A Fallow Season for Eighteenth-Century Studies

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Halito. Sv hochifo yvt Megan, Chahta ohyo sia.
When I call in the harvest, I do not think of antiracist work. As her stalks stiffen and fade from green to brown and the husks of each ear turn brittle, Corn Woman, *Tanchi Ohyo*, tells me it is time to bring in the daughter seeds. A hungry squirrel relative hastens this call. On reflection, though, the October reaping *is* antiracist work. With rustling leaves whispering in my ear, I lay down *hakchuma* (tobacco) at the foot of each stalk. Almost all have grown aerial roots in our unusually wet Michigan summer, a result of climate chaos that has flooded gardens all over the state and rotted our bean and squash sisters from the inside. The aerial roots reach down like fingers into the earth, and I slip tobacco into the crevices they create. I whisper gratitude, *yakoke* (thank you), my face and lips directed toward the soil, toward the roots, toward the land. Only then do I reach up, balancing on my tiptoes, to grasp a hard ear in my palm and twist her away from the mother stalk, depositing her in my basket. Over and over, through the three raised beds I devoted to learning from Cherokee White Eagle corn this season, I bring in speckled amethyst, cream, and indigo ears crowded with daughter seeds. A rhythm: stopping, kneeling, thanking, reaching, collecting.

This rhythm is antiracist work: pausing, reflecting, disrupting, divesting from the capitalist system of settler-colonialism and white supremacy that demands "productivity" from me during every waking moment. It begins with the stopping. Giving my time, my energies, my heart, my attention, my knowledge, my gratitude instead to the land, to gifts that will nourish my community, to a harvest that will feed us, a harvest that I will give away in turn. It is not only that I grow ancestral seeds Native to this land and carefully saved by Indigenous Seed Keepers that makes the harvest antiracist work. It is also that this is *sustainable, nourishing, community-care* done in right-relation to the place where I live that makes this antiracist work. I am a mixed-heritage daughter of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma; I am a settler on Anishinaabe lands in *Waawiyaatanong* ("where the curved shores meet"), currently called Detroit, Michigan. I must learn

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how to live in right-relation to *this* place, where I work and come home, where I sleep, and walk, and cycle through the seasons. *Tanchi Ohyo* helps me learn how to be a respectful relative to *Waawiyaatanong* and all of her animated beings: animal relatives, plant relatives, lands, rocks, seeds, trees, and waters. These are things I almost never see fields of study or institutions doing.

My own academic institution has recently adopted a land acknowledgement statement, as many other organizations have. This statement consists of words they say before events. But as Robbie Richardson and many others have noted, these words must be accompanied by action.[1] I heard a Native mentor once say that the Land does not need to be acknowledged—it knows itself and its existence as a sentient being. A land acknowledgement is for humans, to remind us of ourselves, of our history, of our future, of our responsibilities. It should humble us in gratitude. And so, a land acknowledgement, a token panel at a conference, text on a syllabus, course in the curriculum, special issue of a journal, means nothing to the Land on its own. It changes nothing for Native, Indigenous, and First Nations people, the sacred people of this Land. For Black people, sacred beings stolen to this Land. What comes after? What do we do after "representation"? So many of my Native mentors, friends, and community members ask themselves each day, "Am I living in right-relation to this land? Am I acting as a good future ancestor?" I have never once heard or seen a university ask or act on these questions. Or an organization. Or a conference panel, or a journal, or most of the other "outputs" or "engagements" that our discipline and field produce. I do not see us slowing down to make sustainable choices, to honor our place *among* our more-than-human relatives.[2] I do not see foundational and grounding shifts in how we understand ourselves in this world. No. I see resistance to change, an insistence we produce despite the destruction all around us. I see complaints about what "others" want, shouted from the generations of human chauvinists[3] who have robbed the next seven generations of clean air and water, of hundreds of species relatives, of access to homes and education, of their languages and elders and ancestors, of their rights, of the Earth's very makeup. "We cannot abide to be made uncomfortable," these voices rage.

