

Stuart McKee

Simulated Histories

Activism is the partisan performance of dissent, shaped and imposed for ideological distraction. Demonstrations have become one of the primary means with which cultural groups who lack political access gain public status. The success of any demonstration depends upon a group's ability to represent its struggle and reinforce its identity in the process. "Simulated Histories" examines the ways in which visual language politically promotes cultural identity, particularly the demands of overcoming an "ahistorical" identity.

Stuart McKee is a graphic designer living in San Francisco. He has devoted his practice to the design of typographic systems and interactive exhibits for a variety of national and international museum exhibitions. He has also committed several years to education, most recently as visiting professor of graphic design at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. In his current research, he is examining the ways in which graphic design contributes to the political identities of the American public.

1300 Page Street No.4
San Francisco
California 94117

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Rhode Island
School of Design

Providence
Rhode Island 02903

Milk comes in cartons, and cows are so strange an animal that hunters from large cities kill a substantial number every year on their annual hunting orgies. This despite the fact that in many areas farmers paint the word COW on the side of their animals to identify them.

Vine Deloria; *We Talk, You Listen*

By the time the last Native Americans were removed from their occupation of Alcatraz Island in June of 1971, they had made it seem like history. Reactivating a Sioux treaty from 1868 that entitled them to unused federal lands, they had initially claimed the site of the former federal prison “by right of discovery” nineteen months earlier.¹ Their intention was to establish a Native American cultural center, for which they offered the United States Government “\$24 in glass beads and red cloth.”² In commemoration of their first six months on the island, they proclaimed May 31, 1970 as “Declaration Day,” and prepared a statement that they prominently displayed on a bearskin stretched across a large timber frame. Swelling at one point to more than six hundred residents, they shared a historically familiar way of life. Visual and verbal descriptions in the national media emphasized tribal clothing, a Thanksgiving celebration and peace pipe ceremonies. *The New York Times* published a photograph displaying a tepee set dramatically against the Golden Gate Bridge.³ The group hoisted a flag up the island lighthouse that depicted their symbolic identity: “a broken peace pipe and a crimson tepee emblazoned on a field of azure.”⁴ Their original proclamation contains a passage summing up the visual significance of the event: “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.”⁵

Alcatraz was the first in a succession of demonstrations that have been heralded as the beginning of a new era of Native American history. The drama of capturing the prison, though it eventually faded from public prominence as daily life settled in, demonstrated that history can be reconstructed from an “ahistorical” past.

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“Indian Group Stakes a Claim to Alcatraz,” *The New York Times*, November 21, 1969, 49.

2

“New Flag Over Alcatraz,” *Time*, January 5, 1970, 20.

3

The New York Times, February 22, 1970, 75.

4

“New Flag Over Alcatraz,” 20.

5

The Council on Interracial Books for Children. 1979. *Chronicles of American Indian Protest*. New York: The Council on Interracial Books for Children, 311.

Vine Deloria, Jr., Sioux and former executive director of the National Congress of the American Indian, offers an insider's perspective in his sharply phrased *Custer Died for Your Sins*, published in 1969:

Because people can see right through us, it becomes impossible to tell truth from fiction or fact from mythology. Experts paint us as they would like us to be. Often we paint ourselves as we wish we were or as we might have been... To be Indian in modern American society is in a very real sense to be unreal and ahistorical.⁶

The transparent identity to which he alludes is the result of a history of federal attempts to dissolve the Native American way of life. An infamous example is the Dawes Act, which in 1887 institutionalized a policy known as "allotment," the removal of tribal lands from native jurisdiction and their redistribution, in modest parcels, to individual Native Americans; whatever remained was then offered to white settlers.

