




# “The most bombed nation on Earth”: Western Shoshone resistance to the Nevada National Security Site

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores a set of protests challenging U.S. occupation of the Nevada Nuclear Test Site as a means of understanding the deployment of bordering rhetorics in colonial expansion and indigenous resistance. The protests have used a variety of strategies that appropriate artifacts historically controlled by colonial powers such as passports and No Trespassing signs to assert their own sovereignty and demand a change to the material conditions of U.S. occupation of land recognized as belonging to the Western Shoshone in the Treaty of Ruby Valley. These protests offer a chance to complicate current scholarly understandings of decolonial protest. This article analyzes the verbal, visual, and performative elements of these protests and argues that indigenous citizenship and border protests can coopt and reappropriate traditionally hegemonic rhetorics as a means of challenging naturalized assumptions about nationhood, borders, and sovereignty.

## Introduction

Colonization and nuclearization have been mutually supportive systems since the dawn of the nuclear age. The development of nuclear weapons and nuclear energy has relied heavily on the use of resources and space on or near indigenous lands, and the growing nuclear industrial complex has, in many instances, served as justification for colonial powers' expansion and control of indigenous nations. This process, identified by numerous scholars as “nuclear colonialism,” has resulted in disproportionate negative effects on the environmental health and autonomy of indigenous peoples (Endres, 2009b; Grinde & Johansen, 1995; Kuletz, 1998; LaDuke, 1999; Thorpe, 1995). These processes, however, have not gone wholly uncontested. Many indigenous people have vehemently opposed the use of their land for militarized purposes. One such instance of contestation centers around the Nevada Nuclear Test Site, land long claimed by the Western Shoshone Nation.

Since the 1980s, Western Shoshone protesters have allied with Catholic opponents of nuclear testing to resist U.S. occupation of the Nevada Test Site (Harney, 1995). Together, these groups have utilized a variety of rhetorical approaches to challenge dominant narratives of nationhood and citizenship that are couched in colonial histories. These protests build on strategies used by other indigenous and anticolonial resistance movements and have the potential to inform future movements. They offer a valuable opportunity to expand on current understandings of indigenous protest rhetoric, bordering rhetorics, and nuclear rhetorics. This article analyzes the verbal, visual, and performative rhetorics of these protests and argues that this coalition has expanded on the strategies of other indigenous protesters to include the cooptation and reappropriation of traditionally hegemonic rhetoric. This study offers an opportunity for rhetorical scholars to critically question naturalized framings of space, nationality, and sovereignty and to move toward social change. This research challenges the systemic erasure of indigenous peoples that coincides with colonial expansion and militarization, asking American readers to recognize colonial

underpinnings of dominant narratives that question indigenous claims to sovereignty while naturalizing White Americans' presence. This article concludes that work to reframe the discourse surrounding the Nevada Test Site is also a move toward material decolonization at the site.

### Scholarly perspectives on appropriation, bordering, and indigenous resistance

Many of the protests that I investigate in this article enact a bordering rhetoric that both mirrors and challenges colonial rhetorics of sovereignty. By calling on structures put in place by the U.S. government, the protesters highlight the contradictions of U.S. government policy that both acknowledges—through treaty agreement—the Western Shoshone Nation's sovereignty over the region and asserts U.S. dominance in the territory. This approach functions to challenge understandings of the space that are shaped exclusively by U.S. colonial frames. By appropriating the rhetorics that have been used to colonize the space, these protesters attempt to reclaim Western Shoshone sovereignty through rebordering the territory and reasserting indigenous presence.

The appropriation of colonial rhetorics as a means of challenging colonial systems evident in these protests mirrors de Certeau's (1984) analysis of the ways that marginalized groups “make do” (*bricolent*) within systems they cannot escape (p. 66). He argued that resistance may often come in the form of manipulating elements of a power structure to one's advantage—using systems that were designed to disempower in empowering ways. Black (2009), for example, argued that “subjugated people work through dominant rhetorics to assert their own rhetorical inventiveness” (p. 81). In the context of removal, he suggested that Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw, and Seminole resisters appropriated colonial rhetorics to highlight the incoherence of removal policies and empower themselves as agents of political change. Black (2016) further argued that Native American activists working for the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 and the Indian New Deal of 1934 drew on rhetorics of liberal democracy to advocate for self-determination. Similarly, Kimokeo-Goes (2009) explored the ways that Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins (of the Southern Paiute Nation) and Lydia Lili'oukalani (Queen of Hawai'i) appealed to American ideals as a means of demonstrating the contradictory nature of colonialism. Phillips (2006) added to this analysis by arguing that marginalized people may also resist colonial systems by calling on different subject positions that are deemed inappropriate by those with power, for example, by positioning themselves as citizens of an indigenous nation rather than citizens of the United States.

Appropriation as a decolonial tool may be particularly valuable in the context of bordering and nationhood. Nationhood, as understood by Western powers, relies on the bordering of spaces to separate out sovereign territories over which governing bodies can rule, but this understanding is incompatible with some historic indigenous understandings of space as shared between peoples (Kuletz, 1998). Shapiro (1997) has argued that the construction of borders is not a natural state but rather a Western imperial project used to approve or deny sovereignty, and therefore subjectivity. The protests explored in this article challenge both the bordering and the debordering performances of the U.S. government at the Nevada Test Site. Although the U.S. government has engaged in debordering by violating treaties, naming the territory as a part of the United States, and using the space for U.S. military purposes, they have also engaged in bordering performances by cordoning off the site with fences and erecting No Trespassing signs (Harney, 1995). The protest strategies discussed in this piece have appropriated these colonial bordering rhetorics to redraw national borders that would separate out the United States from the Western Shoshone Nation.

