



The Written Rhetorical Strategies Implemented By Indigenous Activists During the Occupation of Alcatraz

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Thesis

By examining the written rhetorical strategies of satire and analogy in the Proclamation, as well as the strategy of storytelling in the letter, it becomes apparent how these works attempt to further the goals of the occupation, primarily those of self-determination, sovereignty, and the restoration of rightful land. These rhetorical strategies and the occupation became transformative to the following decades of Indigenous activism, into modern-day resistance.



Background Information

- The Treaty of Fort Laramie, signed in 1868 between the U.S. Government and the Sioux Nation, required that all unused or abandoned federal land be given back to Native Americans
- Alcatraz Island, a former federal penitentiary, now abandoned for six years, was rightfully the property of Native Americans
- On Nov. 20, 1969, eighty-nine Indigenous people from various tribes, who called themselves “Indians of All Tribes,” arrived on Alcatraz Island
- The occupiers intended for Alcatraz to become the home of a new American Indian Center

Evaluating the Alcatraz Proclamation

The "Proclamation To The Great White Father and All His People" was written by the Indians of All Tribes and addressed to the government. It uses the primary rhetorical strategies of satire and analogies to further the occupation's goals.

Satire

“We, the native Americans, re-claim the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians by the right of discovery”

- This satire is used to expose the senseless rationale of the Doctrine of Discovery, which justified the illegal seizure of Indigenous-occupied land by colonizers

“\$24 in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man’s purchase of a similar island about 300 years ago”

Evaluating the Alcatraz Proclamation Continued

- It is apparent how unfair this deal would be, alluding to how grossly immoral the colonizers’ negotiations with Native American landowners
- By ironically offering to purchase Alcatraz Island via cloth and beads, the historical unfair negotiation and coercion of Indigenous people regarding land agreements comes to light



Analogies

- The first of two major analogies in the Proclamation compares the conditions of Alcatraz Island to those of Indian reservations
- The authors say that Alcatraz is similar to reservations in that because it lacks running water, has high levels of unemployment, and has no health care or educational facilities, to name a few similarities
- By comparing Alcatraz to reservations, the occupiers are calling attention to the deplorable conditions of reservations
- The second primary analogy in the Proclamation compares Alcatraz Island to Liberty Island

“It would be fitting and symbolic that ships from all over the world, entering the Golden Gate, would first see Indian land, and thus be reminded of the true history of this nation”

- The occupiers are appealing to the “true history of this nation,” which is that freedom does not mean freedom for all



Evaluating the Alcatraz Letter

The Alcatraz Letter, addressed to fellow Indigenous people, uses storytelling via diction and via a shared history to conjure up support for the movement.

Evaluating the Alcatraz Letter Continued

Storytelling Via Diction

“We are issuing this call in an attempt to unify all our Indian Brothers behind a common cause.”

- The authors of the letter use diction to cast all Indigenous people as a united front, fighting the same battle
- They are making the issues of Alcatraz everyone’s collective issue, thus calling everyone to action

Storytelling Via a Shared History

“We feel that if we are going to succeed, we must hold on to the old ways. This is the first and most important reason we went to Alcatraz Island.”

- The authors of the letter write tell the story of Indigenous people who are united via a shared history, whose way of life is now threatened
- The authors understand that by appealing to the nostalgia of a period in the past, they can conjure up support for the occupation



The Lasting Impact of Alcatraz

While the Occupation might have only lasted from November 20, 1969, to June 11, 1971, the impact of both the movement’s goals and its strategies lingered for decades.

- Wamsutta, a leader of the American Indian Movement, used nostalgia and diction in his speech at AIM’s 1970 Thanksgiving Day Protest that was reminiscent of the Alcatraz Letter
- The Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy, in their 1973 Trail of Broken Treaties manifesto, used satire to mock the government’s concern over Native Americans’ protests to mistreatment, rather than the mistreatment itself
- Other examples include J. Kēhaulani Kauanui’s 2003 call for Hawaiian sovereignty and the current Indigenous movement **LANDBACK**

