

## **Abstract**

This work seeks to understand Indigenous food sovereignty movements by placing them into historical context, connecting past colonial encounters with contemporary struggles surrounding food access. Food sovereignty goes beyond food security, taking into account deeper cultural connections to food. Outside of Native communities, food sovereignty movements are often misunderstood due to the individualized nature of each movement according to the culture from which it emerges. This goes back in part to a misconception of Indigenous nations, particularly those in North America, as one monolithic culture. In reality, each of the hundreds of Indigenous cultures across the continent have their own beliefs and traditions, and though there are some common threads between communities, what works to restore or improve one group's food sovereignty may not work for another. Federal groups that provide funding for such movements, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, often do not allow for differences in cultural preferences when stipulating how funding must be allocated, and Indigenous peoples are made to either compromise their own values or not receive funding. On the ground, Native communities face harassment from non-Natives who see the enactment of Native fishing, hunting, or gathering rights—typically rights protected by treaties—in an ahistorical context that appears on the surface to be undeserved special treatment. These views have resulted in lengthy and expensive court litigations, harassment and property damage preventing access to resources, and in some cases outright violence against Native peoples. Fostering an understanding of food sovereignty movements and the long, complex histories behind them may help mitigate these kinds of instances, making the way back to food sovereignty easier for Indigenous communities.

**“Bringing Back the Songs We Need”: The Narragansett Food Sovereignty Initiative at the  
Crandall Minacommuck Farm**

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**Table of Contents**

Introduction.....3

Chapter One:

    An Overview of Food Sovereignty.....11

Chapter Two:

    Fluidity as Praxis:

        Narragansett Adaptive Strategies from Deep Time through Detribalization.....24

Chapter Three:

    Narragansett Survivance, Continuity, and Mobilization.....60

Conclusion.....75

Bibliography.....78

## Introduction

On a humid August day, a swarm of vehicles that included two buses congregated on a field in Westerly, Rhode Island. An entrance sign read “Crandall Minacommuck Farm,” followed by the smaller “Narragansett Food Sovereignty Initiative” sign below. The Narragansett Indian Tribe, the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, the Intertribal Agriculture Council, and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) co-hosted this final day of the Intertribal Food Sovereignty Summit. The first time such an event was held in the northeast, the Summit brought together Indigenous people from around the globe to discuss and share ideas and experiences regarding food sovereignty movements. Also present was a cohort of USDA and NRCS fieldworkers, there to learn methods for working constructively with Indigenous communities. The farm visit had been rescheduled because of inclement weather, but the delay only increased the excitement of Summit attendees as they stepped onto sovereign Narragansett land.

Divided into groups, attendees circled the farm according to pre-set stations. Each showcased a different feature of the farm, offering visitors the opportunity to observe and ask questions that might aid food sovereignty efforts in their own communities. One feature in particular was difficult to miss: the large field filled with row upon row of towering corn stalks. Dawn Spears, a co-founder of the Narragansett Food Sovereignty Initiative, gestured towards the high-growing corn. “This is the first time in over a century that Narragansett flint corn has been grown on tribally-owned land,” she said. “It’s bringing back the songs we need.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dawn Spears and Cassius Spears Jr., “Crandall Minacommuck Farm” (Presentation, Intertribal Food Sovereignty Summit, Pequot Museum and Research Center, Ledyard, Connecticut; and Crandall Minacommuck Farm, Westerly, Rhode Island, August 23, 2018).

The bulk of the event was held at the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Tribal Research Center in Ledyard, Connecticut. Guest speakers from different tribal nations presented on their community's approach to food sovereignty, creating dialogues around shared problems and successes. Representatives from the Oneida Nation, located in what is now Wisconsin, described how they began Ohe-láku, a planting cooperative that brought a traditional white corn back to the community. A member of the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative explained the updated Farm Bill, changes to the Tribal Food Code Project, and other legislation that could affect tribal efforts. Panel discussions on seed saving, seed sovereignty, and youth involvement, as well as a panel of USDA administrators, provided opportunities for attendees to ask questions of experts in an array of subjects. Native chefs, farmers, seed keepers, conservation workers, storytellers, medicine people, and ecologists came together to share knowledge, building connections between communities that embraced one goal: food sovereignty.

The concept of food sovereignty has gained public attention in recent years, though it is not new. La Via Campesina, an international group that brings together “millions of peasants, small and medium size farmers, landless people, rural women and youth, indigenous people, migrants and agricultural workers from around the world,” defined the term *food sovereignty* for the first time in 1996.<sup>2</sup> In 2007, the Forum for Food Sovereignty in Mali refined the term, where it was encoded in the Declaration of Nyéléni. The Declaration defined food sovereignty as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.” The Declaration also identified food sovereignty as a movement that centers the needs of consumers and producers over corporations; defends the inclusion of the future generations; prioritizes local

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<sup>2</sup> “The International Peasant’s Voice,” La Via Campesina, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://viacampesina.org/en/international-peasants-voice/>.

and national economies while empowering small-scale agriculture and production; and contributes to environmental sustainability. “The rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity,” the Forum declared, “are in the hands of those of us who produce food.”<sup>3</sup>

Elizabeth Hoover, a committee member of the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance (NAFSA) and the Manning Assistant Professor of American Studies at Brown University, has noted that the academic definition of food sovereignty is often different than definitions on the ground. In her research into diverse food sovereignty movements across the country, she has also found that the definition varies from community to community. This study explores the concept of Indigenous food sovereignty first as a broad movement across Indigenous North American communities, then through a case-study of the initiatives being undertaken by a single community. Food sovereignty is often understood as a goal to be achieved, when in reality it is a process dictated by the specificities of each community’s situation. Hoover has identified a list of factors both historic and contemporary that potentially influence a population’s food sovereignty, but notes that an applicable factor for one population may not apply to another at all, or may reverberate differently. While common threads link different communities that experienced—and still experience—colonization, the lasting effects are not necessarily identical from community to community.

For instance, one major factor undermining food sovereignty is land loss, both historic and ongoing. For many Indigenous nations, land loss occurred simultaneously with forced migration. When the Pawnee were forced to relocate from their homelands in what is now Nebraska to “Indian Territory” in what became Oklahoma in 1875, they carried their seeds with

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<sup>3</sup> “Declaration of Nyeleni,” February 2, 2007, Selingue, Mali, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290>.

them, but the different climate could not sustain them. They continued to attempt plantings over the next century, but the corn would not grow. Many Indigenous communities, including the Pawnee, consider seeds living beings with whom the people have a reciprocal relationship and responsibility. In the interest of the seeds, the Pawnee Nation began working closely with descendants of settlers who came to occupy their homelands. The descendants planted the corn in ancestral soil, and the resulting harvest was brought by truck to the Pawnee in Oklahoma. In this way, they still have access to their traditional corn, which has been in the care of their people for time out of mind, understood to be a gift from Corn Mother. While this relationship with the descendants of settlers is unquestionably beneficial, it still means that the continued reproduction of this corn is largely in the control of others and not the Pawnee themselves. An ideal situation for the future would involve the return of Pawnee homelands, but that step has not been taken.<sup>4</sup>

The Narragansett, who are the subject of the case study in chapters two and three, also faced significant land loss, but they were not forced to relocate away from their homelands en masse. While historical land loss and colonial incursion significantly impacted their ability to exercise food sovereignty, their situation is different from the Pawnee, and as such requires a different approach. The Narragansett have regained access to lands that were historically theirs, and have had several varieties of seeds rematriated to them. Since the seeds are being planted in the same ground in which they were adapted, the Narragansett are able to grow their traditional seeds themselves, as a community. They continue to face barriers to accessing other traditional resources, however, namely such oceanic foods as clams and saltwater fish. The continued presence of non-Natives on what has become coveted “beachfront” property limits ocean-

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Hoover, “From ‘Garden Warriors’ to ‘Good Seeds’: Defining and Enacting Food Sovereignty in American Indian Community Gardens,” (Presentation, Intertribal Food Sovereignty Summit, Ledyard, CT, August 21-23, 2018); Rowen White, Elizabeth Charlebois, and Scott Martin, “Seed Rematriation,” (Panel discussion, Intertribal Food Sovereignty Summit, Ledyard, CT, August 21-23, 2018); see also Rowen White, “Seed Rematriation,” *Sierra Seeds* (website), March 19, 2018, <http://sierraseeds.org/seed-rematriation/>.



gathering activities to what small groups can accomplish, rather than the whole community, and requires cooperation from the people who control the properties in question.<sup>5</sup>

Such variations between experiences of Indigenous nations dictate what factors impact each individual movement. Another, and arguably the most important, component of food sovereignty movements are community cultural practices. Food sovereignty movements are deeply entangled with layered cultural meanings; in a North American context, these complex strata mean that food sovereignty movements often work in tandem with cultural revitalization efforts. While the specific traditions and beliefs of one nation cannot be substituted for another, many Indigenous cultures consider foods as far more than “consumable commodities,” instead understanding them as beings with whom they have a reciprocal relationship. The example of the Pawnee and their traditional corn is one of many such examples. Some foods, such as corn, salmon, and moose, feature strongly in communities’ cultural origin stories, or other stories that convey cultural identity. These stories often outline expectations of behavior towards the being in question, as well as towards the earth more generally. In efforts to restore food sovereignty, communities are also reinstating their connections with these other-than-human beings. Citizen Potawatomi author and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer explains these relationships:

The state guidelines on hunting and gathering are based exclusively in the biophysical realm, while the rules of the Honorable Harvest are based on accountability to both the physical and the metaphysical worlds. Taking another life to support your own is far more significant when you recognize the beings who are harvested as persons, nonhuman persons vested with awareness, intelligence, spirit—and who have families waiting for them at home. Killing a *who* demands something different than killing an *it*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dawn Spears (Narragansett tribal member, Narragansett Tribal Food Sovereignty Initiative farmer, and COO of the Northeast Indigenous Arts Alliance), in discussion with the author, March 11, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Asfia Gulrukh Kamal et al., “A Recipe for Change: Reclamation of Indigenous Food Sovereignty in O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation for Decolonization, Resource Sharing, and Cultural Restoration,” *Globalizations* 12, no. 4, (2015): 559-575, 570; Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 183.

The Mi'kmaq, for instance, believe that the Creator sent moose as a gift when they were in danger of starvation. In exchange for its life, moose made them promise that they would use every piece of its body and treat it with respect, and never take more moose than they needed to survive. The people were cautioned that if any of these promises were broken, moose would leave them. In the late eighteenth century, the moose of the Cape Breton highlands had all but vanished from overhunting and habitat loss because of expanding colonial settlements. In the 1940s, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) escorted eighteen moose by train from Alberta; over 5,000 moose now roam the highlands, and moose hunts have resumed among both Native and non-Native people. The Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq Chiefs issued a booklet for harvesters detailing how the moose are to be harvested and used, bringing the ancient agreement back into living practice. Through this lens, moose harvesting is a much more vital practice than simply obtaining food. They are also handing down understandings of these reciprocal relationships to the next generations that not only act as guidelines for sustainability, but help define the Mi'kmaq as a distinct culture.<sup>7</sup>

For many Indigenous communities, a common struggle stems from non-Native populations misunderstanding—or, just as often, not caring about—the connections between historical traumas, contemporary issues and needs, and the cultural significance of subsistence practices. Not recognizing historical events and their continued effects creates hurdles for Indigenous populations exercising sovereignty in numerous arenas, including food sovereignty. Not understanding or recognizing deeper meanings connected to food frames questions of food

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<sup>7</sup> Story adapted from Monique Cantin, Albert Marshall, and Clifford Paul, “Tiam’s Promise: The Mi’kmaq Legend of the First Moose,” June 11, 2014, produced by the Unama’ki Institute of Natural Resources (UINR), accessed July 15, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_ajkdVMABWQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ajkdVMABWQ); Guidelines booklet available at <http://mikmaqrights.com/uploads/MooseGuidelines.pdf>; Donald Marshall Sr., Alexander Denny, and Simon Marshall, “The Covenant Chain,” in *Dawnland Voices: A Anthology of Indigenous Writing from New England*, 29-55, edited by Siobhan Senior (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

sovereignty as trivial, exacerbating the uphill battle many communities face in performing cultural practices in spaces that may already be hostile to Native presence. Elizabeth Hoover explains that “when considering how to apply the concept of food sovereignty to Native American communities’ efforts to regain control over and rebuild their food systems, it is important to consider the series of factors that, as a function of colonization, have worked to disrupt indigenous food systems over the past four centuries.”<sup>8</sup> To consider any food sovereignty movement, then, we must first understand the history that has led to the present moment, and make the connections between past and present that will enable communities to better practice self-determination.

This work explores the layering of cultural meanings with historical and ongoing colonialisms, and the reverberations each has within Indigenous food sovereignty movements today. Chapter one continues to unpack general concepts of food sovereignty, demonstrating how different factors have created specific sets of needs in different communities, rooted as they are in distinct landscapes and historical contexts. Chapter two explores the history of the Narragansett prior to their illegal detribalization in the late nineteenth century, drawing connections between the various encroachments of English colonists—and later the United States—and shifts in Narragansett foodways. Chapter three studies Narragansett survivance following what was intended by the state of Rhode Island as the extinguishment of the tribe, placing the establishment of the Narragansett Food Sovereignty Initiative within a larger framework of Narragansett persistence. Having inhabited what is now Rhode Island for time out of mind, the Narragansett have persevered through epidemics, colonial incursions, two wars and numerous smaller conflicts in their homelands, illegal detribalization, land theft, systemic

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Hoover, “‘You Can’t Say You’re Sovereign if You Can’t Feed Yourself’: Defining and Enacting Food Sovereignty in American Indian Community Gardening,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 41, no. 3 (2017): 31-70, 34-35.

racism, and ongoing legal battles with the state. Using Elizabeth Hoover's framework, the case study demonstrates how Narragansett efforts towards food sovereignty over time have been in response to issues and opportunities on the ground, and how historical occurrences such as those discussed above continue to resonate in the present day.