Much of the current scholarship on borders focuses on the way societies form and enforce borders, particularly the U.S.–Mexico border. DeChaine (2012) wrote, “The majority of extant scholarship on the subject assumes the existence of borders as static entities, as given objects to be examined for their effects on individuals and populations” (p. 3). He urged a shift from a study of *borders* to one of *bordering*—an investigation of the discursive practices that create borders. Understanding that borders are not material and grounded in space but are also created from sets of symbolic actions, he argued, is necessary for critically examining the categories of hierarchy that

surround bordering practices. Expanding on this argument, as well as Anzaldúa's (1987) theory of borders as performed, Ono (2012) argued that borders are figural constructions of inclusion and exclusion that travel with individuals. For borders to function as borders, he argued, the separation of individuals must be policed, and constructions of "belonging" on one side of the border or another are built around visual and social markers such as race, language, or cultural practices. These markers of belonging travel with individuals, expanding the scope of borders far beyond the physical spaces that divide territories. Through this lens, the discursive practices that constitute borders occur in not only the crossing of physical boundaries but also the demarcation of particular bodies as presumptively natural or alien. Luibhéid (2002) argued that contemporary rhetorics surrounding borders mark White bodies as natural citizens unworthy of suspicion, enabling unharassed passage through borderlands, whereas Black and Brown bodies are marked as suspicious and in need of policing. Cisneros (2014) worked to understand the processes by which this naturalizing logic might be challenged and suggested that Latina/o immigration activists have deployed vernacular rhetorics of citizenship and belonging to reconfigure the U.S.–Mexico border. The protests examined in this article utilize myriad tools to undermine colonial bordering rhetorics, participating in new discursive formations of place that challenge hegemonic narratives similarly to other, more widely recognized, forms of protest (Endres & Senda-Cook, 2011).

Because this body of scholarship focuses primarily on the production of borders, and almost exclusively on the border between the United States and Mexico, there is insufficient study of how bordering practices are implicated in colonial expansion into indigenous territory. The Western Shoshone–Nevada Desert Experience protests provide a point of entry that demonstrates the colonial power not only of bordering rhetorics but also *debordering*. This is what DeChaine (2005) called *sans frontièrisme* (without borderism). He argued that failing to challenge constructions of global borderlessness is potentially dangerous for marginalized groups. These are the populations most likely to be divested of their lands, disenfranchised, or subjected to harmful practices by the debordering of space that allows more powerful nations to control or nonconsensually incorporate smaller nations into their empires. It is important to apply this skepticism of debordered globalism in the context of indigenous sovereignty, which has been progressively diminished through the erasure of borders to accommodate U.S. expansionism. Butler (2004) argued that the precarity of borders becomes evident at the moment when they are breached and that institutions respond to this realization by violently attempting to regain a sense of security. She used the example of September 11, 2001, when it became clear that U.S. borders had been violated and the nation responded with violent nationalism. This drive to secure borders creates a constant negotiation at contested sites such as the Nevada Test Site, where parties with different relationships to the border attempt to forward their own interpretation of the border over contrasting interpretations of the border forwarded by other parties. Although the U.S. government has attempted to deborder the site to incorporate it into the United States, the protesters have worked to challenge this debordering by reasserting the site's belonging in the Western Shoshone Nation.

Although this work on the nature of borders is incredibly valuable, there is little scholarship focusing on these rhetorics in the context of indigenous peoples in the United States. Much of the scholarship surrounding indigenous sovereignty rights has focused primarily on the legal rhetorics the U.S. government has used to assign or deny sovereignty. Witkin (1995) argued that the United States has imposed citizenship on indigenous people as a means of removing protections and services, seizing land, and terminating recognition of nationhood. Going one step further, Justice (2010) proposed that "rhetorics of recognition" are used to award or deny either native or non-native status to support colonial structures, such as through the use of blood quantum to determine eligibility for services afforded to indigenous people. Deloria (1969) and Black (2008) argued that this defining of indigenous citizenship and nationhood status has been used to refuse rights to indigenous people without giving up the ability to take resources from indigenous lands. The *Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock* decision, for example, granted Congress ultimate plenary power over indigenous lands, establishing a paternalistic relationship in which tribes were wards of the U.S. government and

subject to federal decisions (Black, 2008). The wardship established through this decision eroded sovereignty but entitled indigenous peoples to federal protections and services, which would be denied under statuses such as dependent nation or sovereign nation (Deloria, 1969).

Kuletz (1998) and Rothman (1992) argued that the U.S. government has utilized these rhetorics to erase the presence of indigenous nations in desert spaces to create a sense of emptiness that would justify the seizure of lands claimed by native peoples for government use. By obscuring continued presence of indigenous people in desert spaces, the government has constructed these spaces as wastelands and used this framing to assert that the only beneficial purpose of these spaces is to serve as sacrifice zones for nuclear waste storage or testing (Endres, 2009a, 2012; Kuletz, 1998). Similarly, Endres (2009b) argued that colonial powers have excluded indigenous arguments from conversations to maintain the stability of nuclear colonialism, for example, by dismissing or ignoring comments opposing the establishment of a nuclear waste siting facility at Yucca Mountain in Nevada. Lake (1991) argued that these frames that locate indigenous peoples as part of the past, absent from the present and future are a means of utilizing time as a rhetorical tool to disempower indigenous peoples, and that indigenous protesters have problematized this linear version of time in favor of “shared time” that subverts opposition to their arguments. This understanding of indigenous protest becomes particularly important for analyses of protests that rely on treaties to assert the existence of particular borders, as this reliance requires protesters to demand that the U.S. government honor past obligations rather than situating those agreements as historic and irrelevant to modern understandings of space.

