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“Free Peltier Now!” The Use of Internet Memes in American Indian Activism

Corinna Lenhardt

Written in bold letters on the fingers of a bright red fist that stands out against a white background, we read the words “TRUTH, POWER, JUSTICE, STRENGTH” (fig. 1). At the top and bottom, more bold black words visually frame the raised fist just as their meaning frames the particular context of this fist icon. Although the image’s style clearly recalls homemade signs held up during demonstrations and rallies, it is actually an Internet meme that was first posted on August 3, 2014 on the Facebook page of Leonard Peltier’s Support Group.¹

Internet memes begin with users who mash up, Photoshop, and tag a chosen original video, photograph, or image macro (combinations of image/photograph and text), quickly turning the original content unit into a complex network of multiplying, intertextual meanings. In this article, I describe, define, and analyze selected Internet memes created by campaigners and activists concerned with the imprisonment of the American Indian Movement (AIM) activist Leonard Peltier. As Candice Hopkins reminds us, “digital technologies have become a medium for speaking and telling our [American Indian] stories,” and, as Malea Powell has further argued, the Internet medium is sufficiently open “to the language of survivance (survival + resistance).”² In grassroots indigenous activism, Internet memes are a fairly recent development that must be understood as one form of an active political, as well as cultural, resistance. Analysis of Peltier Internet memes affords a fascinating glimpse into contemporary

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FIGURE 1: *The “Free Peltier Fist” meme, first posted July 5, 2016 on the website Ya-Native.com; see [facebook.com/leonardpeltiersupportgroup/](https://www.facebook.com/leonardpeltiersupportgroup/) photos.*



American Indian strategies of digital self-representation that reveal creative and participatory interventions as they are newly created and adapted.

Without a doubt, the plight of Leonard Peltier demands ongoing debate and worldwide publicity. Internet memes are a key visual strategy with the potential of boosting Peltier activism into the contemporary digital environment of Web 2.0—and thereby bring about not only global consciousness of the surrounding issues, but also worldwide, collaborative action plans.³ Peltier, of the Anishinaabe, Dakota, and Lakota nations, is currently a federal prisoner serving two consecutive life sentences for the murders of two Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents in 1975. Peltier was, and still is, a leading member of AIM, which seeks to promote and uphold American Indian rights. On June 26, 1975, during a confrontation involving AIM members on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, FBI agents Ronald Williams and Jack Coler were fatally wounded in a chaotic shootout. Peltier was convicted of their murders in 1977 and sentenced to two consecutive life sentences. While Peltier does not deny that he was present during the incident, he has always denied killing the agents, as was alleged by the prosecution at his trial. Thus, at a peak of American Indian activism and active resistance—five years after the Trail of Broken Treaties and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) building takeover, four years after the siege of Wounded Knee, and two years after the violent conflict on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation—a leading AIM activist was convicted and sentenced to lifelong imprisonment.⁴ Both his indictment and conviction caused much controversy from the start. Amnesty International USA has categorized the Peltier case as an unfair trial.⁵

The purpose of this article is not to examine the legal environment, but rather the rhetoric of the social activism his case has sparked from the late 1970s to the present. More specifically, the contemporary creation and dissemination of Internet memes is contextualized in the rich tradition of American Indian grassroots activism that demands clemency for Peltier. Undeniably, rhetorical and visual strategies are closely intertwined with the unprecedented potential of Internet memes for quickly reaching a large number of users all over the world, raising awareness and educating, and for triggering individual as well as collaborative political activism. Moreover, this is especially noticeable in AIM activism of the present, which at the same time, draws upon and adapts the strategies of the past thirty-six years.⁶

In a 2011 essay, Danielle Endres focuses on the high degree of political agency involved in American Indian activism, past and present, and singles out how “the presence of so many non-American Indian members in this movement has important implications for the types of rhetorical strategies used by activists.”⁷ One recent implication, I argue, is the rhetorical strategies of Internet memes supporting the Free Peltier cause. Since the mid-1970s this grassroots movement has successfully targeted a global audience, indigenous and non-indigenous people alike, a rich history that provides depth to a rhetorical analysis of Internet memes as contemporary activism. Taking into account both the manifold continuities and the new possibilities Internet memes offer, I suggest that the digitalization of Peltier activism is a key instance of American Indian survivance strategies—online—and a new challenge to the conceptualizing efforts of American Indian and indigenous studies scholarship. That this challenge is indeed worth accepting will become clearer when the potential of Internet memes for the Free Peltier endeavor is examined.

This article will first review the creative potential inherent in Internet memes and their dissemination with a focus on the use of such memes within Peltier activism. Second, I analyze the underlying claims to knowing and owning “the truth” about the (presumed) unjust incarceration of a cultural leader and elder, and then examine the right to represent this “truth” within a framework that includes both American Indian activism and politics and that of the United States. The language of survivance deployed in these Internet memes helps us to understand the intensity of the cultural and political agency and resistance that they represent.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURAL AND INTERNET MEMES

The term *meme* was most influentially conceptualized in Richard Dawkins’s 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*.⁸ Heavily influenced by evolutionary biology, Dawkins suggests that culture must be understood as a continuous process of cultural units (ideas, behaviors, or styles) undergoing transmission, replication, mutation, selection, and deletion: “Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.”⁹

Dawkins gives examples of memes ranging from melodies, catchphrases, and fashion trends, to building and crafting technologies, and to religion. Constantly

competing for hosts, the memes that prove successful and viable are those that display a combination of key characteristics essential for their survival and proliferation: “high longevity (the endurance of a copy), high fecundity (the rate of copying) and high copying fidelity (the amenability of the idea to copying). Culture is formed via natural selection as memes compete for semiotic survival.”¹⁰

