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Title
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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/53j7n4xx

Journal
American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 18(4)

ISSN
0161-6463

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Publication Date
1994-09-01

DOI
10.17953

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AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURE AND RESEARCH JOURNAL 18:4 (1994) 189–212

American Indian Placemaking on Alcatraz, 1969–1971

ROBERT A. RUNDSTROM

We will not ever get anything till we make Alcatraz.[1]

Leslie Marmon Silko wrote that the Hopi deliberately chose an austere physical environment in which to anchor themselves.[2] The high mesas compel the people to come together repeatedly in labor, ceremony, and prayer for the common good. The physical environment, once learned, allowed a Hopi place to evolve across more than seven centuries.

If one were to make a list of other sites in North America as seemingly untenable as the Hopi mesas, Alcatraz Island would have to be written at the top of that list. So difficult is the place that the only long-term attempt to live there was made by those society outcasts deemed too dangerous to live elsewhere, and their overseers. Yet, as foreboding as a site might be, Silko believes that until a viable and balanced relationship to place is found, a people cannot truly be said to have emerged.[3] Place and human identity must be invested in each other for ethnogenesis to occur. In his own effort to identify an Indian sense of place, N. Scott Momaday has named this achievement, "reciprocal appropriation," wherein humans invest themselves in place while simultaneously incorporating place into fundamental experience.[4] Moreover, he says, it requires a "moral act of the imagination."

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Twenty-five years ago, on 9 November, fourteen hardy Indian college students from Bay Area universities and colleges decided to spend the night on Alcatraz—the beginning of what we now recognize as a series of extraordinary acts of imagination. In retrospect, this was the reconnaissance needed for the major landing that took place eleven days later, when eighty-nine men, women, and children began to inhabit the island in more permanent fashion. From my perspective as a geographer, I think that they came to build a new future and to create an Indian place in which a sense of pan-Indian ethnicity could be renewed. In Silko's terms, a people had to emerge. It is appropriate on this anniversary to cast a glance backward and look at some of the ways Alcatraz was made into an Indian place.

With only slight variation, many geographers agree that place consists of four elements: physical site and situation, a tangible created environment, a social milieu, and a set of personal and shared meanings.[5] These are separated for convenience of discussion, but, in reality, they interpenetrate and form an indivisible whole, a context or arena reciprocally shaping and shaped by the social and political will. This geographical view of place, as both agent and creation, is crucial to explaining why Alcatraz was chosen as a protest site, how its features were used and given fresh meaning, and how it was successfully coupled with Indian identity, becoming a lasting symbol of the late twentieth-century political landscape.

PHYSICAL SITE AND SITUATION

Alcatraz lies astride the treacherous tidal currents of San Francisco Bay, just two-and-one-half miles inside the Golden Gate (figure 1). A trace of shoals, one named for the island, leads to Fort Point at the southern base of the Golden Gate Bridge. Ships and towed barges entering the bay must be piloted carefully north to the Richmond oil terminals or south through a narrow pass set in the one-and-one-quarter-mile gap separating the island from glitzy Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. In 1969, the southern route led to the Vietnam War by way of the Alameda Naval Air Station and the Oakland Army Terminal. Foghorns and lights on the two ends of the island warned traffic in these shipping lanes.

Alcatraz is tiny by any measure, a little more than one-quarter mile long and one-eighth of a mile across. Its northern

Figure 1. View of Alcatraz Island from the south during the 1969 occupation. The buildings on the terrace in the foreground were razed immediately after the occupation was over. Source: Alcatraz Archival Collection, History Room and Special Collections, San Francisco Public Library.

tip actually points to the northwest, so its impressive eastern face is turned away from San Francisco. Its surface rises in two steps to its highest point at the center, approximately 110 feet above the waves. Halfway up at either end, a small terrace breaks the slope, and another relatively flat surface forms the top. All three were carved out in the nineteenth century. The intermittent slopes are rugged and steep, angling up from the water on all sides. With no natural harbor or cove, the island can be safely reached only via a single dock jutting out to the east on artificial pilings. The island's water supply was always piped or shipped in and stored in ground tanks and a water tower.

Alcatraz is no more rugged than the surrounding hills in Marin County and San Francisco, but the eye inevitably falls upon "the Rock" because of its isolated prominence in the water. Its situation also places it in stark contrast to the continuous cover of grass and flowering plants found in Marin and the gleaming towers and

eclectic neighborhoods of the urban area. Patches of low-growing native plants, adapted to the saline and surprisingly arid environment, occur only where a hold among the rocks can be found. The abundant trees and shrubs evident today were all introduced and nurtured. Topsoil always had to be imported for the small gardens tended by the families of the military officers or prison guards who used to live there. In 1969, as always, California seagulls were the most evident form of wildlife. Any outdoor activity seems to attract their attention, and at dawn and dusk they are especially vocal. Pesticides eliminated most of the brown pelicans by the end of the 1960s, but twenty years later they became a common site around the island once again. Seal, otter, and small sharks may be spotted occasionally in the fast water.

In all respects, the natural feel of the place is one of austere beauty, lonely isolation, and inhospitality amidst the general hubbub of the shiny, boisterous metropolis surrounding it. Neither the physical nor the created environment ever satisfied the basic biological needs of the island's periodic human residents.