More recently, when Dillon S. Meyer was confirmed in 1950 as the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, "termination" became federal policy. The "Termination Act" was intended to bring Native Americans greater independence by scheduling their tribes for elimination, and thus accelerating the process of an "inevitable" assimilation by relocating Native Americans into non-tribal society. The policy was only partly successful, and termination became a primary impetus for Native Americans to consolidate themselves into the political pressure organizations that they began in the 1950s. "The best characterization of tribes," Deloria writes, "is that they stubbornly hold on to what they feel is important to them and discard what they feel is irrelevant to their current needs. Traditions die hard and innovation comes hard."⁷

Tradition is the pervasive pattern of thought and behavior that is the foundation of cultural identity. It is the evidence of an experience that transcends the individual, reaching back to indiscernible origins. Ahistorical by nature, traditions are cultural memories that cannot be used to index a particular past. By infusing the occupation at Alcatraz with their visual

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Deloria, Jr.; Vine. 1969. *Custer Died for Your Sins*. New York: The McMillan Company, 2-3.

7

Deloria. *Custer Died for Your Sins*, 16.

tradition, the activists ensured themselves public legitimacy by lucidly recapturing the aura of popular history. As Michel de Certeau has written:

Even if ethnology has partially relieved history of this task of establishing a staging of the other in present time—the reason why these two disciplines have been in intimate rapport—the past is first of all a means of representing a difference.⁸

Activism is the means with which politically disenfranchised groups advance into the public spotlight to press a claim for political reform. To demonstrate, as the word suggests, is to offer an alternative model of reality. The activist's goal is to stage a predicament with such force and authority that it receives enough publicity to affect the historical record. Demonstrations, marches, occupations and riots have all been history-making processes. For Native Americans, the dominant history reads as a chronicle of events, attitudes, prejudices and fabrications that attempt to undermine their identity. History is the literature of cultural validation, and only the engaged researcher or well-read citizen will be able to decipher what is history from what is myth. The visual language of Native American traditions, as represented by attributes that are easily recognizable to most Americans, becomes witting historical testimony to the "origin"-ality of their culture.

Whether by performance or publication, the mass-mediation of dissent is as important for attracting converts, sympathizers and like-minded ideologues as it is for increasing public awareness. No matter how alternative its articulation of society, activism is a communicative act, and the planners of a protest must make many of the same considerations as the publicist or professional communicator. Both political activists and graphic designers, for example, take advantage of the rhetorical strength of organization, recognize and target a specific audience, operate with the intention of eliciting a prescribed reaction and create and manipulate potentially striking visuals. The television and the newspaper, with their capacity to create headlines, become the complicit partners, especially for groups who lack the finances, professional resources or audience to publish their own record. Historians

8
de Certeau, Michel. 1988.
The Writing of History.
New York: Columbia
University Press, 85.

are likely to rely on the mass media when researching any event that has occurred within the public realm, or that preoccupies the majority interest. As the historian Norman H. Pearson has observed, the press is valid “[i]f for no other reason than that a newspaper represents what the public knows about any event.”⁹ The media thus largely controls whether a demonstration will remain an isolated incident or become a spectacle played to a worldwide audience.

Of all the visual considerations the activist must promote, the most crucial is the legibility of the group’s identity. The public must be able to associate an event with a particular political pressure group, and thus must be able to perceive some degree of “difference” about them, whether real or contrived. Activism compels a shifting scheme of social imagery; initially that which the pressure group engenders, and subsequently that with which society characteristically responds. A sociologically-motivated design process is set into motion, in which the visual equation of identity reveals the power of text and image to influence the historical record.

It is the way of power to surround itself with an array of things to be believed and admired, credenda and miranda. No power could stand if it relied upon violence alone, for force is not strong enough to maintain itself against the accidents of rivalry and discontent.

Charles Merriam, *The Miranda of Power*

In October of 1972, hundreds of Native Americans organized a caravan and headed for Washington, D.C. to emphasize their status as the “forgotten original Americans.”¹⁰ What began as their appeal to negotiate an agreement with officials at the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) eventually escalated into a declaration of war on the United States.¹¹ Organized by the activist American Indian Movement (AIM), the caravan was named the “Trail of Broken Treaties.” Members from a variety of Native American nations had planned their arrival by car, bus and station wagon to coincide with the attention-getting week that preceded the election of President Richard

9

Taft, William H. 1970. *Newspapers as Tools for Historians*. Columbia: Lucas Brothers Publishers, 38.