Dawkins’s conceptualization of cultural memes has been severely attacked from several sectors of academia, yet his terminology has not only survived thus far, but is currently experiencing a renaissance within the Web 2.0.¹¹ Whether through online communication, such as email or instant messaging, or in blogs, forums, social networks, video hosting sites, or imageboards, the often rapidly spreading Internet memes specifically echo Dawkins’s conceptualization of memes as cultural units of imitation. However, in light of the limitations of Dawkins’s cultural meme theory—which effectively silences the impacts of power relations, racism, colonialization, and gender and class biases on the presumably “fair” majority voting for cultural superiority—I differentiate between Dawkins’ concept of “meme” and the Web 2.0 term “Internet meme.” Limor Shifman has specifically described Internet memes as

units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process. I suggest looking at Internet memes not as single ideas or formulas that propagated well, but as *groups* of content items that were created with awareness of each other and share common characteristics.¹²

Keeping in mind Shifman’s concept that mutual awareness is always present during the creation of memes, we can position the creation and dissemination of Internet memes on the digital crossroads of “networking individualism” and the complex and continuous transnational flow of data.¹³ More specifically, the visual content of memes, properly considered through “the prism of user-generated globalization—a process in which memes are translated, customized, and distributed across the globe by ordinary Internet users,” clearly crosses “linguistic and national borders with much greater ease.”¹⁴ In contrast, verbal and textual content are subject to localization strategies such as translation, enculturation, and recontextualization.

Applying Limor Shifman’s approach to Internet memes as data units that are created through the networking of individual users in the Web 2.0, my discussion focuses on the three dimensions of Internet memes that creators can potentially imitate and rework: content, form, and stance (see fig. 2). The first dimension encompasses the messages, ideas, and ideologies communicated by a meme. The dimension of form focuses on the “physical incarnation of the message” and describes a specific Internet meme’s visual, and possibly audible, sensory characteristics.¹⁵ Drawing on Robert Englebretson’s notions of “stance” and “stancetaking,” the analysis of the third dimension can decipher the self-positioning of an Internet meme’s addresser at the communicative crossroads of Internet meme, linguistic code, addressees, and other potential addressers (or, Internet meme recreators).¹⁶

In order to further clarify the dimension of “stance,” it seems appropriate to divide the dimension itself into three subdimensions, all of which have been analyzed and

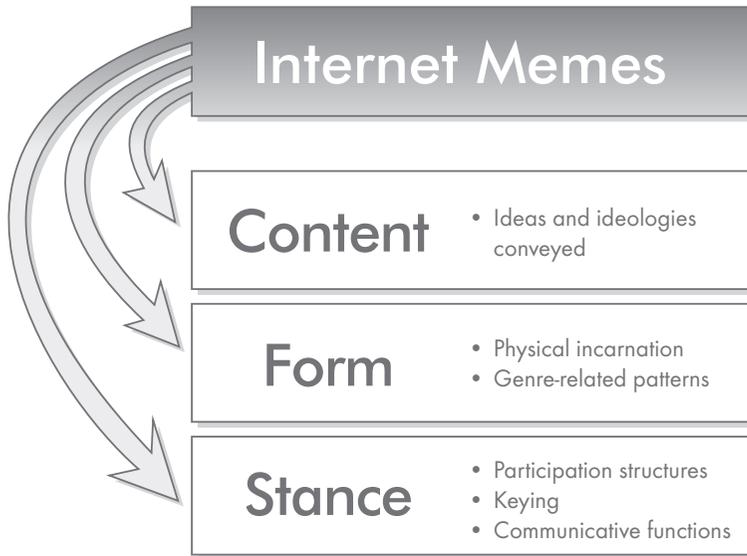


FIGURE 2: Author’s illustration of the three dimensions of an Internet meme based on Limor Shifman, “Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18, no. 3.

described within discourse and media studies. The first subdimension of stance consists of what Susan Philips has identified as “participation structures.” These are contexts and discourse patterns that are not predefined and invariant, but rather negotiated and performed in the actual communication. This concept prompts the question, “What does participation look like and who is entitled to participate?”¹⁷ The second element of stance is “keying,” as defined by Erving Goffman, a concept later essentially supplemented to include “mocking-subversive keying.”¹⁸ Because keying encompasses the tone and style of communication as well as the anticipated effects on the addressee, this analysis answers the questions, “How is the Internet meme keyed, and how does its culturally coded tone/style affect the addressee?” The third component is “communicative functions,” as conceptualized by Roman Jakobson, which interrogates stance using the analytical rubric outlined in the question, “If this communication is an effective act, must I describe its primary function(s) as referential, emotive, conative, poetic, phatic, or metalingual?”¹⁹

While it is perhaps fair to assume that the dominant function of Internet memes is emotive—to circulate humor, for instance—they are notably versatile and adaptable to the utmost extent situationally, as well as culturally. For example, political Internet memes arguably predominantly target younger users with “a new amalgamation of cute cats and hard-core politics” in order to infuse an optional lane of political participation into the crossroads of networked individualism and global data-flow.²⁰ Whether employed in top-down or grassroots contexts, the repetition and creative variation

of Internet memes turn the individual interaction with a digital unit into an act of political participation, which oscillates between persuasion, “connective action,” and the polyvocal expression of a multiplicity of interconnected comments and opinions in public (data) space.²¹ Put more simply, while sometimes a funny cat image may become just a funny cat meme, that same cat picture can be quickly employed to create a political and activist Internet meme aimed at facilitating joint action, individual engagement, and broad outreach. Suddenly, the cat is not only cute and funny, but also potentially revolutionary.

How and Why are Internet Memes Used in Peltier Activism?