Resistance to these colonizing rhetorics has often come in the form of assertion of presence. For example, Witkin (1995) discussed letter-writing campaigns conducted by multiple indigenous nations that challenged the seizure of lands. Morris and Wander (1990) wrote that indigenous nations regularly band together to create Native American coalitions that rely on historical understandings of indigenous behavior in order to “create a ‘social hegemony’ strong enough to enable them to overcome the consequences of a long-standing ‘historic bloc’” (p. 165). However, Lake (1983) challenged this interpretation of reliance on indigenous tradition, arguing instead that indigenous protests—particularly the Red Power movement—have been misunderstood as unsuccessful appeals to White audiences rather than being more accurately interpreted as forms of self-address that successfully mobilize indigenous actors. He described this internally directed rhetoric that centers inherent sovereignty as “consummatory rhetoric,” which is differentiated from outwardly directed instrumental rhetoric focused on demanding changes from the U.S. government or other actors.

Although these legal rhetorics and indigenous challenges to them may function similarly to deborder the space by incorporating indigenous peoples into U.S. nationality, there is insufficient study of the intersections of spatial border rhetorics and rhetorics of nationality. This article attempts to expand on this body of literature by understanding the ways that protesters at the Nevada Test Site have appropriated colonial rhetorics of nationhood and borders in order to assert Western Shoshone sovereignty and independence from the United States.

### The selection and analysis of texts

To sufficiently analyze these protests, it is necessary to understand that the tactics of resistance used by indigenous decolonial protesters have not always adhered to traditional Western rhetorical standards but have instead used both traditional and novel approaches to resist colonial domination (Lake, 1991; Morris & Wander, 1990). Norton-Smith (2010) argued that scholarship concerning indigenous processes of world ordering and sense-making must consider performance to be “the principal vehicle of meaning and the way by which the world is made” (p. 96). Ceremonial dance and music, for example, become ways to communicate shared cultural value systems (Norton-Smith, 2010). Participation in performance, then, is an important way of structuring the world equal to discursive labeling and categorizing. In the context of bordering, the inclusion of performance as a

method of making meaning allows us to understand the way our physical interaction with constructed borders changes the way we see the world. If borders are not simply spatial markers, but figural constructions, then they can take on meaning only through action. It seems reasonable, then, to include performative elements of protest in the study of attempts to challenge the creation or erasure of borders.

This, however, is not to say that performance is the only means by which indigenous peoples resist colonization. Many decolonial movements utilize rhetorical strategies that mirror traditional Western approaches. For example, Palczewski (2005) argued that Ward Churchill was able to successfully challenge supporters of Columbus Day celebrations primarily because he seized on an epideictic moment during the celebrations to join the past with the present in his legal argumentation. In this instance, conventional rhetoric was a useful tool in combatting colonialism because of specific opportunities to use those rhetorical strategies in especially effective ways. Similarly, Endres (2011, 2012, 2013) has explored several instances in which indigenous movements have used verbal forms of rhetoric to deploy cultural values as a tool for decolonization.

Incorporating both performative rhetorics that draw on Western Shoshone epistemologies and verbal rhetorics that draw on Western traditions of argumentation and legal logic is particularly necessary for an analysis of these protests because of their simultaneous deployment of consummatory and instrumental rhetoric. For many Western Shoshone individuals, the land occupied by the test site is a sacred space that has been defiled by nuclear tests (Harney, 1995). This relationship to the land necessitates opposition to U.S. occupation not only on the grounds of treaty agreements but also on the basis of opposition to the violent desecration of sacred sites. Some of the rhetorical strategies deployed in this case speak directly to this relationship with the land and center Western Shoshone ways of knowing the world that are incompatible with American understandings of space. At the same time, however, the desire for material change necessitates that the protesters deploy rhetorics tailored to American audiences in advocating for material change. Many of the rhetorics analyzed in this piece were produced for or in cooperation with White Americans who are often unfamiliar with Western Shoshone traditions. This article attempts to walk the line between recognizing the Western Shoshone epistemologies that provide context for these texts, such as differing understandings of the space occupied by the test site, and audience-focused analysis that realizes many of the tactics deployed in these protests are directed at White American audiences and may, therefore, draw less heavily on traditional Western Shoshone communication practices.

This article, then, analyzes both the verbal and the embodied forms of protest that have been incorporated into resistance at the Nevada Test Site. My analysis centers on the use of symbols of nationhood such as passports and flags as a means of enacting Western Shoshone sovereignty. This argument emerged from a close reading of the texts. I have chosen to analyze a number of firsthand accounts of protests as well as documents (such as passports) associated with those protests, and visual images and videos of the protests along with written materials published online in opposition to the site. These texts come from a variety of sources, including the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, the personal collections of protest participants, websites published by opponents of the test site, and Corbin Harney's accounting of the protests and Western Shoshone relationship to the land at the test site, *The Way it Is: One Water ... One Air ... One Mother Earth*. These texts have been chosen to provide a well-rounded accounting for the multiplicity of ways that the protesters have challenged colonialism at the site, as well as for their rich content that provides for depth of analysis. In the following sections, I provide a brief historical context for the protests this article discusses, offer my reading of the protests, and explore the potential implications of these protests for scholarly understandings of indigenous protest rhetoric.