10

“Indians in Capital Defy a Court Order,” *The New York Times*, November 4, 1972: 42.

11

“Eviction of Indians by U.S. Delayed by Appeals Court,” *The New York Times*, November 7, 1972: 36.

Nixon to his second term of office. Though the participants had arranged meetings with administration officials in advance, upon arrival the officials refused to negotiate. Government guards attempted to clear the frustrated itinerants from the building, and a spontaneous rebellion began that led to the takeover of the BIA headquarters. Various accounts in the media relayed that 400 to 800 participants barricaded themselves inside the building for seven days, butting the doors with furniture, breaking windows and collecting "at least two truckloads of 'highly incriminating evidence'"¹² on Indian affairs against present and former members of Congress. In the words of AIM spokesman Dennis Banks: "We have destroyed the BIA."¹³

The legible factor of the takeover was the "occupation." Familiar to the then militaristic mood in American society, the reclamation of territory historicized the incident by conjuring up past injustices against Native Americans. The taking of the Bureau, which at the time had veto power over all Native American affairs, symbolized the taking back of the right to self-government. Both text and imagery played a significant part in the drama. A large banner was raised above the building entrance that retitled the site the "American Indian Embassy."¹⁴ A photograph captured another verbal reclamation, a condemnation painted in dripping letters across an interior office wall. It read:

*They made us many promises, more than I can remember, but they never kept but one; they promised to take our land, and they took it.*¹⁵

Whatever doubt remained as to the participants' identity was erased by copious references to traditional culture. Armed Native American guards patrolled the front of the building, and a tepee was erected on the Constitution Avenue lawn of the Bureau grounds.¹⁶ The occupants, who reportedly had no guns, fractured office furniture to make clubs,¹⁷ and lashed knives to the ends of some to fashion spears.¹⁸ They reportedly appeared in the windows wearing lipstick smeared across their faces in the manner of warpaint.¹⁹

12

"Indians Take Documents as They Leave," *The New York Times*, November 9, 1972, 52.

13

"Indians Take Documents...", 52.

14

Prucha, Francis Paul. 1985. *The Indians in American Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 82.

15

"Indians' Status Unchanged: Very Bad," *The New York Times*, June 27, 1976, 3:3.

16

"Eviction of Indians by U.S. Delayed by Appeals Court," *The New York Times*, November 7, 1972, 36

17

"500 Indians Seize U.S. Building After Scuffle With Capital Police," *The New York Times*, November 3, 1972, 78.

18

"Eviction of Indians by U.S. Delayed by Appeals Court," 36.

19

"Eviction...", 36.

But culturally loaded symbols rarely work their magic quietly; myths simultaneously emerge and diverge. Within one appears the legendary “first” American, reinforcing the most reliable of nationalistic motivations: “to invoke a historic past stretching into prehistory so as to legitimate claims they make on behalf of ‘their’ people.”²⁰ Within another is marshalled the defense, the “primitive,” “savage” or “helpless” *stereotype*, in which tradition is re-materialized into a form of cultural insult, proof that the “Other” is more than skin-deep in difference.

The visual cues of a stereotype straddle conflicting histories. By turning tradition against culture, the motive to typecast is a strategy in which threatened political interests fabricate an image of opposition for their own advantage, cleansing the mirror to reveal a clearer image of themselves. Stereotypes are among the offenses that activists must undermine as quickly as possible to wrestle their image from ideological control. The AIM has voiced specific complaints against the depiction of the Native American in the American film industry. They have pointed out that American motion pictures place Native Americans into fabricated family structures; that they ignore Native American accomplishments, history and intelligence; and that they characterize them as poor fighters or drunks who speak in insulting mannerisms.²¹

The mass media, in another example, perpetuates the myth that Native Americans are economically dependent on the non-Native American system. The contemporary American success story places its male protagonist in the global symbol of the three-piece suit, a guise which has been ill-suited to Native American tradition. Modernism, indeed, has its traditions. American corporate tradition requires that an individual must conform to its mercantile mannerisms if he or she is to be regarded as economically viable. A story from *The New York Times* illustrates the influence of material characteristics on an image, upholding the myth that tradition and economic progressiveness do not mix. The article describes Peter McDonald, then chairman of the Navajo Nation, as:

20
Griffin, Roger.
“Nationalism,” in
*Contemporary Political
Ideologies*, Roger Eatwell
and Anthony Wright,
editors. Boulder: Westview
Press, 1993, 147.