Today’s social (grassroots) activism concerned with the incarceration of Leonard Peltier is clearly, though not solely, focused on convincing President Obama to grant executive clemency to Peltier, ideally in the form of an unconditional pardon.²² Peltier activism has been prioritizing the principle of strength in numbers since the 1970s by means of online and offline petitions, mass phone calls and letters to the White House, protest marches and vigils, merchandise, committed prominent advocates, and, more recently, by creating web pages and social media profiles. Furthermore, the Free Peltier cause has been circulated visually since the time of Peltier’s incarceration: under the now-iconic words demanding “Free Leonard Peltier,” handmade posters and banners typically incorporated a portrait of Peltier, often painted in profile or as an outline, illustrating his plight within the larger picture of American Indian history and activist movements.²³ Peltier’s image was not only present at the AIM-initiated Longest Walk of 1978, it has since then functioned as an unflinching reminder of governmental injustice and settler-colonialist oppression in American Indian protest events. The political left has also used Peltier’s image in worldwide marches, vigils, and political street art.²⁴

On the one hand, this continuous iconization of Peltier’s image by diverse left-wing groups and activists, especially in combination with the verbal demand “Free Leonard Peltier,” might be seen as national, culture-specific projections of political causes onto the icon “Peltier” that move away from Peltier’s immediate biography and the Free Peltier cause. On the other hand, this generalized, anti-oppression iconization might also be seen as helpfully circulating back to Peltier and his immediate plight. The Free Peltier mural in Belfast, Northern Ireland, for example, contextualizes Peltier with the Ballymurphy Massacre of 1971 during the British Army’s dubious Operation Demetrius, and thus functions within a culturally specific Northern Irish republican discourse.²⁵ However, it also connects Peltier’s status as a political prisoner and his still-pending liberation to contemporary Northern Irish people and political agendas. The efforts to connect a worldwide support basis to an indigenous cause might actually not only attract compatible political ideologies, but ultimately may also prove to be very effective, as evidenced by the impressive momentum of the international indigenous movement: in 2007 the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples passed successfully due to both its publicity and its adoption of “the language of human rights” to frame indigenous concerns.²⁶

Hence it has been of the utmost importance to Peltier activism to raise and maintain awareness globally, trigger media coverage, and prompt direct action such as signing petitions and going to rallies, and also “liking” and otherwise disseminating online content. Indeed, “strength in numbers” promises to have a threefold impact on the executive clemency petitioning process concerning Peltier. First, in the documentation stage, Peltier’s executive clemency application compiled by the Office of the Pardon Attorney will include magazine and newspaper articles covering the case, the trial itself, and the aftermath, in addition to letters written by supporters. Second, although in most cases the pardon attorney recommends to the president that the petition be denied, a petition is much more likely to make it past the documentation stage if it “is likely to attract widespread public attention.”²⁷ And finally, particularly during election season, pressure from the United States public, Native and non-Native alike, can have a direct impact on the outcome of an appeal because federal clemency decisions are made by the president alone.

FREE PELTIER MOVEMENT INTERNET MEMES: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND SELECTION METHOD

In order to reach critical mass, Peltier activism rests on three strategic pillars—information, communication, and identity formation—all of which profit significantly from the Web 2.0 and its production, dissemination, and reproduction of Internet memes. The underlying premise, in the words of Aaron Bastani, is “that Internet-mediated memetics represent a fundamental shift in how social movements, as new forms of social practice, rear themselves and how quickly they spread, are adopted and reach critical mass.”²⁸ The first pillar—information—employs Internet memes strategically, not only to inform about the cause but to condense the diverse contents of the cause’s aim(s), its opponents, symbols, and emotional stance into a comprehensive, quickly and easily disseminated message, independent of both the addresser’s and the addressee’s geographic location. The latter aspects already suggest the second pillar, communication. In many respects, social media platforms, such as the Leonard Peltier’s Support Group Facebook page, work as digital hangouts, creating meeting environments for like-minded people to conveniently and quickly discuss and share information, opinions, and emotions about their causes from their homes at any time.²⁹

Last, but not least, a successful Internet meme can be described as a lens that focuses onto one identity a multitude of ideas, interests, emotions, and experiences that gather around individuals or figures like Peltier—such as a general affinity for social activism. Fostering solidarity and feelings of group belonging among activists, web-based activities, according to Shala Ghobadi and Stewart Clegg, “may help reduce attention to differences that exist within the group (differences in education, social class, and ethnicity) . . . and minimize resource-based differences between online participants.”³⁰ Recalling once more Dawkins’s conceptualization of memes as cultural units of imitation and selection, one can loosely

think of the Internet as a bank of ideas, and the really successful meme occurs when one of those ideas chimes massively with the population it encounters,

summing up a shared or individual experience or viewpoint to the extent users wish to perpetuate it as somehow representative of their position, often amending it slightly on its way. The successful meme is not necessarily new, incisive, funny or holding a powerful critique. It is, however, popular and democratic.³¹

Although chiming is clearly a primary defining factor of Internet memes, it is impossible to define a general threshold for “chiming/non-chiming” of Internet memes with the very different populations they encounter. For my analysis, I have singled out the three Internet memes that the users of Leonard Peltier’s Support Group (LPSG) on Facebook have posted, liked, shared, and/or otherwise engaged with most frequently. More specifically, I will look at the most successful image macros (i.e., image and text combinations) of the support group. Currently, the LPSG is the biggest social community concerned solely with the Free Peltier cause. Operated by Gitxsan Nation member Reamus Wilson, who also runs the “<http://www.free-leonard-peltier.com>” and “<http://www.ya-native.com>” websites, the LPSG currently counts 68,501 likes as of September 8, 2016. All Internet memes discussed have triggered more than 2,000 responses, passing the threshold of more than 1,000 interactions other scholars have established in similar projects.³² Thus, the three Internet memes presented are understood as “chiming massively” in the specific context of the LPSG Facebook group.

The Einstein Blackboard Internet Meme

The first Internet meme in this discussion is generally referred to as the “Einstein Blackboard” meme. It is based on a 1931 photograph of Albert Einstein writing an equation for the density of the Milky Way on a blackboard at the Carnegie Institute at Mount Wilson Observatory headquarters in Pasadena, California. In 2001, a generator site with the web address of www.hetemeel.com shared a cropped version of the original photograph whereby users could add whatever they wanted Einstein to write on the blackboard, thus creating a template for the Einstein Blackboard Internet meme. As of today, the website counts more than 9,000 variations of the Internet meme online. Visitors can witness Einstein drawing a particularly cheerful specimen of the pony character from the children’s animated TV series *My Little Pony*, for example, or celebrating the birthday of, and disclosing his love for, the mathematical constant pi. Typically, the Einstein Blackboard Internet meme imitates the form of the original photo (Einstein, blackboard, chalk writing), and reworks its content and stance. Replacing the content of Einstein’s complex equation with a cartoon pony, for example, significantly opens up the participation structures, while the keying is shifted from serious to humorous, and the image macro now essentially communicates an emotive function (humor).

