

SINGING A NEW SONG: THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN INDIGENOUS STRATEGIES OF NONVIOLENT SOCIAL CHANGE

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Summary

This chapter explores the ways in which a number of Indigenous peoples' songs facilitate nonviolent social change. The author draws on historical and contemporary nonviolent social movements in which American Indian, Australian Aboriginal and First Nations peoples have implemented song in ways that support the principles of nonviolence. As an integral part of these Indigenous peoples' cosmologies, song plays a powerful role in their creative strategies of nonviolent change. The case studies explored in this chapter illuminate the long history of both principled and pragmatic nonviolence among a number of Indigenous peoples in Canada, Australia and The United States. This text includes a number of examples of specific roles that song plays in these Indigenous peoples' processes of nonviolent social change. A number of songs are analyzed in relation to their role in educating others about the effectiveness of nonviolence. Other songs provide evidence of raising awareness of specific injustices

suffered by Indigenous peoples. And still other songs provide details of the ways song maintains the spirits of oppressed Indigenous peoples by building hope that a more peaceful society can be created through the practice of nonviolence. The author also explores ways in which songs reinforce Indigenous peoples' identities under threat by assimilation. Latter sections describe the ways in which songs serve as repositories and disseminators of Indigenous knowledge, assisting in the reduction of epistemic violence toward Aboriginal Australians, American Indians and First Nations peoples. Exploring the ways in which these Indigenous peoples' songs weave a web of connections with non-Indigenous supporters, the text also demonstrates songs' role in creating a more powerful coalition of nonviolent change agents. The chapter builds a strong case for the central role of song in nonviolent social change, particularly in reducing direct and structural violence toward Indigenous peoples living in colonized countries.

1. Introduction

Song plays a powerful role in the lives of Indigenous peoples in Australia and North America. On these continents many Indigenous peoples consider song to be a process that both animates and continues to sustain the cosmos. For example, Pawnee American Indian stories of creation explain that the world was created through the song of the stars. Aboriginal Australians describe the song lines that run throughout their country, connecting all things. Within Indigenous oral culture, song is a particularly powerful and familiar way of influencing others, of storing and sharing information. As integral processes of American Indian, First Nations and Aboriginal Australian ways of being and knowing, songs are vital processes in the lives of these peoples.

Given the constitutive role of song in First Nations, Aboriginal Australian and American Indian cosmologies, it is not surprising that song plays a major role in these Indigenous people's movements for nonviolent social change. Within these movements, songs reinforce the collective identities of Indigenous peoples, even under the severe threats posed by colonization. Indigenous activists have been known to disrupt their opponents by singing in ways that challenge the power of the dominant political systems, often giving voice to songs that have been banned by their oppressors. Through their songs, these Indigenous peoples also educate others about the goals of nonviolence and the effectiveness of adhering to nonviolent principles. In some campaigns, their songs have carried coded messages to others within the movement, sharing information needed to save the people from further violence and even death.

The impact of songs within nonviolent social change relies on more than words. The lyrics combine with music in ways that affect people both emotionally and intellectually. Songs stir the spirits of listeners, creating a liminal space in which people can 'lose themselves' and become something new through the experience. The connections facilitated through the liminal experience of singing also support Aboriginal Australian, First Nation and American Indian people's epistemologies, honoring their connections to current generations, ancestors and generations yet to come. Songs appeal to people's minds, hearts and spirits, combining all three aspects of human experience into a powerful force of change. Thus song is well suited to these Indigenous people's social movements, many of which emphasize a balance of intellectual, emotional and spiritual processes.

American Indian, Aboriginal Australian and First Nation peoples' use of song in nonviolent social change demonstrates their application of *moral imagination*. Conflict transformation scholar John Paul Lederach's research illuminates the role that the moral imagination plays in transcending cycles of violence, such as those experienced by Indigenous peoples in colonized countries. Lederach maintains that the moral imagination requires: embracing the complexities of violent situations, a belief in and practice of creative actions, and 'stepping into the mystery', the largely unknown lands of nonviolence. As will be illustrated in this chapter, American Indian, First Nations and Aboriginal Australian peoples' songs give voice to the moral imagination, singing up the often silenced histories of colonial conflict, and creatively envisioning ways of living in peace with their enemies.