21
Hartman, Hedy. 1976. “A
Brief Review of the Native
American in American
Cinema,” *The Indian
Historian*, 9: 3, 27.

*The man who has offered himself as the hope of the Indian future. He drives a Lincoln Continental, favors pin-striped suits, and when indicted for embezzlement in 1977 hired F. Lee Bailey to plead his case... The most important icon in his office in Window Rock, Ariz., is not a tribal artifact, but a softball-sized lump of coal on a brass stand.*²²

When one cultural group controls the image of another, it gains the ability to use it to reinforce its own identity. That proud incidence of Colonial American activism, the Boston Tea Party, derives much of its remarkable character from the appropriation of Native American culture. When a group of colonial patriots disguised “in the Indian Manner”²³ raided three ships that were docked in Boston Harbor in December of 1773, and dumped 340 chests of tea from their cargo into the harbor waters, they insured themselves historical legibility. The historian Benjamin Woods Labaree has described that the colonists were only “[r]oughly disguised as Indians, in most cases with no more than a dab of paint and with an old blanket wrapped around them...others had dabbed soot or dirt on their faces to conceal their identities.”²⁴ Reputedly, no one knows exactly why the colonists adopted the masquerade.²⁵ It was crucial that the message sent back to England contain reports of unmistakably fabricated identities, as the event would probably not have received such a festive name had the identity of the raiding party been actual Native Americans. The message sent to future Americans was one of the speed with which the representation of “difference” becomes politically strategic.

Contemporary Native American activists have focused much of their energy against the appropriation of their names and images to predicate the otherwise nondescript identities of our “nationalized” athletic teams, including the Atlanta Braves, the Washington Redskins, the Kansas City Chiefs and the Cleveland Indians. Corporate America knows too well the consequences of changing consumer traditions. Crowds of several hundred demonstrators have rallied at stadiums in Washington, D.C. and Atlanta to protest the derogatory connotations within the iconography, as well as the ritual

22
“Struggling for Power and Identity,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 1979, 22.

23
Greene, Lawrence. 1938. *America Goes to Press: Headlines of the Past*. New York: Garden City Publishing Company, 18.

24
Labaree, Benjamin Woods. 1964. *The Boston Tea Party*. New York: Oxford University Press, 143.

25
Labaree, *The Boston Tea Party*, 143.

practices of donning warpaint and feathers²⁶ (by Redskins fans) and the performance of the “tomahawk chop”²⁷ (by Braves fans). One of the marchers, Dr. James Riding In, a historian and Pawnee national, stressed the significance of history when he was quoted at the scene: “It is to show that we are not just savages captured in the distant past and not to be made a mockery of.”²⁸

Radical factions frequently strive to reclaim the imagery that has been turned against them. Like other separatist “power” movements that gained strength in the 1960s and 1970s, the Red Power Movement asserted their affinity with the pejorative myth to render it useless. The Red Power insignia, as it was printed on the tactical paraphernalia of the United Native Americans, presented the Native American as a “warrior,” outfitted in tribal clothing and mounted upon a horse, spear in hand; tensely poised beside such statements as “Indians discovered America” and “Custer had it coming.” As long as any government politically favors certain cultures, the visual game of identity negotiation is not likely to disappear.