On July 7, 2012, Reamus Wilson first posted a “Free Leonard Peltier” version of the Einstein Blackboard Internet meme to the Leonard Peltier’s Support Group’s Facebook page (fig. 3). To date, Wilson has reposted it three times, for an overall total of 1,944 likes and 568 shares. As in the previous examples of the Einstein Blackboard Internet meme, the form remains stable, such that the Peltier version is

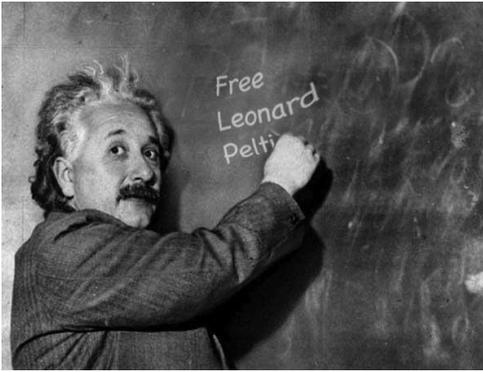


FIGURE 3: “Free Leonard Peltier” adaptation of the “Einstein Blackboard” meme by Reamus Wilson, first posted July 7, 2012 on Leonard Peltier’s Support Group Facebook page; see facebook.com/leonardpeltiersupportgroup/photos.

easily connectable to the overall meme. It is the content that is recreated, to display the prominent (though unfinished) “Free Leonard Peltier” slogan rather than the equation.

In terms of stance, the participation structure (who is entitled to participate and how), as well as the communicative function, have been significantly opened up to address a broad audience—including, but not limited to, addressees familiar with Einstein, Peltier, the Einstein Internet memes, those connected to the Facebook group, or to group members with the conative imperative to complete Einstein’s “Free Peltier” slogan and, ultimately, put it into practice. Both participation structure and communicative function follow the logic of an instrumental rhetoric; they urge the addressees to follow Einstein’s teaching and to free Peltier, to join the LPSG activism. They create visibility and grant a continuous outreach to a broad online community, thereby reflecting and enabling further instances of Peltier grassroots activism, such as the use of dollar bills with “Free Leonard Peltier” written on them to create visibility and perform outreach.

The most striking aspect of this version of the Internet meme, however, is that the stance is only partially reworked. While the Internet meme’s stance has been reworked with regard to participation structure and communicative function, its keying remains surprisingly close to the original photograph’s tone, one of seriousness and rationality mixed with eccentric brilliance. Here the reworking of the text on the blackboard is neither ironic nor humorous, but rather, takes on the same status as the equation in the original photograph: the keying of this message is that freeing Peltier is a rational, straightforward, and serious undertaking. Following the logic of a consummatory, self-addressing rhetoric, Einstein is depicted as “one of us,” that is, as a person knowing the truth about Peltier’s unjust incarceration and the need to free him now.³³

In a nutshell, the Peltier version of the Einstein Blackboard Internet meme reaches out to a broad online audience by creating visibility and possibly support for the cause, at the same time it affirms the identities of the group members and fashions (semiotic) belonging, as well as social bonding, on the basis of shared knowledge and a shared cause. Yet despite the strategically interesting move by Peltier activists to claim and creatively adapt a well-known, pop-cultural frame for the depiction of their key

message, first and foremost the Einstein Blackboard Internet meme remains just that: an Einstein Blackboard Internet meme. Although it has been reworked by the Peltier cause, it exists independently and thus is not a “primary” Peltier Internet meme.

The “Free Peltier Fist” Internet Meme

A second Internet meme employed in the Free Peltier cause is the raised fist (fig. 1). The raised fist is popular as a symbol of solidarity and support, as well as resistance in the face of violence, and in the United States is typically associated with various twentieth-century leftist groups and workers’ movements. Equality movements that mainly identified with the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement appropriated the fist icon successfully, for example. In the twenty-first century indigenous movements such as Idle No More and the Indigenous Nationhood Movement have used the “Free Peltier Fist” Internet meme in logos and graphic campaigns. First posted on July 5, 2012 to the LPSG Facebook page, this meme has been reposted six times and has collected a total of 4,974 likes and 1,899 shares.

By employing a well-known fist symbol, the Free Peltier Fist thus shares the historic form and stance of an indigenous movement’s logo. The added content is the words on the fist’s fingers and those framing the fist top and bottom, which directs the emotional stance of active resistance for the Peltier cause while keeping the various contexts and associations that the raised fist icon triggers strategically untouched. On the fist itself, “resistance, truth, power, justice and strength” name topoi of political and social activism with which indigenous and non-indigenous activists around the world can readily identify. Significantly, this explicit language has been used to describe Peltier’s plight since the 1970s. It effectively succeeds at establishing a direct relation with other indigenous movements and thereby posts and inscribes itself into these traditions and causes. A key representation of the strategic fostering of collective identity, the Free Peltier Fist Internet meme oscillates between indigenous and non-indigenous histories of activism, creating a semiotic space of belonging and resistance for everyone who claims to know the truth about Peltier’s trial and wants to help to achieve justice.