## Chapter I

### An Overview of Food Sovereignty

On the trip from the Pequot Museum to the Crandall Minacommuck Farm, the three women I rode with shared stories from their communities. One, hailing from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, described living so far from a real grocery store that she makes the hours-long drive the night before, and gets a hotel room so that she can start her shopping the next day and not have to rush. She purchases an entire month's worth of food and sundries for her family at once so she does not have to make the trip as often. The other women nodded, and reciprocated with their own stories about doing massive amounts of grocery shopping at once to avoid relying on either commodity foods or the heavily processed food available at convenience stores closer to home. They did not say where they were from, but their stories were hauntingly similar. Another woman at the Summit described the situation in her northern Alaska community to a panel of USDA administrators. She explained that members of her community have to drive to the Canadian border to meet a trailer truck in order to get fresh produce, because the produce provided by the commodity foods program takes so long to reach them that it is often rotten when it arrives. The truck driver "was our favorite person," she said, "but we shouldn't have to go through that just to get vegetables. It's nonsense."<sup>1</sup>

Many reservation communities, such as the Pine Ridge Reservation, do not have access to grocery stores because of a combination of distance, ability to travel, and poverty. These communities either rely on commodity foods (for qualifying households), goods available for purchase at gas-station convenience stores, or some combination thereof. The term "food desert"

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous, (personal conversations, August 23, 2018); and Anonymous commenter, (USDA Q&A Panel, Intertribal Food Sovereignty Summit, Pequot Museum and Research Center, Ledyard, CT, August 21, 2018). All four women asked not to be named in writing, though they agreed to have their stories included.

is often used to indicate areas where healthy food is difficult to come by. The USDA defines a food desert as “parts of the country void of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas. This is largely due to a lack of grocery stores, farmers’ markets, and healthy food providers.” Elizabeth Hoover finds the term “food desert” deeply problematic. A far cry from barren wastelands, deserts can and do provide resources to those who have the knowledge to find them. The term also suggests that these areas are a natural phenomenon, when in reality they are economically created. Over a quarter of Indigenous households were below the federal poverty line in 2010, as opposed to fifteen percent of all U.S. households. In an era when foods high in calories but low in nutritional value are significantly cheaper and more available to purchase than fresh foods, poverty has become a reliable indicator of such health problems as obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. Economic factors inform not only people’s access to healthy foods, but they also create hurdles for tribal nations trying to enact programming and projects to reestablish food and cultural sovereignty. Hosting workshops, conducting studies, purchasing supplies to start community gardens, or implementing larger initiatives all require financial backing. Among tribes with high rates of poverty, starting food sovereignty projects requires applying for grants or other funding, which in turn requires time and effort.<sup>2</sup>

A term often conflated with food sovereignty is *food security*. Food security is having enough food, with no concerns about its origins, how and by whom it was produced, or potential cultural connections to the food being consumed. While food security is an issue that also needs

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<sup>2</sup> Hilary K. Seligman, et al, “Food Insecurity is Associated with Diabetes Mellitus: Results from the National Health Examination and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) 1999-2002,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 22, no. 7 (July 2007): 1018-1023; Lisa M. Nackers and Bradley M. Appelans, “Food Insecurity is Linked to a Food Environment Promoting Obesity in Households with Children,” *Journal of Nutritional Education Behavior* 45, no. 6 (December 2013):780-784; Elizabeth Hoover, “From ‘Garden Warriors’ to ‘Good Seeds’”; Jessica C. Jones-Smith, et al, “Obesity and the Food Environment: Income and Ethnicity Differences Among People with Diabetes,” *Diabetes Care* 36, no. 9 (September 2013): 2697-2705.

addressing, and whose concerns sometimes overlap with those of food sovereignty, as in the stories of the women above, it does not address the many histories of Indigenous peoples and their complex connections with food. Where food security might be met by constructing a grocery store on or near tribal land and ensuring that people could also afford the food it supplied, food sovereignty entails any given community having access to foods that hold significant meaning to them as a people. Food sovereignty movements seek to “democratize food production, distribution, and consumption,” expanding upon the right to adequate amounts of food to include the rights to produce one’s own food, and to have access to foods that are culturally significant.<sup>3</sup> For coastal peoples, food sovereignty can encompass fishing or whaling rights; for peoples in the southwest, this can entail having adequate access to water for irrigation; for others it could be the right to farm, or hunt, or gather wild plants. Each Native nation has distinct cultural traditions around the production and consumption of food, and no single approach to food sovereignty can possibly address the needs of all.

To further complicate the idea of food sovereignty, the meaning of the term *cultural traditions* is critical. The idea of what is traditional can be radically different not only from nation to nation, but even among people belonging to a single nation. Many recipes considered traditional feature such non-indigenous ingredients as sugar, wheat, cheese, and butter. Some people regard what their grandparents ate to be traditional, even if those foods resulted from European colonization. Others insist that traditional foods should only encompass what was available prior to European incursion. Internal disagreement over what constitutes traditional food can create barriers for movements if community members disagree about goals and decide not to participate. Even if everyone is in agreement regarding goals, the idea of the traditional

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<sup>3</sup> Hoover, “‘You Can’t Say You’re Sovereign,’” 33.

can create other difficulties, such as when foods agreed to be traditional are no longer available, such as the now-extinct passenger pigeon. Definitions of tradition are not only applied to food, but to procurement practices as well. If a tribe was not agricultural prior to colonization, do they consider gardening or other agriculture as traditional now? Some do, citing the fluidity of traditions as a tradition in itself. Some movements disregard concerns of tradition entirely, choosing instead to focus their energy on community health by whatever means necessary.<sup>4</sup>

Understandings of tradition as applied by Euro-Americans can also create roadblocks within Native communities. Non-Native people tend to view a tradition as something static and unchanging, passed down from each generation to the next in original form. When imposed on Native communities, this conceptualization creates a stereotype of Native people as forever trapped in a single moment in time. In her seminal work on the way Native peoples were and are depicted as “vanishing” in New England town histories, White Earth Ojibway historian Jean O’Brien writes:

This penchant for Indian purity as authenticity also found essential expression in the idea of the ancient: non-Indians refused to regard culture change as normative for Indian peoples. Thus, while Indians adapted to the changes wrought by colonialism by selectively embracing new ways and ideas, such transformation stretched beyond the imaginations of New Englanders: Indians could only be ancients, and refusal to behave as such rendered Indians inauthentic in their minds. Indians, then, can never be modern.<sup>5</sup>

Even when assimilation into settler-colonial culture has been encouraged or demanded, such as in the “praying towns” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or the boarding schools of the

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<sup>4</sup> Devon Mihesuah, “Searching for *Haknip Achukma* (Good Health): Challenges to Food Sovereignty Initiatives in Oklahoma,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 41, no. 3 (2017): 9-30, 23; Devon Mihesuah, “Indigenous Health Initiatives, Frybread, and the Marketing of Nontraditional ‘Traditional’ American Indian Foods,” *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016): 45-69, 52-55; Elizabeth Ann Berton-Reilly, “Our Corn is Still Standing: Indigenous Foodways and Identity in New England,” *Digest: A Journal of Foodways and Culture* 5, no. 1 (2016) [digest.champlain.edu/vol5\\_issue1/PDFS/BertonReilly\\_PDF.pdf](http://digest.champlain.edu/vol5_issue1/PDFS/BertonReilly_PDF.pdf), 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> Jean O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxii.



nineteenth and early twentieth, those who appeared to assimilate were no longer considered truly Native by their Euro-American counterparts.

The persistence of this stereotype—what Patrick Wolfe has termed “repressive authenticity”—continues today.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the “vanishing” of Indigenous people in New England towns, the stereotype has been used to detribalize several Native nations, or deny nations federal recognition on the grounds that their cultures have not continued unbroken to the present day. Questions of authenticity and cultural continuity have risen in the wake of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), legislation passed in 1990 that requires federally funded institutions to identify and repatriate Indigenous remains, as well as items of cultural significance. The stereotype has also figured in countless racist acts against Native people in the present day who non-Native people see as not “really Indian.” In this view, Native people receive “special treatment” from the government that includes different tax laws, federal funding, or the ability to open casinos. The fact that these rights are guaranteed by treaties is frequently left out of the conversation. Historically, repressive authenticity contributed to the removal of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Seminole, and Muskogee (Creek) Nations, commonly referred to as the “Civilized tribes,” during the early- to mid-nineteenth century. Their removal resulted not in spite of their adoption of Euro-American practices, but because of them, since these practices—most notably instituting a constitution, adopting plantation agriculture, and participating in slavery—all signaled permanence. Rather than allow “modern” Natives to maintain their cultural homelands, they were perceived as an imminent threat and accordingly forced to remove west.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4, (December 2006), pp. 387-409.

<sup>7</sup> Angela A. Gonzales, and Timothy Q. Evans, “The Imposition of Law: The Federal Acknowledgement Process and the Legal De/Construction of Tribal Identity”; Joanne Barker, “The Recognition of NAGPRA”; and Amy E. Den Ouden, “Altered State?: Indian Policy Narratives, Federal Recognition, and the ‘New’ War on Native Rights in Connecticut”; all in Amy E. Den Ouden,

Repressive authenticity surfaces in the present day when Indigenous peoples enact their treaty rights to practice such food-related activities as hunting, fishing, and whaling. A series of lawsuits in the late twentieth century—the result of tribal members being arrested for exercising their treaty rights—affirmed the rights of several Ojibwe groups to spearfish in waters they had been forced to cede in the nineteenth century. Non-Native people responded with racialized violence, property damage, and protests in which they carried signs sporting such slogans as “save a fish, spear an Indian,” as well as the effigy of a stereotyped Indian head on a pitchfork.<sup>8</sup> Legal battles endured for twenty-five years. When the Makah Indians of Cape Flattery held a whale hunt in 1999, the first one in over seventy years and an activity protected by treaties, they received bomb threats at their reservation schools, as did some members of the tribe. Echoing insults aimed at Ojibwe spearfishing, protesters made bumper stickers reading “Save a whale, harpoon a Makah.” In letters and interviews with local news outlets, non-Native residents expressed anger, especially over the use of modern boats and rifles in the hunt. Non-Native residents argued that if the Makah utilized modern technology while claiming ancient rights, then surely non-Natives could “pick and choose which old tradition to resume” as well. The “old traditions” suggested for non-Native resumption included capturing slaves, committing cannibalism, and scalping Indigenous people.<sup>9</sup>

Other tribes have been unable to legally exercise their treaty rights at all, either through lack of federal recognition, or because court decisions have not favored them. By no means have they ceased hunting, harvesting, and fishing—but they often must do so secretly, and at great risk

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and Jean M. O’Brien, eds., *Recognition, Sovereignty Struggles, & Indigenous Rights in the United States: A Sourcebook*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2013). Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism,” 395-396.

<sup>8</sup> Patty Loew and James Thannum, “After the Storm: Ojibwe Treaty Rights Twenty-Five Years after the *Voigt* Decision,” *American Indian Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2011), pp. 161-191.

<sup>9</sup> Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 1-3, 7-8; Robert J. Miller, “Exercising Cultural Self-Determination: The Makah Indian Tribe Goes Whaling,” *American Indian Law Review* 25, no. 2 (2000): 165-273.

should they attract official notice. Still others cannot exercise these rights because what is being sought can no longer be consumed safely. Studies have shown that hazardous sites, such as waste landfills, coal factories, and superfund sites are disproportionately located within three kilometers of communities of color, including Indigenous communities. Downriver from a superfund site, Akwesasne Mohawk communities cannot eat the majority of locally-available fish because of industrial toxins in the water. More than a hundred thousand hard rock mines and over four thousand abandoned uranium mines scattered over the American west have poisoned watersheds with mercury, arsenic, uranium, and other chemicals and heavy metals. Indigenous nations affected by mining runoff include the Diné (Navajo) Nation, the Northern Arapaho Tribe, the Eastern Shoshone Tribe, the Te-Moak Tribe of Western Shoshone, the Apsaalooke (Crow) Tribe, the Spokane Tribe, the Ute Indian Tribe, multiple Pueblo nations, the Menominee Indian Tribe, and the nine Tribes within the Great Sioux Nation, among others.<sup>10</sup>

Oil pipelines that traverse Native lands also create issues that range from land loss via eminent domain, to leaks that cause irreparable environmental harm. Recently in the public eye were the water protectors at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, fighting the installation of the Dakota Access Pipeline, who met with militarized violence. The pipeline was originally slated to be installed ten miles north of Bismarck, but was moved to a new route following concerns regarding the risk of leaks. It now crosses both the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, and is less

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<sup>10</sup> Robert D. Bullard, Paul Mohai, Robin Saha, and Beverly Wright, "Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty: 1987-2007: A Report Prepared for the United Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries," (Cleveland: The United Church of Christ, 2007); U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, "Not in My Backyard: Executive Order 12,898 and Title VI as Tools for Achieving Environmental Justice," October 2003; Laura Pulido, "Geographies of Race and Ethnicity II: Environmental Racism, Racial Capitalism and State-Sanctioned Violence," *Progress in Human Geography* 1, no. 10 (2016):1-10; Elizabeth Hoover, "Cultural and Health Implications of Fish Advisories in a Native American Community," *Ecological Processes* 2, no. 4 (2013). <http://www.ecologicalprocesses.com/content/2/1/4>; see also Elizabeth Hoover, *The River is In Us: Fighting Toxics in a Mohawk Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Johnnye Lewis, Joseph Hoover, and Debra MacKenzie, "Mining and Environmental Health Disparities in Native American Communities," *Current Environmental Health Reports* 4, no. 2 (June 2017): 130-141.

