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Decolonize Wall Street!
Situating Indigenous Critiques of the Occupy Wall Street Movement

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ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS:

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Thank you for your courage. Thank you for making an attempt to improve the situation in what is now called the United States. Thank you for your commitment to peace and non-violence. Thank you for the sacrifices you are making. Thank you.There's just one thing. I am not one of the 99 percent that you refer to. And, that saddens me. Please don't misunderstand me. I would like to be one of the 99 percent...but you've chosen to exclude me. Perhaps it was unintentional, but, I've been excluded by you. In fact, there are millions of us indigenous people who have been excluded from the Occupy Wall Street protest (John Paul Montano, 2011).

I. Introduction

Occupy Wall Street emerged as an important social movement in September 2011 challenging growing socio-economic inequality and institutional policies in the years following the 2008 global economic crisis. What started in New York City quickly spread across the United States and the world where participants occupied public spaces, set up tent cities, and organized mass demonstrations to challenge these social injustices. The slogan "We are the 99%" became a rallying cry for supporters, pitting the majority against the few who were believed to hold a disproportionate amount of power and resources. Occupy inspired many to join the movement and created space for a wider discussion about socio-economic inequality. At the same time, the movement itself spawned critique from those who wished to reframe problematic power relations as mechanisms of a colonial apparatus working to disenfranchise Indigenous peoples.

Exemplifying this critique, the excerpt above is from a September 2011 open letter to the Occupy movement posted online by Anishnaabe writer John Paul Montano. His sentiments criticizing the Occupy movement reflect those of many Indigenous critics across North America, though certainly not all. Some have actually participated in and helped shape the movement, while others have expressed stronger antipathy, rejecting it altogether and demanding far more than merely acknowledgement or inclusion. Many activistsargue that the term" occupy"is a misnomer for describing what non-Indigenous protesters are doingbecause, as Chinese-Mohawk activist Jessica Yee (2011) argues, "The United States is Already Being Occupied." Critics are calling for a refiguring and renaming of the movement to "Decolonize Wall Street" to reflect grievances about Euro-American colonization and its continuing legacy, placing discussion about inequality into historical context, and recognizing the injustices that Indigenous Peoples have endured long before the emergence of the Occupiers'contemporary concerns. Making appearances at Occupysites, engaging protesters, and through blogs and social media, the Decolonize movement demonstrates just one instance in a long history of ambivalence marking the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the Left.[1]

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[1]To be clear and keeping in mind the dynamic and fluid nature of culture, we do not wish to set up a binary between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures and peoples. People are identified throughout this article consistently with the ways in which they self-identify. Terms like "Indigenous" and "Aboriginal" are used interchangeably, but we by no means wish to conflate the disparate peoples who tend to be grouped together into these categories.

The broader Occupy movement is inclusive of various complaints, with the most predominant contesting the inequality engendered though the free market system and resulting economic collapse of the twenty-first century. Decolonizeaims to influence the movement by criticizingand reframing some of these arguments with expanded perspectives ofwhite privilege, power beyond economics, and reminding protesters that they benefit from systems of colonization that have historically worked to disenfranchise Indigenous groups. While the broader group protests corporate greed and environmental destruction, Indigenous activists use the movement as an opportunity to make claims to natural resources and ancestral lands (K, 2011).

This article explores the Decolonize movement through a review of discursive themes and visual culture.Like the Red Power and American Indian Movements(AIM) of the 1960s and 1970s,Decolonize takes advantage of broader social shifts to make claims to Indigenous places and to denaturalize the particular challenges facing Indigenous groups.[2]The current movementcreates spaces for dialogue by organizing teach-ins, creating special committees, and hosting sacred fires and special tents on site. More importantly, it relies on fleeting rhetorical moments opened up by the global financial crisis and the Occupy movement to make creative and playful appeals. Therefore, as we will explain, Michel de Certeau's(1984)notion of tactics is useful for framing the Decolonize phenomenon when considered along with Indigenous epistemological principles. Many scholars have employed de Certeau's work similarly in emphasizing the agency of marginalized groups in the face of oppressive circumstances.However, as we will argue, a framework combining de Certeau's idea of tactics with those of Aboriginal thinkers, who account for the importance of place and humour in Indigenous epistemologies, is more appropriate for situating Decolonize and similar instances where Indigenous people find rhetorical opportunities to express dissent. Herein we will consider Indigenous places as comprised of much more than concrete and physical features. They hold value as social locations where various forms of life are connected, and inhabitants hold particular responsibilities; accordingly, many Indigenous world-views are constituted within and through specific places (Kuokkanen, 2007; Cruikshank, 2005).

Scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), a Maori academic in New Zealand, have done similar work in identifying the shortcomings of Western academic ideas. In particular, she adjusts a foucauldian framework in order to more adequately situate contemporary Aboriginal concerns. She describes the ways in which empirical academic research is underpinned by Western colonial assumptions and encourages other Indigenous researchers to do the same in a process she describes as *Decolonizing Methodologies*.Moreover, she and other Indigenous thinkers like Winona La Duke (2005) have described naming (or renaming) as a powerful tool of control, and while they specifically write about the naming and claiming of land masses, we can expand their arguments to the naming of social movements as the terms "occupy" and "decolonize" connoteddifferent meanings. We humbly offer this contribution to scholarly and pragmatic debates addressing the broader discourse of decolonization.

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[2] This article uses the term American Indian Movement (AIM), though we acknowledge that not everyone who identifies or identified with The Indians of All Tribes or the Red Power Movement do so with AIM. See Josephy et al. and Johnson et al. for further discussion on the origins of these groups.

II. Tactics andUneasy Partnerships

In*The Practice of Everyday Life*,Michel de Certeau describes tactics as "victories of the 'weak' over the 'strong'" (xix).Unlike strategies, which are reserved for the powerful, tactics depend on fleeting moments of resistance and clever maneuvers or tricks. The privileged,elite in society use what he calls "proper," permanent spaces (ie. corporate and government buildings located in the seats of power).On the contrary, because tacticians frequently do not have a space in which to act, he suggests,"…a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing'" (p. xix). He suggests that Indigenous peoples in particular employ tactics, and "…often made of the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind…" (p. xiii). de Certeau, along with his contemporaries coming out of emerging cultural studies and post colonial theory traditions, were attempting to avoidthe determinism associated with social discipline and structuralism while emphasizing agency (Napalitano & Pratten, 2007).

The idea of tactics is useful in several respects for situating the Decolonize movement as well as other forms of Indigenous activism over the past forty years. In particular, it helps to describe the ways in which Indigenous activists take advantage of social movements, discursive shifts,and ephemeral opportunities. For example, the American Indian Movement (AIM) modeled itself partly after the Black Panther Partyin the 1960s and 1970s; similarly, the momentum started by the Arab Spring and Occupy movements were harnessed by Decolonize.At its most active as an international movement, AIM targeted "proper" places like the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington D.C., and its protestswere fleeting, as activists were often forcibly removed (Baird-Olson 1997).[3]AIM came to be associated with occupations in Wounded Knee, Mount Rushmore, and Alcatraz Island, though AIM activists might not call their activities "occupations" as such. They staged events like the "Longest Walk," during which hundreds of Aboriginal peoples marched into Washington D.C., "to dramatize the forced removal of Native Americans from their aboriginal homelands" (Josephy et al, p. 2).

Similarly, identification and organization through the Western construct "Indian" by AIM to mobilize a Pan-Indigenous social movement, might also be described as making do with imperfect tools. In the process, Eurocentric and essentialist binaries are employed in order to disrupt the colonial ideologies through which they were produced. The identity category becomes a useful tool for the various groups who have been lumped into a binary in juxtaposition with Europeans, regardless of their differences. In Hall's (2001) terms, the identity category is used by AIM and Decolonize as a "temporary attachment" to gain momentum (20).

