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American Indian Activism and Audience: Rhetorical Analysis of Leonard Peltier's Response to Denial of Clemency

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This essay focuses on the movement to free Leonard Peltier to better understand the relationship between the rhetoric of American Indian activism and non–American Indian audiences. A rhetorical analysis of Peltier's response to denial of clemency in 2001 reveals how Peltier appealed to non–American Indian supporters to join in a broader struggle for American Indian social justice revealing a rhetorical strategy of transference from individual to collective. The essay challenges assumptions of previous research and adds more complexity to our understanding of the rhetoric of American Indian activism.

Keywords: American Indian Activism; Audience; Leonard Peltier; Rhetorical Criticism

Activism, resistance, and struggle are not unfamiliar concepts to American Indians. From Tecumseh's (Shawnee) struggle against Colonial American expansion into indigenous land bases, to Geronimo's (Chiricahua Apache) resistance to forced relocation to the San Carlos Reservation, to the Red Power movement, to contemporary struggles over land rights and sovereignty, American Indians have a long history of activism. Although examination of American Indian activism has yet to receive sustained attention in rhetorical studies, there is a growing body of scholarship on it (e.g., Black, 2007, 2009a, 2009b; Lake, 1986; Palczewski, 2005), and more specifically on Red Power activism (Knittel, 2006;

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Lake, 1983; Meister & Burnett, 2004; Morris, Sanchez, & Stuckey, 1999; Morris & Wander, 1990; Sanchez & Stuckey, 2000; Stuckey, 2001). This essay focuses on the Free [Leonard] Peltier movement to better understand the relationship between the rhetoric of American Indian activism and non–American Indian movement members.

Specifically, this essay has three purposes. First, this essay challenges the assumption that all members of American Indian activist movements are American Indians. While scholars of American Indian rhetoric do not explicitly argue that all American Indian activist movements are solely comprised of American Indians—indeed these scholars would concede that some members of the movements are non–American Indian—it is nonetheless implied in most of the research through the lack of consideration of non–American Indian members. Lake (1983), for example, has conflated Red Power rhetoric with general terms: ''Indian rhetoric'' and ''Indians'' (pp. 128, 134). Lake's argument assumes that the 1970s Red Power movement was predominantly comprised of American Indians whose grievances were directed to the non–American Indian establishment (i.e., the federal government, the BIA, and the dominant non–American Indian culture). More recent essays also implicitly assume that American Indian activism is mainly performed by American Indians (e.g., Black, 2009a; Sanchez & Stuckey, 2000). However, the Free Peltier movement's supporters are not just American Indians, even though Peltier's cause is still associated with Red Power and American Indian activism. Indeed, the Free Peltier movement has been successful in appealing to non–American Indian supporters. As this essay will demonstrate, the presence of so many non–American Indian members in this movement has important implications for the types of rhetorical strategies used by activists.

Second, this essay challenges the artificial distinction made between internally focused consummatory rhetoric addressed to American Indians and externally focused instrumental rhetoric addressed to non–American Indians. In consummatory rhetoric, discourse is the sole purpose, as opposed to instrumental rhetoric where it is a means to political or social change (Cherwitz & Zagacki, 1986; Lake, 1983). In the study of social movements, consummatory rhetoric can affirm the identities of movement members (Gregg, 1971). Lake (1983) argued that most Red Power rhetoric is consummatory. It is directed internally towards ''movement members and other Indians for the purposes of gathering the like-minded'' (p. 128). Further, it takes the form of ''consummatory self-address,'' a ritual enactment of American Indian identity and beliefs (p. 142). Several scholars have challenged Lake's argument, instead suggesting that American Indian activist rhetoric uses both consummatory rhetoric and instrumental rhetoric (Black, 2009a; Sanchez & Stuckey, 2000). The Free Peltier movement uses a synthesis of instrumental and consummatory rhetoric. However, the Free Peltier movement challenges that consummatory rhetoric is mainly directed at American Indians and instrumental rhetoric is directed to non–American Indians outside the movement. Because the Free Peltier movement includes a large proportion of non–American Indian members, the internally focused consummatory rhetoric is directed at American Indians *and* non–American Indians.