than a mile upstream of the Standing Rock reservation and Lake Oahe. Lake Oahe not only supplies the drinking water for the reservation, but is also sacred to the Standing Rock Sioux.<sup>11</sup>

Climate change has also impacted many communities' ability to utilize traditional food sources. Karuk peoples in what is now California have seen the almost total loss of salmonid fish—a classification that includes salmon, trout, graylings, and others—and acorns, which together made up almost half of their traditional diets. In areas of Louisiana, communities are steadily losing land because of rising ocean levels and increased storm activity, which endanger the habitats of traditional food sources. A decline of sea ice has negatively affected Pacific walrus populations, which some Alaskan tribes hunt. Warming trends cause droughts that reduce corn crops, in addition to causing wildfires that destroy ecosystems and homes. Changes in water levels and heightened water toxicity have drastically decreased harvests of wild rice in the Great Lakes region, a traditional and sacred staple of the Anishinaabe people.<sup>12</sup>

Current food sovereignty movements are also navigating the ongoing legacies of other historic factors. Cultural disruptions caused by warfare, such as population loss, collective trauma, and theft of homelands, all endangered food sovereignty. For instance, the scorched-

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<sup>11</sup> NYC Stands with Standing Rock Collective, “#StandingRockSyllabus,” (website), <https://nycstandswithstandingrock.wordpress.com/standingrocksyllabus/>; Nick Estes, “Fighting for Our Lives: #NoDAPL in Historical Context,” *The Red Nation*, September 18, 2016, <https://therednation.org/2016/09/18/fighting-for-our-lives-nodapl-in-context/>; Elizabeth Burleson, “Dakota Access to Justice and Pipeline Politics: Tribal Consultation, Environmental Justice and Rules of Engagement,” in *Environmental Law* Second edition, edited by William Rodgers and Elizabeth Burleson (Eagan, MN: Thomson Reuters, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Valerie Blue Bird Jernigan et al., “Addressing Food Insecurity in a Native American Reservation Using Community-Based Participatory Research,” *Health Education Research* 27, no. 4 (August 2012): 645-655; Gary Paul Nabhan, “Perspectives in Ethnobiology: Ethnophenology and Climate Change,” *Journal of Ethnobiology* 30, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2010): 1-4; Kari Marie Norgaard, *The Effects of Altered Diet on the Health of the Karuk People: A Preliminary Report* (Karuk Tribe of California: Department of Natural Resources Water Quality Program, 2004), 16-24, 37-42, [https://www.klamathwaterquality.com/documents/Norgaard\\_%20Health%20Effects%20of%20Altered%20Diet.pdf](https://www.klamathwaterquality.com/documents/Norgaard_%20Health%20Effects%20of%20Altered%20Diet.pdf); Matthew B. Bethel et al., “Blending Geospatial Technology and Traditional Ecological Knowledge to Enhance Restoration Decision-Support Processes in Coastal Louisiana,” *Journal of Coastal Research* 27, no. 3 (May 2011): 555-571; K. Cozzetto et al., “Climate Change Impacts on the Water Resources of American Indians and Alaska Natives in the U.S.,” *Climatic Change* 120, no. 3 (October 2013): 569-584; Margaret Hiza Redsteer et al., “Accounts from Tribal Elders: Increasing Vulnerability of the Navajo People to Drought and Climate Change in the Southwestern United States,” in *Indigenous Knowledge for Climate Change Assessment and Adaptation*,” edited by Douglas Nakashima, Igor Krupnik, and Jennifer T. Rubis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 171-187; Barbara J. Barton, *Minoomin: The Story of Wild Rice in Michigan* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 25-26, 42, 65-68, 78-79, 81-87, 92-96, 108-109, 130-131.

earth campaign—known as the Sullivan, or Clinton-Sullivan, Campaign—conducted against the Haudenosaunee during the American Revolution was deliberately intended to cause “total destruction and devastation of their settlements.” The campaign especially targeted the Seneca, Cayuga, and Onondaga Nations, three of the six nations constituting the Haudenosaunee confederacy, though they were not the only ones to suffer casualties. George Washington directed his generals “to ruin their crops now in the ground and prevent their planting more.”<sup>13</sup> The campaign resulted in the deaths of approximately half the Haudenosaunee people over the subsequent winter, which was especially harsh. The precise effects of such attacks on the traditional practices of communities is difficult to quantify, but disruptions to intergenerational patterns of agricultural knowledge almost certainly occurred.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, the Native boarding schools established in the nineteenth century, many of which ran until the mid-twentieth century, had the erasure of Native cultures as a foundational goal. Richard Pratt, the founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, famously stated in 1892 that “All the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”<sup>15</sup> Carlisle was considered the “flagship” school, and schools that followed used it as a model to pursue the same goal. Achieving this mission involved cutting children’s hair, making them wear Euro-American style clothes, and imposing Euro-American gender roles. They were forbidden from speaking their languages or practicing their religions. Foods contained primarily dairy, wheat, and white sugar, none of which were present prior to

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<sup>13</sup> George Washington to Major General John Sullivan, 31 May 1779, in *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 20, 8 April–31 May 1779, edited by Edward G. Lengel. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 716–719.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Jemison, “A View of the Revolution, 1775-1779,” in *The World Turned Upside Down: Indian Voices from Early America*, edited by Colin Calloway (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1994), 157-160; Rhiannon Koehler, “Hostile Nations: Quantifying the Destruction of the Sullivan-Clinton Genocide of 1779,” *American Indian Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 427-453.

<sup>15</sup> *Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction* (1892), 46-59. Reprinted as Richard H. Pratt, “The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites,” in *Americanizing the American Indians: Writings by the “Friends of the Indian” 1880-1900*, edited by Francis Paul Prucha, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 260-271.

colonization, and all of which caused rampant health problems among the students. The schools enforced their efforts with systematic violence that not uncommonly resulted in children's deaths. Those who survived were caught in a liminal state: born into one community, but forced to assimilate—or appear to, at least—into another. The result was generations of Indigenous people who, having spent the most formative years of their lives in a place of racialized violence, had also missed years of cultural teachings from within their own communities. Many, though not all, could not speak their own language and knew next to nothing about their cultural traditions. The project of forced assimilation was ultimately unsuccessful, demonstrated by the continued vitality of Indigenous cultures, but the boarding school experience left legacies of violence and trauma that still echo today.<sup>16</sup>

Like the boarding school diets, commodity foods programs that provided foods heavy in sugar, empty carbohydrates, and sodium, resulted in widespread health issues in Native communities such as diabetes, heart disease, and obesity. While efforts have been made to improve the quality of foods available through the program, which is still in use, it retains its legacy of being unhealthy as well as insensitive to cultural preferences. With diabetes as the seventh leading cause of death among Indigenous populations—a diabetes-related mortality rate 249 percent higher than that of non-Natives—many food sovereignty movements emphasize improving the physical health of the population in addition to improving cultural and spiritual health.<sup>17</sup>

Many of the factors discussed above contribute not only to a lack of food sovereignty, but also to a lack of political and cultural sovereignty, as well as to widespread poverty. Poverty

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<sup>16</sup>Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1933), 230-234; Maureen Smith, "Forever Changed: Boarding School Narratives of American Indian Identity in the U.S. and Canada," *Indigenous Nations Studies Journal* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 57-82; Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 151, 156-157, 211-214.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Hoover, "You Can't Say You're Sovereign"; Elizabeth Hoover, "From 'Garden Warriors' to 'Good Seeds'."

exacerbates access to traditional and healthy foods, as well as access to comprehensive healthcare. In 2012, a quarter of Indigenous households in the United States were food insecure, and Indigenous households with children were more than twice as likely to be food insecure than their non-Indigenous counterparts. While food security and food sovereignty are not the same issue, they overlap: food insecurity as a baseline condition means not having enough food at all, culturally significant or otherwise. These interconnections create significant overlap between cultural restoration, food sovereignty, health, and political self-determination.<sup>18</sup>

Sean Sherman, an Oglala Lakota chef, food educator, and food sovereignty activist, considers the history of U.S. government policies and actions to be nothing less than “a war on Indigenous foodways, because if you control the food, you control the people.” He points to unhealthy food as the foundation for the majority of health issues that have become prevalent in Indigenous communities, and a return to pre-colonial foods as a place from which to heal Native communities. At a talk given at Brown University, Sherman addressed frybread, often considered a traditional Native food, calling it “a recipe for chronic illness and pain” primarily composed of colonial ingredients. “Let’s update this story with real corn cakes that enfold braised bison or smoked duck, authentic Native food. They taste of the time when we, as a people, were healthy and strong, and of the promise that we can stand up to the foods that have destroyed our health, the forces that have compromised our culture.” This sentiment runs throughout food sovereignty movements, and is far from simply poetic.<sup>19</sup>

In a 2012 study at Northern Michigan University, Native and non-Native research subjects participated in a decolonized diet for one year; participation levels ranged from eating a

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<sup>18</sup> Anne Gordon and Vanessa Oddo, “Addressing Child Hunger and Obesity in Indian Country: Report to Congress,” *Mathematica Policy Research Reports*, January 12, 2012, [www.fns.usda.gov/addressing-child-hunger-and-obesity-indian-country-report-congress](http://www.fns.usda.gov/addressing-child-hunger-and-obesity-indian-country-report-congress).

<sup>19</sup> Sean Sherman, “The Sioux Chef: An Indigenous Kitchen,” (Lecture, Brown University, Providence, RI, November 8, 2017); Sean Sherman and Beth Dooley, *The Sioux Chef’s Indigenous Kitchen* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 9.

diet between twenty-five and hundred percent pre-colonial foods. Over five hundred foods available during the study existed prior to colonization and were native to the Great Lakes region, where many of the Native participants originated. Results showed significant reductions in weight and waist size among all participants, as well as decreases in blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood glucose levels. Participants reported that having family or community support was crucial to their success in maintaining their commitments—participants whose families were unable to accommodate their needs were more likely to revert to post-contact foods. They also found that treaty rights and boundaries made a difference in access to decolonial foods between not only Native and non-Native participants, but also between participants in different tribes. Those who were legally able to fish or hunt, and had access to places to do so, were much more likely to maintain their diets. In a three-year follow-up study, all of the former participants reported that they still consumed pre-colonial foods, albeit at lower levels than during the study. Thirty-three percent reported no longer needing medication for conditions they had prior to the study, like high cholesterol or diabetes. Considering the proven health benefits, Sean Sherman wonders “why isn’t the original indigenous diet all the rage today? It’s hyperlocal, ultraseasonal, uber-healthy: no processed foods, no sugar, no wheat (or gluten), no dairy, no high-cholesterol animal products. It’s naturally low glycemic, high protein, low salt, plant based with lots of grains, seeds, and nuts. Most of all, it’s utterly delicious.”<sup>20</sup>

The non-profit Sherman launched, North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems (NATIFS), highlights four foundational points in restoring Indigenous foodways and food sovereignty: removing colonized thought; reconnecting spiritually, mentally, and physically with

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Reinhardt, “DDP: Decolonizing Diet Project,” (Presentation, Intertribal Food Sovereignty Summit, Ledyard, CT, August 21-23, 2018); Martin Reinhardt, “Spirit Food: A Multi-Dimensional Overview of the Decolonizing Diet Project,” in *Indigenous Innovation: Universalities and Peculiarities*, edited by Elizabeth Sumida Huaman and Bharath Sriraman (Boston: Sense Publishers, 2015), 81-105, 97-102; Sherman and Dooley, *Sioux Chef*, 5; Sherman, “The Sioux Chef” (Lecture).



the natural world; understanding and building Indigenous foundations; and regaining, retaining, sharing, and practicing cultural knowledge. He notes that with over five hundred federally recognized tribes in the U.S. alone, there is no one way of approaching food sovereignty, and understanding each community's history is necessary to moving forward and healing the traumas caused by colonization. Equally important is recognizing the survivances and continued vitality of Indigenous communities, and seeing sovereignty movements within a context of continuation, rather than one of only loss.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Sherman and Dooley, *Sioux Chef*, 5; Sherman, "The Sioux Chef" (Lecture).

