

We Have Always Been Here: Indigenous Scholars in/and Eighteenth-Century Studies

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Abstract

Outlining my own experience as a modern American Indian in academia, in this essay I reveal the ways that my Choctaw heritage and identity have been outlawed, and discouraged by social expectations and racist stereotypes. Part manifesto, part personal narrative, I highlight needed changes in decolonizing scholarly research, publishing practices, and pedagogy, and I call on the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS) to make changes that illustrate true commitment to diversity initiatives which centre Native American and Indigenous Peoples' (NAIP) voices, experiences, and knowledge. My ancestry, connected to Andrew Jackson and the Trail of Tears, centres as a catalyst to my call for an overthrowing of academic complicity with settler colonialism.

*We are clay people
We are a people of miracles*

*We have survived the walking; it is behind us.
We have survived the blankets; they are the tattered cloth of the past.*

*The dark dirt of Mississippi
The waters of Misha Sopokni [Mississippi River]
The red clay of Okla Homma
They mingle with our bones.
We are clay people.
We are a people of miracles.*

—Estilline Tubby, Choctaw story-teller¹

- 1 Estilline Tubby, Choctaw story-teller, "We Are a People of Miracles," printed in Tim Tingle's *Walking the Choctaw Road: Stories from Red People Memories* (El Paso: Cinco Puntos Press, 2003), 139–40.

Sv hohchifo yvt Megan; Chata ohoyo sia.
My name is Megan; I am a Choctaw woman.

I live in and write from what is currently Detroit, Michigan, the traditional and ancestral lands of the Anishinaabe, specifically the Three Fires Confederacy: comprising the Odawa, the Ojibwe, and the Potawatomi.

Many of you know me. I have sat among you for over a decade now. I have listened to papers, shared my work, chatted over coffees, debated about pedagogy, laughed over fancy dinners, organized events, and Tweeted up a storm with you. I have always been here. *We* have always been here. Native peoples have and are always among you. We are the sacred beings of this land, and our teachings tell us that there will be a time when our people will awaken our sleeping ways, and together swell with the fruits of this land as it and we heal together. I cannot speak for all Native Peoples, and indeed having been absent from many of the ways Native American and Indigenous Peoples (NAIP) are raised, their experiences, I have no claim to—I have reaped many of the privileges of a life as a white-passing woman with a settler education. But also know that I never felt comfortable telling you. Can you account for every word you've said, every joke you've told in my presence at the hotel bar? You may not remember, but I promise you, I do. I remember the use of colloquial phrases like "circle up" and "savage." I have held my ancestors close to my chest, guarding my relationship to them with reverence and fear.

For most of my life I felt that I did not have a "right" to my Indigenous identity, ancestors, or culture. It was the constant message, every day, from every power. The "Indians" were a people of the past, or on reservations, neatly out of the way of everyone else. Nobody wants to be reminded of us, or of the great atrocities this country has committed against us, so we best keep quiet and out of sight. For my entire life I have tucked into my wallet my tribal identity document—an "Indian card." From my father's mother's family, I am a citizen of Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. This is a truth buried deep in my heart, a kernel of my identity as sure as the colour of my eyes, or the Native slope of my nose. But it is also a truth I have always known to be quiet about. To be ashamed of. To be hushed. To be known, but not discussed. To be spoken of in the past tense, but not the present.

There are many lived contradictions to life as a white-passing modern Indigenous person, as an Indigenous academic, living wherever the job sets you down. But being here is still an important act. My father always

insisted that we make ourselves counted. My brother and I were born Choctaw, and so when they asked us our race, we dutifully bubbled-in “American Indian or Alaskan Native” (still the official phrasing per the US Bureau of Indian Affairs). “Be counted, so they know we are here,” my father would say. I knew it was good to count myself in this way that it became *data*. Data could help our peoples in removal lands. Could help other families on the reservation. But I knew not to claim it as a language, culture, spirituality, or identity because it went against all teachings. The Native way of moving in the world is as a part of the land, but every identity tag of settler life requires a disconnection from it. How could I call myself Native if I called myself a high school sophomore? A reader of Jane Austen?