However, de Certeau's description of tactics as situated in time rather than space means it does not fully comport with the emphasis on place in many Indigenous knowledge systems as well as the long history of forced removal experienced by Indigenous peoples. Claims to particular Indigenous places are central in denaturalizing historical injustices resulting from colonization, according to many activists. Both AIM and Decolonize are misfits for what de

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[3] Though their activities did span for months and even years sometimes as with Alcatraz Island and Wounded Knee and were perhaps a bit more flamboyant than some of the more subtle activities de Certeau described.

Certeau would describe as "a calculus which cannot count on a 'proper' (a spatial or institutional localization)" because both insist that proper spaces, like government buildings, are actually located within Indigenous places (xix). Like other Indigenous movements before it, Decolonizecenters on a permanent connection with Indigenous lands regardless of forced movement, fettered mobility, and assimilation. Such claims should be considered against the backdrop of violent, forced removal for many groups, which not only dislocated them physically, but caused devastating damage to entire ways of life rooted largely in physical locality and traditional knowledge, affecting subsistence activities, spiritual belief systems, and family and tribal connections. More general claims to ancestral lands, for example "Turtle Island," or all of North America, are understandable in light of forced removal and the fact that many people who identify as Indigenous do not currently reside on ancestral lands for a variety of reasons (Josephy et al., 1977). Although at times exhibiting sweeping hyperbole, the emphasis on place is serious and central in the Decolonize movement as it has been throughout a long history of Indigenous activism (See Josephy et al.; Johnson et al., 1997).For the Decolonize movement, non-Indigenous peoples are occupying places that never ceased being Indigenous, and they demand this fact be permanently acknowledged.[4]

Similarly, de Certeau's comparison of the marginality experienced by minorities with that encountered by the majority population as part of the modern condition runs counter to Decolonize rhetoric. He writes, "Marginality is today no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive" (p. xvii). His argumentis consistent with Occupy's tagline "We are the 99 percent," which suggests the majority is disadvantaged by the 1% of the populationwho control the wealth. de Certeau considers "the weak" to be most people. Conversely, visible minority activistsargue that they have suffered the most from social and financial marginalization not only now, but also since colonization, and criticize the Occupy movement for its lack of diversity. The POC (Or People of Color) Occupy Wall Street Working Group, engages withthe Occupy movement through social media websites like Twitter to insert their own movement names to the narrative. They apply their ownhashtags, an identifier that names and categorizes a tweet, such as #POC in addition to one of the traditionally used identifiers #Occupy or #OWS. The added "hashtag" expands the message's audience as it enables users to search for content relevant to both movementsacross networks. Like Decolonize, this group troubles the idea of occupation by adding an additional layertothe name of the movement and engaging with it on its own termsand in a way thatsets itself apart from the broader movement. The #POC hashtag continues to name and categorizetweets related to racial issues long after Occupy's protestshave dissipated.Indigenous groups and leaders have also created and continue to use the hashtag #DECOLONIZE with or without added identifiers to engage the movement on their own terms and to build an online community around a common goal.

Decolonize activists emphasize the ways in which all non-Indigenous peoples have benefitted from colonization in settler societies. So, for them, the Indigenous experience of inequitable relations of power and wealth distribution is not the same as the marginality faced by majority culture (Desjarlait, 2011). As Denver AIM suggests:

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[4]Similarly, in Australia in 2006, a federal judge acknowledged this kind of claim, determining that the entire of city of Perth is actually on Aboriginal lands, although this decision was problematic in many ways as it relied on a Western legal framework.

> In the U.S., indigenous nations were the first targets of corporate/government oppression…If this movement is serious about confronting the foundational assumptions of the current U.S. system, then it must begin by addressing the original crimes of the U.S. colonizing system against indigenous nations ("Occupy Denver…").

Some Occupy groups have expressed interest in working more closely with Indigenous peoples to include their concerns. Occupy assemblies, like those in Denver, Oakland, and Boston have endorsed proposals outlined by chapters of the American Indian Movement. Denver's 10-point "Indigenous platform proposal" includes the repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery; the "recognition, observance and enforcement of all treaties" between the United States and Indigenous nations; and recognition that "settler state boundaries in the Americas are colonial fabrications that should not limit or restrict the ability of Indigenous peoples to travel freely" among other requests (Calhoun, 2011; Occupy Denver, 2011).