## Chapter II

### Fluidity as Praxis: Narragansett Adaptive Strategies from Deep Time through “Detribalization”

The ancestral homelands of the Narragansett extend through most of what is currently Rhode Island, encompassing as well the islands in Narragansett Bay. Narragansett tradition holds that they have inhabited their homelands for time immemorial. As told by the late Elder Medicine Woman Dr. Ella Sekatau, “more than 15,000 years ago, Narragansett tribal ancestors lived out where the ocean is now, but had to suddenly abandon their homes when the ocean rose overnight.”<sup>1</sup> Collective tribal memories such as this have provided clues for underwater archaeologists from the University of Rhode Island (URI), who are conducting fieldwork in conjunction with the Narragansett. As of 2017, three underwater sites have been located, two of which contained cultural artifacts from ten to twelve thousand years ago. Tribal members such as Doug Harris hope that the project will shed light on the oral histories that have been maintained over generations. Chali Machado, a Narragansett tribal member and student researcher with URI, hopes that their work will “bridge the gap between science and oral history.” The project may also help silence some of the ongoing controversies between Narragansett claims to place and those of self-styled “Swamp Yankees,” descendants of colonists who maintain their own “indigeneity” in ways that undermine Narragansett past and presence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ella Sekatau to Doug Harris, quoted in Johanna Knapschaefer, “Villages Beneath the Sea,” *Quadangles Online* (December 5, 2015), <https://web.uri.edu/quadangles/villages-beneath-the-sea/>, Accessed November 3, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Canonicus, Mixan, and Pessicus, “Submission of the Chief Sachem of the Narragansett to Charles I,” April 19, 1644 (1644.04.19.00), Yale Indian Papers Project, accessed electronically, <http://hdl.handle.net/10079/digcoll/3983>, accessed November 15, 2018; Jim Pierce, “Diving for History in Narragansett Bay: Researchers at URI and Narragansett Tribe Members are Diving for Evidence of Early Humans in Rhode Island’s Waters,” in *Providence Monthly* (May 11, 2017), accessed November 3, 2018, <http://providenceonline.com/stories/uri-narragansett-underwater-archaeology,23339>; Christine DeLucia, *Memory Lands: King Philip’s War and the Place of Violence in the Northeast* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Chali Machado, quoted in Johanna Knapschaefer, “Villages Beneath the Sea.”

Oral histories of the Narragansett and other coastal tribes in the region such as the Niantic to the southwest, the Pequot and Mohegan to the west, and the Wampanoag to the east, describe foodways that included hunting, gathering, fishing, and crop-based agriculture. Prior to multiple contacts between Narragansett peoples and Europeans, the Narragansett were seasonally-mobile agriculturists, moving primarily in small- to mid-sized kin-based communities from one known location to another depending on what resources were available. The seacoast and rivers held fish and shellfish such as cod, striped bass, sturgeon, perch, eels, clams, snails, oysters, and crabs. The nearby salt marshes and estuaries were ideal for hunting fowl like ducks, geese, swans, and cormorants. Farther inland, areas were deliberately burned to keep them clear of underbrush, creating an “edge effect” that was frequented by deer, rabbits, porcupines, turkeys, and bears, as well as other animals who sought the grass between the trees and the shelter of the trees themselves. Intentionally cleared fields contained the Three Sisters—beans, squash, and corn—planted together so that each of the plants benefitted the growth of the others. Other botanicals such as nuts, berries, and medicinal plants were gathered from the surrounding landscape, which was selectively and deliberately modified to meet Narragansett needs. All of these resources were gathered following a seasonal cycle of movement, which were in turn reflected in their language. Lunar months were named for activities or natural phenomenon such as the weeding, planting, and ripening of corn, the catching of fish, the melting of ice, and the coming of frost. The life cycles the Narragansett followed reflected a deep and intricate knowledge of the ecosystem they inhabited, and a knowledge of how to best curate that ecosystem for their needs.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, first revised ed. (New York: Hill and Wang: 2003), 37-40, 43, 51, 53; Barbara L Harper and Marcella Remer Thompson, “A Representative Narragansett Heritage Diet” (working paper, The Superfund Research Program, Oregon State University, August 7, 2018), accessed November 11, 2018, [https://superfund.oregonstate.edu/sites/superfund.oregonstate.edu/files/narragansett\\_heritage\\_diet\\_2017.pdf](https://superfund.oregonstate.edu/sites/superfund.oregonstate.edu/files/narragansett_heritage_diet_2017.pdf); Julie A.

Archaeological sites on land show inhabitation dating to the same period as those underwater—ten to twelve thousand years ago—with evidence of continuous, semi-sedentary inhabitation beginning at least four thousand years ago, possibly much longer. A midden in what is now Tiverton, Rhode Island shows evidence of heavy shellfish consumption as long as six thousand years ago, and similar sites have been excavated on islands in Narragansett Bay. Archaeologists across the northeast have found evidence of increased shellfish use around the same time, correlating with the beginning of relative stability of the ocean levels along the coast. This stability in turn resulted in the creation of estuaries and other habitats that would have made certain species more readily available for hunting. While archaeology can show changes such as these, referred to in the texts as “coastal adaptations,” it cannot explain why these changes occurred, and possible explanations range from population pressure to a simple desire for greater dietary variety. David Bernstein, a noted archaeologist who has conducted numerous projects in Narragansett homelands, notes that while new foods were added to the diet, the old foods were not taken out. Instead, subsistence practices were expanded to include both.<sup>4</sup>

Not limited to seafood, these patterns of subsistence diversification also occurred in the consumption of botanicals, mammals, and other fauna. Plant remains are much more scarce than those of animals, primarily because the acidic nature of the region’s soils degrade remains beyond recoverability. Shell middens, thought of as something like a historical kitchen trash-heap, are a valuable resource for archaeologists because the calcium from the shells helps alkalize the soil and make preservation of delicate items much more likely. Plant remains are also more likely to have survived if they were carbonized before being dropped or otherwise

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Fisher and David J. Silverman, *Ninigret, Sachem of the Niantics and Narragansetts: Diplomacy, War, and the Balance of Power in Seventeenth-Century New England and Indian Country* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2014), 12-13.

<sup>4</sup> David J. Bernstein, *Prehistoric Subsistence on the Southern New England Coast: The Record from Narragansett Bay* (Boston: Academic Press, Inc., 1993); Paul A. Robinson, “A Narragansett History from 1000 B.P. to the Present,” in *Enduring Traditions: The Native Peoples of New England*, Laurie Weinstein, ed. (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1994), 79-82.

added to the soil. Plant remains have been found in places such as storage pits, hearths, and home sites. Hickory nuts, which were seasonally abundant, high in protein, and easily storable, have been found in nearly every archaeological site in Rhode Island that dates back to the Late Archaic period—from six to eight thousand years ago. Other species dating to that period have appeared archaeologically in large quantities, including wild grapes and sumac. Over the next several thousand years, other wild plants were incorporated into regional Indigenous diets as well. Acorns began to appear in substantial quantities during the Terminal Archaic period; hazelnuts during the Early Woodland period; chenopods and bulrush during the Middle Woodland period; and bedstraw, black- or raspberries, and possibly cherries during the Late Woodland period, just prior to European encroachment. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but demonstrates the fluidity of Narragansett subsistence practices over time. The repeated presence and concentration of these remains, especially of acorns and hickory nuts, suggest that the collection and preparation of these foods were major activities.<sup>5</sup>

While the archaeological record shows ample evidence of mammals, fish, shellfish, birds, and numerous gathered plants being consumed thousands of years before colonization, cultivars such as the Three Sisters only appear archaeologically in Narragansett lands a few hundred years before European arrivals. Evidence exists of agriculture in other parts of the region dating to around two thousand years ago, such as the lower Connecticut River valley and the Boston Harbor Islands, but no comparable evidence has been found in Narragansett homelands. One possibility for this absence is that evidence simply has not survived, or has not been located yet, due to the acidic soils of New England, the extensive building developments both recent and historical, and rising ocean levels. Many of those in the field deem those reasons unlikely

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<sup>5</sup> Bernstein, *Record from Narragansett Bay*, 107-120.

culprits, however, concluding instead that agriculture simply was not part of Narragansett subsistence patterns for as long as collective memory suggests. Supporters of this theory believe that agriculture came into common practice instead in the few centuries prior to European incursion onto Narragansett, and other, shores. Rather than an agriculture-dependent society, the archaeological record suggests that the Narragansett selectively adopted foods based on their needs and wants, maintaining a fluid and flexible set of subsistence patterns. This fluidity allowed for dietary shifts due to any number of influences, such as changing weather patterns, demographics, or simply taste. The debates between archaeologists and ethnohistorians have continued for decades, with neither side conceding to the other.<sup>6</sup>

The Narragansett people stand firmly by their histories and collective memories. These histories can account for environmental changes that occurred at the end of the last Ice Age—changes confirmed by western science. Some Narragansett—and other Indigenous people—suggest that perhaps western science needs time to catch up to traditional Native knowledge. Questions around specificities of time and the validity of cultural memories and practices tie into larger stereotypes of Indigenous people as unchanging and frozen in time—what Wolfe called repressive authenticity. Over-emphasis on the archaeological record also serves to invalidate Indigenous ways of knowing, creating a dichotomy between western science and Indigenous knowledge. Robin Wall Kimmerer, an ecologist of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, described the dichotomy:

The practice of doing real science brings the questioner into an unparalleled intimacy with nature fraught with wonder and creativity as we try to comprehend the mysteries of the more-than-human world. Trying to understand the life of another being or another system so unlike our own is often humbling and, for many scientists, is a deeply spiritual pursuit. Contrasting with this is the scientific worldview, in which a culture uses the

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<sup>6</sup> Robinson, “A Narragansett History,” 80-82; Bernstein, *Record from Narragansett Bay*, 107-120; Harper and Thompson, “A Representative Narragansett Heritage Diet.”

process of interpreting science in a cultural context that uses science and technology to reinforce reductionist, materialist economic and political agendas. I maintain that the destructive lens of the people made of wood is not science itself, but the lens of the scientific worldview, the illusion of dominance and control, the separation of knowledge from responsibility.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of current movements around food sovereignty, far more important than determining when the Narragansett adopted agriculture is that at some point prior to European arrival they chose to. Cultivated crops rapidly became a staple source of food for the Narragansett, and continue to feature strongly in their cultural identity today.<sup>8</sup>

### Early Colonial Interactions

When the ship of Italian explorer Giovanni da Verrazano was first sighted in Narragansett Bay in 1524, the Narragansett had been practicing these patterns of living, including cultivation, for generations. In a letter to the French king, who employed Verrazano to find faster passage to Asia, Verrazano described part of what is now Rhode Island, seen during his fifteen-day sojourn off the coast:

We often went five or six leagues into the interior, and found the country as pleasant as is possible to conceive, adapted to cultivation of every kind, whether of corn, wine or oil; there are open plains twenty-five or thirty leagues in extent, entirely free from trees or other hinderances, and of so great fertility, that whatever is sown there will yield an excellent crop. On entering the woods, we observed that they might all be traversed by an army ever so numerous; the trees of which they were composed, were oaks, cypresses, and others, unknown in Europe. We found, also, apples, plumbs, filberts, and many other fruits, but all of a different kind from ours. The animals, which are in great numbers, as stags, deer, lynxes, and many other species, are taken by snares, and by bows, the latter being their chief implement; their arrows are wrought with great beauty, and for the heads of them, they use emery, jasper, hard marble, and other sharp stones, in the place of

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<sup>7</sup> Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 342-343: “So the gods tried again to make good people who would be givers of respect, givers of praise, providers and nurturers. To this end they carved a man from wood and a woman from the pith of a reed. . . . But after a time the all-seeing gods realized that these people’s hearts were empty of compassion and love. They could sing and talk, but their words were without gratitude for the sacred gifts that they had received.” The gods unleash their power against the people made of wood—the second attempt at making humans, in Kimmerer’s telling—and destroy them in order to try again. They finally succeed by making people out of corn. Kimmerer asks if we really are people of corn, or if we are still in fact people made of wood, framing her question in terms of Native understandings of time, which are typically non-linear: “Creation, then, is an ongoing process and the story is not history alone—it is also prophecy.”

<sup>8</sup> Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 346.

iron. . . . They change their habitations from place to place as circumstances of situation and season may require.<sup>9</sup>

Verrazano may have exaggerated his account was exaggerated to emphasize the fertility of the so-called new world, but the account does correspond to Narragansett oral histories, as well as other European and Euro-American accounts. Writing at various points in the seventeenth century, Samuel de Champlain, John Winthrop, and John Josselyn all discussed the foods of the Indigenous communities of what became southern New England. These colonists described the gathering, preparation, and use of wild plants; methods of catching or gathering fish and shellfish; the hunting and trapping of woodland animals such as raccoons and deer; the hunting of wild birds, and the widespread cultivation of crops. While not all of these colonial authors concerned themselves directly with the Narragansett, their writings do attest to the general, and often shared, practices of Indigenous peoples in the surrounding region.<sup>10</sup>

Arguably, Roger Williams wrote the most well-known colonial depictions of the Narragansett people. After his banishment from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Williams and his followers settled at what is now Providence in 1636. Over the course of Williams's life he had many dealings with the Narragansett, documenting his observations in journals and books. Perhaps the most well-known is *A Key Into the Language of America*, which was written as both a dictionary of sorts and an anthropological account. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Williams's writings regarding Native peoples were not limited to lamentations of them as

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<sup>9</sup> Giovanni da Verrazano, "Letter of Giovanni da Verrazano to Francis I, July 1524," in Joseph G. Cogswell, ed., "The Voyage of John de Verazzano Along the Coast of North America, from Carolina to Newfoundland, A.D. 1524," in *American Scenic and Historical Society, Fifteenth Annual Report* (New York: New York Historical Society, 1841): 37-67, accessed October 20, 2018, [https://eena-alexanderstreet-com.proxy.mtholyoke.edu:2443/cgi-bin/EENA/hub.py?type=part\\_details&browse=all&sourceid=S2890](https://eena-alexanderstreet-com.proxy.mtholyoke.edu:2443/cgi-bin/EENA/hub.py?type=part_details&browse=all&sourceid=S2890). It should be noted that Verrazano's name is spelled multiple ways, even in a single document, as is evident in the title of the source above. I have used "Verrazano" in my writing.