The American education system depends on celebrating only certain types of knowledge as valuable; a certain version of American history, a certain way of calculating “facts” and experience. Native ways are not a factor. In order to be American, one could not be Native. If I was a “high school sophomore,” then I could not be Native in an embodied sense, only in a statistical one. In this way my story is not unique: I have been removed from my traditional lands many times over. My ancestors were pushed and shoved, marched and corralled. In the days I have walked this plane, my family has shuffled the country for my father’s job, and as an adult I relocated again and again for school, for work: my feet never resting where our sacred mound birthed us from her warm embrace.²

My grandmother did not often talk about her family. We knew not to ask. Waves of tension about the subject hung like smoke around the kitchen tables of my childhood. Nobody had to say anything for everyone to know not to say anything. I pursued the study of literature because I felt so little connection with any identity offered up to me by the settler world. I wanted to know, and learn, and feel more, and I could not figure out why I had a hunger for these things. Now I can see that this dissatisfaction came from being denied my ancestry. I read about women in literature and history, because that was an identity that I was allowed to embody. And I am grateful that not only did I find myself in literature in these ways, but also across several decades of practicing “finding myself and my identity through literature,” I learned that it was okay to be angry with the ways your identity has been defined by others, and denied to you. Feminism taught me to be proud to be a woman, and to be angry at

2 The Choctaw creation story is situated at Nanih Waiya, the Mother Mound (Inholitopa iski), in the region now labelled on United States maps as Winston County, Mississippi. The Choctaw and Chickasaw peoples both emerged from this sacred mound, and settled nearby.

the struggle of being one. Studying women writers taught me that who I am has always been here. Conducting book history and bibliographical research as a feminist scholar teaches me to reject colonialist structures of recording history and lived experience, and seek instead for other ways to find traces of myself in the past.

I studied all of these things instead of Native American history and literature for many reasons. There were not many classes offered—ever, anywhere I studied, at any level. It was never required, or encouraged. But mostly, I did not seek it out because I did not want to spend my education reading about the death and destruction of my people. I did not want to read about how we were wiped out, gone, not here and not remembered. I did not want to feel that pain—those blood memories. And I did not feel like I had a *right* to them. Until recently, I did not know how much was there.

You see, there is nothing like feeling that you cannot even ask or talk about your ancestors to strip away your sense of curiosity about or love for your people or yourself. There is nothing like being told that you don't exist anymore to make you feel like you don't have the right to being. And there is nothing like a government defining your race *for* you and deciding *for* you, that you are or are not *enough* of your identity to own it or feel it. Because settler Americans are fed the myth of the disappearing Indian, I did not exist. And because settler Americans have defined “what Indians look like” and “how Indians act,” I was told over and over again by these stereotypes that I did not have the right to know, care about, or *feel* myself. “I’m not Choctaw enough to get to ask these questions, to learn.” And of course, that is the initiative behind blood quantum—a plan specifically devised to “breed out” Indigenous peoples by telling us that we were all “becoming white” anyway. I see it clearly behind the oh-so-convenient union between my ancestor, Hotioka, daughter to a Chata chief, and a government land agent. I see it in settlers claiming to define what it meant to be a part of a people that they themselves were actively putting to death. I had to provide a copy of my blood quantum documentation to my graduate program. They had to know “just how Indian” I was.

But I know this now: I am a Choctaw woman, and everything I learn about my ancestors, my people, culture, and language is a powerful act of resistance against the centuries of intentional and racially motivated erasure of my people. It is fighting for my eighteenth-century ancestor, Apukshenubbe, one of the Choctaw mingos (chiefs), who features in

Andrew Jackson's journals as a frustrating leader, who was murdered after refusing to hand over the tribe's lands, and for the fourteen-year-old Sophia who was entered into the Dawes Rolls to be counted as a citizen of one of the Five Civilized Tribes after her mother survived the Trail of Tears death march.