This chapter explores the ways in which First Nations peoples, American Indians and Aboriginal Australians use song as an integral part of both principled and pragmatic nonviolence. To a large extent, these Indigenous peoples sing to decrease the violence of colonization which historically has decimated their peoples, and continues to present serious challenges to their survival. The first section in this chapter illustrates the role that song plays in Australian and North American Indigenous social movements which could be categorized as principled nonviolence. The next section explores ways in which Aboriginal Australian, American Indian and First Nations peoples use song as a tactic of pragmatic nonviolence. The final sections of this chapter illuminate some of the specific roles that the songs of these Indigenous peoples play in both principled and pragmatic nonviolent social change

2. American Indian and First Nation Song and Principled Nonviolence

In principled nonviolence, both the goals and the processes of the movement are firmly based on the philosophical tenets of nonviolence. Participants of principled nonviolence are exhorted to be nonviolent in thought, word and deed. A number of First Nations and American Indian societies have at times been based on comprehensive philosophies of nonviolence. Within these Indigenous societies, song has played a powerful role in establishing and maintaining nonviolent principles and processes.

2.3 The Ghost Dance Songs

One of the most significant examples of American Indian use of song in principled nonviolence can be found in the Ghost Dance, a ceremony practiced by a number of Western American Indian tribes in the late 1800s. Wovoka, a Paiute Indian medicine man in California, originated the ceremony that rapidly spread across many American Indian nations with its message of nonviolence. The philosophy of the Ghost Dance was one of peace and Wovoka adjured adherents to 'do no harm to anyone, do right always...do not tell lies...you must not fight.' Wovoka's doctrine was entirely pacifistic, stressing the importance of avoiding violence, even in thought.

The songs of the Ghost Dance taught the philosophy of nonviolence and built hope for American Indian participants that such a change was both possible and worthwhile. Many of the songs reinforced traditional beliefs and values of these American Indian peoples, reminding them they had more to sustain themselves than warfare. Moving

from a philosophy of warriors to a philosophy of nonviolence presented a tremendous challenge for the members of these American Indian Nations. In his seminal research into the Ghost Dance and its songs, James Mooney, American ethnographer for the Smithsonian, stated:

It is hardly possible for us to realize the tremendous and radical change which this doctrine works in the whole spirit of savage life. The career of every Indian has been the warpath. His proudest title has been that of warrior...Now comes a prophet as a messenger from God to forbid not only war, but all that savors of war...It is such a revolution as comes but once in the life of a race.

Although Mooney's discourse is shaped by now outdated beliefs about race, he clearly recognizes the tremendous paradigmatic shift in which the Ghost Dancers were involved.

The Ghost Dance songs played a major role in this dramatic change process, strengthening the dancers through words that held the promise of a better world based on a number of traditional values and beliefs. These songs reinforced hope for the cultural and physical survival of these peoples who were facing starvation, dislocation, and death at the hands of White settlers and agents of the American Government.

The Ghost Dance songs also served as principled nonviolence having pragmatic outcomes, as they countered the challenges posed by the epistemic violence evidenced in the colonial program to eliminate American Indian ways of knowing. At the time of the Ghost Dance, the teaching of traditional American Indian values and knowledge was prohibited by reservation agents and missionaries. One role of the Ghost Dance songs was to resurrect the traditional knowledge the people needed to strengthen and sustain themselves in the task of living nonviolently in the face of extreme violence. The songs also protested epistemic violence by giving voice to traditional Indigenous knowledge, nonviolently resisting the colonial restrictions against its dissemination.

As well, the Ghost Dance songs taught specific principles of nonviolence. As James Mooney explained:

The Ghost-dance songs are of the utmost importance in connection with the study of the messiah religion, as we find embodied in them much of the doctrine itself, with more of the special tribal mythologies, together with such innumerable references to old-time customs, ceremonies, and modes of life... as make up a regular symposium of aboriginal thought and practice.

It was this compendium of philosophies of nonviolence and traditional Indigenous knowledge that the colonial authorities sought to destroy, and that the Ghost Dancer participants voiced through song.