## The Treaty of Ruby Valley and the Nevada Test Site

In 1863, the U.S. government negotiated the Treaty of Ruby Valley with the Western Shoshone Nation. This treaty outlined agreements about the use and custody of the Western Shoshone territory *Newe Segobia*, which stretched from what we know as southern Idaho to Southern California, and encompassed much of the state of Nevada.<sup>1</sup> The treaty allowed the U.S. government to establish military bases for the purpose of maintaining safety for travelers, rail lines, and communications infrastructure; permitted mining and ranching in the territory; created provisions for the president of the United States to establish reservations for the Western Shoshone within the territory; and guaranteed the Western Shoshone compensation for the use of the land and resources in the territory (Treaty of Ruby Valley, 1863). In 1941, the area that would eventually encompass the nuclear test site was designated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as the Las Vegas Bombing and Gunnery Range (Fehner & Gosling, 2000). The site was chosen because, according to the U.S. government, the desert was unsuitable for human habitation or use for any purpose other than minor cattle grazing or weapons testing (Fehner & Gosling, 2000). In 1950, sections of the gunnery range were appropriated for nuclear weapons testing, and the site was used intermittently between 1951 and 1992 when the U.S. ceased nuclear weapons testing in response to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (Beck, 2002). After challenges from members of the Western Shoshone Nation regarding this use of the land included in the Treaty of Ruby Valley, the United States offered to buy the land in 1979 and created a trust in the Department of Interior, where money was deposited on behalf of the Western Shoshone (Beck, 2002). Although those who opposed the test site refused to accept the trust funds or approve the use of the land for nuclear testing, the U.S. government forcibly distributed the money under the Western Shoshone Claims Distribution Act of 2004, justifying the use of lands in *Newe Segobia* for expanded geothermal energy production and privatization (Fishel, 2006; Harney, 1995).

Western Shoshone opposition is by no means universal. Although many Western Shoshone individuals oppose nuclear testing from an ecological or religious perspective, others are unconcerned with the nuclearization of *Newe Segobia* and are more interested in violations of sovereignty, and still others have worked with the Department of Energy (Kuletz, 1998). Those who oppose the test site are also divided; although some are willing to create alliances with White opponents of nuclear testing, others are skeptical of coalitional work (Kuletz, 1998). Those who embrace alliances with White protesters to gain attention through large numbers have worked extensively with a Catholic group called the Nevada Desert Experience. This group originated with a demonstration in 1982 called the Lenten Desert Experience, organized by a group of Franciscan workers hoping to bring attention to the violence of nuclearization supported by testing in Nevada (Lynch, 2005). As the group evolved, they began to incorporate environmentalist and pacifist concerns that had been prevalent in nonindigenous protests at the site with Western Shoshone concerns about sovereignty and defilement of sacred land. In the late 1980s, the Nevada Desert Experience formed a coalition with the Western Shoshone Nation that would develop innovative protest strategies to challenge the testing of nuclear weapons in *Newe Segobia* (Haber, 2011; Rosse, 1995).

The protest tactics analyzed in this article upend conventional understandings of borders, nationhood, and citizenship. The Western Shoshone granted White Americans permission to enter their nation, challenging assumptions about the racial and ethnic identities of border crossers, the location of U.S. borders, and the (in)dependence of indigenous nations. These tactics have appropriated colonial rhetorics of nationhood and borders, appealing to Western notions of treaty-based international relations, to demonstrate the incoherence of American colonialism and assert Western Shoshone sovereignty over *Newe Segobia*. In the following sections I explore some of the

<sup>1</sup>The territory is referred to as both *Newe Segobia* and *Newene Segobia* in the protest materials analyzed in this essay. Because *Newe Segobia* is more common in the literature, this article uses *Newe Segobia* except when referring to texts that use *Newene Segobia*.

ways in which sovereignty has been enacted and the implications of these protests for the study of indigenous protest rhetoric and nuclear colonialism.

### **Antinuclear resistance strategies at the Nevada Nuclear Test Site**

This coalition has incorporated numerous strategies to highlight the tensions between their understanding of the space occupied by the Nevada Test Site and the U.S. government's interpretations and uses of that same space. This section investigates these protests to appreciate the ways these protesters attempt to convey the meaning of sovereignty and borders.

### **Passports**

One of the most powerful rhetorical strategies used by the Western Shoshone and Nevada Desert Experience began in January 1987, when Western Shoshone leaders began issuing permits for protesters to enter Shoshone land during demonstrations (Rosse, 1995). Still issued today, these permits read as follows:

Permit for non-Western Shoshone citizen to enter the Southern Zone of the Western Shoshone Nation (aka the Nevada Test Site). ... To be valid this permit must be signed by an officer of the Western Shoshone Nation, and must be carried at all times when within the zone indicated. Upon request, this permit must be made available to an officer of the Western Shoshone National Council (WSNC) and may be revoked at any time by the officer or the WSNC. (Western Shoshone Nation, n.d.)