TANGIBLE CREATED ENVIRONMENT

Little was physically built during the Alcatraz occupation.[6] The overpowering presence of the abandoned buildings from the federal penitentiary era dominated the land then as they do now. Without working plumbing and heating, and with only intermittent electricity, the massive concrete and iron structures could hardly be less appealing as a human home. Yet the built landscape was enormously useful to the occupiers in the early days. The first official document released to the press, the "Proclamation to the Great White Father and All His People," recognized the island for what it was: isolated, run-down, and without transportation, sanitation, employment opportunity, health care, schools, or any of the physical endowment needed to support human occupancy. In short, it was perfectly suitable as an Indian reservation![7] This brand of humor permeated the entire occupation, its ironic inversions functioning as a powerful rhetorical device for incorporating the abandoned prison buildings into personal and shared experience. Its expression in the proclamation was the beginning of the creation of an Indian place.

Graffiti and Other Signs

Beyond the people and their activities, the most visible markers of Indian Alcatraz were the more than two hundred examples of graffiti and signs, many of which were used to subvert and invert names and places.[8] For example, Bureau of White Affairs was painted on one window,[9] and Nixon, Agnew, and Alioto were carefully written in block letters over individual cells in the main cellhouse (figure 2). Apartment for Rent hung on the door of another.

The phrase *Indian Land* may have been the most ubiquitous message. The words were part of large-scale signs prominent on the barracks building facing the dock, on the water tower, and on a wall near the old warden's house. Specifically, on the side of the barracks, just above what is now the park rangers' main office, were the words Indian Land, Indians Welcome, and United Indian Property, the latter transferring the island from federal control as surely as the occupation itself (figure 3). The water tower called out to air and bay traffic, Welcome, Peace and Freedom, while

FIGURE 2. *Photo taken on 7 July 1971. Original caption reads, "Cells in the row Capone was on. Names were lettered overhead by Indian occupiers." Courtesy of California Historical Society,* San Francisco Chronicle *Collection. Clem Albers, photographer.*

FIGURE 3. Large signs on a prominent wall of the old barracks face the dock. Source: Alcatraz Archival Collection, History Room and Special Collections, San Francisco Public Library.

declaring the place the Home of the Free . . . Indian Land. You are on Indian Land was yet another reminder written in dripping block letters along the walk up to the cellhouse. The shadowy remains of the words written on the barracks building and the water tower persist today as the most tangible expressions of Alcatraz as an Indian place.

Place names are elemental to the panhuman experience, often preceding other aspects of the placemaking process. On Alcatraz, names such as Sioux, Pomo Room, and Paiutes were painted on interior doors and walls as signifiers of place and perhaps also as markers of tribal "turf," even as a pan-Indian ethnic identity was under construction.[10] Notably, two apartment houses formerly used by prison guards and their families were remade into Pima House and Ira Hayes House No. 1, the latter gaining a measure of authenticity when the San Francisco Public Health Department issued at least one identification card with that address on it.[11]

The power of signs to invert meaning and incorporate place into experience may have reached greatest complexity in the entrance to the main cellhouse. The stars-and-stripes seal of the

U.S. penal system, guarded by that ubiquitous symbol of federal authority, an eagle with outstretched wings, is perched directly over the doorway. At first, a sign reading This Land Is My Land was hung around the eagle's neck (figure 4).[12] Later, the seal of the penal system was painted red, white, and blue and the word *FREE* was painted on it with the narrow stripes of the seal serving as the vertical strokes of the letters (figure 5). In two deft moves, the island, the cellhouse, the symbolic power of the eagle and flag, and a popular national anthem all had been appropriated. In addition, the spirit of a prison and a people had been marked for freedom in one stroke of placemaking. In contrast, whites read both signs only as taunts from presumedly anti-American Indian radicals. In the remaking of Alcatraz, however, such creations were part of ritual discourses used regularly by Indian occupants.

Any attempt by an outsider to decide the intended audience of these markers inevitably leads to more ambiguity. Many signs must have been aimed at the elements of white society engaged in surveillance during the occupation. Visiting reporters must have been another intended audience. However, I would argue that the most important viewers were the Indian occupants themselves, who were addressing each other using the language of creation to conceive a new place.[13]

In July 1971, a month after the occupation ended, the federal government brought bulldozers and a wrecking ball onto the island, and armed patrols with guard dogs were posted on twenty-four-hour watch. The apartment buildings around the parade ground on the southern terrace were razed, ostensibly because they were crumbling and unsafe (figure 6).[14] Clearly, the more important reason for the destruction was to render the area "placeless." Pima House, Ira Hayes House No. 1, and the other buildings in the area had been used as residences and contained a lot of graffiti. Their destruction was an unambiguous reassertion of federal authority and an unmaking of place no less powerful in its message than the moment in June 1971 when armed federal marshals and FBI officers stepped upon the island.

Proposal for New Construction

For at least some of the occupants, the graffiti and signs were part of an effort to transform the existing landscape, if only temporarily. New construction was intended for the long-term future.[15]

FIGURE 4. A subverted sign guarding the entrance to the main cellhouse appropriates the island through an ironic reference. A media photographer self-consciously adjusts his camera as people cluster near the doorway. Source: Alcatraz Archival Collection, History Room and Special Collections, San Francisco Public Library.