This is a significant contribution to how scholars understand the multifaceted and multivocal nature of contemporary American Indian activism.

A third purpose of this essay is to demonstrate one strategy of blended consummatory and instrumental rhetoric—a shift from individual to collective. This strategy appeals to an audience with many non–American Indians and invites them to transfer their support for Peltier's cause (individual) to wider support for American Indian activism (collective). This strategy uses three interrelated rhetorical appeals: 1) identification, 2) an appeal to justice, and 3) a call to action. Peltier used identification and the appeal to justice to hail movement members (American Indian and non-Indian) as defenders of justice for the collective struggle of American Indians. His call to action obliged his audience to transfer their support for Peltier to a more general support for justice for all American Indians, with the goal of social and political change. This strategy of shifting from individual to collective may be useful beyond the Free Peltier movement.

To make these arguments, this essay hones in on the Free Peltier movement. In the next section of the essay, a description of the Free Peltier movement and its relationship to the Red Power movement challenges the assumptions that American Indian activism is mainly made up of American Indians and that consummatory rhetoric is directed to American Indians. Then, the essay further focuses on one moment in the Free Peltier Movement and a specific message from Peltier. In 2001, activists in support of Peltier's cause appealed to former President Bill Clinton to grant Peltier executive clemency based on what they argued was evidence of his wrongful imprisonment for the murder of two FBI agents during the American Indian Movement (AIM) occupation of Wounded Knee in the 1970s. Clinton did not grant Peltier clemency. In response, Peltier released a statement from prison addressed to his friends and supporters. A rhetorical analysis of Peltier's response will explicate the strategy of transference from Peltier's individual situation to the collective struggle of American Indian activism. The essay concludes by returning to the three purposes highlighted above and offering two implications of the analysis.

The Free Peltier Movement

Before demonstrating how the Free Peltier movement challenges assumptions about the identity of movement members, it is important to provide some context on the development of the movement. The Free Peltier movement developed out of Red Power Activism. Although the origins of Red Power, like most social movements, are multifarious and subject to different interpretations, most accounts of the origins of Red Power point to the 1969–1971 occupation of Alcatraz Island. According to Johnson, Champagne, and Nagel (1997), the Red Power movement lasted from 1969–1978, noting that ''certainly, many individual people were politically active before and after this period'' (p. 9). The Red Power movement produced numerous visible protest events including the Trail of Broken Treaties (1972), the Occupation of Wounded Knee (1973), and The Longest Walk (1978). Many of the protest events in

the Red Power movement included the mainly American Indian members of AIM, which was founded in 1968 in Minneapolis, Minnesota and still exists today.

In 1973, AIM members helped traditional Oglala Lakota people occupy the town of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation to call attention to grievances against the Oglala Lakota government as well as the US federal government (Josephy, Johnson, & Nagel, 1999). The period after the conclusion of the occupation is often referred to as the ''reign of terror'' among Red Power activists because of intensified FBI surveillance on Pine Ridge, the corrupt reign of the Pine Ridge Tribal Chairperson, Dick Wilson and his GOONs (Guardians of the Oglala Nation), and violent conflicts between traditional Oglala people and the government under Dick Wilson (Matthiessen, 1992). AIM continued to support the traditional Oglala Lakota who faced repercussions from the occupation and conflicts with Dick Wilson and the GOONs. In 1975, Jumping Bull invited Leonard Peltier and several other AIM members to the Pine Ridge Reservation. On June 26, 1975, a shoot-out occurred at Bull's ranch involving the AIM contingent, FBI agents, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) officials. Although the details of the actual shoot-out are blurry by most accounts, it resulted in the death of two FBI agents—Jack Coler and Ron Williams—and one American Indian—Joe Stuntz. In 1976, Leonard Peltier was arrested for killing the two FBI agents. After standing trial and receiving a guilty verdict, on April 18, 1977, he was sentenced to two life terms in prison.