Protesters receiving these permits participate in acts of civil disobedience by crossing over into the testing grounds and showing their passports to the police officers who arrest them for trespassing. The protesters incorporate the arrests into the structure of the protests by challenging the arrests, using the permits to enact the Western Shoshone's arguments about their sovereignty, as the American protesters refuse to recognize the legal right of U.S. officials to arrest them in territory they argue is controlled by the Western Shoshone. This refusal to cooperate is an attack on the assumed legitimacy of the borders (or lack thereof) that mark the physical space of the desert. Mignolo (2011) and Wanzer (2012) called this strategy of delinking from colonialism by challenging Western claims to universal knowledge systems "epistemic disobedience." The arrested protesters, by refusing to share the police officers' understandings of jurisdiction in the territory, are challenging a form of knowledge that has been naturalized in favor of a different understanding of the space situated within knowledge systems produced by the Western Shoshone Nation.

The refusal to participate in the construction of American control of the space is an act of resistance that goes beyond the physical movement of bodies into a place marked as secure, to the deconstruction of a space created through colonial rhetoric and attempt to renew understandings of that space that existed prior to American colonization. The protesters challenge the relegation of the Treaty of Ruby Valley and Western Shoshone sovereignty to the past, reasserting their presence in the present in a display of the temporal rhetorics that Lake (1991) discussed. McKerrow (1999) argued that people can deconstruct spaces by embracing the concurrent "sense of here/now *and* not here/now." This protest strategy challenges understandings of here and now that grant the U.S. control of the space and instead reasserts Western Shoshone control that was assumed at the time of the Treaty of Ruby Valley. By rejecting understandings of the space that have been naturalized in Western colonial narratives, the protesters challenge the colonial power structures that created those narratives, highlighting alternative possibilities for how the space might be configured that are grounded in history.

Protesters have reiterated this challenge to U.S. authority during the line crossings by refusing to recognize any authority other than the Western Shoshone National Council. Western Shoshone citizen Bill Rosse, Sr., for example, has participated in protests by handing out permits to protesters at the site. In one recounting of this participation, Rosse (1995) stated,

I'm gonna be one of these guys coming around here with a clipboard and giving people permission to be here. So if they want to arrest somebody, they can arrest me, or the Western Shoshone National Council actually, since I'm their representative. (pp. 144-145)

Rosse's challenge to police to arrest him or the Western Shoshone National Council members for giving people permission to be on the land demonstrates the spirit of these protests. Members put their bodies on the line to support Western Shoshone sovereignty and challenge the authority of the United States to dictate the use of the land occupied by the test site or to allow or disallow individuals to be present.<sup>2</sup> Rather than ask the federal government to recognize the right of Western Shoshone citizens to access the land, the Western Shoshone protesters assumed that right as well as the right to decide which other individuals could be on the land.

## Signs

In addition to the issuance of passports and the bodily occupation of the site, protesters at the site have also used a wealth of visual tactics to resist nuclear testing on land covered by the Treaty of Ruby Valley. This article focuses primarily on the erecting or modification of signs to convey protests' messages. In one protest, the Western Shoshone covered signs from the United States declaring the test site to be a secure area and banning trespassers with a sign of their own that reads:

Welcome to the Western Shoshone Nation

Newene Segobia

In 1863 the Treaty of Ruby Valley between the Shoshone people and the U.S. Government recognized this land as the Western Shoshone Homeland. This treaty is still the law of the land! The Nevada National Security Site is illegal. (Haber, 2011)

The sign opens by contesting U.S. control of the space occupied by the test site while welcoming visitors to *Newe Segobia*. Although the United States declares that crossing into that space is a crime (trespassing), the Western Shoshone welcome individuals to visit their nation. The placement of the sign communicates a determination to assert control, literally papering over the commands of the United States in favor of hospitality offered by the Western Shoshone. This once again asserts the Western Shoshone right to interact how they wish with the territory without the permission of the U.S. government and encourages antinuclear protesters to enter the land without requesting U.S. approval as a means of challenging U.S. authority over the space. In addition, the sign frames U.S. actions such as arresting protesters as illegal, as they do not respect the supreme authority of the Western Shoshone National Council. In this way, U.S. officials become the criminals who are failing to honor the "law of the land," taking prisoners in a space where they have no legal authority to do so.

By calling on the treaty to support the authority of the Western Shoshone National Council, the sign also argues that the United States has failed to uphold its own laws. The Treaty of Ruby Valley, the sign argues, is a legally binding contract that determines the border between two nations. By failing to adhere to those borders, the United States has violated this treaty. In essence, U.S. officials are exercising an authority that the U.S. government abdicated with the signing of the Treaty of Ruby Valley, failing to follow the laws even of their presumptive sovereign. By arresting protesters, then, these officials are demonstrating their own lack of understanding of international law and supporting a rogue nation.

The sign also makes explicit the argument implicitly forwarded by the welcoming of visitors to *Newe Segobia*. The bottom half of the sign includes a declaration about the illegality of the test site,

<sup>2</sup>Although it is not the primary focus of this article, the connection between corporeality and protest is worth examination. Those interested may find a good exploration of the relationship between bodies, discursive colonization, and resistance in Grosz (1994). Future research on the relationship between corporeality and allies or accomplices may also be warranted.



citing the Treaty of Ruby Valley. Calling the treaty “the law of the land” rejects U.S. authority to dictate laws or ban trespassing (while coopting language used to uphold that authority) and affirms the power of the Western Shoshone National Council to make those kinds of decisions. This tactic appeals to the commitments of yesterday that the U.S. government has abandoned in favor of expansionism and entreats the United States to comply with those international agreements. In effect, the protesters call upon conventions of international law to remind audiences of the bounds to U.S. governmental authority. Rather than accepting the naturalized assumption that the U.S. Constitution is the “law of the land” for all of the territory between the Canadian and Mexican borders from the Atlantic to Pacific, the sign asserts a different law for this land—the land that the Western Shoshone argue was never legally a part of the United States.

