On the banks of the Missouri River at Chamberlain, South Dakota, in September 2004, members of the Lewis and Clark expedition re-enactment (Figure 12), dressed in early nineteenth-century period costume, and protected by local and federal police, stood before the tribal members from Lakota, Dakota, Ponca, Kiowa and Diné Nations.1 The tribal leaders demanded that the re-enactment expedition turn back and proceed no further into Yankton Sioux territory, stating that the Lewis and Clark re-enactors were perpetuating the lies of American history.2 Ponca activist Carter Camp claimed the ‘Indians here did not like the first Lewis and Clark and they sure don’t like the second ones.’3 The Lewis and Clark expedition represented the ‘dawn of genocide’ for Plains Indian Tribes, argued the tribal leaders.4 ‘You are re-enacting the coming of death to our people’, Camp told the expedition members. ‘You are re-enacting genocide.’5

The nationally vaunted and much publicized bicentennial re-enactment sought to commemorate the ‘Voyage of Discovery’, the expedition led in 1804–6 by Captain Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson, it was the first American expedition to cross the western United States. The expedition, which departed in May 1804 from near St. Louis on the Mississippi River, made its way through the heart of vast Lakota (formerly named Sioux) territories to the Pacific coast. The ‘Voyage of Discovery’ re-enactment soon became a tense political stand-off and attracted much media attention. Tribal leaders, many of whom were veteran Native rights activists, including Alex White Plume, Floyd Hand, Carter Camp, Alfred Bone Shirt, Russell Means and Vic Camp, wanted the Lewis and Clark Expedition re-enactors to cancel their re-enactment journey of an expedition that they claimed ‘began 200 years of genocide, land theft
and resource exploitation from the Plains tribes’. Standing firm by their police escorts, however, ‘Lewis’ and other re-enactors insisted that the tribal leaders could not ‘change history and turn back time’, and argued that the leaders had no authority to stop them.

The actors offered the tribal leaders the tomahawk pipe, an object emblematic of a Native diplomatic and conciliatory tradition used to broker peaceful relations, in an effort to replay a moment from the expedition’s first relatively peaceful meeting with the Yankton Sioux (Figure 13). But the protest leaders refused to smoke it with these unwelcome performers, and they would not participate in the illusion of an historic conciliation, nor its beguiling re-enactment. While seated in a circle to confer, the Native delegation of elders gave ‘Lewis’ and the other re-enactors three days to go home. If the re-enactors did not turn around, the tribal leaders vowed they would stop the expedition.

The Lewis and Clark voyage sits deep in the national story: the US cultural and physical landscape commemorates their expedition with ‘ubiquitous roadside markers, interpretative centres, hotel signs and restaurant logos’, writes Cindy Ott. Likewise the 200-year anniversary attracted thousands of additional tourists to the region. Until it...