

My Journey to Developing a Sincere Land Acknowledgement

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My journey to write and present my Indigenous land acknowledgment has been long. I remember when, over a year ago, I was participating in a series of professional development webinars. Each participant was asked to work to develop a land acknowledgement. I attempted but had few sincere words, and I terribly fumbled those words that I did offer. In the end, I felt like a failed social justice activist. I had some intellectual and emotional barriers to overcome before dedicating the time and effort to compose my thoughts and write a proposed sincere acknowledgement to honor Native Peoples. That time was not my time and place to grow in this regard. This work is not something we should feel compelled to do on demand. Just like I had to become spiritually prepared to take on the anti-bias/anti-racist (ABAR) work from an African American perspective, I had to become spiritually prepared to come to the realization that true freedom is linked to the collective liberation of all Native and African American people in this country.

There were barriers to developing what I think is a sincere tribute. I grappled with my view that, at times, land acknowledgements in professional spaces rang hollow. I found it hard to connect to these sentiments of acknowledgement on a personal level. During the last couple of years, I felt weary, exhausted, and full of angst and worry about the situation of my African American sons, my own people in America. Finally, in Hampton Public School, I had a 4th grade level education concerning Indigenous history in the area that I lived. That education was only enhanced by my 5th grade visit to the nearby re-enactments of Jamestown, Virginia. As an adult, I lacked a deeper level understanding about atrocities perpetrated against Native peoples throughout U.S. history and how important it is to honor the sovereignty, resilience, and immense contributions that Native Americans have made to the world.

Before writing a land acknowledgment, I gave much thought, over much time, about what my end goal is for penning work that would make me, as an individual committed and accountable, to act to support, even in a small way, to decolonization. What could I do to right the wrongs that have oppressed and disenfranchised another group of citizens? I had to know what I wanted to do, and not to necessarily follow a script. I had to connect my own stories of race to those of Indigenous people where I was born and raised in Hampton, VA. I had to fully understand the African and Indigenous shared narrative that stemmed from our shared existence on the same land. I used my local resources, such as: the Hampton University African American and Indigenous Museums; the Hampton History Museum; and, the Hampton Main Public Library as well as online sources to complete my research.

I finally discovered my shared connection with the Indigenous people that lived on, and near my home. Through the work of Deborah Tucker, a librarian and researcher at Wayne State University, I uncovered our parallel identities. I offer a few here. Both groups that first landed in Kecoughtan, then named Elizabeth City, and now named Hampton, Virginia, experienced forced removal. Africans were removed from their continent and Indigenous tribes were removed from their territories. Both groups experienced enslavement, colonialism, social disorder, and a three-way culturally degrading situation. The Indigenous land was stolen, and Africans were robbed of our labor. Both groups have strong oral traditions, cultural traditions, resisted acculturation, and endured conflicted interactions and collaboration for survival. When we were allowed to be educated, both groups were at times educated together. For example, more than 1,380 Indians from 55 different tribes attended Hampton Institute, now Hampton University, between 1877 and 1923 for the sole purpose to “... ‘uplift’ the Negro from his state of degradation; ‘civilize’ the savage and teach him how to work. Members of both races would be taught to dress, speak, work, behave as whites— even though they were offered no guarantee that they would ever be offered powers and privileges equivalent to those enjoyed by whites.”

The Indigenous land and people acknowledgement that I have written is my first. I have read it in public only twice. As I travel I continue to research and adapt it to fit the land on which I visit for other public addresses, as I recently did when I last visited Kansas City, MO. This land acknowledgement is an organic document. It is my hope that it will never be finished until true justice is realized. When the land of the Native Peoples are returned to the Nations, and when Africans and their descendants receive fair and equitable reparations for the free back breaking labor used to build the structures in which we deliver the acknowledgements, and for the great wealth that the United States now possesses because of the contributions of both groups of citizens.