

‘ASK NO ONE FOR YOUR SOVEREIGNTY’: JOHN TRUDELL AND THE AFFIRMATIONS OF ALCATRAZ

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Floating amid the dances of the flower children; wafting in the atmosphere of patchouli oil, sandalwood incense, and marijuana; braided into the long hair and other EuroAmerican projections and reworked stereotypes of American Indian life ways—a global political reorientation was taking shape that deepens the superficial ideals of the Woodstock Years. As the 60s and 70s revalorized what had been the shame of Native American identity into a badge of honor, and as Native American artists, intellectuals, and activists rode that popular wave to reclaim their voices, international Indigenous movements coincided to make those voices echo around the world. The rising discourse of Indigenous sovereignty worldwide is proposing to restructure modern notions of the nation-state, a prospect that many 60s progressives might have longed for, but few envisioned. (See Niezen, *The Origins of Indigenism*; and Bruyneel, *The Third Space of Sovereignty*). The 2007 passage of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was a step in the codification of that discourse. Beginning in 1969, Santee Sioux artist and activist, John Trudell, made an important contribution to those voices and to that emerging new structure.

During the nineteen-month occupation of Alcatraz, or what Acoma poet Simon Ortiz calls the “liberation” of Alcatraz, launched in November 1969, Pacifica radio station KPFA-FM in Berkeley, California, broadcast monologues and interviews with John Trudell and others from the island. As Robert Warrior and Paul Chaat Smith write in their history of the period, “WBAI-FM in New York and KPFK-FM in Los Angeles, stations with similar leftist politics as KPFA, also carried the program, popularly called ‘Radio Free Alcatraz’” (*Hurricane 71*). Today, tapes and CD’s of those historic broadcasts remain in the Pacifica Radio Archives in Los Angeles. On some of the recordings, there are background noises of children, as well as laughter, echoing in the mothballed jail halls, and one can imagine the struggling community in those reclaimed iron-barred rooms.

Trudell’s own activist struggle was launched on that island, and his emerging leadership in the American Indian Movement occupied him throughout the 1970s, culminating in personal and political tragedies that are well documented. He turned to writing, acting, and stage performing in spoken word, launching his recording and publishing career in 1983. Currently the discography includes a dozen recordings, and there are a few books of his lyrics and poems. Aged twenty-three in 1969, Trudell had recently studied broadcast communications and journalism at college in San Bernardino, east of Los Angeles, and he comments on air about now being able to put his training to use. Of course, he adapted his training in ways hardly considered on the San Bernardino campus, where he refused to take an American History course because of its misrepresentations of Indians.

Through his early radio communications, Trudell offered articulations of the originary complex of Native American sovereignty. “Sovereignty” is, indeed, a contested term both within Indigenous communities and between those communities and their dominant surrounding nation-states. Dakota scholar, Vine Deloria, Jr., who redefines its Indigenous usage as “peoplehood,” traces contemporary usage of “sovereignty” to the labor movements of the mid-1950s.

Haudenosaunee scholar Taiaiake Alfred strongly registers his skepticism about the applicability of the term to modern Indigenous politics and values, due to its monarchical baggage in European discourse. Choctaw scholar Michael D. Wilson prefers the word “freedom” for many reasons, akin to Alfred’s.¹ Accounting for these objections, as well as its broad, even popular, usage in Indian Country, I am using “sovereignty” here descriptively, not only to quote Trudell, “Ask no one for your sovereignty” (*Stickman* unpagged), but also to register its currency in federal policies of “government-to-government relations” with recognized tribes. Fitting Trudell’s rhetorical posture as provocateur, a “strategic sovereignty” at work in American Indian politics invokes the dominating discourse to resist that very domination.