Contemporary American Indian music continues to celebrate the ways in which American Indian peoples are strengthened by the principles of nonviolence underlying the Ghost Dance. In his song 'Ghost Dance,' Robbie Robertson, a musician of Mohawk descent, illuminates the principle of loving nonviolent resistance to violence that formed

the philosophical underpinnings of the Ghost Dance ceremony. This stance taken by the Ghost Dancers demonstrates principles of nonviolence similar to those of Gandhian *satyagrahis* who are exhorted to not fear for their bodies, but to respond to violence with love. Through Robertson's song, modern day listeners are encouraged to reflect on the power of this stance which has been described as moral ju-jitsu, deflecting violence with love. Robertson's lyrics state:

*You can kill my body
You can kill my soul
For not believing in your god
And some world down below...*

*You don't stand a chance against my prayers
You don't stand a chance against my love.*

In "Ghost Dance", Robertson also uses words from a historical Commanche Ghost Dance song, illustrating the ways in which the music encouraged Ghost Dancers to maintain hope for a better life, even though they were surrounded by settler peoples seeking their extinction. In the following verse, this Commanche song encourages the Ghost Dancers to not give up in the face of extreme violence, but to hope for a better era:

*We shall live again,
We shall live again.*

Robertson also incorporates lyrics from a traditional Ghost Dance song of the Crow Nation. The words of this song encourage American Indian tribes to hold onto their values and traditions until conditions improve and they can freely and openly live in ways that reflect their values and beliefs. In Robertson's music, traditional Ghost Dance songs express a modern format, calling for American Indian and First Nations listeners to keep hope alive, relying on the connections with the natural world that characterize their Native epistemologies. The words of the Crow Ghost Dance song relate this message:

*The whole world is coming
A nation is coming, a nation is coming,
The Eagle has brought the message to the tribe.
The father says so, the father says so
Over the whole earth they are coming.
The buffalo are coming, the buffalo are coming.
The Crow has brought the message to the tribe,
The father says so, the father says so.*

The Ghost Dance songs provide an example of the ways in which American Indian peoples have incorporated music as part of a major social movement based on the philosophy and practice of nonviolence. These songs strongly demonstrate the moral imagination through the ways in which they facilitated 'stepping into the mystery' of the nonviolence that lies beyond the cycles of violence they are experiencing. The songs

of the Ghost Dance created a powerful liminal space for participants, and many of them went into a trance-like state where they reported visiting with ancestors who encouraged them to persevere. The Ghost Dance movement died out shortly after many of its adherents were massacred at Wounded Knee. However, the story of this principled nonviolent campaign continues to provide a moving example among contemporary American Indian Nations of the power of nonviolence and the role that song can play in sustaining the participants within such movements.

2.4 Song and the Founding of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy

Song played a major role in nonviolent social change during the founding of the Haudenosaunee confederacy, a group of five First Nations peoples who united around a thousand years ago (Since the addition of the Tuscarora in 1721, the confederacy has contained six nations). The Confederacy is based on the principles of nonviolence articulated in the Great Law of Peace. Haudenosaunee oral history describes the manner in which the Peacemaker, Deganawidah, brought principles of nonviolence to warring tribes in the Great Lakes region. The Senecas, Oneidas, Cayugas, Onandagas and Mohawks had been fighting among themselves for years and the violence had increased in intensity until it was affecting the tribes' very survival. Deganawidah came into the midst of this situation with a message describing nonviolent processes that, if undertaken, would lead to peace. Understandably, given a message of such radical change, the tribes were at first reluctant to listen to the Peacemaker.

According to many versions of the Haudenosaunee legend, song played a crucial role in influencing these nations to turn to nonviolent means of resolving conflicts. At one point the Oneidas, Cayugas and Mohawks had agreed to accept the nonviolent processes that Deganawidah was teaching. However, the Seneca tribe continued to war against them, refusing to accept the new principles. As part of nonviolent protest and persuasion, Deganawidah, along with leaders of the Oneidas, Cayugas and Mohawks, came into Seneca lands singing the Peace Hymn which celebrated the nonviolent processes and relationships which would lead to peace. The hymn played a significant role in the delegation convincing the Senecas to join the confederacy. However, the Haudenosaunee peacemaking process was not complete. The neighboring Onandaga nation, led by a powerful man named Tadodaho, refused to accept emissaries from the four tribes who had joined the confederacy. Once again, song provided a nonviolent process that assisted in turning the Onandaga from war to peaceful ways. The Peacemaker was repeatedly turned back from Onandaga lands. Some versions of the story say that the peacemaker then appealed to Jigonhsasee, a woman who had previously made her living feeding warriors on their journeys, but who had turned to nonviolence under Deganawidah's teachings. According to this legend, Jigonhsasee sang to Tadodaho, the leader of the Onandagas. Upon hearing Jigonhsasee's song, Tadodaho came out of the swamp, listening to the delegation for the first time. Thus began the transformation which led to the Onandaga becoming one of the members of the confederacy and accepting the principles of nonviolence underlying The Great Law of Peace.

