, Peter. "Alcatraz Is Not An Island." Broadside, From Newberry Library, Special Collections. [https://webvoyage.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-](https://webvoyage.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=887767)

[bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=887767](https://webvoyage.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=887767).

Debord, Guy. "Writings from the Situationist International 1957-61." In *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Undefined Undefined Undefined, 701-07. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2014.

Hersher, Rebecca. "Key Moments In The Dakota Access Pipeline Fight." *NPR*. February 22, 2017. Accessed December 13, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/02/22/514988040/key-moments-in-the-dakota-access-pipeline-fight>.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 2004.

Fermoso, Jose. "A Thanksgiving Bonfire at Dawn: Celebrating Native American Resistance on Alcatraz." *The Guardian*. November 22, 2018. Accessed December 11, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/22/thanksgiving-native-american-sunrise-ceremony-alcatraz-occupation-protest>.

Indians of All Tribes. "The Alcatraz Proclamation." *The New Inquiry*. April 18, 2017. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://thenewinquiry.com/the-alcatraz-proclamation/>.

- Johnson, Troy. "We Hold the Rock." National Parks Service. February 27, 2015. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://www.nps.gov/alca/learn/historyculture/we-hold-the-rock.htm>.
- Herman, Talia. "The Crowd This Year Was More than 5,000." Digital image. *The Guardian*. November 22, 2018. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/22/thanksgiving-native-american-sunrise-ceremony-alcatraz-occupation-protest#img-3>.
- Hightower-Langston, Donna. "American Indian Women's Activism in the 1960s and 1970s." *Hypatia* 18, no. 2 (2003): 114-32.
- Landry, Alysa. "Native History: Sacred Bald Eagle Becomes U.S. National Emblem." *Indian Country Today*. June 20, 2014. Accessed December 11, 2018. [https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/native-history-sacred-bald-eagle-becomes-u-s-national-emblem-nxW8y7QEq0mV\\_EC2oh5GyA/](https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/native-history-sacred-bald-eagle-becomes-u-s-national-emblem-nxW8y7QEq0mV_EC2oh5GyA/).
- Loriaux, Michael. "Avant-garde Art and the Ghost of Marx." Critical Studies in World Politics: Art, War, and Decadence in the Twentieth Century. Class lecture at Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris, FR, November 21, 2018.
- "NativeLand.ca." Native-land.ca - Our Home on Native Land. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://native-land.ca/>.
- Rahimian, Ramin. The newly rebuilt water tower with the restored graffiti. Digital image. *The New York Times*. December 24, 2012. Accessed December 13, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/25/us/alcatraz-american-indian-occupation-graffiti-preserved.html>.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. New York: Verso, 2011.
- Rundstrom, Robert A. "American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969-1971." *American*

*Indian Culture and Research Journal* 18, no. 4 (1994): 189-212.

SF State Bay Area Television Archives. "Alcatraz Island." Digital image. CRG@CGP. April 13, 2015. Accessed December 11, 2018.

<https://classracegender.wordpress.com/2015/04/13/alcatraz-the-birthplace-of-the-native-american-red-power-movement/>.

Sy-Quia, Stephanie. "Rock of Nations." *The New Inquiry*. November 25, 2017. Accessed December 13, 2018. <https://thenewinquiry.com/rock-of-nations/>.

"The Medicine Wheel and the Four Directions - Medicine Ways: Traditional Healers and Healing - Healing Ways - Exhibition - Native Voices." U.S. National Library of Medicine. Accessed December 11, 2018.

<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/exhibition/healing-ways/medicine-ways/medicine-wheel.html>.

Tuck, Eve, and K W. Yang. "Decolonization is not a metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.

Weizman, Eyal. *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*. London: Verso, 2017.