To this day, Peltier maintains his innocence. The Free Peltier movement argues that he was targeted and set up by the U.S. government because he was a key member of the AIM (Weyler, 1992). According to Messerschmidt (1999),

> Leonard Peltier is a political prisoner . . . . He was convicted by an all white jury for a crime he did not commit, the murder of two FBI agents. But as we will see, Peltier was tried and convicted because he was an American Indian leader struggling to defend the rights and lands of his people. (p. 1)

The Free Peltier movement's main aim is to free Peltier through parole or clemency. In 2001, the Free Peltier movement, under the auspices of the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee (LPDC), called on President Clinton to grant Peltier executive clemency before leaving office.

The link between the Red Power movement and the Free Peltier movement may lead to the assumption that the Free Peltier movement is made up mostly of American Indians. However, the Free Peltier movement has been successful in drawing a wide diversity of movement members beyond American Indians. Peltier's cause remains one of the few issues from the height of Red Power activism that spurred an active, high-profile movement among non–American Indians. This movement, then, challenges the assumption that American Indian activism is mainly made up of American Indians. Peltier's supporters and allies include legal defense organizations, human rights organizations, individual citizens, and celebrities. For example, Robert Redford produced a documentary sympathetic to Peltier's cause—*Incident at Oglala: The Leonard Peltier Story* (1992) —and Willie Nelson headlined a benefit concert for Peltier in 1987. Additional supporters include: scholars at a variety of

universities in the US, legal centers such as the Hastings Public Interest Law Foundation, celebrities including Ani Difranco and Oliver Stone, civil and human rights organizations, a variety of faith-based organizations, and unions (Friends of Peltier, 2010b). The diversity of support was also present for the 2001 clemency campaign. According to an article in the *Ottawa Citizen*, ''Mr. Peltier's clemency supporters include the National Congress of American Indians, Nobel Laureate Rigoberta Menchu, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Rev. Jesse Jackson, the Dalai Lama, Robert Redford, the National Council of Churches, Amnesty International and many others'' (Tsun, 2000). This diverse membership not only supports the first purpose of this essay—to challenge the assumption that all members of American Indian activist movements are American Indians—but also supports the second purpose of demonstrating the false distinction made between the assumed audiences of consummatory and instrumental rhetoric. Considering that the Free Peltier movement is made up of a mix of American Indian and non–American Indian members, the internally focused consummatory rhetoric of the movement is necessarily addressed to both American Indian members and non–American Indian members. The next section of the essay will further demonstrate these points, but it will also address the third purpose of the essay to reveal a strategy that combines instrumental and consummatory rhetoric to persuade a mixed audience.

Peltier's Response to Denial of Clemency

This section presents a rhetorical analysis of Leonard Peltier's response to his denial of clemency to demonstrate the strategy of calling on movement members to shift from individual support for Peltier's cause to collective support of American Indian causes more generally. On January 29, 2001, Peltier released a statement from prison addressed to his ''Friends and Supporters'' (Peltier, 2001). Peltier stated, ''People from every walk of life participated on this campaign. People from every denomination and belief prayed from every corner of the Earth'' (p. 1). That Peltier addressed this statement to friends and supporters indicates that the message was mainly intended to reach members of the Free Peltier movement. That he acknowledged that his supporters came from all walks of life indicates recognition that his supporters included non–American Indians. Of course, nonmovement members might have also read Peltier's statement, but that audience is not the focus of this analysis.