Another disturbance in 1969 aroused a group whose identity seemed to materialize from thin air. “Hundreds of young men went on a rampage in Greenwich Village” began *The New York Times* account published on June 29 of the event that has come to be known as the “Stonewall Rebellion.”²⁹ Early in the morning on June 28, a group of plainclothes policemen raided the Stonewall Inn, a watering hole for New York City’s gay and lesbian community, with the intention of arresting patrons and seizing alcohol that was being served without a liquor license. It had been the third raid in the neighborhood within a one-month period, but the clientele did not take it passively this time around. Breaking away from officers and out of a police van, the Stonewall’s patrons began to heave “bricks, bottles, garbage, pennies and a parking meter”³⁰ at their captors, and in the 45-minute “melee” that ensued, the protesting crowd, which grew from 200 to 400 participants, overturned cars and set trash cans on fire. Similar-sized crowds gathered to vent their anger on at least two other evenings within the following week; blocking the street, chanting their disapproval

26

“Indignant Indians Seeking Changes,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 1992, 14.

27

“Native Americans Protest Chops, Fonda Complies,” *The Washington Post*, October 20, 1991, D5

28

“Indignant Indians Seeking Changes,” 14.

29

“4 Policemen Hurt in Village Raid,” *The New York Times*, June 29, 1969, 33.

30

“4 Policemen...” 33.

and reading aloud condemnations of their mistreatment. Graffiti appeared on the Stonewall's boarded-up windows verbally capturing the burgeoning solidarity: "Support Gay Power."³¹

Before the incident at the Stonewall Inn, the overwhelming public image of the homosexual was pathological. *Time* magazine ran an article four months after the rebellion that typified the gay and lesbian community's status as outcasts. Homosexuals, it reported:

*Are one of the nation's most despised and harassed minority groups. A poll taken for CBS-TV not long ago revealed that two out of three Americans look on homosexuals with disgust, discomfort, or fear, and one out of ten regards them with outright hatred. A majority considers homosexuality more dangerous to society than abortion, adultery, or prostitution.*³²

The politically paranoid McCarthy era was particularly intolerant of gay and lesbian citizens. Historian John D'Emilio writes of the period: "The full (United States) Senate bowed to mounting pressure and authorized an investigation into the alleged employment of homosexuals 'and other moral perverts' in government," and adds that subsequent actions pursued by the government included firings, anti-gay reports, military purges, rampant suspicion and workplace scrutiny.³³ The fear that their identity might be publicly disclosed cloistered the gay and lesbian image far from the historical mainstream. Gay and lesbian Americans were an invisible minority, passing as "straight" in order to assimilate economically. No gay or lesbian public leader, figurehead or role-model was available to set an example. Censorship preserved a cultural record that was homosexually sterile, as exemplified, once again, by the motion picture industry, whose 1934 code prohibited any representation of "gayness" in American films. Gays and lesbians were extensionally "non-sensical" entities, without social distinction, without political delegation, without a tradition. Consequently, gay and lesbian identity was overwhelmingly ahistorical. A majority of Americans could neither accurately identify or imagine a non-stereotypical homosexual.

31

"Police Again Rout 'Village' Youths," *The New York Times*, June 30, 1969, 22.

32

"Coming to Terms," *Time*, October 24, 1969, 82.

33

d'Emilio, John. 1983. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 42.

Stonewall accelerated the historical process of activating the homosexual image in America.

Like the Native Americans, and like any culture that has a history of exclusion, gay and lesbian activists have favored the "occupation" as a demonstration tactic. The places that they occupy are the places of the collective memory that have denied them recognition. Contesting the national myth that homosexuals are socially corrupt, various gay and lesbian groups have chained themselves to the White House fence,³⁴ interrupted the programming of the *MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour*³⁵ and attempted a stand-off inside the U.S. Supreme Court Building to contest discriminatory sodomy laws. With what means did their identity become legible? *The Los Angeles Times* reported that when the 600 activists at the Supreme Court demonstration "stepped forward" to be arrested in 1987, fellow demonstrators were "waving banners," and wearing T-shirts that demanded "Legalize my Love," all the while accompanied by chants of "Hey, hey, ho, ho, homophobia has got to go."³⁶