<sup>10</sup> Harper and Thompson, "A Representative Narragansett Heritage Diet," 42-45.; John Josselyn, *New England Rarities Discovered* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1986), first published 1672 by G. Widdowes, London; John Winthrop, *Winthrop's Journal: "History of New England" 1630-1649* vol. 2, James Kendall Hosmer, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908); Charles Pomeroy Otis, translator, *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain Volume II, 1604-1610* (Boston: The Prince Society, 1878).



supposedly savage and threatening. His writings often—though not always—reflected a certain level of respect for his Native hosts as different rather than simply inferior. For example, he seemed to see seasonal movements of Narragansett peoples between resource areas as what they were: intentional and pre-planned movement to maximize the ratio of food to labor. Other colonial writers, such as the missionary John Eliot, saw these seasonal movements as aimless wanderings, and lamented the supposed meanderings of a people he sought to Christianize. Williams's close interactions with the Narragansett gave him a vantage not always seen by the typical English observer, allowing him to witness and record a more nuanced description of Narragansett subsistence patterns. For instance, he noted not only the reasons behind their mobility, but also their gendered labor divisions, which other colonists often overlooked or misunderstood:

Their women constantly beat all their corne with hand: they plant it, dresse it, gather it, barne it, beat it, and take as much paines as any people in the world . . . . It is almost incredible what burthens the poore women carry of *Corne*, of *Fish*, of *Beanes*, of *Mats*, and a childe besides. . . . Yet sometimes the man himselfe, (either out of love to his Wife, or care for his Children, or being an old man) will help the Woman which (by the custome of the Countrey) they are not bound to.<sup>11</sup>

Williams also noted other labors and practices of Narragansett men, such as hunting, fishing, and trapping, as well as customs of land use and the exercising of usufruct rights.<sup>12</sup>

One of Williams's first dealings with the Narragansett was to dissuade them from allying with the neighboring Pequot, who were teetering on the brink of war with the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Illnesses that had swept southern New England for the last three years had, by comparison, not decimated the Narragansett as they had other tribes, who sometimes faced

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<sup>11</sup> Roger Williams, *A Key Into the Language of America: Or, An Help to the Language of the Natives in that Part of America, called New-England* (London: Gregory Dexter, 1643), 37-38, 100-101.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

mortality rates of around ninety percent. Comparatively unscathed as they were, the Narragansett were one of the most powerful Native groups in the region. Their involvement in the impending violence had the potential to tip the scales, and Williams feared the results of an anti-colonial alliance between the Pequot and Narragansett. He convinced the Narragansett to side instead with the English. This was not a terribly difficult undertaking for Williams, as the Pequot were the Narragansett's greatest rival in gaining tributary communities from whom to extract wampum, which could be traded for English goods. The 1637 massacre of the Pequots at their fort in Mystic, during which Narragansett and Mohegan men acted as archers in support of English troops, gave the Narragansett some cause to regret their alliance. While numbers vary from four to over seven hundred Pequot casualties, sources agree that the fort held mainly women, children, and elders. The English set fire to the fort, and killed or captured any who fled. The Narragansett were appalled at English-style warfare, which was "too furious, and slays too many men," while the English claimed God sanctioned their victory.<sup>13</sup>

When the Pequot War ended, the Narragansett anticipated receiving hunting privileges in Pequot land, as well as a number of Pequot captives as due payment for their support. Use of former Pequot territory would increase Narragansett access to subsistence resources as well as fur-bearing animals that could be traded with the English. The hunting privileges did not materialize, and controversy arose over whether or not the Narragansett would be given any captives, since rumors swirled that they had harbored Pequot refugees against English orders. In 1638, the sachems Canonicus and Miantonomi were called to Hartford to sign a treaty that officially ended the Pequot War. The provisions of the new treaty voided any prior agreements

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<sup>13</sup> Patricia E. Rubertone, *Grave Undertakings: An Archaeology of Roger Williams and the Narragansett Indians* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 76-78; Fisher and Silverman, *Ninigret*, 39-41; Charles Orr, ed., *History of the Pequot War; The Contemporary Accounts of Mason, Underhill, Vincent and Gardener* (Cleveland, Ohio: Helman-Taylor, 1897), 84; Ronald Dale Karr, "'Why Should You Be So Furious?': The Violence of the Pequot War," *Journal of American History* 85 (December 1998): 876-909.

between the Narragansett and the English, and they lost any claim to Pequot land despite their service as English allies. In addition, they were ordered to pay a wampum tribute annually for each received captive, and the English gave themselves the power to interfere in all future conflicts between the Narragansett and any other tribe. Though they signed the treaty, the Narragansett collectively had little interest in maintaining these concessions, and even less in the continued impositions into their affairs by the English.<sup>14</sup>

Over the next few years, the English colonial government's attempted encroachments into Narragansett business continued with no signs of slowing. Of particular issue were the colonists' attempts to control the Narragansett's reactions to the Mohegans, who themselves aimed for regional dominance. With the Pequots removed from power, although not destroyed as the English claimed, the Mohegans found themselves no longer in a subordinate position and sought to exert control over Pequot homelands and survivors. They also sought dominance over other tribes who found themselves freed of Pequot governance, establishing themselves as the largest threat to Narragansett supremacy. With a steadily increasing English population on both tribes' doorsteps, resources such as land and trade goods translated to bargaining power with the English. Conflict between the tribes would continue for decades, and served as the starting point for many conflicts between the Narragansett and the English.<sup>15</sup>

The Mohegan sachem Uncas actively sought to sow discord between the Narragansett and the colonists. In 1640, following a tip from Uncas, the English accused the Narragansett sachem Miantonomi of plotting against them with the Mohawk Nation. He denied the charges, claiming friendship with the English. Two years later, rumors circled again of a Narragansett-led

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<sup>14</sup> Rubertone, *Grave Undertakings*, 78.

<sup>15</sup> Fisher and Silverman, *Ninigret*, 41-45; Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 181-184.

effort at a multi-tribal alliance. This time, however, the rumors were true. Miantonomi, in a speech to the Montauketts in 1642, called for a pan-Indian alliance against the English, citing ongoing land and resource loss as major threat:

So must we be one as they [the English] are, oth<sup>r</sup>wise we shall all be gone shortly, for you know our fathers had plentie of deare & Skins, our plaines weare full of dear, as also our woods, and of Turkeies, and our Coves full of fish and foule. But thes English having gotten our land, they with Sithes cut downe y<sup>e</sup> grass, and with axes fell the trees; their Cowes and horses eat y<sup>e</sup> grass, and th<sup>r</sup> hogs spoyl our Clambanks, and we Shall all be starved.<sup>16</sup>

As Miantonomi observed, colonial encroachments threatened Narragansett subsistence methods, as did intrusions of the colonists' livestock. For all his resentment towards them, however, Miantonomi saw the value of the animals. When urging war on the English, he counseled that no cattle be slain, because they would provide meat "till our dear be Increased again." His statement suggests that while willing to utilize English animals as a source of food if necessary, his, and perhaps others, true desire was the repopulation of deer and a return to traditional subsistence practices.<sup>17</sup>

Miantonomi's call to arms, however, was largely unheeded, and his imagined alliance never came to fruition. Other tribes, aware of the ongoing conflict between the Mohegan and Narragansett, and of Narragansett discontentment at English interference, may have seen Narragansett endeavors towards an alliance as an effort to replace the English, gaining even more political power for themselves. For other tribes already weakened by past epidemics, this outcome only meant trading one master for another. The next year, fighting again broke out between the Mohegan and Narragansett. The Mohegan captured Miantonomi in 1643. At the

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<sup>16</sup> Lion Gardiner, "Leift Lion Gardener His Relation of the Pequot Warres," in *Appendix to the History of the Wars of New England with the Eastern Indians*, ed. Samuel Penhallow (Cincinnati: William Dodge, 1859), 26.

<sup>17</sup> Lion Gardiner, "Leift Lion Gardener His Relation of the Pequot Warres," 26.

instigation of the English, who did not want to incur direct retribution from the Narragansett, the Mohegan put Miantonomi to death.<sup>18</sup>

### **Fields, Forests, and Fences**

While Miantonomi likely geared his efforts more towards the elimination of English interference than anything else, his view of livestock as an issue was well-founded. Prior to European incursion, no domesticated animals inhabited Narragansett country or the northeast in general, except perhaps a few dogs. Initial encounters with English livestock were confusing for Indigenous people who had never seen such animals as these. Native communities equated livestock discursively with the wild animals they were accustomed to, a connection aided by the colonists' initial lack of fencing that allowed the animals to roam freely, creating an illusion of wildness. According to Williams, the Narragansett called swine "ockqutchaun," meaning woodchuck, because woodchucks were "about the bignesse of a *Pig*, and rooting like a *Pig*." For other livestock, such as cows and goats, they simply added the suffix "-suck"—which indicated a being as an animal in Narragansett—to the English name, creating new names rather than categorically adopting the English words. In this way, these new animals were understood and interpreted through a Narragansett lens rather than one imposed by colonial authority.<sup>19</sup>

In the years following the Pequot War, the number of livestock in colonial New England multiplied exponentially, especially cattle and swine. Owners of Caribbean sugar plantations found that their profits increased if they fed enslaved laborers cheap imported food rather than dedicating potential cane fields to growing food themselves. New England farmers in turn increased their livestock and crop production to meet the demands of this new market. Fences were time- and labor-consuming to construct, and colonists often thought it cheaper and easier to

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<sup>18</sup> "Submission of the Chief Sachem of the Narragansett to Charles I"; Fisher and Silverman, *Ninigret*, 41-50.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, *A Key Into the Language*, 105-107; Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*, 38-39, 185.

simply allow their animals to roam what they saw as open lands: the forests and coasts used by Native people. These animals quickly became problematic for Indigenous populations, because they depleted food supplies that both the people and the animals they hunted relied upon. The swine especially wreaked havoc when they consumed nuts, berries, roots, and other plants harvested by Native women. They also dug up clam beds, destroyed planting fields and the crops they held, and disturbed caches of stored food meant for winter. Narragansett women, whose labors were made unnecessarily difficult by the marauding animals, referred to them as “filthy cut throats.”<sup>20</sup>

Complaints about these incursions to colonial authorities were often met with silence. When they did respond, it was often to insist that it was the responsibility of Native people to construct fences around their fields to keep straying animals out, rather than any duty of the English to keep track of their livestock. When Native people replied that they did not know how to build fences, English colonists sometimes offered help, enacting laws mandating that teams of colonists assist Native people in constructing fences around their fields. Officials in Warwick, Rhode Island taxed English cattle to acquire enough funds for fencing supplies, and further stipulated that one member of every English household contribute their labor to the construction efforts. Fences, however, did not always work to contain or exclude the animals, and the encroachments continued. Moreover, efforts to protect the planting fields did nothing to protect wild resources that Native people depended on for food. The English saw the woodlands and beaches as public domain, suitable for allowing their animals to graze freely. Native northeast societies generally employed usufructuary land-use patterns, in which the land “belonged” to whomever was using it. When a person or family was no longer utilizing a given piece of land, a

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<sup>20</sup> Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*, 151-152, 186-189; Williams, *A Key into the Language*, 106-107.

sachem would typically reassign use of it to someone else. Areas such as forests were considered communal, as were any harvestable or huntable resources within them. The English's assumption that they could release their animals to roam at will through commonly-held forests was an abuse of the system, because the animals often destroyed resources that were meant to be available to all. Animals in forests were typically considered literal free game by Native communities, and livestock were initially no different. Indigenous populations were not accustomed to thinking of animals as personal property, and the period of adjustment saw many suits against them for killing what they considered another free-range food source. While English courts did occasionally acknowledge the damage caused to cultivated Native fields, they denied that any destruction of forest resources was worthy of repayment by the animal's owners. Some colonists went so far as to sue Native people for property damage if their traps caught wandering livestock instead of deer. Colonists regarded Native subsistence patterns that did not resemble their own as invalid, and English refusal to acknowledge their legitimacy would impact Indigenous-colonial relations for centuries to come.<sup>21</sup>

### **Economic Shifts and Political Maneuvers**

As colonization advanced, English land-use systems created an ever-increasing demand for expansion. Colonists had very specific ideas about what constituted proper agriculture: bounded and privately-owned property divided into sections by use. Fields were plowed and planted with barley, oats, and corn, while other land was cleared and eventually fenced, to be used as pasturage for animals. Unlike typical Native agriculture, English planters practiced monoculture, which quickly stripped the soil of nutrients and forced more land clearing to continue accommodating the agriculture-driven economy. Large swaths of land were purchased

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<sup>21</sup> Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*, 192-198.

from Indigenous people, often under questionable circumstances. The Narragansett largely managed to control English expansion into what was known as Narragansett Country, selling lands in ways that benefitted them on multiple fronts. Ongoing conflicts with Uncas and the Mohegans following Miantonomi's execution created a need for such European goods as weapons and gunpowder. The income from land sales allowed the Narragansett to finance their campaigns, despite English attempts to prevent them doing so. Land grants in the 1630s created a buffer against incursion from the Wampanoags by intentionally positioning colonists between the two tribes. This positioning also provided new sources of trade for the Narragansett, allowing them more direct access to English trade goods. By the mid-17th century, the Narragansett had maintained the majority of their homelands, and the only English settlements contained around fifteen hundred people altogether—in comparison, the Narragansett numbered around fifteen thousand. In the 1650s and 1660s, however, a number of large transactions in rapid succession resulted in the loss of nearly all of the Narragansett's core lands, restricting them to the area around Ningret Pond—near modern-day Charlestown. Some of these sales, most notably the Pettaquamscutt Purchase in 1657/58, have come under scrutiny as having been obtained under very questionable circumstances; others have not. In 1658, Rhode Island declared that all purchases of Native land must first have approval from the assembly. As pointed out by historian Virginia DeJohn Anderson, however, this legislation hardly stopped individual land dealings; it merely made them somewhat regulated.<sup>22</sup>