The strategic move towards claiming to know and to represent the truth about Peltier within the visual framework of an indigenous movement’s logo is also noteworthy from a different perspective. While the Internet meme aims at outreach and increasing the numbers of diverse, worldwide followers, it also encodes a far more specific message to a smaller percentage of American Indian activists. Peltier has written his own statement of his case, one that his supporters often recirculate, in which he portrays himself as an instance of (historic) injustice committed by the US government against American Indian peoples: “I am guilty only of being an Indian. That’s why I’m here. But I’ve never regretted that I was one of those who stood up and helped protect my people. And, I would like to say with all due sincerity—and with no disrespect—that I don’t consider myself an American citizen.”³⁴ He situates himself in the tradition of Crazy Horse as a martyr and a leader of AIM who stands up for his people physically and verbally when threatened with injustice and harm. In this context, Peltier cannot possibly envision

himself as an American citizen because this would entail negating the history of US governmental injustices and the resistance of Crazy Horse, as well as acceptance of US government jurisdiction over his case. In visually representing knowledge of the truth about Peltier's imprisonment, this Internet meme reintegrates contemporary Peltier activism into the ideals and goals of the 1970s militant AIM movement and calls for a like-minded, active American Indian resistance.³⁵

If one also takes into account the Internet's position as the communicative tool of choice, a high degree of political agency and activism becomes apparent. Think, for example, of contemporary social online activism such as the UK Uncut, the Occupy Movement, or even the Arab Spring, which formed and reproduced themselves by relying on the Internet without organizational structures or hierarchies. Likewise, the Free Peltier Fist Internet meme is an effective action that transmits itself "independent of any democratic structures and party political hierarchies," and independent of the United States. The Free Peltier Fist meme operates self-reflexively, that is, with an implicative awareness of the possibilities of Internet meme dissemination within the boundaries of Web 2.0.³⁶ Compared to the Einstein Blackboard Internet meme, the Free Peltier Fist Internet meme is more explicitly connected to the Peltier cause. While the central symbol of the raised fist exists independently from the Peltier cause, the Free Peltier Fist Internet meme uses verbal clues directly related to Peltier and to the larger framework of American Indian activism.

The "Peltier in Profile" Internet Meme

The last example is the Internet meme that I call "Peltier in Profile." Compared to the two memes previously discussed, the Peltier in Profile Internet meme stands out clearly as a full-fledged Peltier meme. First created for the LPSG's Facebook page, this image macro consists of an original photograph (a black-and-white portrait of Peltier in profile) to which the Internet user adds, and/or alters, whatever textual message he or she would like to convey. Often, the profile of Peltier is cut out and placed into a new visual context: for example, it has formed the background for a quotation from Peltier; been displayed against a background of barbed wire and an activism flowchart; and been placed on top of an upside-down US flag with the ominous statement "UNTIL HE IS FREE."

By focusing exclusively on content, form, and stance, the LPSG's predominant aim is to create enough strength in numbers to convince President Obama to pardon Peltier. No longer integrating LPSG's own activism into mainstream meme creation or other social movements, the Peltier in Profile meme is a creative, specific rendering of group identity that expresses the collective demand for action and involvement. Instead of integrating the key message ("Free Leonard Peltier!") into preexisting images (Einstein or a raised fist), the Peltier in Profile Internet meme is centered upon the iconic and irreplaceable image of Leonard Peltier in combination with different, exchangeable textual messages concerned with the Peltier cause. Since its first post in 2012, the meme has collected more than 12,000 likes and generated nearly 8,000 shares, making it the most successful Internet meme on the LPSG's Facebook profile as of September 8, 2016.

Among the three versions of the Peltier in Profile meme shown on the LPSG's Facebook page, the barbed wire version (fig. 4) is the most successful, followed by the reversed US flag (fig. 5), and the Peltier-quotation versions (fig. 6). As of September 8, 2016, the individual user data are: 3,991 likes and 5,123 shares for the barbed wire version; 4,436 likes and 1,533 shares for the reversed US flag version; and 3,539 likes and 1,251 shares for the version featuring the Peltier quotation. The two renderings shown in Figures 5 and 6 are most similar in that they communicate the same emotional stance and follow the same rhetorical strategy, although the formal aspects partially differ, especially the background and text. Both versions place a photo of Peltier's head in profile in the center of the image macro, thus creating an iconic focus on Peltier's mental capacities, with his steady gaze directed outwards and upwards to something or someone beyond. Both versions communicate the emotional effects of distress, anger, and frustration that have resulted from the unjust incarceration of Peltier, for Peltier himself, as well as for "us," and for the United States in general. The quotation used in figure 6, "Wherever they put me, or keep me, or lock me away, rest assured that my heart and prayers are always with you" is from an September 12, 2014 open letter Peltier wrote to his "Friends, Relatives and Supporters" on his seventieth birthday and published online a day later.³⁷

The discursive construction of "they," who have locked the cultural leader away, against the union of Peltier's "heart and prayers" and "us" on the outside of the prison bars, is traceable in both versions. The reversed US flag politicizes this state of dire distress and portrays the incarceration of Peltier as a national crisis. Participation relies upon structures of "us" versus "them" and a highly emotional key which have a consummatory effect directed toward the members or supporters of the Free Peltier movement, thus stabilizing a feeling of group belonging and collective like-mindedness. In the reversed US flag version of the Peltier in Profile Internet meme, this space of like-mindedness and belonging is opened up significantly as it explicitly renders the Peltier case as a collective United States issue—in diametrical opposition to the Free Peltier Raised Fist Internet meme.

The barbed wire version (fig. 4) is constructed differently from the other Peltier Profile versions, however. Quite remarkably, this is the only image macro on LPSG's Facebook page that states and outlines a specific course of action for activists that is outside the realm of online activism. At the top the text sternly questions, "Why is this innocent man still behind bars?" This version displays an "innocent man" behind both "bars" and barbed wire rather than revolving primarily around emotion and an iconic leader. Left of center the Internet meme urges us to "Call the White House Comment Line (202)-456-1111 Demand Freedom and Justice for LEONARD PELTIER," positing that this innocent man is still behind bars for no effable reason. Employing a clearly conative, imperative stance, the underlying rhetoric is instrumental, demanding individual action for the common cause. Correspondingly, this is the only version in which the "shares" clearly outnumber the "likes," marking a peak in the volume of content-sharing, demonstrating that within the Facebook community the triggered response has been active.

Why is this innocent man still behind bars?