Language has characterized protest in many forms, with visible language especially prominent since the legalization of picketing in 1938.³⁷ Portable placards are the most democratic, as well as the most public, form of graphic expression. Signs offer demonstrators an unrestricted form of self-publishing, a blow to ideological censors. Contemporary demonstrations gain much of their legibility from the distinctive manner in which signs visually replicate a protester's voice, as Norman Cantor's account of a typical turn-of-the-century English suffragette attests:

In the years after 1906 no government minister was secure from the harassment of these shameless militants. If he stood for a by-election, his speeches to the electorate were certain to be disrupted by at least one piercing female voice clamoring for an explanation of why women had no votes. Such interruptions could not be ignored. The lady would more than likely unfurl a huge banner to add a visual dimension to her demand.³⁸

34

Cunningham, Michael. 1992. "If you're queer and you're not angry in 1992, you're not paying attention," *Mother Jones*, May/June 1992, 63.

35

Ibid., 62-63.

36

"600 Gay Rights Activists Arrested in Capital Protests," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1987, 1:16.

37

Barbrook, Alec and Christine Bolt. 1980. *Power and Politics in American Life*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 138.

38

Cantor, Norman F. 1969. *The Age of Protest: Dissent and Rebellion in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Hawthorne Books, Inc., 6.

The collective presence of a crowd of sign-carrying marchers has the visual advantage of defining group size, giving shape to their shifting mass and distinguishing them in the eyes of their spectators, who perceive a sudden, if only momentary, upset in the balance of power.

Much of what the press characterized as the “new gay militancy” during the “Gay Power” era of the early 1970s was nothing more radical than the rhetoric of the picket. Picketing was controversial during the “homophile” era of the 1950s, when the first organized gay and lesbian political groups emerged, and the issue of identity was much more tentative. Shirley Willer, one of the founders of the early lesbian group Daughters of Bilitis, felt that picketing presented a degree of extremism that contradicted what was then the primary political motivation: assimilation. As reported by historian Toby Marotta, Willer observed that:

*Demonstrations which define the homosexual as a unique minority defeat the very cause for which the homosexual strives—to be an integral part of society. The homosexual must show that he is in fact, not a unique social problem.*³⁹

Merely the presence of individuals unafraid of the repercussions of publicly proclaiming their homosexual identity in those days had, as it still has today, remarkable legibility. Examples within the media accounts of most protests cite a sign or graphic statement which is meant to mark the bearer as a homosexual: “Fag;”⁴⁰ “I am a lesbian;”⁴¹ “We are wife and wife;”⁴² “The Lord is my Shepherd and He knows I’m gay;”⁴³ and “I deserve the right to die in combat.”⁴⁴

In 1993, twenty-nine demonstrators from the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project attended a mass at St. James Cathedral in Brooklyn to protest what they called the “hypocrisy” of Bishop Thomas V. Dailey, who wrote in a pastoral letter “that homosexuality was ‘ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil.’” As Bishop Dailey delivered his sermon, members of the group stood up two by two displaying their anger as well as their identity via statements painted across the fronts and backs of their shirts; a sample of which read: “I encounter anti-queer violence every day.”⁴⁵

39
Marotta, Toby. 1981. *The Politics of Homosexuality*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 51.

40
The Washington Post, April 26, 1993, A8.

41
“Thousands of Homosexuals Hold a Protest Rally in Central Park,” *The New York Times*, June 29, 1970, 20.

42
The New York Times Magazine, October 11, 1992, 20.

43
“Thousands Hold March to Back Homosexuals,” *The New York Times*, June 25, 1984, B3.

44
“Gay Rights Activists Stage Another Round of Protests,” *The Washington Post*, April 27, 1993, D3.

