

THE LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY: PERFORMANCE AND/OR ACTIVISM?

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Colonial history shapes my college experience. I reside in a building named after the man credited for developing the US legal system, at a top private university named after the first conqueror of indigenous lives, on land named after a merchant from another land: John Jay's building, Christopher Columbus' university, and Amerigo Vespucci's land, respectively. These narratives shape my everyday dialogues at Columbia University, which has profited from colonialism for years while ignoring indigenous lives. However, if you look with an observant eye, beneath the brush, a foot above the ground, you will notice the university statement "IN HONOR OF THE LENAPE PEOPLE" that reads:

The Lenape lived here before and during the colonization of the Americas. This plaque recognizes these indigenous people of Manhattan, their displacement, dispossession, and continued presence. It stands as a reminder to reflect on our past as we contemplate our way forward.

Every time I leave my dorm, I pass this plaque and almost always forget its existence. Given its placement on the ground, my peers and I rarely notice it. How telling.

The placement and writing on the plaque leave so much unsaid and ignored about colonial atrocities and their current effects, functioning in tension with indigenous social justice. Columbia installed the plaque in 2016, after three years of petitioning from the university's Native American Council to have a land acknowledgment, gaining over 1,000 electronic signatures on *Change.org* ("Columbia University: Acknowledge Lenape Territory"). After the approval, the then-current President of the Native American Council Julian Brave NoiseCat announced that "[t]here is a lot of work yet to be done" (Woo). Despite the rich indigenous history of lands governed by the US, as of 2020, "1 in 3 Native Americans are living in poverty, with a median income of \$23,000" a year (Redbird). These systemic conditions present barriers to education for many indigenous communities as well. Does this plaque empower the historically oppressed or contribute to systemic issues by merely attempting to place Columbia as a seemingly progressive, politically-correct institution? As an elite institute with "a mission to advance diversity," how can we resolve the rhetoric of the plaque (Bollinger)?

To some, these acknowledgments are a step in the right direction. Publicly, the plaque meant much for the local indigenous community. "A prayer of thanks [was led] by SilverCloud, an [NYC-based] intertribal Native American singing group" (Woo).

Also, the Native American Council “Co-Political Chair Tristan Stidham explains that “It’s nice to see that native peoples and their history are being acknowledged by the administration” (Holmes). When one considers the pride that the plaque brings to the indigenous student community, it recognizes the efforts put into the fight for justice. Rather than simply bashing the university for needing to make more social justice progress (as NoiseCat touches on earlier), the plaque’s installment encourages empowerment and solidarity around the social justice outcome.

Similarly, David Hollinger’s 2006 essay “From Solidarity to Identity” calls on us to look past identity values and unite in solidarity to promote change in the United States. He portrays “solidarity” as “the problem of the twenty-first century,” elucidating the issue of how to qualify support like the plaque within the realms of actual or artificial “solidarity” (Hollinger 23). Hollinger defines “solidarity” as “an experience of willed affiliation” that “is more performative than community” (Hollinger 24).¹ Since the process to unite people to advocate for the plaque was by personal will on *Change.org*, Hollinger allows us to perceive the plaque as an act in solidarity, rather than an act of virtue signaling that further embeds systemic issues. Solidarity can function as positive societal change when understanding that it must “be addressed differently depending on the specific constitutional and cultural circumstances on which it arises” (Hollinger 30). When understanding the deep systemic imbalances in the university, one can view the plaque as an object of solidarity towards reform, expressing optimism towards the performance of installing the plaque. Hollinger’s argument, however, is not very critical of performative actions that do not directly challenge systems of oppression, which allows the observer to become critical of his “willed affiliation” within a context of activism.

In tension with Hollinger’s perspective, Saidiya Hartman’s 2019 essay “The Plot of Her Undoing”—which discusses how power structures continually hurt women of color and other oppressed peoples—offers an account of marginalization that resonates with the plaque. She specifically uses examples that draw the reader to critically view power structures and forms of solidarity. She elaborates that “[t]he plot of her undoing begins with . . . a short account of the destruction of the Indies” (Hartman 3). Like this “short account” which further embeds systemic issues, the shortness of the three sentences on the plaque does little to create real, positive change; there is so little said about the pain of millions of indigenous peoples and their continued marginalization. The text cannot equate to the lives affected, so it functions in tension with its purpose to improve social justice. Similarly, “[t]he plot of her undoing begins with a man in his study writing a tome about the Americas, the species, the fauna, the races” (Hartman 1). In keeping with Hartman’s imagery, the plaque sticks out almost like an informative marker with the scientific name and range of a local plant; it is missable. The plaque draws many similarities with the idea that the university is not fully addressing systemic issues faced by indigenous peoples. Hartman elaborates that the harm begins “with a treaty ceasing all hostilities,” implying that

statements of peace do not help but rather further embed the systemic issues at hand (3). Implied colonialism and oppression are present even on the plaque itself. The statement ends with an imprint of the university name and its “King’s Crown” logo which have hegemonic undertones. On the *Change.org* website that the Native American Council used to gain support in 2013, the organization points out that “Using the name ‘Columbia’ and King’s Crown imagery, the University already implicitly acknowledges the fact that the school has prospered because of a colonial legacy that entailed the persecution and removal of the original owners of this land—the Lenni Lenape people” (“Columbia University: Acknowledge Lenape Territory”). With Hartman’s elaboration, these calls for justice from the university without systemic changes allow us to perceive the plaque as merely a harmful attempt to place the university along with its partner American institutions in a position that displays social justice without acting on it, critiquing the entire situation.