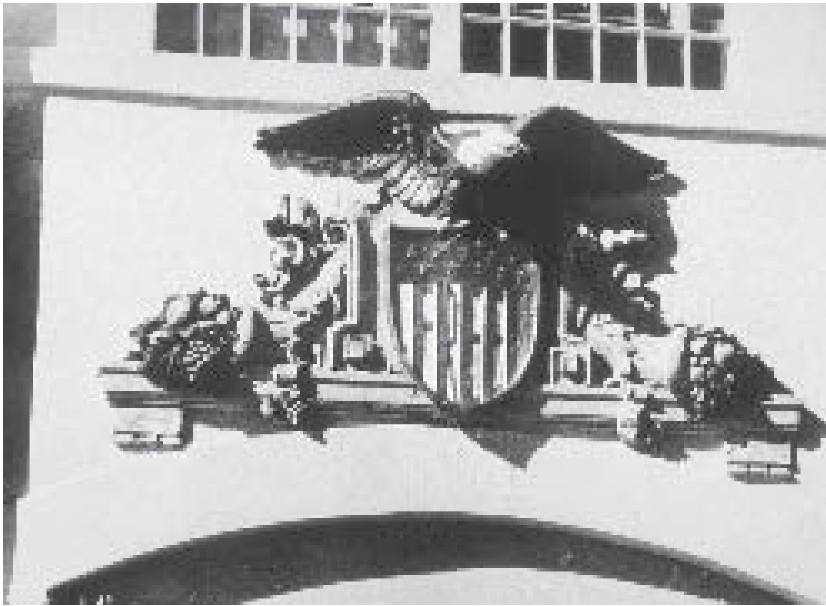

Figure 5. Further alteration of the shield of the U.S. penal system remakes Alcatraz in several ways. Photo taken on 11 November 1970. Original caption reads, "Eagle, Cornucopias, Shield above entrance to main cell block painted red/white/blue & 'free' written in by Indians." Courtesy of California Historical Society, San Francisco Chronicle *Collection. Darrel Duncan, photographer.*

Ideas for completely remaking the built environment were aired in a roundtable discussion at the "Gathering of All Indian Tribes," an intertribal conference held in the dining room of the main cellhouse on 23 December 1969. The emerging plan for buildings and grounds aimed to solve the inherent problems of lack of water, limited space, rocky surface, and steep slopes in a way that made use of non-Indian technologies yet also reflected traditional Indian built forms. A passage from the typescript of minutes from the roundtable discussion puts it this way [emphasis in original]:

> Key Idea: It is important to use traditional Indian art ideas as basic to the architectural structures so as to be authentic, and to use contemporary architecture, knowledge and art skills to express these ideas in a way to say that this *must last forever*.[16]

Figure 6. Photo taken on 7 July 1971. Original caption reads, "Guard John Geagan of American Patrol Service, hired to patrol with sentry dog Whiskey—in background is PIMA house, a former staff dormitory—lighthouse on top." Remains of warden's house are also shown at the top right. Courtesy of California Historical Society, San Francisco Chronicle *Collection. Clem Albers, photographer.*

Ideas for housing included longhouses, tipis, wickiups, hogans, modernized pithouses, and even cliff dwellings cantilevered into the various rock faces of the island. Sweat baths, totem poles, sculpture, mosaics, murals, electric cars for on-island use, cable trams for travel to the mainland, helicopters, chemical waste disposal, atomic energy, and a desalinization plant were other ideas raised at the December roundtable.[17]

The result was a planning grant proposal for an "All Indian University and Cultural Complex" submitted to the National Council on Indian Opportunity at an island meeting on 23 February 1970.[18] The proposed budget of $300,000 was to be spent on razing the old prison infrastructure and creating an initial design for a center for Native American studies, a spiritual center, an ecological center and medicinal herb garden, a marine observatory, and a museum. The community centerpiece was to be a large redwood roundhouse of the type built by the Pomo in northern California. An eagle would grace the roof at the center and serve as a universal symbol of Indian unity. The roundhouse's location on the very top terrace of the island, replacing the main prison cellhouse with the federal eagle over its main entrance, represents yet another inversion of the old Alcatraz.

The government, of course, rejected the proposal, countering with its own idea for a federal tourist park. Indians of All Tribes, Inc. flatly rejected the federal counteroffer.19 Although none of the Indian ideas for a created environment were ever put into place, they played an important role alongside the graffiti and other signs as aspects of a reciprocal appropriation ongoing between the people and the island.

A SOCIAL MILIEU

Like others trapped in BIA urban relocation projects across the country in the 1950s and 1960s, Bay Area Indians, in isolation from family and reservation life, needed an environment where they could live and function together, in opposition to federal attempts at detribalization. In some ways, local Indian organizations had been helping out for quite awhile. For example, small powwows were held regularly in various parts of the Bay Area. But Alcatraz became the locus for a much larger social experience that quickly spanned the continent, as people from across North America

journeyed to the island and stayed for various periods of time.[20] For this to occur, interpersonal experience and feeling had to be given shape and had to be made visible in commonplace and extraordinary ways.[21]

Perhaps the regular powwows were the most common and distinctive means by which a social milieu was created and sustained. The drumming and singing often lasted long into the night, the sound giving shape to island experience while also symbolizing the investment being made. At other times, various specific tribal dances were held on special occasions. People were also compelled to come together regularly to eat the daily meals served in a communal setting inside the main cellhouse.

Ritual gift exchanges were a common feature of island life both during and after Indian visits to the place. Traditionally prepared fish and venison came in on occasion. One person forwarded yellow cedar from the Pacific Northwest for ceremonial purposes.[22] Sometimes, a song, ceremony, poem, or prayer was brought as a gift.