45
“Homosexuals Turn Mass into Silent Protest of Pastoral Letter,” *The New York Times*, August 30, 1993, B4

It is not surprising, given the closeted nature of the gay and lesbian past, that labels of “gay”ness, “lesbian”ness, and more recently “queer”ness have practically become mandatory. The function of labeling is to mark the presence of something that cannot otherwise be ascertained, such as ownership, prescription or content. With so limited a tradition from which to work, labeling has become the dominant strategy of cultural recognition for gay and lesbian activists. The need for distinction is not unique to their group. The technological and social equalization of individuals in modern society has eliminated, for many cultural groups, evidence of a connection to something that anticipates contemporary life. Thomas K. Fitzgerald has identified that these “post-traditional” cultures are in part the result of the “global” audience that international media conglomerates view as a homogenous community with similar needs.⁴⁶ Feeling that their sense of identity has been compromised, such groups adopt a process of *ethnogenesis* to develop a scheme for cultural distinction. Ethnogenesis attempts to create what nationalists aim to preserve: a tacit sense of history and patriotism that ideologically binds citizens to each other and to their past. Demonstrators typically eschew such quiet reform; militant activity is more likely to become historicized.

Print is a powerful mechanism for gay and lesbian nationalism as well as militancy. True ideological saturation of the community has come about largely through the development and dissemination of a homosexual vernacular.⁴⁷ As demonstrators have brought this message onto the streets, design has become as strategic a component as any that they employ. A diverse array of commodities including t-shirts, hats, flags, ribbons, pins and earrings have been popularized as markers that bear group names, slogans or gay and lesbian symbology including: the rainbow motif, the lambda character, the pink triangle and the cross-over red ribbon that marks AIDS political sympathizers. Seven men from the Washington, D.C. area presented themselves wearing “Boy Scout paraphernalia as well as tags that said ‘fag’ or ‘queer’ and pins from their gay rights groups” when they publicly submitted applications to become scout leaders to the National Capital Area Council of

46

Fitzgerald, Thomas. 1993. *Metaphors of Identity*. Albany: State University of New York Press. For a discussion of the influence of electronic media on cultural identity, see Meyrowitz, Joshua. 1986. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*. New York: Oxford University Press.

47

See, for example: Thistlethwaite, Polly. 1990. “Representation, Liberation, and the Queer Press,” in *Democracy/A Project by Group Material*, Brian Wallis, editor. Seattle: Bay Press, 207.

the Boy Scouts of America, according to *The Washington Post*.⁴⁸ Non-verbal forms have served as environmental markers, as when protesters draped the California State Capital building with a rainbow banner during a multi-day siege on Sacramento to protest Governor Pete Wilson's veto of employment discrimination protection in 1991.⁴⁹ Organizers for the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion have planned to unfurl the largest homosexual marker to date as part of their "International March on the United Nations to Affirm the Human Rights of Gay and Lesbian People." If all goes according to plan, on June 26, 1994, 10,000 participants will carry a rainbow flag measuring thirty feet wide by one mile long along their New York City demonstration route.⁵⁰

The activist group Queer Nation has demonstrated the degree to which "graphic" ethnogenesis has come to identify gay and lesbian activists. In Alameda County, California in 1992, residents of a street named "Gay Court" began a petition that would change the name to "High Eagle Road," to avoid the stigma that it attached to their exclusive neighborhood. Queer Nation members designed special membership cards and mounted a "welcome wagon" campaign. Carrying banners and speaking into bullhorns, they introduced themselves to the Gay Court residents door by door and offered them their sympathy, as well as group membership, for being victims of homophobia. While moving from house to house, they "stickered" the street with their identity, consisting of "from ten to fifteen" different stickers featuring statements such as "What causes homosexuality?" and "Fag Power."⁵¹

The demonstration placards that represent many gay and lesbian political organizations have gone through a similar evolution, some acquiring a finesse that contradicts the tradition of dissent. Americans have learned to shop wisely for the "well-designed" package, be it a supermarket staple or a candidate for public office. Cognizance of the values of graphic distinction, composition and high standards of production have increased significantly. Design in activism strengthens the power of appearances and the authority of the pressure group's voice. A radical message with mainstream

48

"Gay Men Protest Scouts' Ban," *The Washington Post*, February 25, 1992, C3.