However, Hartman’s institutional affiliation as a Columbia professor ingrains her within a system that has profited off of colonialism, despite her activism. However, she uses her Columbia platform to strengthen her work. To make progress, such colonial systems seem impossible to escape, as we all are living within its fruition. This feeling that we cannot escape the remnants of colonialism leaves interpretive room for the reader to relate injustices to Hartman’s text that occurred after its 2019 publication. Her writerly choices in the essay facilitate this. Rather than using a specific event, Hartman often chooses to use broad terms such as “an executive order,” “the rule of law,” and “a man who looks presidential” to describe policies that begin “the plot of her undoing” (3, 5). Hartman encourages the reader to view flawed policies given the context of their present. For a Columbia affiliate in 2022, that might be President Bollinger’s policies, including the installation of the plaque, which leads the reader to question if and how the plaque represents empowerment and solidarity.

Between Hartman’s critical view of actions from hegemonic structures and Hollinger’s positive solidarity-building atmosphere, the plaque sets itself somewhere in between the two perspectives, allowing a step forward with a critique of the current atmosphere. Hartman and Hollinger’s beliefs on larger American systems and communities not helping to end systemic issues connect with their acknowledgment of imperfections and delays. Hollinger reiterates that “we cannot count on the rest of the population” but rather that we can only count on proactive allies who demonstrate solidarity through their action (23). A thousand signatures led the core charge for the plaque, which took lots of solidarity, yet 1,000 is only about 10% of the undergraduate students at Columbia; the signers’ “willed affiliation” contributed to their steps forward, and the actions took much time and effort (Hollinger 24). Accordingly, when discussing potential solutions to solving systemic issues, Hartman outlines that “[t]he undoing of the plot . . . advances at a snail’s pace,” like the three-year journey to attain the plaque (5). These perspectives point to the idea that current American structures will not support a radical shift towards social justice but rather shift gradually with the

actions of those who care in solidarity. There will never be a perfect response; noticing the inequities that become more apparent with the plaque's installation process encourages further justice.

The gradual advancement of social justice also echoes structural capitalism in the United States (which is a product of colonialism), as this system embeds many injustices. The plaque, accordingly, allows observers to critique the capitalistic systems of the United States and private educational institutions like Columbia. For many, the plaque serves as a reminder of the work that American institutions should do in the future. The university historically runs on a capitalist model with its roots shaped by colonialism, and "capitalism has little respect for any affiliations that it cannot turn to its own purposes" (Hollinger 25). Hartman similarly alludes to capitalist ventures which harm the oppressed, like "[bills] of sale . . . financial [transactions,] and exchanges" (1,3). Hollinger and Hartman both imply that the system has slowed down the process towards growth; this point allows us to view the university's systemic structure as a powerful inhibitor of the growth of historically oppressed communities. Yet, it is the slow breakdown of the structure, starting with the plaque's acknowledgment, that allows others to begin their journey to bring social justice.

Perhaps we can view Columbia's actions with the plaque as a move of solidarity, however, not directly from the university, but rather from the adapting reactions of the community on a path towards justice. We see an example of imperfect American solidarity that strengthens future indigenous activism but does little tangible social justice with its placement. To philosopher Michael Waltzer, "America is still a radically unfinished society, and for now, at least, it makes sense to say that this unfinishedness is one of its distinctive features" (614). Waltzer highlights in his 1990 essay "What Does It Mean to Be an 'American'?" that this imperfection drives American progression through its collisions of diverse cultures. The United States has "appropriated the adjective 'American,'" displaying the idea that much of our sentiment on what the country represents is fabricated and complicated by competing interests (Waltzer 591). By acknowledging the appropriation of its name, our country is transforming. Similar to Hartman's paradoxical employment at the institution, there is no "aim [for] a finished or fully coherent Americanism" (Waltzer 614). When placed in a context of social justice disparities, there is no way for us to completely create a just world; there is always disparity. Rather, we have to utilize these experiences to overcome injustices. The plaque, for instance, reminds me of conversations with my Navajo peer who does indigenous research with Columbia. She makes me more aware of the current benefits and research advocacy that the university provides to historically oppressed groups, albeit colonial structures persist with Columbus' name on her emails, publications, and media with the university, as does the Columbia logo on the plaque. Like Hartman, she undertakes her advocacy work in an environment in tension with her movement; she too embraces the imperfect American solidarity. Perhaps, one can view the plaque as a step in the right direction, not necessarily

because of the university's system, but rather because it allows a critical view of the university's decision about the plaque, inspiring them to promote real productive change to break the structural imbalances in the United States.

In the larger context, what is happening at Columbia University, a privileged university committed to empowering diversity in education, represents a mere window into the oppression that is burrowed into other American institutions, especially other private universities which do not have the resources, leadership, and activism to promote change. Along with lower college enrollment rates, Native American graduation rates at four-year institutions remain at 41%, lower than the national average of 63% ("Factsheets"). Yet, just as I have become inspired to write this essay, the plaque facilitates questioning and advocacy vital for social justice. Understanding the absence of systemic changes from the university functioning critically with the presence of a plaque allows scholarly thinkers to further critique societal imbalances and the structures that perpetuate them to promote change.

NOTE

1. Performative implies positive impact in this expression. The negative connotations around the phrase "performative activism" were not as prevalent in 2006 and were likely not considered.

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