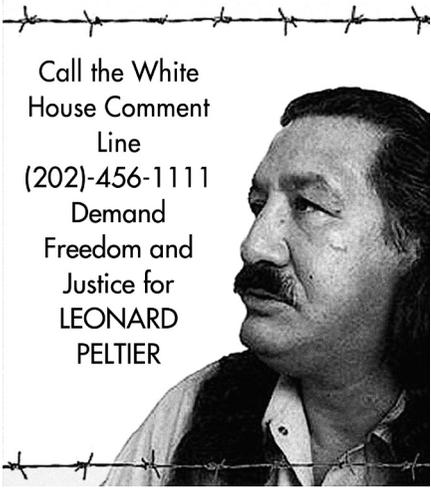


FIGURE 4: “Peltier in Profile” meme featuring barbed wire, first posted September 5, 2014 on Leonard Peltier’s Support Group Facebook page; see facebook.com/leonardpeltiersupportgroup/photos.

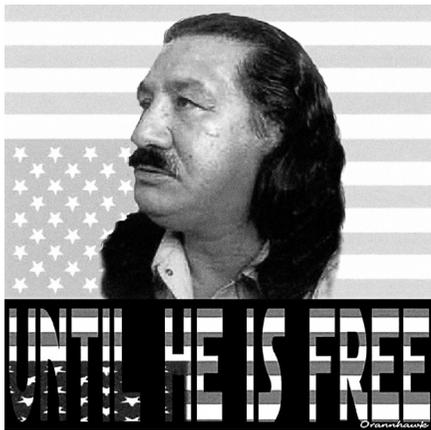


FIGURE 5: “Peltier in Profile” meme featuring the United States flag turned upside-down, first posted on September 26, 2012 on Leonard Peltier’s Support Group Facebook page; see facebook.com/leonardpeltiersupportgroup/photos.

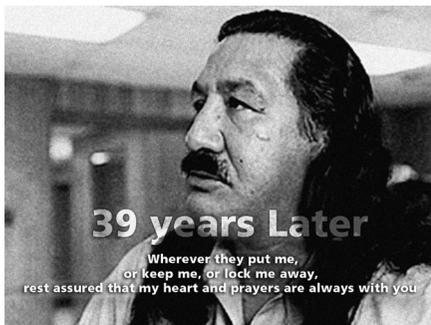


FIGURE 6: “Peltier in Profile” meme featuring a Peltier quotation, first posted on September 6, 2014 on Leonard Peltier’s Support Group Facebook page; see facebook.com/leonardpeltiersupportgroup/photos.

CONCLUSION

The various aspects of creating online activism demand a high degree of political agency and determination: deciding on a specific course of action, focusing on communication strategies and outlets, creating content, and integrating these into other social movements and online platforms in order to reach the targeted global audience. If understood as specific instances of American Indian rhetorical survival strategies, the Internet memes discussed in this article use different strategies of appropriation, integration, and creation to keep the Peltier cause alive and kicking. The Free Peltier Now Einstein Blackboard Internet meme infuses Peltier's cause into an appropriated mainstream Internet meme. The Peltier Fist Internet meme integrates Peltier's cause specifically into AIM as well as the broader histories of American Indian resistance and worldwide left-wing activism. Finally, the versions of the Peltier in Profile Internet meme create a uniquely individualized and personalized message of Peltier's plight and active resistance that is directed both inwardly, to Peltier activist group members, and outwardly, to potential supporters worldwide. As a result, variations of Peltier Internet memes can be found in many areas on the web, such as social networking websites, individual profile timelines, blogs, video sharing sites, and official national and international websites with clear political agendas. For example, a Northern Irish website frequently publishes a variation of the Peltier in Profile Internet meme that employs the Peltier profile amended by the statement "IRELAND FOR PELTIER."³⁸

First and foremost, creating, imitating, sharing, or liking an Internet meme is an act of "survival + resistance," or survivance, within the spheres of social media.³⁹ This low-cost activism helps the Free Peltier movement to raise awareness, increase and sustain visibility, and foster feelings of collective like-mindedness and belonging among members and (future) supporters of the group. This is crucial for a grassroots movement that predominantly aims to convince the president of the United States to pardon a political prisoner. By building strength in numbers—the sheer onslaught of people, letters, and phone calls univocally demanding executive clemency for Leonard Peltier—the movement hopes to break through the doors of the White House and the high-security Coleman Federal Correction Complex in Florida. As this article has shown, these Internet memes work toward this goal by creating and iterating a common cause set in a world of diametrical opposites—truth versus lies, justice versus injustice, freedom versus incarceration, and us versus them—broad enough for a mixed audience to identify with.

Moreover, the Free Peltier Fist meme suggests an additional aspect of Peltier activism beyond global outreach. In claiming the "truth" about the Peltier case, this Internet meme opens up a realm of political agency consistent with indigenous political objectives and (militant) actions ranging from the occupations of Alcatraz Island and Wounded Knee and the Trail of Broken Treaties in the early 1970s, to the protests and occupation resistance against the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016. Thus, the LPSG's memes balance the need to secure a worldwide basis of support with the coding and reintegration of the Free Peltier cause into American Indian activism, specifically.

For the Free Peltier cause, the timing for further investigations could not be better. As the presidency of Barack Obama quickly draws to an end and this article goes to press, activists around the world remind the public and the White House that the traditional time for presidential pardons has come. In August 2016 alone, Obama commuted the sentences of 325 people, and thus pushed the total number of commutations he has granted while in office to 673, “nearly equal to the number of commutations issued by the previous 11 administrations combined (690).”⁴⁰ Not surprisingly, like stepping-stones toward the shared aim of convincing President Obama to “free Leonard Peltier now,” this reminder has been accompanied by, and voiced through, an onslaught of Internet memes placed into circulation on the Web 2.0.

NOTES

1. Leonard Peltier’s Support Group Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/leonardpeltiersupportgroup>.

2. Candice Hopkins, “Making Things Our Own: The Indigenous Aesthetic on Digital Storytelling,” *Leonardo* 39, no. 4 (2006): 343; Malea Powell, “Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing,” *College Composition and Communication* 53, no. 3 (2002): 396; Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), vii.

3. Originally introduced at the first O’Reilly Media’s Web 2.0 Summit on October 5-7, 2004 in San Francisco, the umbrella term “Web 2.0” today summarizes the move from a purely content-based World Wide Web to the dominance of collaborative, interactive, and user-centered applications such as social-networking websites, blogs, video sharing sites, wikis, and mashups (i.e. web application hybrids). See Paul Anderson, *Web 2.0 and Beyond: Principles and Technologies* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2012), 7.