49

"Gays: Protest in Sacramento Draws Thousands," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 1991, A32.

50

"Mile-long rainbow flag to raise over \$500,00 for AIDS," *Island Lifestyle*, May 1994, 21.

51

Interview conducted by the author with Jonathan Katz; April, 1994.

appeal is more likely to garner public respect. The replication of a visual system into a campaign of coordinated multiples creates a sense of cultural pervasiveness, mimicking the “timeless” quality of an established tradition. Typographic design simulates a history of belonging, a grain that Roland Barthes perceived in all mythologies: “A clarity which is not that of explanation but that of a statement of fact.”⁵²

It is with this same ethnogenesis that designers construct the identities of corporate America. Typographic expression has a remarkable range of discrete codes that can function as cultural “tokens,” offering limitless potential for identification. The appeal for standardization in corporate design is the appeal to create both a difference and a tradition. When established businesses revise their visual images, they attempt to erase an “outdated” tradition and replace it with another, pervasive and complete, that seems to mesh better with the current historical drift. Graphic design is a process of creating cultural myths that index other visual histories.

Hurriedly digging during the early morning hours, a group of forty Crow, Arapaho, Cheyenne and Sioux nationals cemented a historical marker to a prominent patch of ground within the Custer Battlefield National Monument. Created in memory of the 112th anniversary of the Battle of Little Bighorn, the black steel plaque, approximately one square yard in size, read:

*In honor of our Indian patriots who fought and defeated the U.S. calvary [sic]. In order to save our women and children from mass-murder. In doing so, preserving rights to our Homelands, Treaties, and Sovereignty. 6/25/1988.*⁵³

The plaque was placed directly beside the official United States memorial to General George Armstrong Custer, a twelve-foot tall pillar inscribed with the names of the 200 cavalymen who died as a result of the battle. AIM spokesman Russel Means reported that three previous park superintendents had promised to seriously consider Native American proposals to install a monument at the site, to no avail. Means observed that the soldiers whose deaths were commemorated

52

Barthes, Roland. 1972. *Mythologies*. New York: The Noonday Press, 143.

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“Activists’ Plaque at Little Bighorn Honors ‘Patriots’ Who Beat Custer,” *The Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 1988, 24.

on the pillar “[c]ame to kill our women and children. Can you imagine a monument listing the names of the S.S., of Nazi officers, erected in Jerusalem?”⁵⁴ Park Superintendent Dennis Ditmanson offered: “The Park Service has no objection to a monument for the Indians who fought here, but it is incumbent on them to first design something that is appropriate.”⁵⁵

Appropriate in this case did not mean appropriation. The Native Americans who planted their history beside the “official” presentation recognized that political and social coding influences the public’s perception of text. Idiomatic language marks its users with distinctive socioeconomic identities, the study of which is known as *sociolinguistics*.⁵⁶ The *visual* presentation of language is just as idiomatically conditioned, creating tones of voice that either “speak to” or do not “speak to” specific audiences. Typographic standards and methods of production, gauged by varying degrees of crudeness, economy or sophistication, accumulate values that mark the maker’s or user’s identity with cultural “status.” One does not have to refer far back into the past to be reminded that an individual’s ability to use visual language has always earned him or her some degree of political privilege. As Celia Lury has observed: “Writing is a specialized technique wholly dependent on specific training, for both producers and receivers. It is only in the last 150 years or so that people in any society have had access to this technique (of formal learning).”⁵⁷ The way in which a cultural group uses graphic design, a highly specialized form of the practice of writing, or whether they choose to use it at all reveals much about their knowledge of the cultural influence of visual language. Any group that has not yet established a place for itself within the popular design histories may nevertheless be somewhere out on the streets, shaping an identity.

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“Activists’ Plague...”, 24.

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“Activists’ Plague...”, 24.

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See Hymes, Dell. 1974. *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

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Lury, Celia. 1993. *Cultural Rights: Technology, Legality and Personality*. London and New York: Routledge, 102.