The posting of new signs is not the only challenge to signage posted by the United States. In fact, images of other protests show the same sign discussed in the preceding section, but this time, rather than covered, it is marked by graffiti that challenges American dominance. The sign originally read

You are now entering the Nevada Test Site

No trespassing

By order of the United States Department of Energy. (Harney, 1995, p. 138)

On the graffitied sign, “United States” is crossed out, with “Western Shoshone” written underneath; unlike the sign-covering-sign of the earlier analysis, this marked sign does not welcome visitors but warns away trespassers, although who is the trespasser and who is the rightful authority is reversed. For the Western Shoshone National Council to declare that no trespassing is allowed in the territory is to rebuke all those individuals associated with nuclear testing and other government activities at the test site as criminals for entering the territory without permission from the Council. This crossing-out also creates a dual meaning. In addition to reading, “You are now entering the Nevada Test Site, No trespassing, By order of the Western Shoshone,” the sign also reads “By order of the Western Shoshone, RESIST.” This message urges those who would support Western Shoshone sovereignty to refuse U.S. domination of the space in favor of supporting Western Shoshone authority in the territory.

Although the graffiti accomplishes many of the same goals as the covered sign, it has the added benefit of simultaneously covering and revealing the sign asserting U.S. control of the land, rather than simply covering—and thereby concealing—the original sign. This coexistence with the colonizer’s assertion of authority inserts a Western Shoshone voice into what has been understood by the public as a monologue. Rather than allowing the United States to maintain a monopoly on authoritative signage at the test site, the protesters force their perspective into the view of anyone reading the sign. The graffiti challenges the attempted erasure of indigenous people from the public imagination for the purpose of American expansionism.

The combination of the messages on the sign marked by graffiti works as a palimpsest—a textual medium whose original text has been deemed no longer necessary or desirable and has been partially wiped away to make room for a new text (de Groot & Leuven, 2014). The original text on a palimpsest never fully disappears, just as the original message of this sign is still visible. But the covering over of the old text with the new emphasizes shifting value systems and priorities; the new text partially replaces the old text because the old text is not deemed valuable enough for independent preservation. Similarly, the rewriting of this sign via graffiti challenges the desirability of U.S. jurisdiction over the land occupied by the test site and recenters Western Shoshone sovereignty. At the same time, this rewriting demands a return to a territorial understanding that was present before the violation of the Treaty of Ruby Valley. The sign does not just reject the old meaning in favor of the new but challenges the idea that the old meaning was natural or historic in the first place by harkening back to an understanding of the space that predated the establishment of U.S. government control and the development of the test site. By centering the Treaty of Ruby

Valley, the Western Shoshone remind the U.S. government of past commitments that have been forsaken and challenge the government to restore a state of international relations between the United States and Western Shoshone that existed prior to the violation of these commitments.

## Naming

In addition to framing U.S. actions at the site as illegal and reappropriating treaty rhetoric to challenge U.S. occupation at the site, these signs also function to challenge U.S. naming of the space where the test site is located. Naming is a crucial element of human reality building; by naming experiences, we assign value, categorize in ways that highlight some elements of experience while casting others in shadow, and justify or condemn behaviors (Burke, 1954; McKerrow, 1999). This is particularly relevant in cases of disputed space, as the power to name a space becomes the power to control it. Disputes over the naming of space have historical significance for indigenous people in North America. For example, the (re)naming of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument as a replacement for what had previously been named Custer's Last Stand was the subject of heated debate. Indigenous advocates opposed to the glorification of General Custer that was communicated by the original name clashed with Custer historians who argued that the name had historic significance (Buchholtz, 2012). Similarly, by maintaining the indigenous name for the territory in question advocates for Western Shoshone jurisdiction challenge the U.S. government's authority not only to occupy the space but to exert any control over it, even in name.

U.S. government officials, then, are careful to refer to the territory where the test site is located as "the territory described in the Treaty of Ruby Valley" (*Northwestern Bands of Shoshone Indians vs. United States*, 1945). This naming may be an attempt by the U.S. government to abdicate responsibility for the treaty. By naming the space in this way, U.S. officials call on the treaty as something done in the past—something their ancestors implemented over which they had no control—and therefore obfuscate their own complicity in the continued use of the territory for militarized purposes today through the use of temporal rhetorics to minimize the treaty to a historical artifact rather than living agreement (Lake, 1991).

For the sign to name the space occupied by the test site as *Newe Segobia* is to reassert Western Shoshone custody of the land. This naming also reasserts separateness from the United States; the sign changes the nature of the border that resisters cross. Rather than being a boundary between publicly accessible land and a restricted-access security site within the same nation, the line the resisters cross becomes an international border. By using passports when they cross over the border, protesters refuse understandings of this border that situate the Western Shoshone Nation as a protectorate or territory of the United States and instead frame their movement across the border as crossing from one independent nation to another, behaving according to their belief that the Western Shoshone Nation is a separate entity from the United States.