Educating the Children

A major purpose of education is to articulate experience. In our schools, children are taught to love and honor the state as a matter of course.[23] Children's books and atlases repeatedly emphasize the centrality of an Anglo-American nationality. While making abstract places more "real," this also marginalizes those who do not fit the dominant social pattern. In an effort to combat this, an island school was organized to articulate Indian political and cultural experience to the children. One of the goals was to interconnect aspects of the island with the children's emerging identities, a process fundamental to placemaking. Figure 7, a classroom photograph taken by a newspaper photographer, presents an unusually clear example. I assume the room was set up for an early class meeting, perhaps the first one, in which various kinds of introductions were being made. The assignment on the lower-right portion of the blackboard indicates that each student was asked to write his or her name, age, home address, school, and grade level on one side of a sheet of paper. More importantly, on the reverse, students were to draw a "picture of something about *Alcatraz*" along with an "Indian design." Apparently, teachers

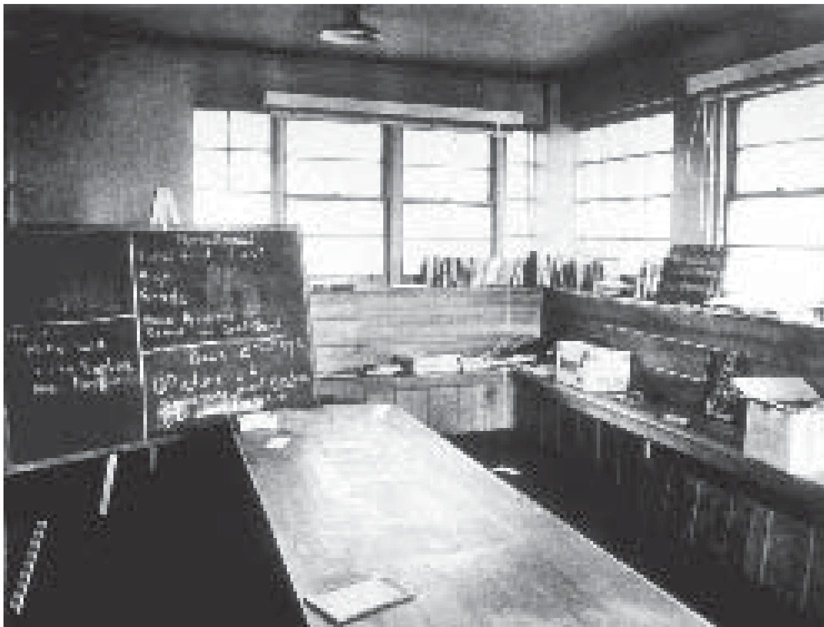

FIGURE 7. Photo taken on 2 January 1970. Original caption reads, "Alcatraz classroom (third floor, old security officer's quarters)." Courtesy of California Historical Society, San Francisco Chronicle *Collection. Vincent Maggiora, photographer.*

were striving to introduce the children formally to their instructors, to each other, and to the place. The latter may be seen as the beginning of an Alcatraz child's first formal effort at reciprocal appropriation.

Another glimpse into the role of education in placemaking is provided by an apparent fragment of a lesson written on 5 May 1970 that I found in the archives.[24] Unlike the one on the blackboard, the strategy here was to get the children to consider the differences between Indian and white ways of thinking about land, nature, and religion, and the historical links between these three. An Indian tradition of living in balance with nature, developing a religious tie to the land, and giving thanks for life was set in opposition to an emphasis by whites on disrespect, the Bible, and taking land from others. Clearly, as happens everywhere, Alcatraz children were being given various models for thinking about place and its cultural and historical significance.

Political Organization

Politics creates place when people make both the place and the political ideals and goals with which it is being invested demonstrably visible to outsiders. This can be an especially powerful form of social cohesion, because the boundaries of a place periodically need defending against intrusion from outside forces.[25] On Alcatraz, the threat of intrusion was not periodic but incessant. A council was quickly put in place soon after initial arrival, and assignments were given to individuals for the purpose of overseeing various social functions: education, finance, security, health, food and supplies, transportation, housing, and so on. A formal organizational chart and regular council meetings in the prison chapel gave the proposed system visibility as an ideal. Alcatraz Council was given authority over the various functions, but the people, or the "membership," as they were later called, actually empowered the council. Council served to implement the decisions of its membership; it had no authority to negotiate with the public or federal government without membership approval. Those serving on the council were to receive no compensation, and they could be recalled by two-thirds of the membership. Under the proposed bylaws for Indians of All Tribes, Inc., membership was determined largely on the basis of commitment to place:

> Every Indian on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay is a member of the corporation if he or she (a) is registered with the coordinator's office as a resident, and (b) has lived continuously on Alcatraz for at least seven days.[26]

Also, membership would be lost if an individual Indian left Alcatraz for more than seventy-two hours in a calendar week without permission from the council.