These sales—those that were made non-coercively, at any rate—were intended both for financial gain, and to potentially garner support from the English for their assaults against Uncas. In response to the potential for an inter-tribal alliance against the colonies, the United Colonies

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<sup>22</sup> Fisher and Silverman, *Ninigret*, 88-93; Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*, 220.



of New England (UCLE), a coalition consisting of two commissioners each from Massachusetts Bay, Plymouth, Connecticut, and New Haven colonies, was created in 1643. The UCNE, which recognized the Narragansett as the largest threat to colonial efforts, supported the Mohegan in their ongoing conflicts with the Narragansett and attempted to restrict Narragansett endeavors. The Narragansett had, through religious dissident Samuel Gorton, “submitted” themselves in 1644 to the “kingdome of Old England” in the form of “that Great and mighty Prince, Charles, King of Great Britaine,” in exchange for his protection. The submission stated that they could not “yield over [themselves] unto any, that are subjects themselves” because they had “suspicion of some of His Majesty’s pretended subjects.” Colonial authorities saw this calculated maneuver as an underhanded move by the Narragansett to go over their heads to a higher authority. Going forward, Narragansett leaders refused to either pay the fines or obey UCNE orders, citing their equal political status as subjects of the king and not the colonies. Despite the Narragansett sending gifts on multiple occasions in the hopes of gaining support for their incursions into Mohegan territory, the UCNE remained antagonistic towards their efforts. In 1645, a group of Narragansett were called to Boston under false pretenses, and then intimidated under threat of violence into signing a so-called peace covenant. By signing, the Narragansett “agreed” to pay a fine of two thousand fathoms of wampum—approximately twelve thousand feet, requiring between fifteen thousand and twenty thousand days of work to create—as well as several other burdensome and humiliating conditions.<sup>23</sup>

The Narragansett had no real intention of obeying the UCNE, and over the next decade and a half they flouted colonial rule on a number of occasions. They continued to fight with the Mohegans, refused to pay the majority of fines levied by the UCNE, and continued selling some

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<sup>23</sup> Fisher and Silverman, *Ninigret*, 51-52, 58-62; “Submission of the Chief Sachem of the Narragansett to Charles I”; DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 127-128.

of their lands as a means of financing their objectives. Tensions steadily mounted, and in 1660, the UCNE forced Narragansett leaders to mortgage their lands as a guarantee of payment for the latest fine. Confronted with an armed force demanding payment, the sachems Ninigret, Pessacus, and Scuttup had little choice but to sign the mortgage. Two weeks later, they received an offer from the Atherton Company, a group of colonial leaders engaged in land speculation. In exchange for a new mortgage, the Company would pay the fine to the UCNE. The new mortgage came with much better terms for the Narragansett than the original, and the sachems accepted. Only later would it become clear that the Company had constructed an elaborate trap to obtain Narragansett lands.<sup>24</sup>

Accepting the deal with the Atherton Company may have been a political gamble for the Narragansett. A 1658 law prohibited purchases of Narragansett land without approval of the colony, which neither the UCNE nor the Atherton Company had sought. Therefore, a chance remained that if the Narragansett defaulted, the colony would contest the Company's claim to the land, and the ensuing legal battle would effectively prevent any colonial claim to it. Several members of the Atherton Company, however, were prominent Rhode Island colonists, so there was an equal chance that any claim by the Company would be upheld. The Narragansett may have also been counting on Charles II in the event of misdealings by the Atherton Company. The Atherton Company would not have obtained their mortgage if the UCNE had not first forced one from the tribe, a manipulation that the Narragansett hoped the Crown would disapprove. In addition, the Narragansett had submitted themselves as subjects to Charles I, who had been deposed and beheaded in 1649. The colony of New Haven—one of the members of the UCNE—had reportedly harbored several of the regicides, a fact that was sure to earn disfavor from

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<sup>24</sup> Fisher and Silverman, *Ninigret*, 61, 67-72, 80-81, 83, 86-99; DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 127-128; Lisa Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip's War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 56-62.

Charles II. Anticipated problems soon became a reality. When the tribe tried to make payment before the Atherton mortgage came due, they were told they could not, because “Mr. Winthrop was in England.” The Company then claimed title for non-payment. The Narragansett sent their complaints to London.<sup>25</sup>

In 1665, a Royal Commission investigated the claims of all parties involved in the Atherton mortgage, and in other contested land claims as well. The commissioners declared the Atherton mortgage and several other deeds void, and ordered off any colonists who had already moved into the lands in question. Many of these nullifications would, however, be overturned several years later.<sup>26</sup> The Narragansett, while emerging victorious in that the opposed transactions were voided, were made to pay the Atherton Company what they owed for the mortgage. They were also required to renew their “submission” to the Crown in exchange for the continued promise of its protection. The Narragansett Country was declared the “Kings Province,” to be administered by the colony of Rhode Island, itself newly chartered by Charles II. For the time being, the Narragansett came away narrowly avoiding alienation from the majority of their lands, a fact that would allow them to continue preferred subsistence practices into the future.<sup>27</sup>

### **Technological Adaptations**

By this point, the Narragansett were arguably less affected by colonialism than others in the area, but that was rapidly changing. While their deliberate controls of English expansion initially meant fewer issues with colonists and their marauding livestock, the clusters of land sales between 1657 and 1660 had seen the populations of both increase steadily in their region.

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<sup>25</sup> Fisher and Silverman, *Ninigret*, 61, 67-72, 80-81, 83, 86-99; DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 127-128; Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin*, 56-62.

<sup>26</sup> John Russell Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, in New England*, vol. 2 (Providence: A Crawford Greene and Brother, 1857), 477-478.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60; Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin*, 60-62; Julie A. Fisher and David J. Silverman, *Ninigret*, 99-100.

These rising numbers were precipitated in part by the promise of a guaranteed market for meat in the Caribbean, and by the 1660s large numbers of livestock were being driven through Narragansett land en route to ports, where they would be shipped south. That the bottom had fallen out of the wampum trade with the depletion of fur-bearing species in the area meant the only thing the Narragansett had that interested the colonists was land. Ongoing desires for trade goods among the Narragansett meant that the trade would continue, now primarily supplied by land sales. Over the last several years, the Narragansett had selectively adopted a number of European technologies into their lives, many related to food production, including metal knives, pothooks, hoes, and kettles. They also maintained technologies of their own, such as the use of stone pestles for grinding corn, which remained a primary food source. The introduction and adoption of select European tools altered their foodways somewhat, but only in the ways they chose. Many of the technologies they integrated into pre-existing patterns were chosen specifically because they eased traditional processes of food planting and preparation, and were not intended to replace them. Hoes, for instance, were more convenient than traditional digging sticks for planting and weeding crops. Plows, in contrast, did not lend themselves well to co-planting practices, and were not readily adopted by Narragansett communities.<sup>28</sup>

Records indicate that, to a certain degree, Narragansett peoples also began to selectively adopt colonial livestock into their subsistence patterns. A law passed in 1666 made it unlawful for “any Indian or Indians within this Collony . . . to keepe or cause to be kept, either hog or any other swine, haveing any apparant cutt marks in one or both their eares,” and authorized the seizure of any such animals by “any person or persons.” The appearance of this restriction suggests that the Narragansett had begun to keep swine on a large enough scale to create tensions

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<sup>28</sup> Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*, 218-224; Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016), 50-58.

between themselves and the colonists. While scant record exists of the Narragansett adoption of any other English-style agriculture, they likely experimented with other animal husbandries as it suited them. Apart from raising animals as sources of food for themselves, the Narragansett who were choosing to keep livestock may have also been working to take advantage of the ready market for New England-raised meat in the Caribbean. With their proximity to the same ports the English used to ship their products, it is possible they saw a financial opportunity for themselves as well and seized it, creating tensions with colonists by introducing outside competition to the marketplace.<sup>29</sup>

Other Indigenous communities in the region participated more extensively in colonial-style agriculture than the Narragansett. The Narragansett had, by comparison, retained more of their homelands than had other tribes, and perhaps had less need or desire to add new practices into their lives. They had also not been missionized to the same extent that others had been, and perhaps felt less pressure from the English to conform to these new patterns of living. Williams, while interested in Christianizing the Indians, was ambivalent in his actual efforts to do so. Other missionaries such as Daniel Gookin complained about the Narragansett's utter disinterest in Christianity, a fact Gookin attributed to the influence of their sachems, and abandoned efforts as futile. Though they were not by any means isolated from colonial influences, the Narragansett arguably were less impacted as a whole than were other Native peoples in the region. Because of this convergence of factors, on the eve of what would be known as King Philip's War, the Narragansett remained one of the most powerful, and conceivably the most independent, of Indigenous tribes in southern New England.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Bartlett, *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island* vol. 2, 172.

<sup>30</sup> Rubertone, *Grave Undertakings*, 92-95, 154-156; Fisher and Silverman, *Ninigret*, 103-104.

### King Philip's War

When fighting broke out between colonial forces and the Pokanoket Wampanoag on the east side of Narragansett Bay in 1675, uncertainty regarding how the Narragansett would respond prevailed among all parties. The enmity between the Narragansett and the Wampanoag was well known. Ninigret, a sachem of the Eastern Niantic, a tribe with deep and complex ties to the Narragansett, had begun consolidating his power among the Narragansett to gain control of the region. The Wampanoag sachem Metacom, more often known in colonial writings as Philip, emerged as Ninigret's rival, playing off internal Narragansett factions to strengthen his own position and establish himself as a regional power. Metacom sought the alliance of eastern Narragansett sachems, who had found themselves less influential as Ninigret's power grew. He also sought alliances with those that were subjugated by the Narragansett, such as the Montaukett. Accusations of plotting war against the English flew between Metacom and Ninigret, and their rivalry played out in colonial courts, each hoping that the English would scrutinize the other. On the other hand, rumors circulated of a multi-tribal plot to overthrow the English, and indeed a number of meetings occurred between leaders of the Narragansett, Wampanoag, Montaukett, Pequot, and Mohegan tribes. While Indigenous leaders described these as nothing more than social dances, at which only a handful of outside tribal members attended, colonial leaders lived in fear of such an alliance and were not entirely convinced by protests of innocence. Many of these tribes had conflicted histories with each other in the recent past, and their somewhat suddenly amiable meetings did not bode well for the English. As historian Christine DeLucia has pointed out in her several works on King Philip's War, nothing about the war was a forgone conclusion at the time, including Narragansett participation.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Fisher and Silverman, *Ninigret*, 104-111; Bartlett, *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island* vol. 2, 267, 272; DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 128-129.

Initially, the majority of the Narragansett—including Ninigret and most of his Niantics—expressed a desire to remain neutral. While some individual Narragansett participated from the start, leaders attempted to express neutrality, even promising reluctantly to deliver any Wampanoag refugees into English hands in an attempt to avoid the war. While they did send the heads of a handful of Wampanoag warriors to various English officials, no living refugees were forthcoming. Taken in conjunction with the participation of some Narragansett factions, the English quickly decided that the Narragansett as a whole were violating their agreement. In late 1675, a number of Narragansett had retreated into Great Swamp with Wampanoag refugees, mostly women, children, and elders. Swamps were difficult to navigate for the unfamiliar, and Indigenous people were well aware of the English understandings of swamps as treacherous places associated with evil, and of their reluctance to pursue any who fled into one. Ninigret had often avoided armed men sent by the UCNE to collect payment—or collect Ninigret himself—by “swamping” himself beyond their reach. This winter, however, was particularly cold, and much of the Great Swamp had frozen over, which allowed the passage of armed riders led by a Native informant acting as a guide. The attack was disastrous: estimates place casualties anywhere from three hundred to a thousand. Survivors fled to areas with minimal English presence, while other Narragansett, who had remained neutral, continued to deliberate over whether or not to join the fighting. Those Narragansett who had chosen to fight continued to do so, and in March of 1676, the English settlement at Providence was burned. Roger Williams’s home was one of the many lost in the fire. Just a few months later, the Narragansett were attacked again, this time at Nipsachuck Swamp, with results as devastating as the Great Swamp massacre. When Metacom was killed at Mount Hope in August of 1676, the war was functionally ended, though sporadic

fighting still occurred. While Narragansett people and their culture survived King Philip's War, the experience irrevocably turned the course of their history.<sup>32</sup>

### **Post-War Survivance and Coersion**

Following the war, the future of Narragansett people was varied and uncertain at best. Some were sold into slavery in the Caribbean or involuntarily indentured in the homes of New England colonists, the latter fate being more common for women and children. A notable exception was made for Metacom's wife and young child, who were sold into the Caribbean because they were so closely related to Metacom, whom the English considered a driving force of the war. Neither sort of un-freedom was new to Narragansett people: following the Pequot War, many Pequot survivors had suffered the same fates, and Roger Williams even requested that he be allowed to take a particular child into his home as a "servant." In addition, a Rhode Island law from 1659 allowed that any Indian who "shall spoyle or damnify the cattell, fence or fruite trees, corne house or other goods of any of the English," and could not pay either the fines or the value of the goods, be "sould as a slave to any forraigne country of the English subjects." Williams, who had long professed himself a friend of the Narragansett, was instrumental in the enslavement and indenture of Narragansett people following King Philip's War, and benefitted directly from the sales. Still other Narragansett were put on trial and forced to testify and confess to treason, rioting, and carrying arms against the English. Many of these men were summarily executed, while others were enslaved. While the Narragansett survived the war and the aftermath, it was not without massive disruptions to their social structures and kin networks.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Julie A. Fisher and David J. Silverman, *Ninigret*, 113, 117-124; DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 129-133.