For the most part, Peltier's statement was a predictable and fitting response to the rhetorical situation. Peltier (2001) began his statement by blaming President Clinton for denying clemency and thanking his supporters. Peltier (2001) stated, ''What Bill Clinton did to us was cruel'' (p. 1). Later in the statement, he referred to Clinton as ''truly hardhearted'' (p. 1) and stated, ''It feels like our sentiments were shooed away like an irritating fly by a president who did not want to face the consequences of his own mistakes'' (p. 1). After blaming Clinton, Peltier praised and thanked his supporters: ''I want to thank and compliment my staff at the LDPC and all of you grassroots supporters who stood beside me and fought so tirelessly for my freedom'' (p. 1).

These comments provide a foundation for the strategy of transference from individual to collective.

Peltier's strategy encouraged non–American Indian movement members to focus on the collective struggle of American Indians beyond Peltier's case (assuming that most American Indian supporters already support the larger movement). This strategy developed in three steps. First, identification positioned Peltier's supporters as part of the larger American Indian activist movement. Second, an appeal to justice linked his cause to the larger cause of injustices for all American Indians. Finally, the call to action explicitly called for support of community development projects for American Indians in addition to continuing to support Peltier.

Identification

Peltier employed identification with his supporters (Burke, 1969) through the language of "us" and "we" throughout his statement. This served both to reaffirm identification with Peltier and the movement after what movement members saw as a disappointing defeat and to expand his audience's identification beyond Peltier's struggle to the struggles of all American Indians. In the statement's opening lines Peltier (2001) stated, "January 20, 2001 was a sad day for all of *us*. I know that this denial of clemency *has affected many of you as much as it has affected both my family and myself*" (p. 1, italics added). This reinforced commonality between the speaker and audience by suggesting that "we" are all disappointed for the same reasons; "we" are frustrated about this decision. Beyond the attempt to maintain identification with his audience, this strategy emphasized that the Free Peltier movement is in the right on this issue: The terms "disappointment" and "nightmare," (p. 1) stressed the movement's claim of Peltier's innocence.

Moreover, this individual to collective strategy emphasized how Peltier attempted to position his supporters as also identified with American Indian activism. In the call to action, Peltier (2001) discussed a community development plan for Pine Ridge Reservation that he had hoped to pursue had he been released. He used the term "we" instead of "I" to discuss this plan (p. 1). Peltier then suggested that after completing this community development plan, "*we* will then be able to move on to other projects that will bring people together" and "I would hope that word of the projects would spread to other reservations" (p. 1, italics added). Although to whom the "we" refers is somewhat unclear, its vagueness is exactly what allowed his audience to choose to identify as part of the "we." Therefore, Peltier's statement did not merely ask his supporters to shift their focus to community development, but actually repositioned them as part of a larger movement for social justice for American Indians (whether they recognize it or not).

Justice

Peltier (2001) further developed the individual to collective strategy through appealing to justice, a value that is relevant to both his individual status as a political

prisoner and the collective status of American Indian struggles. Peltier began by discussing how justice played out in his individual cause. Peltier suggested a motive for Clinton's decision: "We can see who was granted clemency and why. The big donors to the president's campaign were able to buy justice, something we just couldn't afford. Meanwhile, many political prisoners continue to languish unjustly" (p. 1). This again reassured supporters that denial of clemency was a denial of justice, not a statement on Peltier's guilt or innocence. In other writings, Peltier has also appealed to justice; he wrote,

> Justice is not a flexible tool. Unless we all do our part to ensure that justice is applied equally to all human beings, we are a party to its abuse. We must stand together to protect the rights of others. (Peltier, 2003, n.p.)

The appeal to justice may have resonated particularly well with non–American Indian members of the Free Peltier movement because justice is a common topos across U.S. American activism (e.g., Zinn, 2003). Justice is broad enough to appeal to a vast array of supporters, yet is still germane to Peltier's particular situation.