Trudell voiced political and spiritual principles, often repacked into the word “sovereignty,” that he and other Indian artists and activists have since developed during the cultural, literary, and political resurgence in the ensuing generation. He was helping to shape the discourse that would become a global Indigenous strategy, “international redress,”² of eluding nation-state domination by lobbying at international organizations such as the United Nations.³ For all the turmoil, tragedy, internecine politics, and political pressures surrounding Trudell, his shared vision of tribal sovereignty from those early days remains part of an important revisioning of American history, of Native arts and politics, and of an emerging global Indigenous movement. Forecasting legal critical theory, literary affirmations, political negotiations, and specific court decisions of “aboriginal land rights” in the ensuing decades, Trudell and his compadres on Alcatraz articulated varying perspectives toward generational change in Indian Country, in the American mainstream, and in the Indigenous movement worldwide. In his 1994 publication, *Stickman*, Trudell transcends the nation-state in his imperative “ask no one for your sovereignty,” a crystallization of the message at Alcatraz.

Let’s look at shapes of tribal sovereignty as they have been expressed by other Native artists and social commentators. Tribal sovereignty as a legal, political, cultural, and spiritual phenomenon is fundamental to Native literary and legal expression not only in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, but across the centuries of colonialism and before. Whether or not the principle of sovereignty is explicitly addressed in Indigenous discourse, it shapes both context and text by its presence or its absence.

Native American discourses of sovereignty are intimately interwoven with “peoplehood,” with community, and indeed with identity. In Métis-Salish writer and scholar, D’Arcy McNickle’s 1978 novel, *Wind from an Enemy Sky*, set in the 1930s, the old man Bull muses on his grandson’s primary needs: “A boy had to have a good feeling about himself and about his people, or the fire would go out of his life“(239). The brief phrase speaks to the complexity of reciprocal relations that is tribal sovereignty, “the fire” in the life of an Indian boy. Louis Owens wrote of the link between community and identity, describing Native writers working at the “rearticulation of an identity, a process dependent upon a rediscovered sense of place as well as community.” In dialogue with Paula Gunn Allen, Leslie Silko, Geary Hobson, and Jack D. Forbes, James Ruppert, similarly, speaks of a “greater self in the communal” as an indigenous value that bridges the conceptual divide between individual and group (28). “This path to identity

¹ See Vine Deloria Jr, *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* (1972; Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 1992); Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power and Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Toronto: OUP, 1999); Michael D. Wilson, *Writing Home: Indigenous Narratives of Resistance* (Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2008).

² See Ronald Niezen, *The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: California UP, 2003).

³ See, for instance, work of the International Indian Treaty Council, established in 1974. <http://www.treatycouncil.org/home.htm>

is an active one where the individual works with others to define a place and existence for himself or herself” (28), Ruppert writes. That place itself is active as well, participating in the story of communal existence. The link between place and the communal individual is woven always with the history of that geographical place as a cultural space, and in Indian country that history is woven into the cycles of sovereignty. This process of rebuilding grounded, communal identity in Native literature, therefore, leads us back to discussion of the underlying term, sovereignty, for which one working definition might be Bull’s phrase for the coming generation: “a good feeling about himself and about his people.”

I use sovereignty in two contexts: its current political and legal meaning as a force for sustaining Indian community on the local level of nationhood, and its literary deployment in Native texts as “the fire [...] of his life,” the will of the people. We thus may trace the threads between legal discourse of “inherent powers” and literary discourse of “stories in the blood.”⁴ Where courts and Congress debate aboriginal land rights and inherent powers of self-government, Native authors and citizens affirm parallel stories in the blood of communal selfhood. A fuller pattern of sovereignty emerges across this weaving of the social and the spiritual.

Beneath a pragmatic and often sufficient definition of Indigenous sovereignty as “self-government,” the term carries diverse usages, but generally conveys a value of the people first. For all its legal history, it becomes in Native literary usage a feeling, a spirit, a quality—of good humor, open-heartedness, and generosity combined with courage to sacrifice for the community. Sovereignty as a term carries this connection to community, ancestry, spirit, and land. As Vine Deloria, Jr. explains, “This conception of land as holding the bodies of the tribe in a basic sense pervaded tribal religions across the country. It testified in a stronger sense to the underlying unity of the Indian conception of the universe as a system in which everything had its part” (Deloria, *Red* 173). That system view makes claim on “the bodies of the tribe,” calling individual identities to sacrifice for the “the underlying unity.”