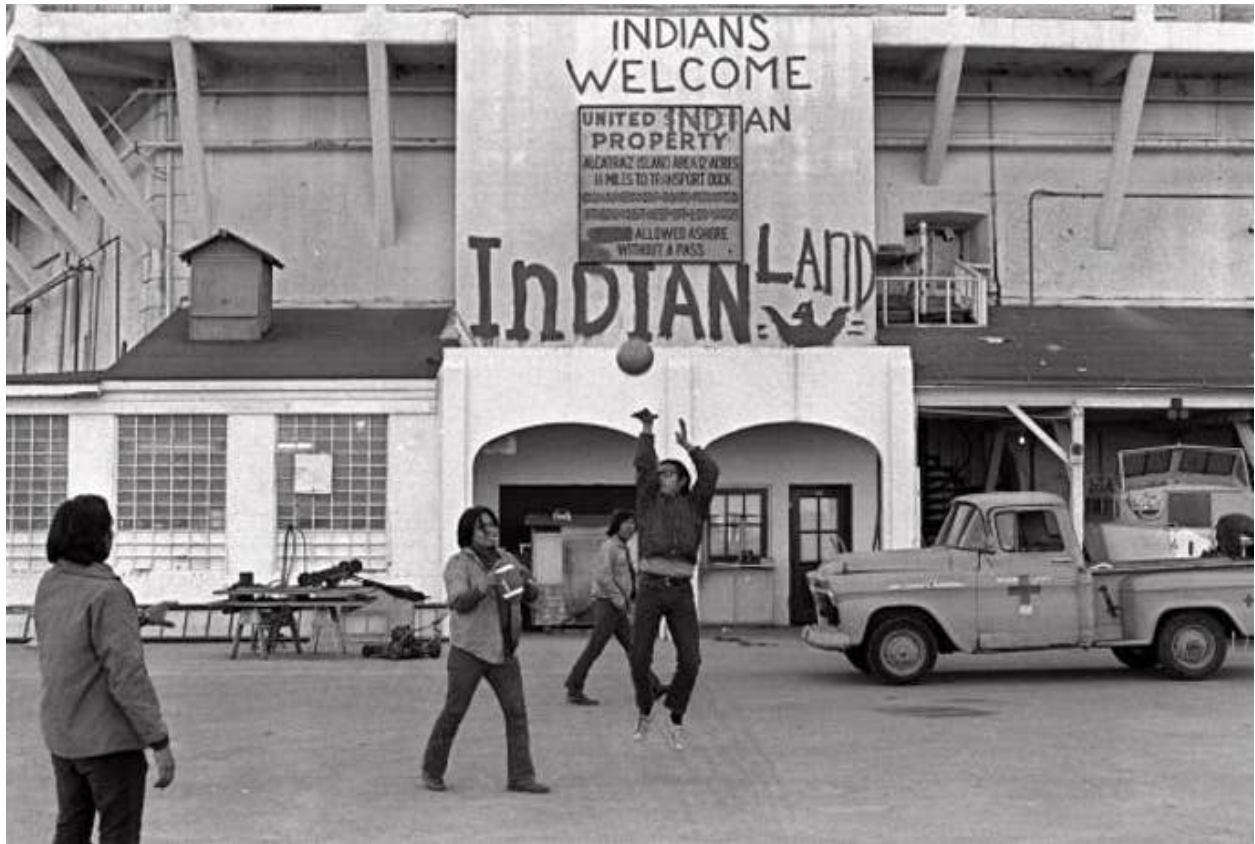
Wollan, Malia. "Alcatraz American Indian Occupation Graffiti Preserved." *The New York Times*. December 24, 2012. Accessed December 11, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/25/us/alcatraz-american-indian-occupation-graffiti-preserved.html>.