4. See United States Federal Bureau of Investigation, History: Famous Cases & Criminals, “RESMURS Case (Reservation Murders),” <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/resmurs-case-reservation-murders>.

5. Amnesty International USA, Cases: “Leonard Peltier,” <http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/cases/usa-leonard-peltier>.

6. My analysis builds upon Powell’s conceptualization of an American Indian “rhetorics of survivance” as well as Angela Haas’s recent investigation into “a decolonial digital and visual American Indian rhetorics pedagogy” in “Toward a Decolonial Digital and Visual American Indian Rhetorics Pedagogy,” in *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story: Teaching American Indian Rhetorics*, ed. Lisa King, Rose Gubele, and Joyce Rain Anderson (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 188). The essay collection *American Indian Rhetorics of Survivance: Word Medicine, Word Magic*, ed. Ernest Stromberg (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006) adds broader context to my study by outlining both the complex multiplicity of American Indian rhetoric strategies, past and present, and the continuous scholarly need for an improved understanding of multi- and transcultural perspectives.

7. Danielle Endres, “American Indian Activism and Audience: Rhetorical Analysis of Leonard Peltier’s Response to Denial of Clemency,” *Communication Reports* 24, no. 1 (April 8, 2011): 2, doi 10.1080/08934215.2011.554624.

8. The term “meme” is Dawkins’ coinage, modeled on “gene”; it has several possible etymological references to Ancient Greek (*μιμεῖσθαι*, to imitate, and *μῦμος*, mime or actor), French (*même*, the same), Latin (*memor*, recalling or remembering), and English (*mime* and *memory*). Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 191.

9. Ibid., 192.
10. Michele Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media: How We Use Language to Create Affiliation on the Web* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 100.
11. See, for example, Ernst Mayr, "The Objects of Selection," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 94, no. 6 (March 18, 1997): 2091–94; Terrence Deacon, "Memes as Signs: The Trouble with Memes (and What to Do about It)," *The Semiotic Review of Books* 10, no. 3 (1999): 1–3; Kalevi Kull, "Copy Versus Translate, Meme Versus Sign: Development of Biological Textuality," *European Journal for Semiotic Studies* 12, no. 1 (2000): 101–20, <http://www.zbi.ee/~kalevi/copytr.htm>; Luis Benitez-Bribiesca, "Memetics: A Dangerous Idea," *Interciencia: Revista de Ciencia y Tecnología de América* 26, no. 1 (January 2001): 29–31, <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=33905206>; Joseph Fracchia and Richard C. Lewontin, "The Price of Metaphor," *History and Theory* 44, no. 1: 14–29, doi 10.1111/j.1468-2303.2005.00305.x; and John Gray, "The Atheist Delusion," *The Guardian* (London), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/mar/15/society>. From the perspective of American Indian and indigenous studies, Dawkins's concept of culture as a self-replicating survival of the fittest misleadingly strips cultural processes of agency and consequently, of the controlling and possibly destructive forces of the dominant cultural discourse as well. Within Dawkins' meme concept, the past and present dominance of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) male cultural products in the United States is solely due to a continuous and "fair" majority voting for the cultural superiority of those products. In other words, power relations, racism, colonialization, and gender and class biases are effectively eliminated from the picture. While the Web 2.0 is by no means an egalitarian and freely accessible utopia, contemporary definitions of "Internet memes" are hardly, if at all, based on this very problematic aspect of Dawkins's original concept.
12. Limor Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18, no. 3 (April 2013): 367, doi 10.1111/jcc4.12013 (emphasis in original).
13. Ibid., 169.
14. Ibid., 155, 161.
15. Ibid., 367.
16. Robert Englebretson, "Stancetaking in Discourse: An Introduction," in *Stancetaking in Discourse: Subjectivity, Evaluation, Interaction*, ed. Robert Englebretson (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 1–26.
17. Susan Philips, "Participant Structures and Communicative Competence: Warm Springs Children in Community and Classroom," in *Functions of Language in the Classroom*, ed. Courtney B. Cazden, Vera P. John, and Dell H. Hymes (New York: Teachers College Press, 370–94).
18. Shoshana Blum-Kulka, Deborah Huck-Taglicht, and Hanna Avni, "The Social and Discursive Spectrum of Peer Talk," *Discourse Studies* 6, no. 3 (August 2004): 307–28, doi 10.1177/1461445604044291.
19. Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1960), 350–77.
20. Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2014), 119.
21. W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg use "connective action" to conceptualize the large-scale and fluid social networks in late modern societies that continue to replace formal organizations: "These networks can operate importantly through the organizational processes of social media, and their logic does not require strong organizational control or the symbolic construction of a united 'we.'" W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, "The Logic of Connective Action," *Information, Communication, and Society* 15, no. 5 (April 10, 2012): 748, doi 10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661.

22. Under Article II, Section 2 of the United States Constitution, a president may use his pardoning power for persons who are falsely convicted of federal crimes. Other secondary strategies of the Peltier legal team include convincing the attorney general to grant an executive review of Peltier's case and trials (following the conviction of Senator Ted Stevens because of misconduct by federal prosecutors); and pressing charges against the US government for failure to produce over 100,000 undisclosed documents connected to the Peltier case pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act. See the International Leonard Peltier Defense Committee, "About Us," <http://www.whoisleonardpeltier.info/home/about-us/>. For information on the legal framework and the process of presidential clemency, see the United States Department of Justice, Office of the Pardon Attorney, "Rules Governing Petitions for Executive Clemency," <https://www.justice.gov/pardon/rules-governing-petitions-executive-clemency>.