From the beginning, the distribution of political authority was organized so that no single person was in charge as a leader, president, or director of either the initial occupation effort or later island operations, an aspect of the Indian social network that was difficult for outsiders to grasp. Print and television media, in particular, were anxious to single out a spokesperson, preferably someone photogenic and charismatic, a process not unlike the creation of individual "chiefs" for separate "tribes" during initial colonization. On the eve of the first occupation, during the gath-

ering at Fisherman's Wharf for the trip out to the island, it was clear that no single individual was in charge of the whole operation.[27] Responding to an article in the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, Lou Trudell made the same point in a letter to the editor written on 12 August 1970:

> There is definitely no one leader or president here . . . , nor has there ever been. We have a seven man council but none are so-called leaders or chiefs. The leaders are the whole body, the whole population on Alcatraz for without them there would be no Alcatraz and there would be no hope.[28]

Outreach

While the political and educational apparatus was emerging on the island, a broader network of external social relations was sought with Indians on reservations across the country. The need to sustain good relations with the reservations is a recurrent theme in minutes of council meetings and other formal discussions on the island for which there is an archival record. Some saw it as a key to the success of the occupation. At the December 1969 intertribal conference, the Overall Aims and Goals Committee submitted its recommendations, including adopting an advisory committee consisting of members drawn from various tribes; keeping all tribal councils informed of activities and problems on Alcatraz; and sending island literature and documents to all tribal councils and Indian organizations.[29]

The main idea was to funnel information and assistance around Indian Country using Alcatraz as a central node or point of distribution.[30] For example, financial savings derived largely from donations went to support political actions elsewhere: one thousand dollars to the March 1970 dispute at Fort Lawton, Washington; and fifty dollars to the Pit River Indians for their land claim project. "Runners" were also sent out to the reservations to gather information, interpret the Alcatraz occupation, and assist with local concerns.[31]

Alcatraz also had an Indian voice reaching out to sustain the urban social network in Indian Country. "Radio Free Alcatraz" first broadcast on 22 December 1969 and was picked up by the Pacifica network and relayed to stations in the Bay Area (KPFA), Los Angeles (KPFK), and New York (WBAI). For fifteen minutes

on weekday evenings, John Trudell played music, reported on Indian affairs, and presented information on Indian history and culture. In a letter asking for support from a potential financier, Trudell argued for an "uncensored voice" in the mass media,

> allowing urban and reservation Indians to communicate directly and regularly with one another . . . . Here is an opportunity for Indian identity and a common purpose to emerge on the national scene.[32]

PERSONAL AND SHARED MEANINGS

The meaning of place was monitored and conveyed in myriad ways on Alcatraz. Some of these have already become evident, indicating the interpenetration of meaning with social behavior, created environment, and natural physical environment. Place makes human feelings concrete, so they can be dealt with in ritual and narrative; these, in turn, reassure individual and group identity. Place also anchors identity so "the terror of facing the world alone is extinguished."[33]

But the meaning of place must be protected and insulated from outside attack, especially those assaults that may be masked by outward displays of good intentions.[34] Protection is necessary because of the moral meaning a place has for its residents and the moral code that applies first to locals. Outsiders cannot be expected to behave correctly and, as a result, do not enjoy full courtesies.[35] For example, the Public Relations Department repeatedly had to fend off attempts by non-Indians to become part of the place. Non-Indians were permitted to visit, but only by special permission, and they could never become island residents. Grace Thorpe wrote many cordial and carefully worded letters in reply to requests by non-Indians for access to the island. While thanking one of the numerous sympathizers for her support, Thorpe was firm in declaring Alcatraz a decidedly Indian place. She added, "I am certain that you understand; this is our first 'free' land since the white man came."[36] In another thank-you letter, she wrote,

> Our seizure of Alcatraz is the awakening of Indian self-determinism and Indian unity. It is the beginning of the Indian's rightful claim, not only to his land, but also his own destiny and power.[37]

Aside from well-meaning sympathizers, other non-Indians wanted Indians of All Tribes to finance their visit and support them while they wrote a story, a play, or poetry, produced a film, or, in one case, conducted a puppet show.[38] White self-aggrandizement at the expense of reservation Indians is well-known, and Alcatraz must have seemed like a similar opportunity once donations began to stream in. If a few requests had been granted, more would have flooded in, expenditures would have accumulated rapidly, and the still-emerging island culture would have been severely compromised.

The written and spoken word are powerful symbols of meaning, but so, too, is song.[39] The importance of sustaining crucial social interaction through drumming and singing has already been noted. Rhythm, volume, and performance time are all important factors, but the shared meaning of the words and vocables and the joy found in sharing memory of them are just as essential. Richard Oakes wrote,

> We did a lot of singing in those days. I remember the fires at night-time, the cold of the night, the singing around the campfire of the songs that aren't shared by the white people . . . the songs of friendship, the songs of understanding. We did a lot of singing. We sang into the early hours of the morning. It was beautiful to behold and beautiful to listen to.[40]

Identity and unity also were symbolized in both personal and shared artwork, the invocation of Plains Indian symbols, and a sense of island history that seems to have been widely shared. Individual works of art poured out during and immediately after the occupation, after the unfortunate accident that took thirteen-year-old Yvonne Oakes's life, and after federal marshals removed the last residents in June 1971. Most extant works include a physical representation of the island and various symbols of political and cultural meaning. A pencil sketch appearing at the end of an editorial entitled "Alcatraz: The Idea" in the second newsletter is representative (figure 8). Benevolent and reverent faces carved Rushmore-like in the island walls surround the stern declaration, "Indian Land." Yet it seems strange to see various prison buildings and the lighthouse in the same drawing. The symbolic clash of the two aspects may be resolved by the closing phrase of the editorial: "Alcatraz the Idea and Alcatraz the Island Must Always Be in Harmony."