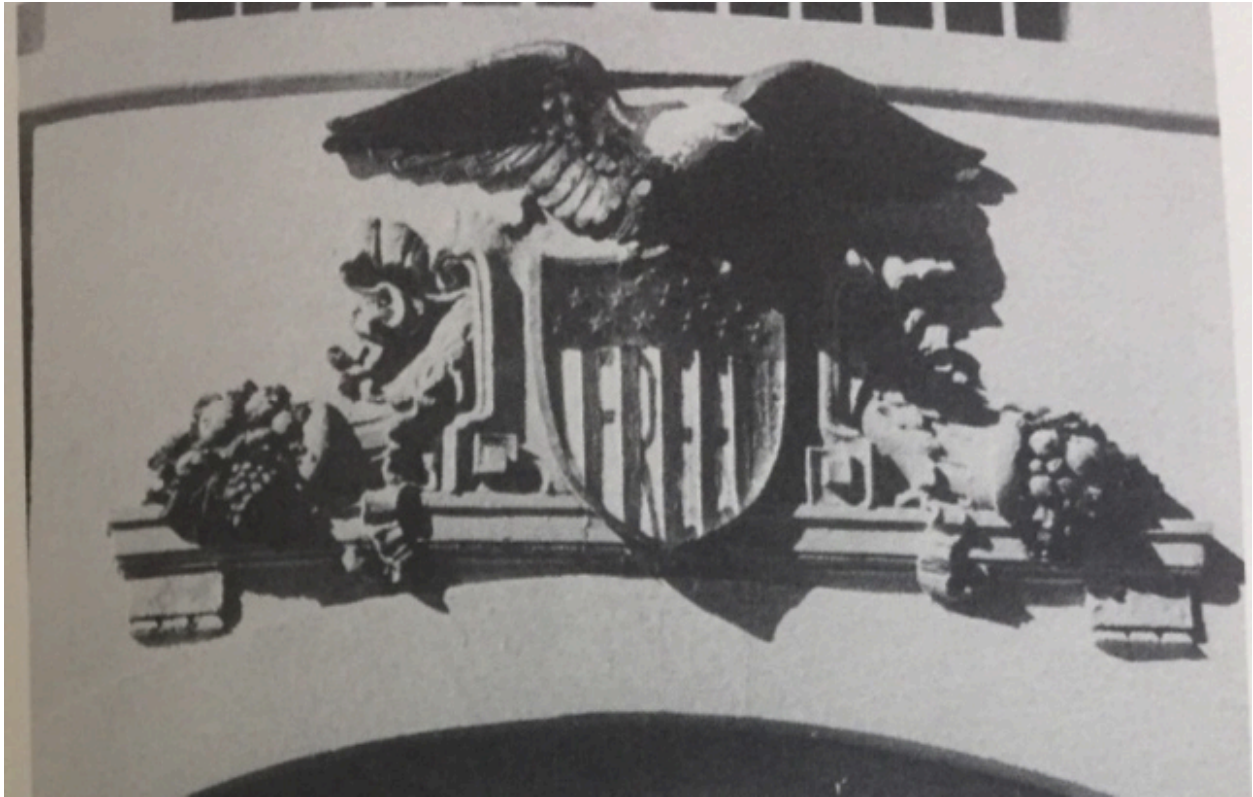
**Figure 1.** Graffiti along the walk to the main cell house. Source: SF State Bay Area Television Archives, found on Cooperstown Graduate Program's "Class, Race, and Gender" (CRG@CGP) course page.



**Figure 2.** Occupiers play ball games in front of a detoured sign. Source: AP photo.



**Figure 3.** Occupiers and reporters stand under altered seal on main cell house. Source: Alcatraz Archival Collection, History Room and Special Collections, San Francisco Public Library. Found in Robert Rundstrom's "American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969-1971."



**Figure 4.** Close-up on further alterations of main cell house seal. Source: California Historical Society, *San Francisco Chronicle* Collection. Darrel Duncan, photographer. Found in Robert Rundstrom's "American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969-71."



**Figure 5.** Restored graffiti on Alcatraz water tower. Source: Ramin Rahimian for *The New York Times*.





**Figure 6.** Crowd gathered at 2018 “Unthanksgiving” celebration. Source: Talia Herman for *The Guardian*.