Peltier (2001) expanded the sense of injustice from his particular case to the larger issue of American Indian conditions by referencing the emptiness of "the nation's talk about reconciliation" with American Indians (p. 1). Because Clinton denied clemency, the statement suggested, the government cannot be trusted to treat other American issues justly. In particular, the government cannot be trusted to address the social and economic despair plaguing Oglala (p. 1). Moreover, community development projects on the Pine Ridge Reservation were positioned as a way to bring justice to American Indians who suffer from unjust conditions. Peltier stated, "As most of you know Native health conditions are also probably the worst in the country. We want to change that" (p. 1). He also stated, "The existing school [on Pine Ridge Reservation] is severely under-funded and inadequate and does not provide the kids with the quality education they need and deserve" (p. 1). In both of these passages, Peltier referred to specific issues for American Indian communities that are the result of injustices to American Indians in general. The lack of resources for American Indians is a common topos in American Indian activism and this lack of resources is blamed on the unjust treatment of American Indians by the federal government (Johnson et al., 1997; Josephy et al., 1999). Using an appeal to justice rhetorically framed the issue as being about the American Indian community and not simply about Peltier.

Call to Action

After reflecting on the denial of clemency, we might expect Peltier (2001) to issue a call for action, to imply the next steps for his defense. However, his comments about future strategies were brief and vague (p. 1). He stated, "I ask you to remain with us while we regroup and develop a thorough plan . . . . The LPDC will release strategies as they are developed. Some will be released this week" (p. 1). The brevity and imprecision of future strategies can in part be explained by the timing of the statement just 9 days after President Clinton's decision. If the LPDC was truly optimistic about the

chances of clemency, then it would make sense that it would not have developed specific strategies for the next campaign.

The statement could have ended with the above passage; however, it was followed by a five-paragraph explication of a specific plan for community development on the Pine Ridge Reservation. It is somewhat surprising that he closed his statement with such an extensive plan for action not related to his imprisonment. Combined with a lack of vision for the next steps in his defense and the frustration outlined in the first half of the speech, Peltier's remarks could be interpreted as having given up on his own cause. However, Peltier did not give up. In reference to his struggle for freedom, Peltier (2001) stated, "I will not give up" (p. 1).

So how do we resolve this apparent inconsistency? By calling on his supporters to act on his community development plans, Peltier did not give up. Peltier's shift to discuss plans for community development on the Pine Ridge reservation reflected his continued participation as an activist in a larger movement for American Indian social justice. As the *Friends of Peltier* website stated, "Leonard Peltier remains committed to The People [American Indians] and does whatever he can to ensure their survival" (Friends of Peltier, 2010a). Red Power activists demanded redress for the years of unjust abuse, oppression, and treaty violations by the US government. In addition to promoting and demanding self-determination and sovereignty, the Red Power movement sought improvements to their communities that are in rapid decay, with high rates of alcoholism, unemployment, and poverty (Josephy et al., 1999). Peltier's plan to improve the Oglala community offered a chance for his supporters to work towards one of the original goals of Red Power to improve communities. Peltier suggested, "If we are successful in establishing these two services, I believe the community will truly benefit" (p. 1).

In this call to action, Peltier placed the struggles of the people over his own imprisonment. He called for improvements to the community and for his supporters to place those interests above his fight for freedom. This is consistent with some of Peltier's other writings. In his book, *Prison Writings*, Peltier wrote, "All of my people are suffering, so I am in no way special in that regard" (Peltier & Arden, 2000, p. 9). Further, he wrote,

> In all these years, there have been so many people who have prayed for my safety and freedom from all faiths . . . . So when you pray, don't pray only for me, but the warriors of AIM who have died for our people, the victims of the "Reign of Terror" on Pine Ridge, and other victims who has [sic] suffered as we have. (Peltier, 2009)

If his supporters followed his call, their actions would symbolically affirm that the movement for social justice in American Indian communities would not be stopped with the continued imprisonment of Peltier. Although only an analysis of audience responses would reveal the success or failure of Peltier's statement, this analysis contends that the discussion of community development plans was an attempt to transfer his supporters' energies from individual justice for Peltier to collective justice for American Indians.