Trudell and his co-revolutionaries indeed lay claim not only to Alcatraz, but to America as “Indian Territory,” thus enlisting the preponderant urban Indian population in the claim for sovereignty. In reservation cultures, the dancers in a ceremonial lodge today are willing to sacrifice their pain because of that connection and that conception of an interconnected universe. That is who they are. Simply residing, or repositioning themselves, in the reclaimed center, they stand outside of and so elude the dialectic of dominant history. Young Native lawyers, men and women, who return to their communities to develop tribal justice systems are equally willing to sacrifice their corporate careers. It is “stories in the blood.” It thus forms a logic of sacrifice for the people in their place on the land, a logic that means Native individuals often give everything so that their families and communities may struggle to maintain “a good feeling” about themselves and about their people. When McNickle’s Bull tries to protect that “good feeling” for his grandson, he is striving to affirm generational connections between the people and a physical and conceptual space peopled with ancestors. Their generations of sacrifices make sovereignty sacred. Reading for sovereignty as the basis for Native community maps a dialogic field among all of these dynamics.

The cultural impacts of Trudell, the Alcatraz occupation, and the American Indian Movement merge with the impacts of seemingly less radical and now canonized publications that flooded across America after the Pulitzer Prize-winning event of N. Scott Momaday’s *House*

⁴ See Gerald Vizenor’s use of this phrase, for instance, in his *Heirs of Columbus* ([Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1991] 29; 39); and see Arnold Krupat’s discussion of Vizenor’s usage in his *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture* ([Winnipeg: Bison Books, 1998] 64).

Made of Dawn, also in 1969. To map the upwelling of Native expression that characterized the latter decades of the twentieth century, we need to chart the political currents as they flow into and out of the artistic ones. Indeed, Trudell explicitly bridges the poetic and the political, just as indigenous aesthetics have always remained deeply woven with community concerns.⁵ A larger study would explore the larger coincidence of aesthetic and ethical changes of that period, marked especially by the 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act, by other legislation and court decisions, as well as by the outpouring of Native literary expression toward the turn of the twenty-first century.

In this much more limited paper let's now trace the discourse of tribal sovereignty in Trudell's radio recordings over the span of his less than two years at Alcatraz. Fuller material histories have been written by others. Here, through the lens of this brief review of the complexity embedded in current discourse of tribal sovereignty, we can note his phrasings of those fundamental concepts of Indian nationhood, peoplehood, sovereignty. Trudell as a spokesman invoked explicit treaty rights against history and federal policy, asserting self-government, and reclaiming cultural purpose in ways that undercut ideological foundations of the dominant nation-state. Further, he articulated some beginning intellectual and ideological space for pluralism in the body politic. Alcatraz in San Francisco Bay became an island of difference in the homogenized community of America.

He articulated a vision of Native American and Indigenous "freedom" in his role as Communications Director for the Alcatraz Council. His broadcasts on Radio Free Alcatraz began December 22, 1969, and continued for more than a year. Trudell was among other powerful voices who led the community at Alcatraz, who took the microphone, and who reflected the continent-wide, pan-Indian spread of the activists as "Indians of All Tribes." In the excitement of national and international media attention, he describes his cohort as "warriors" and celebrates this public relations bonanza as the first time Indians have been "in the national eye." Among those on these recordings with Trudell are Earl Livermore (Blackfeet from Montana), LaNada Means (Bannock-Shoshone of Idaho), Stella Leach (Colville & Sioux of Washington and the Dakotas), Richard Oakes (Mohawk of New York), Gabriel Sharp (Mojave of Southern California), and Raymond Spang (Northern Cheyenne of Montana). Indeed it is a group representing Indian communities on a national scale, and they had support from Canadian Indigenous communities. Many of these figures would go on to create social reform in Indian communities.

In the broadcast venue, Trudell and other speakers sketched a number of reformist goals for long-term habitation and development of Alcatraz Island as an "American Indian Spiritual Center," a Native American University, a museum, and a health center. Initially they mentioned plans to "develop a tape service" of interviews conducted on Alcatraz, and they would send those tapes to the reservations. They saw this as the spearhead of a "renewal of cultural awareness" that affirmed "beauty in the old stories."