Antiracist work in the field of eighteenth-century studies must come intentionally, deeply, and in a mode that is sweeping and makes us unsettled. Token panels that those who resist a sustainable future do not even attend are not enough. Special issues, example texts, and syllabi are not enough—they are seeds in a constantly disrupted ground, never able to take root. We need to heal the soil. We need to be willing to have a fallow period of rest, where we learn how to be fruitful in a new way. What might it look like for eighteenth-century studies to take a mere year to devote itself to healing, and then to unsettling? To talking, and learning, and not making material output, but rather planting sustainable seeds? To having rooms filled with *all people* having the difficult conversations, not just those speaking from marginalized, precariously employed, queer, or early

career perspectives? *Everyone*. Could the journals in our field take a sabbatical? Could we let The Canonical White Dudes rest from panels for a while? Could we imagine a mode of governance that we didn't inherit or adopt from the last four hundred years of colonialist invasion? That instead looks to the thousands of years of human community and learned from not only the structure but from the spirit of the very Indigenous Nations whose people are the original architects of what America tried to build?[4] After rest and learning, we need a time of undoing. Of every journal issue focused on unsettling—unsettling methods, unsettling subjects, unsettling texts and authors and conclusions. Of an entire annual conference of unsettling—whose voices we hear, how we make room for voices, who our leadership is, how we make decisions. Some organizations, the Society of Early Americanists (SEA), for example, have made steps in these directions. Could we be leaders instead of lagging followers in this unsettling?

Every week I receive emails from young Indigenous scholars studying, living, and working in this or adjacent fields. They have heard me speak on or moderate a panel. They have read what I wrote in "We Have Always Been Here," or maybe just my Tweets.[3] Someone has whispered my name to them. They ask if there is a place for them in this field. I want to tell them "yes." I want to encourage Native knowledge-keepers and dreamers to attend the university where I work, or community members to engage with our professional organizations. But for them, and for all of us, to flourish, we must heal our soil. We must make it possible for roots to grow, for sister ideas to find each other and thrive. We must give ourselves the rest, and then the energies, to learn to decolonize, and we must work at decolonizing by embracing a fallow season, and a new season, of unsettling when we are not constantly pulled away, distracted by our current damaging practices. There are good and important works being done now, to be sure: University of Maryland's Anti-Racism series of speakers and workshops, advocacy and mentorship done by Kerry Sinanan, Shelby Johnson, and Miriam Wallace, and The Doctor is In.[4] New wills and ways of scholarship are emerging. But when the resistance to an Indigenous Future is so loud, and is tolerated at the helm of this swaying ship, I am unsure of our ever reaching a peaceful future.[5] I am unsure we can collectively emerge from this malnourished existence.[6]

I will not waver in my commitment to learning from *Tanchi Ohyo*. Or from doing away with punitive grading systems in my classes. I will not stop talking and writing about living in right-relation to this Land, a practice I am myself ever learning more about. I will not stop decolonizing and re-Indigenizing myself, unsettling everything I was told mattered. I will sing to seeds in the ground, and students in my classroom, and activists in my community. I will learn to let this way of thinking and speaking and writing take up space; I will embrace the fallow times with the same respect that I shower on the bursting fruits of Spring. I hope eighteenth-century studies will too.

NOTES

1. See Robbie Richardson, "Some Observations on 'Decolonizing' the University," in "Antiracism in the Contemporary University," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 6, 2021, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/antiracism-in-the-contemporary-university/#_ftn9.

2. Graham Harvey, in *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York, 2005), notes that "persons" is not a word exclusive to human beings but rather includes all animate beings on Earth: trees, animals, rocks, mountains, waters, plants, fungi, and more (xi).

3. Those who believe that humans are superior to all other beings in creation.

4. The Iroquois Confederation's structure of governance, representing six tribes for the people, by the people, in peace influenced the settler architects of the United States government.

3. See Megan Peiser, "We Have Always Been Here: Indigenous Scholars in/and Eighteenth-Century Studies," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 33, no. 2 (Winter 2021): 181–88.

4. The Doctor Is In, the volunteer informal mentorship model for the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies annual meeting and community, was established by Rebecca Shapiro.

5. See Peiser, "An Indigenous Future is for Everyone," in "Antiracism in the Contemporary University," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 6, 2021, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/antiracism-in-the-contemporary-university/#_ftn7.

6. On the "Indigenous Pedagogy" panel at the 2021 virtual Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (CSECS)/Midwestern American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (MWSECS) meeting, Alexandria Tafoya called the American education system "malnourished" of Indigenous knowledge and history; I find this such an appropriate description that I have replicated it here.