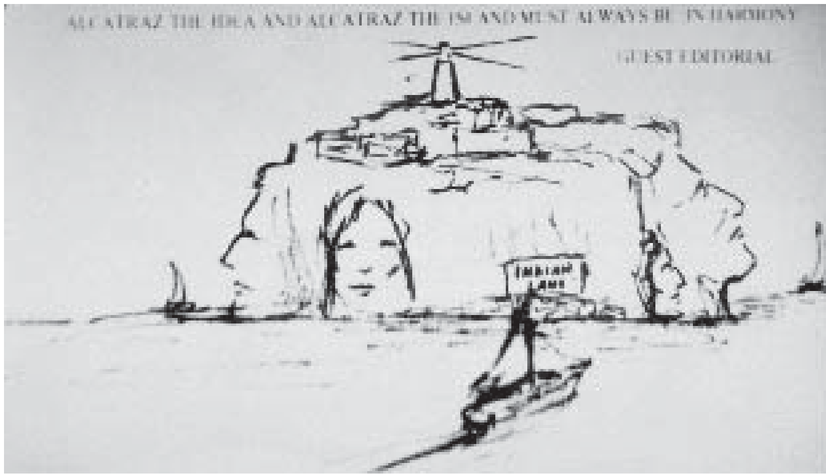

FIGURE 8. Drawing from Alcatraz Indians of All Tribes Newsletter *1:2 (February 1970), 3. Courtesy of San Francisco National Maritime Historical Park Library, Fort Mason Center, San Francisco, California, Harry Dring Papers.*

The use of Plains Indian symbols in graphics officially produced by Indians of All Tribes encouraged unification around another kind of shared meaning. For example, the letterhead used in late 1970 and 1971 featured a gray, full-length silhouette of a stereotypical Plains war chief with feathered headdress and aquiline nose. The island pass issued to residents and visitors was imprinted with three classic Plains images: a tipi, a bison, and the feathered chief.[41] The invocation of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie between Sioux bands and the federal government as justification for permanent transfer of the island was yet another reminder of the implicit value of Plains Indian symbolism.[42]

Many of the occupants of Alcatraz were well aware of the Indian history on the island, starting with the Civil War, when some of the Indians who fought on the side of the Confederacy were incarcerated here as POWs. In the 1870s, a Pyramid Lake Paiute and several Modoc people were sent to the island for crimes against the government, and uncooperative Hopi and Apache were labeled *hostiles* and put on the Rock for awhile just before 1900. The famous 1946 escape attempt and riot featured another noted Indian resident, Clarence Karnes, whose alias was "The Choctaw Kid." In 1964, five Sioux briefly occupied the island. The people who knew this history felt the connections,

which formed another thread in the fabric of Alcatraz. Richard Oakes wrote,

> Alcatraz was a place where thousands of people had been imprisoned, some of them Indians. We sensed the spirits of the prisoners. At times it was spooky, but mostly the spirit of mercy was in the air. The spirits were free. They mingled with the spirits of the Indians that came on the island and hoped for a better future.[43]

CONCLUSION

A complete and complex society evolved on Alcatraz, with all the positive and negative connotations that implies. Place is so complex that no study can claim to be comprehensive, and this one is limited in a specific way. As a geographer interested in how seemingly stark and inhospitable places can be transformed and humanized, I have interpreted Alcatraz as an Indian place composed of four indivisible elements: physical site and situation, a tangible created environment, a social milieu, and a set of personal and shared meanings. My interpretation suggests that a balance between humans and others was struck there. Place became incorporated into the people, just as they invested themselves into its past, present, and future. In Silko's and Momaday's terms, Alcatraz became a place of cultural emergence through the process of reciprocal appropriation.

Alcatraz has an unusually austere physical environment mantled with grim reminders of past human use. Yet, compared to other Vietnam-era political sites, it was occupied in protest for a very long period of time. The grim past was successfully inverted using humor and symbolism to, in effect, rearrange the tangible, created environment. A distinctive social context evolved through many commonplace and extraordinary events, especially those involving education, politics, and the efforts to establish an intertribal nationwide network, with the island at its center. Personal and shared meanings developed through the use of everyday written and spoken language and song. Finally, outpourings of artwork and a shared sense of island history further wrapped people and place together.

The web of symbolic meaning may be of greatest and most lasting importance. The unique twinning of place and human identity that occurred on Alcatraz for so many assured the island

lasting significance as the emergence-place of modern pan-Indian identity and collective protest. As such, Alcatraz persists symbolically today in the mind of each person who was there or who followed its story.[44] Its present use as a federal park showcasing a gaudy prison history and interpretations of white criminality in no way diminishes this fact.

Construction of Alcatraz, and the power with which it was invested, makes its continuing resurrection as a symbolic reference point inevitable. Between 1970 and 1978 alone, thirty-four other protest occupations occurred in Indian Country, all of which refer to Alcatraz for their symbolic power in one way or another. For those who were there, a mere listing of some of the place names invokes Alcatraz as progenitor, a parent in a line of descent: BIA headquarters, Ellis Island, Fort Lawton, Gresham, Mount Rushmore, Moss Lake, Pit River, Pyramid Lake, Rattlesnake Island, Red Lake, Shiprock, Wounded Knee, and any of the Long Walks.

Alcatraz continues today to serve as both a mythic and empirical point of reference. In February 1994, the American Indian Movement began the latest in a series of Long Walks with a sunrise ceremony on the island. These ceremonies, invoking the ritual significance of place, begin with drumming and singing at Fisherman's Wharf. Passage across the narrow channel is marked by continued singing on board ship. On the island, ritual rhetoric, pipe-smoking, prayers, and more singing are featured. They mark the beginnings of individual events, symbolic journeys for justice, just as the occupation itself began a larger series of events. Such personal and shared invocations testify to the continuing power of Alcatraz as an Indian place.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Completion of this article was assisted by a grant from the University of Oklahoma Faculty Research Fund.