Trudell's adamant activism indeed moved beyond reportage, as he critiqued American history and ideology. He invoked the writings of Vine Deloria, Jr., prominent Dakota author and intellectual, describing white civilization as focused on "knowledge" in contrast to Indian civilization concentrated on "wisdom." In his expressions, I find an elusive dance of the dialectic in his conception of sovereignty, where it takes different forms and different tones depending on

⁵ Jace Weaver, in *That the People Might Live: Native American Literature and Community* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), even coins the term "communitism" to register the central ethos of American Indian literary efforts. See the introduction.

whether it looks outward or inward. Trudell's retrospective 1993 proclamation, "Ask no one for your sovereignty," both resists external pressures and affirms internal visions. Thus he plays within and against a colonial dialectic while claiming an autonomous center for Indian lives. There is a circular or perhaps more accurately spiral movement in the name of sovereignty back into the reclaimed center. Alcatraz itself was a dramatic version of that dance.

The main "landing" and occupation of Alcatraz took place on November 20, 1969, two days before the initial broadcasts of Radio Free Alcatraz, and after some less publicized "scouting expeditions" (Hurricane 17). Activists and their families moved in, settled in the empty prison buildings, and proclaimed the island as Indian Territory by legal right as surplus federal land, referring to the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie. By December, Trudell was "Communications Director" for the Alcatraz Council. He grounded the historical and legal dimensions of the moment in the clearest terms. Over one of the earliest broadcasts, in the utopian glow of that early occupation, Trudell said, "It's our rock," thereby simplifying legal allusions to Native treaty rights to surplus federal lands. He called it, "A stepping stone to a better future." Foreshadowing Warrior and Smith's analysis of the "symbolic value" of the occupation, he proclaimed that "Alcatraz is a movement, a chance to unite the American Indian people." Of the dialectical game with the media and with history, Warrior and Smith have written, "As always, what Alcatraz offered most was its symbolic value" (Warrior and Smith 97). Trudell was so acutely aware of that resonant value that it became both the reason for holding on to that rock and the rhetorical purpose for his broadcasts.

During that same early broadcast, Trudell told his mostly white radio audience that, "[The whites] took everything we had except our pride in being Indian. [...] We were never defeated." Here he not only invokes in "pride" the "good feeling" that McNickle draws upon, but he shocks the dominant narrative of manifest destiny and the vanishing Indian by a direct reversal of the frontier myth in the national imaginary. Forty years later it may sound almost cliché, but "We were never defeated" remains news to most school children in American history classes. It is a shot directly across the bow of the colonial ship. He further addresses the history of the federal government working against Indians. Depicting the U. S. government and its Bureau of Indian affairs as a force in dominating opposition to Indians, he asserts directly, "we're going to try to stop all that, we're going to change it."

Yet dodging the exposure of direct attacks, Trudell then moves back into his cultural center, eluding any dialectical rejoinder. Describing a "renewal of cultural awareness," Trudell affirms that there is "a lot of beauty in the old stories," and he invokes an early Vine Deloria, Jr. formula, equating Indian culture to a civilization of wisdom and white culture to a civilization of knowledge ("Trudell Direct from Alcatraz" Archive Number BB2308). Such statements range across the full spectrum of sovereignty as an internal strength, with "a lot of beauty in the old stories," and of sovereignty as a power against external pressures, "We were never defeated."

A different facet of sovereignty emerges in two other recordings of those early days, both aimed by Trudell more directly yet at his white audiences. In a broadcast of 23 December 1969, "Alcatraz Panel with Indians from Various Tribes" (Archive Number BB2309), Trudell, along with Stella Leach (Sioux); Gabriel Sharp (Mojave); and Raymond Spang (Cheyenne), speak of their dreams for development of Alcatraz as "Indian Territory." In discussing their plans for a "Native American University," an American Indian Spiritual Center, and a museum, the pragmatic need for governmental, taxpayers' money to fund such projects leads Trudell into a more interactive discursive posture. Reflecting the outward-looking aspect of sovereignty, he applauds the fact that Alcatraz means the first time Indians are "in the national eye." Further, in

telephone dialogue with the supportive Congressman George Brown, Democrat from Los Angeles, interviewed also by Earl Livermore, Trudell states, “We realize that the American people’s support is very important for what we’re doing, and we’re grateful for it” (“Alcatraz Occupation Discussion. George Brown.” Archive Number BB2310). Trudell is enlisting popular sentiment by playing up the distinction between the federal government and the general population. Forecasting later discourse of “sovereignty without secession” (Maaka & Fleras 92), he explains that they were not advocating for the overthrow of the U.S. government, just struggling to take care of themselves on their own terms on their own land.