On the current music scene, First Nations musician Joanne Shenandoah, Oneida singer-songwriter, has brought the Haudenosaunee philosophy of nonviolence to the wider

community through her album *The Peacemaker's Journey*. This compilation of songs summarizes the story of The Peacemaker and the establishment of the confederacy.

In her cover notes, Shenandoah describes the role of song in establishing the principles of nonviolence among the Haudenosaunee. In telling the story of the Peacemaker, Shenandoah recounts, Only the Onandagas remained apart, since they were under the control of Tadodaho. To convince the sorcerer of the power of the great law, Skennennrahowi (Mohawk name for The Peacemaker) brought together the leaders of the new league to the western shores of Onondaga Lake. Joining together and with everyone singing a song of peace, they set out in their canoes to challenge Tadodaho, finally persuading him to turn from war to peace.

As demonstrated in the Ghost Dance ceremony and the founding of the Haudensaunee confederacy, song has played a powerful role in historic and current principled nonviolence among First Nations and American Indian peoples. In addition, song has also played a critical role in pragmatic nonviolence among these peoples and Australian Aborigines. The next section explores a number of these peoples' campaigns in which they use song as a practical tool for instigating nonviolent social change.

3. American Indian Song and Pragmatic Nonviolence

When used as tools of pragmatic nonviolence, songs facilitate meeting specific objectives within larger social movements. Although such movements do not fully embrace a larger framework of nonviolence, their use of song has provided many practical examples of peaceful solutions to violence. The following section describes the role of song in three American Indian people's implementation of pragmatic nonviolence.

3.1 The Miwok Healing Song

F. David Peat's book *Blackfoot Physics* recounts a historical example of American Indian use of song as a pragmatic tactic of nonviolent persuasion. Peat recounts the story of the Miwok Indians of central California who were saved from extermination by the nonviolent persuasion of a Miwok song. In the 1800s, more and more of the land in California was being claimed by settlers, and the competition for resources was becoming increasingly violent. The Miwok peoples found themselves the target of vigilante groups seeking to kill them—a final solution to conflicts over land and other resources.

According to Miwok elders, the last group of surviving Miwok was tracked down and surrounded by an armed posse. Facing death, the Miwok requested that before the posse fired, the last Miwoks would be allowed to sing a healing song they held sacred, well known among the Miwok people to be a powerful source of change. Surrounded by raised weapons, the remaining Miwok began to sing, and as they sang, one by one the members of the posse lowered their guns, turned and rode away. Miwok descendants of these singers live today, recounting this story, a testimony to the power of song in nonviolent change, even under the most repressive of conditions.

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Biographical Sketch

Polly O. Walker is of Cherokee and Anglo-American descent and grew up on the traditional lands of the Mescalero Apache in the mountains of New Mexico. She earned her doctorate at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia where her research focused on conflict transformation between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australians. Her research interests include reducing structural violence toward Indigenous peoples' ontologies and epistemologies, transforming conflict between Indigenous and settler descended peoples in colonized countries, Indigenous peoples' peacemaking processes and histories, and decolonizing the theory and practice of conflict resolution. As a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, Polly's current work explores the role of ceremony in transforming conflict between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in colonized

countries. She has presented at a wide range of national and international conferences, and published her work in a number of journals both in Australia and the United States. Polly has been involved in dialogues between Native Scientists and quantum theorists, and is co-chair of the Indigenous Education Institute in the United States. Formerly a lecturer in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit at the University of Queensland, she has also been an adjunct associate professor for Colorado College, teaching intensive summer courses on Stradbroke Island. She is a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and has recently published a monologue on colonial racism as a part of the James Backhouse Lecture Series. Her work with the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies has taken her to The Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, where she has worked with chiefs from all of the provinces, exploring the development of cross cultural conflict resolution and peacemaking skills.

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