<sup>33</sup> Warren, *New England Bound*, 92-96, 99, 101-104, 107-110; Roger Williams, "Roger Williams to John Winthrop, 1637-06-30," In *Papers of the Winthrop Family*, volume 3, accessed October 4, 2018, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/winthrop/index.php/view/PWF03d343>; John Russell Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, in New England*, volume 1 (Providence: A. Crawford Greene and Brother, 1856), 412-413; Robinson, "A Narragansett History," 83; Rubertone, *Grave Undertakings*, 16-17; DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 135.



Losses from these kinds of cultural disruptions are difficult to quantify because of their intangible nature. With the massive casualties from both the Great Swamp and Nipsachuck Swamp massacres, it cannot be said how much knowledge was taken before it could be passed to the next generations. Elders, who made up a disproportionate number of the losses in both places, were responsible for orally transmitting cultural knowledge to the young, and the sudden loss of these knowledge-keepers would have had great impact beyond just the demographic loss. Some Narragansett joined relations such as the Niantics, who had largely remained neutral during the war and were at a physical remove from most of the violence. Many of their kinsman were already there, having gone to safety prior to the end of the war. As Miantonomi had told the Massachusetts Colony court in 1642, the Niantics “were as his own flesh, being allied by continual intermarriages,” and these ties had remained. These diasporas were double-edged, however. Even as they promised safety, they necessarily involved alienation from traditional homelands, for some more than others. Planting fields were abandoned, as were places where other subsistence methods had been practiced for generations. Despite these disruptions, the Narragansett and their culture persisted. Far from discontinuing their identity as a tribe, as would be claimed a century later by the State of Rhode Island, Narragansett peoples created and enacted complicated networks of kinship that ensured their survival in a hostile place.<sup>34</sup>

Several acts passed in the aftermath of the war attempted to prohibit the movements and activities of Native people in Rhode Island. In 1676, the Assembly ordered that any Native person in the “custody” of a colonist “shall be bound in the day time (if he goeth abroad from his house), to have a sufficient keeper in company with him, and to be locked up in the night in a sufficient place of security.” The following year saw a law against the building of wigwams or

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<sup>34</sup> Robinson, “A Narragansett History,” 83; Winthrop, *Winthrop’s Journal*, vol. 2, 78.

“shade made of mats or in other ways made for the entertaininge of Indians” on common lands and “men’s perticular lands.” Another order banned Native people from having guns, ammunition, or liquor of any variety on their persons, and empowered colonists to seize the items as well as the person carrying them. The colony sought to outlaw gatherings of Native people, for fear of “mischiefe...to the inhabitants and subjects of this his Majestie’s Collony.” In 1683, Native people were banned from entering Providence; those already present had seven days to vacate. In 1704, all people of color were prohibited from walking city streets after 9 PM “without a certificate from their masters, or some English person of the family to which...they belong, or some lawful excuse.” As with the laws regarding liquor and firearms, all colonists could arrest any person they deemed outside the law.<sup>35</sup>

None of this is to say that Narragansett people, or other Native people, were in reality removed from any given colonial settlement, but these places had become incredibly hostile to their presence, and many may have chosen to avoid them as a matter of course. The Narragansett diaspora demonstrates the flexibility of their social and political structures, but also obscures the nature of any losses they may have suffered. Population loss from the war itself, combined with the distribution of people across a number of communities in its aftermath, almost certainly disrupted transmissions of oral histories and traditions, but tracking such losses is difficult (at best). The colonial records of Narragansett activities were silent except for such events as judicial proceedings, and are skewed towards telling a story of steady decline. While Narragansett people did not utterly vanish from colonial writings, the records resulted from fear

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<sup>35</sup>DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 137; Bartlett, *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, vol. 1, 534, 560-561; Henry C. Dorr, “The Narragansett,” in *Collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society* Vol. VII (Providence: Kellogg Printing Company, 1885), 227-228, 230.

and distrust and were created for colonial purposes, and thus did not document intimate disruptions or continuations that may have been happening within Narragansett communities.<sup>36</sup>

The archaeological record, incomplete as it may sometimes be, does reveal a continued presence, and suggests a “postwar rebuilding, reengagement, and renegotiation of Native-colonial relationships.” Colonially-produced or imported items that shows signs of reworking into objects for Native use, such as glassware that was transformed into scraping or cutting tools, have been found in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century sites. These indicate not only a presence, but also the continuation of traditional practices, and the selective adaptation of colonial items. Historian Ann McMullen coined the term “conversion,” a strategy of survival in which overtly Native practices went underground. While many Indigenous populations remaining in New England following the war undoubtedly practiced conversion, particularly those living in proximity to English settlements, archaeological findings indicate that the practice may not have been as widespread as McMullen suggests. Sites containing items of Native manufacture and reworking instead show that many Narragansett relocated into the heart of Narragansett country. There, they were out of easy reach of colonial authority, and continued to openly practice traditionally adaptive methods of survival.<sup>37</sup>

### **Created Borders, Continued Mobility, and Selective Adaptations**

The Narragansett and Niantic continued to use and occupy their homelands after the war, but the ever-increasing spread of colonial settlement slowly chipped away at these spaces.

Colonists complained about the large number of Indians inhabiting what they saw as English

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<sup>36</sup> DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 137-138, 143-144, 148.

<sup>37</sup> Colin A. Porter, “‘Monuments to a Nation Gone By’: Fortified Houses, King Philip’s War, and the Remaking of a New England Frontier, 1675-1725” (PhD dissertation, Brown University, 2013); Ann McMullen, “What’s Wrong with This Picture?: Context, Conversion, Survival, and the Development of Regional Native Cultures and Pan-Indianism in Southeastern New England,” in *Enduring Traditions: The Native Peoples of New England*, Laurie Weinstein, ed. (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1994), 134-136.

land, and in 1709 attempted to solve the so-called problem. Rhode Island created a sixty-four square mile reservation in what is now Charlestown, in exchange for clear title to remaining Narragansett land. The sachem Ninigret II, who had already sold off large swaths of Narragansett land in the prior two decades, accepted this agreement, despite the promised acreage being admittedly poor for farming. Contemporary colonists hoped this action would restrict the movements of the Narragansett. Lawyer and self-styled historian Henry Dorr, writing in the late nineteenth century, derisively described the effects of the reservation: “they now acquired some of the habits of civilisation—dwelling in houses and wearing clothes.” The Narragansett being moved to a reservation was seen by non-Natives as encouraging inevitable assimilation through containment. Oral histories of the tribe maintain that the Narragansett continued to practice mobility both overtly and covertly across these foisted borders. They used both Native paths and colonial roads in their travels, or created new paths if they found the others too populated with colonists they wished to avoid. Not all Narragansett lived on the reservation, either, and both residents and non-residents traversed the area to visit family, maintaining kin networks across imposed boundaries. As they had since their arrival, colonists saw these intentional travels of Native people—when they saw them at all—as aimless wanderings. A more accurate interpretation identifies such movements as continued acts of resistance, reaffirmations of Narragansett practices and connections in a colonial regime that was working to erase them.<sup>38</sup>

The reservation, which represented but a small portion of their homelands, was the beginning of many dimensional restrictions. While the Narragansett were still actively mobile across reservation borders, subsisting by hunting and fishing became increasingly difficult. More

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<sup>38</sup> Robinson, “A Narragansett History,” 83-84; DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 138-139; Porter, “Monuments to a Nation Gone By,” 123-125, 143-145; Ruth Wallis Herndon and Ella Wilcox Sekatau, “The Right to a Name: The Narragansett People and Rhode Island Officials in the Revolutionary Era,” in *After King Philip’s War: Presence and Persistence in Indian New England*, Colin G. Calloway, ed. (Hanover, MA: Dartmouth College, University Press of New England, 1997), 114-119.

and more colonists flooded into the area at the bequest of groups such as the Atherton Company, who advertised land as “very pleasant and fertile, fit and commodious for plantation.”<sup>39</sup> Sites that had provided food sources for generations were now in the hands of colonists, who, following King Philip’s War, were none too keen on permitting Native presence on their land, as demonstrated by the flurry of legislation to prevent it. The creation of a reservation did not indicate an overnight shift to a different lifestyle, nor should the adoption of English-style agriculture be considered a shift to “civilization.” The idea that Indigenous land-use practices and subsistence methods were inherently “uncivilized” was a deeply held Euro-centric ideal that unfortunately echoes today, and erases the complexity of Indigenous cultural patterns and shifts. Native cultures were in no way static, and the adoption of another culture’s practice does not equate assimilation into that culture, though this argument would be made at the end of the nineteenth century during efforts to detribalize the Narragansett.

In 1750, several Narragansett filed a complaint with the General Assembly that sachem Tom Ninigret, a descendant of Ninigret (~1600-1676), had sold all of the best farms away from the reservation, and as such they were at risk of either starving or becoming a “town charge.” The reference to farms suggests that by this time, the Narragansett on the reservation at least partially depended on agriculture for subsistence. Whether the people practiced companion planting as they had done for generations, or monocropping after colonial methods, is unclear. Animal husbandry patterns are likewise obscure. The Assembly, for their part, were disinclined to prevent Tom Ninigret from selling off any more land. Many of them were either his creditors, or purchasers of the lands he sold. In either 1769 or 1770, Tom Ninigret disappeared, possibly at the hands of angry Narragansett. Some say he died, others that he was murdered, and still others

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<sup>39</sup> Porter, “Monuments to a Nation Gone By,” 120.

held that he was kidnapped in the middle of the night and put on a slave ship bound for the Caribbean. Whatever the occurrence, he was the last hereditary sachem of the Narragansett. The role of sachem was replaced with a Tribal Council in an effort to prevent more one-sided transactions. Nevertheless, by the 1780s, the majority of Narragansett lands were in the hands of white settlers.<sup>40</sup>

By 1810, a missionary visiting the reservation recorded in his journals that the average Narragansett “seldom tills more than an acre of land, & may cut a little hay.” He also recorded that the Narragansett collectively had no oxen, and only four cows. Like many other reservation communities in southern New England, they practiced agriculture on a small scale and supplemented their crops with wages earned by hiring out as stonemasons, laborers, servants, and possibly seamen. Some also hunted and fished, which meant prolonged absences from home because of ever-increasing encroachment from white communities that destabilized local wildlife populations. Two decades later, disputing a vitriolic state report that the Narragansett were living in squalid conditions and were going extinct, three councilmen petitioned the General Assembly of Rhode Island on behalf of the tribe, writing:

We have upwards of fourty familys Now living in the town, [we] have thirty four or five fraimd houses, three log houses, and four or five huts...two fraimes raised and one more is Nearly ready to Raise. [T]he greatest part of our tribe live as well as the Commontry of people, we Raise pork and Beef and Poltry and produce of various kinds...from that [the cedar swamp] we get timber for building Boards, Shingles, ceder poles for fencing our lands & the old women get bark for bottoming chairs, stuff for Baskets Brooms & as [to] the bounds we all know them...we used to have a Saw mill...this pond leads into pawtuck River and So into the sea, here we take saltwater fish such as Alewives and white pirsch and various kinds of fresh water fish with lines and hooks...we have traids

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<sup>40</sup> John Russell Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, in New England*, vol. 6 (Providence: A Crawford Greene and Brother, 1861), 357; Daniel R. Mandell, *Tribe, Race, History: Native Americans in Southern New England, 1780-1880* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 11; Robinson, “A Narragansett History,” 84; Herndon and Sekatau, “The Right to a Name,” 133.

men and women such as carpenters, coopers, shoemakers, tailors, weavers & such are the situation of this tribe that are deemd ten times wor[s]e then the unprotected Savages.<sup>41</sup>

The Narragansett had taken the Euro-American practices that suited them the most, and left others in favor of continuing to practice methods of subsistence that were more traditional. They clearly practiced some agriculture, but did not employ it as the sole means by which to survive, using it instead to supplement their income from labor in various industries. The mention here of women weaving baskets and making brooms, taken in conjunction with written accounts of Native women peddling these items door to door, shows that the Narragansett and other tribes were also creatively blending aspects from both cultures. In these cases, they turned traditional practices into a mode of income that allowed for both their survival and the survival of the practice itself in a developing nascent capitalist economy. These practices also demonstrated that living on a bounded reservation in no way meant that Narragansett ceased traveling their homelands. Reports from people living on the reservation showed that Narragansett living away returned to the reservation periodically to visit family and friends, re-inscribing networks of connection across imagined colonial borders.<sup>42</sup>

Documentation, albeit limited, suggests that those living away from the reservation did not often participate in property ownership, either of land or moveable goods. A handful of probate records and wills nearing the end of the eighteenth century show some accumulation of property by Native people, but not much. Late Elder Medicine Woman Dr. Ella Sekatau suggested that this absence of accumulated goods reflected a continuance of “a traditional native life unencumbered by material objects.” In contrast to property held *by* Native people, a number

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<sup>41</sup> Mandell, *Tribe, Race, History*, 12, 14; Tobias Ross, Christopher Harry, and Daniel Seketer, “Remonstrance Against Dr. Daniel King’s Report,” June 23, 1832, accessed December 12, 2018, [https://sosri.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/digitalFile\\_3f6547d4-1dc6-4bf6-9abb-d89684953046/](https://sosri.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/digitalFile_3f6547d4-1dc6-4bf6-9abb-d89684953046/).