By reclaiming the power to name the territory, the sign enacts Western Shoshone sovereignty and reborders the space. Naming the site as *Newe Segobia* asserts the separateness of the territory from the United States by framing it as a distinct nation. In this way, the protests enact Western Shoshone sovereignty over the site and encourage those reading the sign to rethink their understanding of the space. Similarly, opponents to the site who write for Healing Ourselves and Mother Earth, or H.O.M.E., a nonprofit organization dedicated to education and research surrounding nuclear issues, argue that "the Western Shoshone are the most bombed nation on Earth, with over 1,000 nuclear bombs detonated on their land by the U.S. and Great Britain since 1987" (Healing Ourselves and Mother Earth, n.d., para. 3). This type of rhetoric serves to reiterate the idea that the Western Shoshone are an independent nation rather than a subset of the United States and that continued use of their land is a form of imperial violence and war. This use of naming allows opponents of the site not only to assert Western Shoshone sovereignty but also to highlight that the U.S. actions at the test site are acts of international aggression. The Western Shoshone protesters have built a complex and

sophisticated system of protest strategies that use numerous rhetorical approaches to appeal to audiences on both traditional and novel grounds. By deploying passports and signs, and by naming the site in ways that contradict U.S. understandings of the site, the protesters have worked to undermine the power relations at play through appropriation and rhetorical maneuvering. The following section of this article turns toward the broader implications of these protests for rhetorical theory and scholarly understandings of indigenous protests, bordering, and nuclear colonialism.

### Implications of antitestng protests for rhetorical theory

The reading of protests at the Nevada Test Site through the lens of sovereignty and nationhood offers the chance to expand on current scholarly understandings of indigenous protest strategies. The protesters have enacted Western Shoshone sovereignty through myriad means to challenge U.S. colonial understandings of space in the Nevada desert. In this section, I explore the implications of this study for two broader questions in rhetorical theory. First, I challenge the dichotomous understanding of indigenous protest rhetoric as either consummatory or instrumental by arguing that the tactics and maneuvers deployed in these protests both functioned as a means of building community within the Western Shoshone Nation and of making material demands on the U.S. government for change. Second, I discuss the ways that these protests might add to scholars' understanding of the ways nuclear colonialism is carried out and resisted.

### Consummatory and instrumental rhetoric

This article attempts to expand on Lake's (1983) concept of consummatory protests that "treats Native Americans as independent entities of stature equal to that of other recognized 'nations,' including the United States, and thereby enacts the demand for sovereignty" (p. 140). The protests at the Nevada Test Site have absolutely served a consummatory function, treating Western Shoshone sovereignty as an assumed status, rather than a right or privilege to be granted by the U.S. government. The use of permits, for example, works to enact Western Shoshone sovereignty by challenging the authority of officials of the United States (or the state of Nevada) to arrest protesters present in the space occupied by the test site. The permits assert the authority of the Western Shoshone National Council as the governing body responsible for determining who has permission to enter the space.

However, at the same time they have made material demands on the U.S. government to respect that sovereignty. They have attempted to hold the United States accountable for its past agreements, calling on treaties to remind the United States of its obligations and challenge the testing of nuclear weapons on sacred sites. The insertion of a Western Shoshone voice into spaces that had been previously dominated by the U.S. government (such as signs at the borders of the test site) complicates audiences' ability to maintain their naturalized understanding of the United States as uncontestedly sovereign. By challenging nonindigenous audiences (including U.S. government employees) to recognize their own complicity in the colonization of *Newe Segobia*, the protests attempt not only to bring indigenous resisters together around a common bond but also to make demands on colonizers to rethink and begin making material change.

The protests' both/and approach is also evident in their appropriation and challenging of colonial rhetorics. Appeals to treaty law, bordering discourses, and nationhood draw on Western understandings of sovereignty that are inconsistent with precolonial understandings of space and jurisdiction for the Western Shoshone. For example, "ownership" of the land occupied by the Nevada Test Site was once shared between the Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute with little to no conflict (Kuletz, 1998). This ownership differed significantly from notions of property that derive from Western law. Although Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute agreements prior to colonization demonstrate clear understandings of land possession and occupation, these agreements differ from the Western understanding of property "as a delegation of sovereign power" (Harris, 1993, p. 1724).

Historically, possession of land in the United States has been legally defined according to cultural practices that associate property ownership with Whiteness. Harris (1993) argued that these historic ties have been so tightly woven as to construct Whiteness itself as property. Western legal definitions of property ownership, then, have relied heavily on notions of development or “proper” use of land that have excluded indigenous practices in order to justify colonization of indigenous lands. Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute agreements, on the other hand, delineated familial connections to particular territories and outlined appropriate channels for activity on land controlled by other nations but did not codify property as a means of defining racial identity as American law did.

Prior to colonization, the land that now constitutes the test site was divided into three districts, which were subsets of the Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute nations (Stoffle, Halmo, Olmsted, & Evans, 1990). These districts were recognized by both nations, but land use was governed by mutual agreement rather than codified treaties. Residents of one district might make agreements to share resources with residents of another district based on familial ties or long-standing trade relationships (Stoffle et al., 1990). This relationship to the land is based on mutual care between the land and occupants and mutual respect of jurisdiction between nations (Harney, 1995). The reliance on a treaty that defines the entire test site as belonging to the Western Shoshone Nation, then, is a reliance not only on a Western law that excluded Southern Paiute jurisdiction but also on Western notions of property as sovereignty that differ from precolonial agreements. However, by using vocabularies familiar to U.S. audiences, the protests attempt to challenge those audiences to recognize the contradictions embedded in those systems. Calling on treaties that have been violated demonstrates the U.S. government’s failures to adhere to its own legal systems, and using rhetorics of sovereignty that establish Western Shoshone land rights problematizes U.S. use of the land in ways that are objectionable to protesters.