NOTES

1. Statement made by a participant in the Staff and Physical Operations roundtable discussion at the Indians of All Tribes National Conference on

Alcatraz Island, 23 December 1969. File 32, box 1, Alcatraz Archival Collection, History Room and Special Collections, San Francisco Public Library (hereinafter referred to as SFPL).

2. Leslie Marmon Silko, "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination," in *On Nature: Nature, Landscape, and Natural History*, ed. D. Halpern (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), 94.

3. Ibid., 92.

4. N. Scott Momaday, "Native American Attitudes to the Environment," in *Seeing with a Native Eye: Essays on Native American Religion*, ed. W.H. Capps (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 80.

5. See John Agnew and James Duncan, *The Power of Place: Bringing Together Geographical and Sociological Imagination* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); R.J. Johnston, *A Question of Place: Exploring the Practice of Human Geography* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1991), 97; Edward Relph, "Modernity and the Reclamation of Place," in *Dwelling, Seeing, and Designing: Toward a Phenomenological Ecology*, ed. D. Seamon (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 34–36; idem, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976); Yi-Fu Tuan, "Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative-Descriptive Approach," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81:4 (1991): 684–96; idem, "Place: An Experiential Perspective," *Geographical Review* 65:2 (1975): 151–65; and idem, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

6. I omit from consideration the controversial fire that gutted several buildings and temporarily put the lighthouse out of service on the evening of 1 June 1970. A fire is typically considered destructive, but it also might be understood as a tool for intentionally reconfiguring the created environment of a place. It would be worthy of discussion here if one could clearly establish intent. However, Indian responsibility for the Alcatraz fire has never been established. Indeed, a number of possible explanations for the fire's origin have been offered and debated over the years.

7. Adam Nordwall wrote the proclamation (source: Don Patterson, interview, 28 March 1994), which may have been the first place this observation was recorded. The proclamation is reproduced in Indians of All Tribes's *Alcatraz Is Not an Island*, ed. P. Blue Cloud (Berkeley, CA: Wingbow Press, 1972), 40–42; and in the *Journal of American Indian Education* 9 (January 1970): 16–18. The metaphor of the island as a reservation was widely used. See, especially, Richard Oakes, "Alcatraz Is Not an Island," *Ramparts* 11:6 (December 1972), 38, 40.

8. See John Noxon, *Inventory of Occupation Graffiti, 1969–1971* (San Francisco: Division of Cultural Resources Management, Western Region, National Park Service, 1971).

9. The General Services Administration's (GSA) caretaker on the island, John Hart, saw the humor in the creation of the Bureau of Caucasian Affairs and willingly cooperated with the occupation when he was offered a post as its head. See Oakes, "Alcatraz Is Not an Island," 39.

10. The names are mentioned in Blue Cloud, *Alcatraz Is Not an Island*, 25.

11. Ira Hayes (Pima) was one of the soldiers who helped raise the U.S. flag on Iwo Jima during World War II and who later became a symbol of the plight

of urban Indians. The identification card addressed to "Ira Hayes House No. 1, Alcatraz" is in file 14, box 1, SFPL.

12. The sign was made and hung around the eagle's neck by Don Patterson, former chair of the board of directors, San Francisco Indian Center (source: Patterson interview).

13. For an illuminating discussion of how Red Power rhetoric was used in ritual self-address, see Randall A. Lake, "Enacting Red Power: The Consummatory Function in Native American Protest Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 69 (1983): 127–42.

14. At several points during the occupation, the GSA characterized the buildings as very dangerous, notably on 12 January 1970, four days after thirteen-year-old Yvonne Oakes had died from a fall, and in a news release on 27 May 1970. Both statements are in file 27, box 2, SFPL.

15. An idea for razing all the existing buildings on Alcatraz and replacing them with a massive new university-culture-ecology complex originated with Adam Nordwall. The proposal was initially used mainly as a publicity strategy to raise money to build a new Indian center in San Francisco after an October 1969 fire destroyed the old one (source: Patterson interview).

16. The quoted passage is item 2, page 1 of "Gathering of All Indian Tribes, Round Table Discussion: Design and Lay-Out," 23 December 1969, file 32, box 1, SFPL.

17. These features are listed in "Indians of All Tribes Conference, Design and Lay-Out," *Alcatraz Indians of All Tribes Newsletter* 1:2 (February 1970), 8–9, which is found in folder 268, box 18, HDC 648, Harry Dring Papers, San Francisco National Maritime Historical Park Library, Fort Mason Center, San Francisco, California (hereinafter referred to as FTMASON); and, in "Gathering of All Tribes, Round Table Discussion: Design and Lay-Out," file 32, box 1, SFPL.

18. See "Meeting with Federal Officials on the Island of Alcatraz, February 23, 1970," file 36, box 1, SFPL.

19. See Robert Robertson, "A Proposal," and "Indians of All Tribes, Inc., Reply to Counter-Proposal of Robert Robertson for the U.S.A., April 3, 1970," both of which are in file 16, box 3, SFPL.

20. For insight into the variety of opinions about the social need for Alcatraz, see Adam Fortunate Eagle [aka Adam Nordwall], *Alcatraz! Alcatraz!: The Indian Occupation of 1969–1971* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 1992); Blue Cloud, *Alcatraz Is Not an Island;* Oakes, "Alcatraz Is Not an Island"; and Wilma Mankiller and Michael Wallis, *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 186–95. Also, see the brief essays by LaDonna Harris (172–73) and Lenada James (229–31) in *Indian Self-Rule: First-Hand Accounts of Indian-White Relations from Roosevelt to Reagan*, ed. K.R. Philp (Salt Lake City, UT: Howe Bros., 1986).