I can do this now because I have a community, which many urban Indigenous people are sorely lacking. I had to move all the way to Michigan, and sit amongst the Anishinaabe people, to hear them say "you are our sister, we will help you find your way"; to meet a white colleague who saw my ancestry as a wondrous gift, not something that made them uncomfortable, in order to feel the parts of myself that I did not even know were broken, to begin to knit back together all the tattered pieces that my ancestors suffered. Allowing myself to feel enveloped in the love and community of Indigenous women in the greater Detroit area has been a balm to the generations of trauma I've carried inside me. I feel it wash over me—and every sharing circle, ceremony, lesson, dance, and meal is a light shined into a wound many centuries deep. But it feels good, too, this sudden knowing, and this explanation of why no other explanation ever helped me understand myself. My friend Shiloh (Ojibwe and Odawa) calls this "re-Indigenization"—learning that we have the right to ourselves. Learning about what we have lost. And this right quickly turns into a responsibility. As an Indigenous person, I have a responsibility to my people, to this land.

In winter 2020 I had, for the first time, an "out" Indigenous student in my classroom. While still gingerly walking my own path to discovery, I was given this gift, and the sacred inches of progress and change keep unfolding before me. My wonderful colleague and I set out to make changes at our institution to support Indigenous and Native students, staff, and faculty, and to help bridge our campus with the First Peoples communities of the Great Lakes. This colleague, an Early Americanist scholar, did all of the heavy lifting of teaching administrators and organizing meetings. All of the labour of raising up the point, of trying to help administrators understand treaty history, race relations, and more. She is tenured, practiced in leading her own students through these concepts, and a wonderful feminist who helps my voice as the representative Indigenous faculty in the room remain central to the initiatives we pressed, all the while knowing the emotional toll that every meeting takes on me. She took on the logistics, the educating of others, so that I could be *me*. She fiercely protected the identities, connections, and emotional labour of our

tribal community, whose input helps us move in the right directions. She reminded The Powers That Be at every turn that they were not to reach out to tribal representatives. That it is not the job of the tribes to fix the problems of colonialism. That Universities cannot expect Native peoples to freely give their time, energy, and labour, while raw and bloodied with the trauma themselves, to fix these wrongs.

I had planned to come to the annual meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS) in the spring of 2020 to sit on a roundtable organized by Eugenia Zuroski to talk about an Indigenous ASECS—a topic broad enough to ask why we weren't doing better to *study* Indigenous history, culture, and literature as we are the group of scholars supposedly invested in the very period when colonialism began to choke the globe's Native peoples, but also to think about Indigenous scholars *in* ASECS. We were unexpectedly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic: a wave of disease that hits Native and Indigenous communities especially hard, causing further loss of languages, tribal knowledge, and culture with each person who walks on to the Spirit World. To say that it is a fraught experience to write this under stay-at-home orders extended beyond that of many other states, as I read the news of our elders dying in ways that are all too similar to the smallpox blankets of the past, would be an understatement.

Where do we go from here? you might wonder. I am heartened by the steps ASECS has taken to build Land Acknowledgement statements into meetings, and I have great hopes for the way that they might make those acknowledgments better than the treaties that settlers have produced from their mouths, but never from their hearts or deeds.

Here are some things I've been ruminating on:

- *Teach Indigenous voices in your classroom.* Not conversion narratives, not captivity narratives—stories and documents about actual Indigenous peoples. Start with the treaty of wherever you teach. My students read the Treaty of Detroit (1807). They do a great job analyzing what might entail the promise of protection and stewardship that the treaties claim the government owes Native Peoples of the Great Lakes.
- *Teach and study different kinds of documentation.* Treaties, songs, prayers, dances, wampum belts, seeds. These are all texts. Imagine what you could find there if you treated them the way you do every word dripping out of Alexander Pope's pen.