However, reformers and leftists have often claimed to act in the best interest of Indigenous peoples from the top down, and because the Occupy movement was not initiated by or inclusive of Indigenous peoples, a fair amount of skepticism remains. As Montano explains:

> It seems that ever since we indigenous people have discovered Europeans and invited them to visit with us here on our land, we've had to endure countless 'isms' and religions and programs and social engineering that would "fix" us. Protestantism, Socialism, Communism, American Democracy, Christianity, Boarding Schools, Residential Schools...well, you get the idea. And, it seems that these so-called enlightened strategies were nearly always enacted and implemented and pushed upon us *without our consent*. And, I'll assume that you're aware of how it turned out for us. Yes. Terribly (Montano, 2011).

Similarly, Clayton Thomas-Mueller, a member of the Mathias Colomb Cree Nation and organizer for the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) describes his surprise and fear upon learning of the early Occupy activities. At the time, he was attending a Grassroots Global Justice Alliance Congress, including a network of about 86 social activist organizations led by people of color and Indigenous peoples. He described the situation as they tried to determine, "Who called this action?" suggesting this core group of social movement organizers had not been involved ("Occupy Talks," 2012).Indigenous groups have been placing similar critiques on the social agenda for some time.It is not surprising that they wouldcontinue their engagementwith Occupy to insert considerations of inequality emerging out of colonialism and race.

III. Visual Culture and the Trickster-Tactician

In response to such criticism, while Decolonize has gained momentum from the broader movement, it has produced its own rhetorical and visual approaches, using signifiers that set it apart.For example, some Decolonize posters include the statement, "Occupied since 1625," presumably a reference to the 1625 establishment of Fort Amsterdam (now Manhattan Island) on what was formerly Lenape territory, emphasizing the idea that the Occupiers are on land that is already occupied. Many of the Decolonize posters, circulating at protests and through social

media like Facebook, include colorful drawings and photos of Indigenous people. However, some of the images have been critiqued for reproducing the same stereotypes pervasive in majority culture. Cherokee Blogger, Adrienne K writes that one of the most prolific Decolonize images compiles, "10 things to include to make it recognizably Indian" (K). She points out that although the poster states that Wall Street is on "occupied Algonquin Land," it includes the picture of a Plains Indian and a drawing of a buffalo, neither of which are indigenous to Manhattan Island. She suggests that the poster could have more accurately stated that the Occupation is taking place in Lenape territory.[5]Conversely, K lauds a poster used in Occupy Oakland protests, which places an Ohlone person, from the area, against the backdrop of the modern city. Although some of the clichés pointed out by K may have been unintentional, it is likely that the designers of such artwork included signifiers which would be readily recognizable as "Indian" to help draw attention to their concerns, in essence "playing Indian," (Deloria, 1999).[6]The debate about the content reflects the divisions within Decolonize, but these examples nevertheless show the movement's use of visuals to place Indigenous and colonial historieswithin the discourses constituting Occupy.

In addition, some of the artwork coming out of the Decolonize movement uses maps like the flyer designed by Julian Padilla of Brooklyn New York with Coya White-Hat Artichoker and Jessica Yee featuring a drawing of New Amsterdam to denaturalize its settlement by Europeans. Similarly, artwork created by Erin Konsmo, a Metis Indigenous Feminist from Alberta, uses outlines of North America to show the various non-Indigenous claims to it including the Doctrine of Discovery, Manifest Destiny, and then finally the Occupy movement, indicating that the latter is akin to these first two mechanisms of colonization. While in each case, the same outline of North America is featured, three different symbols (flags, crosses, and signs) are planted crudely on them to indicate various justifications for colonization (Yee, 2011).[7]As David Turnbull (2000)and Benedict Anderson (1983) point out, representational technologies like maps helped to delimit and control space and demarcate territory during colonization. Anderson contends that maps enabled empires and later modern nation states to govern at a distance by interpellating subjects as part of an imagined community located within policed boundaries.In contemporary contexts, borders limit the mobility of more than 40 Indigenous nations intersected by the territorial lines established between the United States, and Mexico, Canada, and Russia (Starks, McCormack & Cornell, 2011). Those living near borders have faced unique challenges and often find themselves in guarded militarized zones as Starks, McCormack & Cornell (2011) point out. Therefore, the use of maps in the Decolonize movement to trouble the control of spaces/places thorough representational technologies is a kind of tactic. Like other approaches in the Decolonize movement, maps are used toparody mechanisms of colonization to denaturalize them, and theysymbolically transform colonized spaces back into Indigenous places.Konsmo's illustration offers the kind of irony, which Ryan (1999) suggests is characteristic of a number of