This appropriation of rhetorics traditionally used in colonial ways demonstrates the necessity of complicating scholarly understandings of colonial and decolonial rhetoric. It is not sufficient to divide rhetorical strategies into those used by the colonizers and those used by the colonized. Rather, it is important to recognize that indigenous protesters may also appropriate tools of colonization as a means of breaking down colonial systems. This, of course, taps into ongoing scholarly debates about the value of appropriating colonial tools for decolonial work. Audre Lorde (2003) famously argued that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 25) Van Toorn (2000), however, maintained that appropriating the master’s tools is both a necessary strategy for indigenous challengers to colonialism and particularly revolutionary, as it challenges the master’s ability to define the terms under which his tools may be used. These protests challenge the division between using and rejecting the master’s tools. The protesters in this case have utilized colonial tools, but they have used them to point out the already existing flaws in colonial systems and to make material demands for change in those systems.

## Nuclear colonialism

In addition to exploring the deployment of consummatory and instrumental rhetoric in decolonial advocacy, this article adds to extant literature on nuclear colonialism. The rhetoric analyzed throughout this piece demonstrates the sometimes inextricable nature of nuclear expansion and colonialism. Endres (2009b) argued that “nuclear colonialism is significantly a rhetorical phenomenon that employs particular discursive strategies for enabling the perpetuation of nuclearism, continuation of colonialism, and deliberate exclusion of indigenous voices from decision-making” (p. 40). In recognizing the discourse that supports nuclear colonialism, it is also valuable to consider the rhetorics that advocates have deployed to challenge nuclear colonialism. Taylor, Kinsella, Depoe, and Metzler (2005) called for increased research on the ways that groups might challenge nuclear weapons development. This article has attempted to offer one such movement. In this section, I continue to expand on this theme, offering two specific nuclear discourses that have been prevalent in this case. First, I discuss the ways that wastelanding discourse served to perpetuate colonialism

through nuclear development in this instance, and second, I explore the ways questions of national security were involved in this case.

Numerous scholars of nuclear colonialism have noted that the rhetorical construction of desert spaces as wastelands is used to justify nuclear mining, testing, and dumping, in turn creating literal toxic wastelands in those spaces (Endres, 2009a, 2012; Kuletz, 1998; Makhijani, Hu, & Yih, 1995; Voyles, 2015). This process of constructing the desert as an uninhabitable wasteland serves to rhetorically empty the space to make way for nuclear tests, erasing the people who have ties to the land. The protesters in this case challenged this rhetorical erasure by asserting presence and by bodily occupying the space to impede operations that required a presumably empty space. In addition, the use of prayers and assertion of spiritual connection to the land challenged the depiction of the desert as a barren wasteland with little worth for uses other than nuclear activity.

In addition to wastelanding discourses, rhetorics of national security have been extremely important in this case. McNamera (2007) argued that national security has been essential in garnering support for the growing U.S. nuclear weapons complex. The belief that nuclear deterrence provides safety for U.S. citizens maintains public faith in the necessity of a nuclear program. In the context of the Nevada Test Site, these arguments rely on an assumption of Western Shoshone inclusion in the United States. The justification for testing nuclear weapons at the Nevada Test Site supposes that the potential risks of those tests are outweighed by the national security benefits resulting from those tests. However, for protesters who consider the Western Shoshone Nation to be separate from the United States, American national security comes at the expense of Western Shoshone national security. Endres (2009b, 2012) has already explored the ways that national security discourse excludes indigenous voices by framing national security as a universal benefit that outweighs negative consequences. The protests in this article speak back at this decision calculus by challenging the notion that the Western Shoshone Nation benefits from American national security. By asserting sovereignty and demanding that U.S. audiences recognize that sovereignty, these protesters challenge the foundational assumption of nuclear colonialist discourses.

Endres (2009b) argued that “if the rhetoric of nuclear colonialism is designed to exclude American Indian nations from deliberation ... then the hope for challenging nuclear colonialism must come from resistance outside the deliberative system” (p. 55). This article has explored one set of protests that work from outside of normative deliberative processes and appropriate the rhetorics of colonialism to highlight and challenge the foundations of nuclear colonialism. These protests demonstrate the ways that justifications for nuclear development are often shaped by colonial understandings of the world and work to dismantle those colonial discourses as part of their challenge to nuclear expansion.

## Conclusion

The protests analyzed in this article serve as a valuable site for expanding current understandings of indigenous protest rhetoric. These protests demonstrate the ability of indigenous resistance to both exercise a consummatory function that enacts sovereignty absent colonial approval and challenge audiences who benefit from colonialism to reconsider their assumptions that support colonial violence. These protesters begin from a different orientation than the U.S. government or mainstream audiences, forcing viewers to question the ground on which they stand.

Burke (1954) wrote, “A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (p. 49). When mainstream audiences to indigenous protest see the United States as sovereign, as rightfully existing, as controlling North America from sea to shining sea, they are not seeing the indigenous nations that have been systematically erased to make way for U.S. expansion. The strategies carried out in these protests flip those conventional ways of seeing on their heads. Rather than starting by assuming U.S. control and asking for a return of sovereignty, the Western Shoshone start by



assuming their own right to exist and exercise sovereignty and then enact that sovereignty in ways that highlight the injustice of the Nevada Nuclear Test Site. The protests encourage audiences to understand that their way of seeing has been crafted through colonialism and that it is neither natural nor just to continue understanding the world in the ways they previously had. Rather than starting from a point of considering the indigenous right to sovereignty, American audiences of these protests are asked to go further by reconsidering their own right to exist and be governed on land that belongs to indigenous nations.

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