21. Tuan, "Place: An Experiential Perspective," 161.

22. For example, the yellow cedar and game meat were indicated in a letter from the Baileys [Tacoma, Washington] to Richard Tyler and Charley Williams, 22.December 1970, in file 14, box 1, SFPL.

23. Tuan, "Place: An Experiential Perspective," 162.

24. The handwritten lesson plan is in file 4, box 2, SFPL. The actual notes written by the anonymous instructor read as follows:

1. Living in balance with nature?
2. Worship is thru thanks for living and for the betterment or respect of his fellow men.
3. White man's entrance into country was in same line of respect as for his Indian brothers and sisters. Indian showed respect for white man when he landed.
4. White man's religion is in same line of one book! The Bible!
5. Land, basis of religion for the Indian, was taken away from him.

25. Tuan, "Place: An Experiential Perspective," 163.

26. In item 1, section 3, "Criteria," of "Proposed By-Laws," folder 085, box 2, HDC 440, Alcatraz Field Collection Documents, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, FTMASON.

27. Patterson interview. Yet, as Patterson also suggests, Richard Oakes was a leader of the student segment of the island population during his brief time there by virtue of his position as president of the Native American Student Association at San Francisco State University.

28. From the typescript titled, "Copy of letter dated August 12, 1970 to 'Mr. Schultz' of the *L.A. Herald Examiner*," found in file 24, box 1, SFPL.

29. These are items numbered 5, 11, and 12 in "Overall Aims and Goals, Committee Recommendations for Adoption," file 32, box 1, SFPL.

30. There was resistance to this idea among some reservation Indians, who viewed Alcatraz as distant and secondary compared to local issues of justice and land rights. Although the occupiers' intent may have been to function as a clearinghouse more than a central authority, reservation resistance to making Alcatraz the center of Indian Country reinforces my earlier point regarding the distribution of authority.

31. The financial contributions are described in the minutes from general meetings. The decision to send $1,000 to Fort Lawton was approved on 20 March 1970 (file 37, box 1, SFPL), and the Pit River decision was made on 7 May 1970 (file 38, box 1, SFPL). The information on runners comes from the *Alcatraz Indians of All Tribes Newsletter*, 16. This idea was formalized in a proposal to create a traveling Indian university. At one point, a bus trip was made to help the Pyramid Lake Paiute people in a local dispute over use of the lake.

32. Letter from John Trudell and Al Silbowitz [the latter worked for KPFA] to David Fuller, The San Francisco Cambium Fund, 2 January 1970, in file 9, box 4, SFPL.

33. Silko, "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination," 93.

34. For example, the power of language in creating place is reflected in efforts by a state to suppress its use. In the early days of the occupation, the federal government was already asking the news media to suppress information and news releases coming from Alcatraz. Except for those in the Bay Area, most newspapers carried only limited stories about Alcatraz. The suppression was understood by those on the island, adding to the cohesion and shared sense

of mission. See "Staff and Physical Operations" [one of the 23 December 1969 roundtable discussions at the intertribal conference], file 32, box 1, SFPL.

35. The power of language also was controlled and made to serve Indian purposes in interesting ways. For example, the cost of subscribing to the *Alcatraz Indians of All Tribes Newsletter*—thus, the cost of gaining access to Indian words and art, much of which was about Alcatraz itself—was set on a racial basis: Indians paid three dollars, while non-Indians were charged six dollars.

36. Letter from Grace Thorpe to Gladys Kaye, 17 March 1970, in file 22, box 1, SFPL.

37. Letter from Grace Thorpe to Tom Quinn, 23 March 1970, in file 22, box 1, SFPL.

38. See files labeled "Inward Correspondence," box 1, SFPL.

39. Naming is a symbol of placemaking, as mentioned in note 10. Suggestions for name changes at the intertribal conference included "Indian Island," "Turtle Island," "Pelican Island," and "American Indian Island."

40. Oakes, "Alcatraz Is Not an Island," 39.

41. An example of the letterhead is in file 25, box 1, SFPL. A representative island pass with Plains Indian symbols is in folder 076, box 2, HDC 440, Alcatraz Field Collection Documents, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, FTMASON.

42. For a detailed discussion of how Plains Indian symbols came to represent a pan-Indian ethnicity, see John C. Ewers, "The Emergence of the Plains Indian as the Symbol of the North American Indian," *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution* (1964), 531–44.

43. Oakes, "Alcatraz Is Not an Island," 40.

44. Wilma Mankiller, principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, emphasizes this in Mankiller and Wallis, *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People.*

Another example of Alcatraz's continuing symbolism at quite personal levels occurred during my research for this paper. The background is as follows: In September 1993, Ponca City, Oklahoma, celebrated the centennial of its birth in the historic Cherokee Strip land rush. The city commemorated the event with a grand unveiling of a controversial life-size bronze statue on a broad plaza in front of city hall. The statue depicts a young man leaping off his horse to drive a stake into the land. The title, since removed, was "This Land Is Mine!" During my interview with Don Patterson, he asked me if I had seen it, immediately pointed out the connection to the sign he had made on Alcatraz (see note 12), and spoke of the continuity in geographical and social terms, the give-and-take, between Indians and non-Indians in particular places over the past twenty-five years.