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[5]K points to another example, which more successfully avoids Indigenous conflations by including the photo of a Lenape person. However, as she points out, like most contemporary depictions of American Indian people, it utilizes a historical image, placing the Indigenous personon it in the past, rather than in modern contexts and places.

[6] Link to: http://nativeappropriations.blogspot.ca/2011/10/representing-native-resence-in-occupy.html#1_undefined,0_

[7] Link to: http://rabble.ca/columnists/2011/10/0ccupy-wall-street-game-colonialism-and-left

Native artists, who have been influenced by the humour of trickster stories. These demonstrate similar qualities of "curiosity, ingenuity, playfulness, earthiness, irreverence, and resilience" (Ryan, p. 6).

The trickster is a character making appearances in Indigenous storytelling throughout North America, and is frequently seen as a comical figure taking the form of a man or an animal like a raven or coyote. It/hecan be mischievous and impulsive and serves many functions in storytelling, among them teaching "culturally appropriate behavior" by demonstrating what is inappropriate through the trickster's exploits (Ryan, p. 6). Like the clever tactician, the trickster also helps to frame the creativityemployed in the artwork and Decolonize movement more broadly.However, while a tactic can be quite subtle in de Certeau's estimation, for example, participating in small resistances while walking in the city, watching the news, or cooking, the trickster can be much more flamboyant. Ryan discusses what he calls the "trickster shift" in Native art as "serious play, the ultimate goal of which is a radical shift in viewer perspective and even political positioning by imagining and imaging alternative viewpoints" (p. 5). The stakes are high for Native artists and activists, and their rhetoric and artwork are designed to be noticed in order to teach a lesson. Unlike tactics, which can involve invisible, internal resistances, "the trickster shift" demonstrates a much more goal-oriented "doing" rather than merely "being" (Ryan, p. 5).Therefore, the ironic messages about Indigenous ancestral lands are not cryptic in Decolonize artwork and rhetoric, from Konsmo's maps to Montano's blogs. Some combination of the trickster-tactician, who takes advantage of fleeting opportunities in the face of power imbalances to make a point about Indigenous places through humour and irony, is perhaps the most suitable frame for understanding the Decolonize movement.

IV. Conclusion

As the previous examples illustrate, the Occupy phenomenon has opened up new possibilities for rhetorical opportunities in naming and claiming. Indigenous groups in particular have used the opportunity presented by Occupy to engage with the movement and the public on their own terms. Their efforts have attempted to expand criticisms of the free market capitalist system to include questions of race, colonization, and social history.Understanding Decolonize through tactics and fleeting moments of resistance, the movement has succeeded as a counter-movement shining a light on Indigenous concerns and calling out the white privilegereproduced, whether intentionally or not, through Occupy.

We recommend the use of these rhetorical opportunities to advance conceptual frameworks that do justice to the unique circumstances faced by contemporary Indigenous peoples. Understanding the trickster-tactician framework reflecting Indigenous forms of resistance is important to understanding Decolonize and its impact on other movements.Our well-worn academic tools for situating agency and powercan partially account for phenomena like the Decolonize movement, but cannot fully explain the creativity found across the spectrum of Indigenous activism and the importance of place and humour in Indigenous epistemologies. It is important, therefore, that Indigenousframeworksof resistance find themselves at the heart of scholarship examining such social phenomena.

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