23. The rhetoric and the broad public display of the slogan "Free Leonard Peltier" are reminiscent of AIM's earlier slogan: "Remember Wounded Knee." According to Elizabeth Rich, the slogan is "a metonymy in which the massacre of 1890 stands for more than one event, the basis for a host of stories, values, and historical characters. It links the gold rush in the Black Hills of South Dakota, which gave rise to the conflict that prompted both the signing and later abrogation of the Black Hills treaty of 1868, and the effort by the U.S. government to allow corporations to mine for uranium in the Black Hills in the early 1970s. AIM's metonymic narrative not only allowed the 1970s activists to shed light on past injustices but also to direct contemporary acts of resistance, which is evident in AIM's action at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation." Elizabeth Rich, "Remember Wounded Knee: AIM's Use of Metonymy in 21st Century Protest," *College Literature* 31, no. 3: 78, doi 10.1353/lit.2004.0039. When read in light of Rich's essay, the strength and iconic status of the Free Peltier slogan also rests on its discursive and political interconnectedness with past and present American Indian resistance. The similarity of Peltier's rhetorical strategies to the strategies employed by AIM, especially in his *Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sundance* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), is analyzed in depth by Janna Knittel in "Sundance Behind Bars: The Rhetoric of Leonard Peltier's Prison Writings," in *American Indian Rhetorics of Survivance: Word Medicine, Word Magic*, ed. Ernest Stromberg (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press (2006), 110–29.

24. Political street art featuring Peltier can be found, for example, in Brighton, UK, with an image posted on "Brighton Political Street Art" via Tumblr (see <http://brightonpolitical.tumblr.com/post/89164795817/another-tile-with-leonard-peltier-tile-on-the-wall>); in Barcelona, Spain (see Antonio Alcántara, "Graffiti per la Llibertat de Leonard Pelier," *Educació Transformadora* website, May 13, 2014, <https://educaciotransformadora.wordpress.com/2014/06/16/graffiti-per-la-llibertat-de-leonard-peltier/>); and on a street named "Avenida Peltier" in Barraquero, Mendoza, Argentina, <https://ingress-intel.com/portal/graffiti-calle-av-peltier/>).

25. Peltier is often featured in murals in the Republic area of Belfast, especially around The Falls Road; he appears, for example, alongside a reproduction of Picasso's painting "Guernica" and a portrait of Frederick Douglass. See Bill Rolston, "The History of Murals in the North of Ireland," October 1, 2015, <http://billrolston.weebly.com/the-history-of-murals-in-the-north-of-ireland.html>.

26. Claire Charters and Rodolfo Stavenhagen, "The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: How It Came to Be and What It Heralds," in *Making the Declaration Work: The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, ed. Claire Charters and Rodolfo Stavenhagen (Copenhagen: IWGIA, 2009), 10–14.

27. For a condensed overview on the process of pardon decisions in the United States, see Samuel T. Morison, "How Pardon Decisions Are Made," July 20, 2012, <http://www.pardonattorney.com/#!pardon-process/c17uc>.

28. Aaron Bastiani, "Part Two: Open Source Activism and Memes," *Open Democracy UK: Power and Liberty in Britain* website, January 11, 2012, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/aaron-peters/part-two-open-source-activism-and-memes>.

29. Leonard Peltier's Support Group Facebook page.

30. Shala Ghobadi and Stewart Clegg, "'These Days Will Never Be Forgotten': A Critical Mass Approach to Online Activism," *Information and Organization* 25, no. 1 (January 2015): 55, doi 10.1016/j.infoandorg.2014.12.002.

31. Deterritorial Support Group, "Egypt, Bahrain, London, Spain?—Tahrir Square as a Meme," May 21, 2011, <https://deterritorialsupportgroup.wordpress.com>.

32. See, for example, Michele Coscia, "Competition and Success in the Meme Pool: A Case Study on Quickmeme.com," paper presented at the Seventh International Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, July, 2013, Cambridge, MA, www.aaai.org/ocs/index.php/ICWSM/ICWSM13/paper/view/5990; and Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 125.

33. A "consummatory rhetoric" is employed to affirm the inner strength of an audience in terms of creating in-group cohesion through evoking emotions of solidarity, unity, and belonging. Randall A. Lake argues that the rhetoric of the Red Power movement is not addressed primarily to a white audience; rather it is a case of consummatory self-address, which enables an emotional and discursive connection between its members and, ultimately, the attainment of activist goals. Randall A. Lake, "Enacting Red Power: The Consummatory Function in Native American Protest Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 69, no. 2 (June 5, 2009): 128, doi 10.1080/00335638309383642.

34. Leonard Peltier, "My Plea for Clemency: Leonard Peltier," January 20, 2009, <http://www.noparolepeltier.com/plea.pdf>, 1. Also see Peltier, *Prison Writings*.

35. This implication of an outsider standpoint that extends to rejection of US citizenship is also traceable in the activist stance of other "raised fist" activisms, albeit with different political aims and implications. The Black Panther Party, for example, "rejected the legitimacy of the U.S. government. . . [and] saw black communities in the United States as a colony and the police as an occupying army"; see Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013), 2. The Occupy movement, too, problematizes the structure of democratic governments and demands the "development of decidedly minoritarian forms of decision making—the 'democracy of direct action'"; see Maple Razsa and Andrej Kurnik, "The Occupy Movement in Žižek's Hometown: Direct Democracy and a Politics of Becoming," *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 2 (May 8, 2012): 238, doi 10.1111/j.1548-1425.2012.01361.x.

36. Bastiani, "Part Two: Open Source Activism and Memes."

37. Peltier's letter is reproduced in Levi Rickert, "Leonard Peltier Turns 70 in Prison; Releases Statement," *Native News Online*, September 13, 2014, <http://nativenewsonline.net/currents/leonard-peltier-turns-70-prison-releases-statement/>.

38. See <http://irelandforpeltier.ie>, as well as additional examples at <http://irelandforpeltier.ie/leonard-peltier-needs-your-help/> and <http://irelandforpeltier.ie/plan-of-action/>.

39. Powell, "Rhetorics of Survivance," 396.

40. Mark Berman, "Obama Commutes Sentences of 111 Inmates, Setting Record for a Single Month," *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/08/30/obama-commutes-sentences-of-111-inmates-setting-record-for-a-single-month/?utm_term=.1be02b11b7e5.