Conclusion and Implications

This essay had three purposes. Through a discussion of the diverse identity of the Free Peltier movement, this essay challenged two assumptions in research on American Indian activism: 1) that all American Indian activists movement members are American Indian (purpose 1), and 2) the artificial distinction between consummatory rhetoric as directed towards American Indians in the movement and instrumental rhetoric as directed towards non–American Indians outside the movement (purpose 2). The rhetorical analysis fulfilled the third purpose to reveal a strategy that combined consummatory and instrumental rhetoric to shift energies from individual to collective conceptions of the cause. This strategy consisted of three interrelated rhetorical appeals—identification, an appeal to justice, and a call to action—that called on movement members to support, and essentially act on Peltier's behalf, to improve the Oglala community and eventually other American Indian communities. Peltier's use of this strategy is related to the diversity of his audience.

Beyond the three purposes, his essay has two implications for the advancement of our understanding of the rhetoric of American Indian Activism. First, the analytic focus on the Free Peltier movement shows that American Indian activism is more complex than much previous scholarship indicates. While Lake (1983), Sanchez and Stuckey (2000), Black (2009a), and others do a wonderful job of contributing to a complex and nuanced picture of American Indian activism, this essay adds another layer of complexity by challenging assumptions that the Red Power movement is only made of American Indians and that consummatory rhetoric is directed at American Indians while instrumental rhetoric is directed at non–American Indians. American Indian activism is still primarily enacted by American Indians; however, there are some facets of the movement that have non–American Indian members. Free Peltier is one example. Other examples include the American Indian antinuclear and environmental justice movements. Parts of movements that have significant non–American Indian audiences may require different strategies such as the one identified. This and other strategies may be useful in persuading activists who support particular causes such as freeing political prisoners or environmental justice to identify with the larger cause of American Indian activism.

Second, implicit throughout the essay is my assumption that non–American Indian members can be important for American Indian activism because they can increase the numbers and visibility of the movement. Moreover, pressure from non–American Indian members may be particularly persuasive when action from the U.S. federal government is needed to move towards political change. Of course, not all parts of the movement would benefit from more non–American Indian members. Indeed, there may be spiritually based causes for which having non–American Indian members could risk revealing proprietary religious information that is not shared with nonbelievers. Yet, one clear goal of American Indian activism is to improve the social and political conditions for American Indian people. In the case of American Indian activism, attracting non–American Indians to the cause is crucial towards achieving material changes in the treatment and conditions of American

Indians. Although he ultimately advocated the importance of consummatory rhetoric, Lake (1983) argued that "realistically, the support of both whites and Indians may be required if the Red Power movement is to achieve all of its goals, a situation which many Indians acknowledge" (p. 142). In fact, tangible political changes for American Indians have been achieved including the Indian Civil Rights Act, American Indian Religious Freedom Act, and the US federal government's policy of promoting American Indian self-determination, although some claim that more is needed to promote justice for American Indians (Wilkins, 1997). The Free Peltier movement not only demonstrates that American Indian issues can be important to non–American Indian audiences but also that, in some instances, it is necessary to appeal to non–American Indian audiences to achieve their political goals, in this case persuading the president to free Peltier.

The promotion of rhetorical strategies aimed toward creating more support from non–American Indians for the Red Power movement may in some ways shift the focus of the movement to be more politically motivated. However, it is still possible to employ strategies directed at AIM members that promote and enact American Indian identities and beliefs, while also using strategies that bring more non–American Indians into the movement. Assuming that non–American Indian members can be an important asset, it is important to study strategies for appealing to non–American Indian audiences. This brief rhetorical analysis reveals one strategy that may be useful for reaching broader audiences, but further research that uncovers more strategies is warranted. For example, more research on the other rhetorical messages of the Free Peltier movement could reveal additional strategies designed to garner or maintain support of non–American Indian members. Further, examination of other American Indian activism movements that have a mixed audience could not only reveal additional strategies, but also allow for comparison between these movements.

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