- *Understand archives and knowledge systems.* Did you know that the Library of Congress subject heading for Native and Indigenous Peoples is still “Indians,” and uses the offensive “Eskimos” as an example of peoples who fall under this umbrella? That “Indigenous Peoples” as a subject heading was revised as recently as 2019? The history of knowledge systems is inherently colonialist: that things have to be written down in certain ways, by certain people, saved in certain places in order to “count.” Are you teaching oral narratives? Are you referring to Indigenous peoples as the scholars and historians that they are? If you are requiring an Indigenous voice to have a university degree to consider them a historian, you are not understanding that they are a story-keeper, greatly respected by their tribe. If you are teaching relations of Indigenous narratives filtered through settler anthropologists or editors, you had better be doing the hard work of illustrating what that textual editing obscures.
- *Make room for these voices, and listen.* We may have written a land acknowledgement for ASECS, but has the organization guaranteed a panel every year for knowledge-keepers from the hosting city’s local tribe to use for their purposes of engagement? Are we giving, in finances, community support, and respect, to the sovereign nations on whose stolen land we have the great privilege to meet? Are we using ASECS as a tool for education in our field that does not put that burden on NAIP?
- *Let NAIP have a safe place to find one another.* Make a time and a space for Indigenous peoples to find one another. I feel sure that I have brothers, sisters, non-binary and two-spirit kin among you—who are invisible on purpose, or perhaps because you do not feel you have the right to be visible. I want to meet you all. Living far from my own tribe, it has been inter-tribal support that has helped me the most, and academics are certainly flung far from their peoples.

The feminist scholars of ASECS have made the annual conference and community one that has supported me in ways I now know are unique in academia. I have been surprised and touched by the positive and supportive responses I have received since 2019 working and living more publicly as a Choctaw woman. But I am tired, as a lifetime member of ASECS, of seeing this matriarchical organization—for

indeed the real leading here is done by scholars speaking from disability, from gendered and queer identities—filled with scholars in positions of power who hoard their fortunes. Why, in every panel about pedagogy, about changing our discipline, about women writers, about POC, about disability studies, is the room filled *only* with marginalized and early career scholars? Stop scheduling Swift panels against papers on queer writers. Stop scheduling *anything* against agents of change, as an act of solidarity and a true effort to show how much we value this change. What a very small act this would be to start the work of acknowledging how our field is complicit with settler colonialism. Publish different *kinds* of work by and about Indigenous peoples, who will not have great caches of archival papers, or decades of academics to engage with. You will have to let go of your obsession that only monographs, only articles that look a certain way, or our colonialist citation systems, give credence to knowledge. *ECF*, a powerful journal in our field is providing this very space, so that I and others like me, might return to our jobs and illustrate how a rigorous journal deeply values the words and experiences of Indigenous Peoples as inherently scholarly arguments about our own histories, lives, and tribes. This act is radical only in that we cannot imagine the raising up of Indigenous people as anything *but* radical. The suggestions I offer above are tame.

When I brought the *Treaty of Doak's Stand* (1821) to my undergraduate class on Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature, my students hungrily applied their critical thinking skills to the nuances of the language, the structure of the document. Their smart and careful study of this treaty, in chorus with other documents focused on Indigenous folks that day, was seated in the class theme: Observing and Recording the Eighteenth Century. The students said they learned that day that they are witnesses, and that that is one of the important works of historians: that the peoples in the literatures we read are made visible, made present again in our classroom. The second signature on the *Treaty of Doak's Stand*, just after Andrew Jackson's, is the mark of Chief Apuckshunnubbee, or hugs-them-like-a-bear-until-they-die, my seven-times great grandfather. I carry his sacred blood inside me.