The political rhetoric is peppered, as so often happens in Native American expression, with complex humor. Although gratefully aware of the dialectical dependence on government and the American people’s support, the panel can’t hold back their tease of white do-gooders. Trudell sets up a joke by pointing out ironically that many Americans want to help Indians, but they go about it in the wrong way. Instead of the political and economic restructuring of land rights, he explains, too many well-intentioned whites simply resort to charity. Ray Spang then picks up the punch line, adding that too many people who want to help Indians just send old clothes, and he’s heard the elders at home on Montana’s Northern Cheyenne reservation talking about starting an “old clothes-burning ceremony.” Trudell carries the joke still further, saying that the heat from the fire of that ceremony would be the only warmth the Indians get from such help. The second round of this panel discussion, including Richard Oakes (Mohawk); LaNada Means (Shoshone-Bannock); and Earl Livermore (Blackfeet), gives Trudell a different launching pad to turn the register of discourse of sovereignty to the fighting mode. Referring to himself and the other occupiers as “warriors,” he critiques the oppressive education system of the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a program “to break down the Indian people as a fighting unit.” Here he describes his own recent refusal to take American History at college in San Bernardino because of the textbook’s misrepresentations of Indians. Moderating, but thereby underscoring the fighting spirit of the Alcatraz occupiers, Trudell goes on to say that they are not here to advocate overthrow of the U.S. government, just struggling to take care of themselves. Again, the dialectical oppositional discourse retreats, or rather regroups, into the self-affirming community of Indian sovereignty. Again, Trudell’s rhetorical moves here forecast the later discourse of “sovereignty without secession” in the global Indigenous movement.

A key term that Trudell uses, as it arose later in Simon Ortiz and others, is “nationalism.” During a January 12, 1970 broadcast of “IndianLand Radio,” he celebrates the “strong sense of Indian nationalism,” that the occupiers are feeling after their initial negotiations with government representatives. (“IndianLand Radio: With Marilyn Miracle.” Archive Number BB2314). Like the term “sovereignty” itself, “nationalism” functions as a reappropriation rather than a wholesale affirmation of a dominant discourse. Indigenous “nations” function in many varied forms within current nation-states in a post- and paracolonial world. Clint Carroll, in “Articulating Indigenous Statehood: Cherokee State Formation and Implications for the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” maps some of those instances and their complexities in his analysis of prospects for not only nationhood but Indigenous statehood in the Cherokee case, while he registers that term as one of many emerging options for different Indigenous “nations.”

In a major broadcast for the one-year anniversary of the occupation, after many disappointments in government negotiations and internal fractures, and seven months before the seemingly insubstantial finale, Trudell, through some brief phrases, speaks again of the sovereignty of communal selfhood, looking in rather than out. He waxes philosophical, speaking of freedom as control of your own life, a striking claim standing on a windy island in San

Francisco Bay. He again shrugs off the dialectical power, saying simply, “Get off our backs.” Describing their shrinking numbers as non-violent “masters of peace,” he reaffirms their resolve, saying simply that now, instead of remaining victims, they are “interested in winning.” (“Indians on Alcatraz: First Anniversary. John Trudell and LaNada Means.” Archive Number BB2611). However reductive or weary, “winning” is another truthful way to express the affirmations of sovereignty. Ideally, winning is an affirmation of a renewed center, as well as a successful act of resistance. As symbolism, the resonances of those broadcasts continue to push open the iron doors of the future.

Warrior and Smith write, “Even in its final dark months, Alcatraz still meant a great deal to many Indians, even to some who lived there despite great hardships” (107). In the ongoing spoken words of Trudell, as well as in the less outwardly radical voices of so many other Native artists and activists, the meaning of Alcatraz can only continue to grow and change the meanings of America, again.

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