<sup>42</sup> Mandell, *Tribe, Race, History*, 12, 14, 36, 42.

of Native people turn up in official records as the property *of* colonial people. Colonists often extorted either land or service from Native people who had accumulated debt. Since few off the reservation owned property, and regulations controlled who could sell reservation land, many indebted Native people were placed in indentured servitude. Native children, sometimes as young as two years old, were taken from parents and indentured to colonial families on a regular basis on the grounds that government officials believed the parents economically and morally unfit. Being landless meant that Narragansett living off-reservation were not engaging in colonial-style agriculture, nor were they likely to practice their own methods of subsistence as widely as before. The areas they would have been able to use a generation ago were rapidly becoming fenced and privatized, cutting off Narragansett access. The Narragansett engaged instead in socioeconomic patterns that often kept men away for long periods, working on seafaring ships, joining the military, or going on prolonged hunting or fishing excursions. White officials equated family survival with the presence of a husband or father, and disregarded women-led households as insufficient. Within this patriarchal schema, colonial authorities deemed the absence of Narragansett men as paternal abandonment.<sup>43</sup>

As with their kin on the reservation, Narragansett people living in more urban settings functioned around the impositions of town boundaries. Many Rhode Island towns, in efforts to reduce the number of poor or ill who sought public aid, required people to have departure certificates if they planned to change their town of residence. If a person petitioned the town for aid and did not have such a certificate, they were ordered to remove back to “their” town, or risk arrest for vagrancy. Native people turned up a number of times in town records as being “warned out,” sometimes several times, but rarely were they arrested or removed. Some records show that

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<sup>43</sup> DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 142, 148; Porter, “Monuments to a Nation Gone By,” 120; Herndon and Sekatau, “The Right to a Name,” 119-123.



when a constable went to arrest them, they had “vanished,” only to have them turn up again weeks or months later, when the process would begin again. Native women were especially present in town records. As women alone—the records rarely mention the presence of a man—they may have garnered more notice from town officials who feared placing greater burdens on public relief funds, whereas men did not generate the same concerns. Whatever the case, despite dressing and living like their white neighbors, urban-living Indigenous people clearly were not hindered by imposed borders, nor did their appearance of acculturation mean that they had in any way abandoned their fluid mobility practices.<sup>44</sup>

### **Repressive Authenticity and Detribalization**

White Rhode Islanders had a less flexible view on what it meant to be Native, and by the end of the nineteenth century had attempted multiple times to “detribalize” the Narragansett, claiming their extinction as a race. Beginning in the 1820s, state officials’ reports on the Narragansett highlighted such facts as the rates of intermarriage between Native and African Americans as irrefutable evidence of their imminent extinction. Phrases like “pure-blooded,” “tainted” or “untainted,” and “mixed” became widely used not just in Rhode Island but in all of southern New England. Questions about race and social structure came ever more to the forefront, especially when, after the American Revolution, New England states passed laws that gradually ended slavery and resulted in an increase of free African Americans. In Rhode Island, censuses and other records created by white officials began to describe Native people as “black,” “mulatto,” or “mustee” instead of as Native. The same person could be, and often was, listed as multiple races over the course a few years, demonstrating both the ongoing changes in conceptions of race and the subjectivity of the designation. Court records for a John Hammer

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<sup>44</sup> Herndon and Sekatau, “The Right to a Name,” 121, 128-130.

describe him simultaneously as Narragansett and black; the judge overruled Hammer's insistence that he was Native, and officially designated him a black man. Acts such as these have been described as "documentary genocide," and in the case of the Narragansett indicated the beginning of a long road of being legislated out of existence.<sup>45</sup>

State reports in 1832, 1858, 1866, and 1879/80 all sought to detribalize the Narragansett. The 1858 report described the Narragansett as "gradually wasted away...the Narragansett of the present day can boast of little else than the name," noting that intermarriages between Narragansett and African Americans were so commonplace that "there is not an Indian of full blood remaining." The report also targeted the supposed mismanagements of reservation lands as more reason for detribalization, even though "they are provided with comfortable dwellings, are well clad, and have proper supplies of food." Subsequent reports cited similar so-called evidence, and the 1879/80 report argued that "their extinction as a tribe has been accomplished as effectually by nature as an *Act* of the General Assembly will put an end to the name." The report attempted to undermine Narragansett ties to their reservation lands by claiming that what "Native blood" they had was not even Narragansett, but Niantic or Pequot instead. It further stated that Ninigret, from whom several families claimed descent, was himself not Niantic or Narragansett, but Pequot. The constant refrains regarding what became known as blood quantum, as well as the claims that the Narragansett were never *actually* the Narragansett, but instead a hodgepodge of other tribes, worked to establish a belief that the Narragansett were extinct. This belief consequently meant that the people living on the reservation had no valid claim to the land they occupied, shoring up the Assembly's decision to detribalize.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Mandell, *Tribe, Race, History*, 49-56; Herndon and Sekatau, "The Right to a Name," 125-127.

<sup>46</sup> *Report of the Commissioner on the Narragansett Tribe of Indians, made to the General Assembly, at its January Session, 1858* (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., 1858; *Narragansett Tribe of Indians: Report of the Committee of Investigation; A Historical Sketch, and Evidence Taken, made to the House of Representatives, at its January Session, A.D. 1880* (Providence: E.L. Freeman & Co., 1880), 6, 9-22.

The 1879/80 report also included a “historical sketch” of the Narragansett that quoted Roger Williams at length, relying heavily as well on other “sketches” and histories that themselves drew on Williams’s works. This recounting of the Narragansett’s history was juxtaposed with their present state, and the report described the Narragansett living on the reservation as not “exhibiting any of the traits of character that distinguished his ancestors.” By making these comparisons, the report intended to erase them culturally. Williams, whose life was entangled with those of the Narragansett, was and still is widely regarded as the expert on Narragansett culture before it became supposedly tainted by English presence. His writings were used by the Assembly and others as documentation of what the Narragansett had been, creating an idealized “before” with which to bemoan the Narragansett’s present. Holding Williams and his observations up in this way effectively created a trap for the Narragansett. Unable to modernize without being regarded as a diluted version of their former selves, they also could not maintain their traditional patterns unchanged, lest they be deemed uncivilized and inherently deficient. In the case of the 1879/80 report, the deployment of a rhetoric of diminishment succeeded, and over the protests of most—though not all—of the Narragansett people, the tribe was officially declared extinct by the State of Rhode Island in 1879. All but the land immediately surrounding the Narragansett Church was sold, and each tribal member was promised a fair share of the proceeds, amounting to just over fifteen dollars each. For many, the money never materialized.<sup>47</sup>

The Assembly held public hearings for the Narragansett or others to offer comments on the decision. Though several tribal members attended and protested, the hearings were a far cry

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<sup>47</sup> *Report of the Committee 1880*, 9-22; Mandell, *Tribe, Race, History*, 202-206; DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 159; Jean M. O’Brien, “State Recognition and ‘Termination’ in Nineteenth-Century New England,” in *Recognition, Sovereignty Struggles, and Indigenous Rights in the United States: A Sourcebook*, Amy E. Den Ouden and Jean M. O’Brien, eds. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 159-160.

from when they once held enough power to petition a king. The Assembly had already made up its mind, and the proceedings were an empty formality. The Narragansett viewed their legal termination as the endgame of a plot carried out by white Rhode Islanders, and especially Charlestown residents, to eliminate laws that protected them and their rights as Native people, and to take the last of their lands away. A history of animosity between those who lived on the reservation and their white neighbors supported this belief, making clear the racial overtones that were at play. Rhode Island officials promised that Narragansett peoples would be made full citizens of the United States and have all the benefits such a status entailed. Angry Narragansett pointed out that African American citizens did not enjoy all the same rights as their white neighbors, despite official claims to the contrary, and asked why their “citizenship” would prove any different. Narragansett Councilman Gideon Ammons was especially poignant, stating that he did not think “that many of these white gentlemen here would like to have any of our n[\*\*\*\*]r tribe hang around your daughters and court them. If we come out as citizens, it would be a name without any gain to it.” Questions of race and rights created more schisms within the tribe, as the state decided that the distribution of proceeds from the land sale would be dependent on blood quantum. Questions arose about the definition of “Indian,” and who got to decide. From the initial reports to the distribution of monies, the Assembly disregarded Narragansett modes of self-determination and sovereignty, and refused to recognize the natural fluidity of Native cultures and their ability to adapt. They relied instead on a narrative in which Indigenous people were incapable of change, and only ever victims of it.<sup>48</sup>

Detribalization was the culmination of two centuries worth of efforts toward cultural genocide by first the English colonists, and later the Rhode Island government. Narragansett

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<sup>48</sup> *Report of the Committee, 1880*, 24-92, quote 44; Mandell, *Tribe, Race, History*, 204-214; Jean O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 5, 107, 118.

foodways, fluid as they were, had been significantly altered by introduced livestock, land loss, war, cultural changes in response to colonization, and governmental legislation. Detribalizing the Narragansett enacted what state authorities imagined would be the last step in erasing the tribe from the landscape: denying their tribal sovereignty. As will be shown in the next chapter, this effort was entirely unsuccessful. The Narragansett had persisted to this point by continuing to adapt their own practices in ways that best suited their goals, and that adaptability ensured their continuation as a cultural entity. Though their subsistence patterns were greatly altered, their traditions were never overwritten or forgotten.

### Chapter III

#### Narragansett Survivance, Continuity, and Mobilization

As in the aftermath of King Philip's War, the Narragansett did not vanish or diminish when they were detribalized, but continued to enact their inherent sovereignty as they refused to be written out of existence. Narragansett peoples continued to hold tribal events and meetings, and continued to identify as not only Native but as distinctly Narragansett, despite Rhode Island's efforts to the contrary. In 1923, the Indian Council of New England, a pan-Indian organization, was formed out of Providence at the suggestion of Gladys Tantaquidgeon, a Mohegan medicine woman and anthropologist. The Council intended to revitalize Native cultures, document the many survivals of Native communities, and encourage public events to help gain visibility and recognition from non-Natives. Although organized initially by mostly non-Native people, the Council was primarily Native-led. Leaders emphasized the importance of conducting personal research rather than depending on old and often incorrect information. Activities of the Council centered around events, and helped fuel similar efforts in other tribes, connecting Native people across New England who had similar goals and problems.<sup>1</sup>

The efforts started by the Council, which ended in the 1930s, were partially responsible for the publication of a Narragansett tribal magazine, *The Narragansett Dawn*, from 1935 to 1936, as well as the founding of the Tomaquag Museum in 1958. Both projects were the work of Princess Red Wing, a Narragansett and Pokanoket Wampanoag historian, folklorist, and tribal elder. *Narragansett Dawn* published news articles, editorials, and general tribal updates, as well as poetry and prose by members. The magazine offered basic language lessons, often derived from the works of Roger Williams, as well as stories and memories from Narragansett elders in

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<sup>1</sup> McMullen, "What's Wrong with This Picture?," 138-144.

an effort to pass on their knowledge to younger readers. The museum, which still operates in Exeter, Rhode Island, offered collections of Indigenous items from across the continent, and tours guided by Red Wing herself. Today, the museum remains the only Native museum in the state, offering extensive collections based in southern New England. The museum also offers outreach programs, such as the Indigenous Empowerment Network. The IEN promotes community support through partnerships with outside organizations, education and employment opportunities, and outreach to other tribal museums.<sup>2</sup>

While the Narragansett continued operating as a sovereign group, the sale of the reservation lands following detribalization meant that the only land held in common was that on which their church sat. The Narragansett pursued two attempts in 1884 and 1898 to reclaim their lands, raising funds from members to hire a lawyer, but they did not succeed. In 1934, the tribe was incorporated as a non-profit organization, and was able to purchase land and construct a longhouse not far from the church in the 1940s, where they continued holding meetings and other events. Individually, many Narragansett owned parcels of land in the area, and many of those planted gardens in their yards, but it was by no means a universal practice. Other members had moved away, or lived in increasingly urban areas where agriculture, even a small vegetable garden, was not feasible. While a small community garden was built at the longhouse, neither that site nor the church was extensive enough to support large-scale communal gardening. The tribe pressed for the return of a strip of land along the coast that would have allowed them to fish, but they would not see any return of their homelands until the last quarter of the twentieth century. Though they were becoming increasingly visible, as a whole the state and its residents

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<sup>2</sup> Rubertone, *Grave Undertakings*, 61-63; DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 171-172; Tomaquag Museum (website), accessed December 15, 2018, <https://www.tomaquagmuseum.org/>.

continued to overlook their ongoing and unbroken presence, and many a town history wrote them off entirely as vanished.<sup>3</sup>

### **Land Reclamation and Federal Recognition**

In 1975, the Narragansett took monumental action: they filed a case against the town of Charleston seeking to reclaim thirty-two hundred acres of former tribal lands. They built their case on the 1790 Nonintercourse Act, which stated that no transactions between Native nation and American state could occur without approval from the federal government. When the Narragansett were detribalized nearly a century earlier, no such approval had been sought by the state, and thus the lands were removed from Narragansett title illegally. Utilizing the Act in this way had proven successful for the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy against the State of Maine in 1975, and it worked for the Narragansett as well. In 1978, the case was settled out of court and the tribe received eighteen hundred acres. The return of their land was a powerful moment, but it was not without stipulations. The tribe agreed to drop any other land claims cases; they would be allowed to develop only thirteen percent of the land; and they became subject to state laws, since they were not federally recognized but technically operating as a non-profit corporation. This last condition would prove problematic for the tribe in enacting their sovereignty in the near future. Meanwhile, they had taken on the settler-colonial government much as they had in the 1660s, and had again come away with at least a small victory.<sup>4</sup>

The tribe achieved federal recognition in 1983, and ceased to operate as a corporation. The path to federal recognition is complex. A tribe must demonstrate social, political, and cultural organization that was present historically and continued uninterrupted to the date of

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<sup>3</sup> "Perseverance," The Narragansett Tribe of Indians (website), accessed December 11, 2018, <http://narragansettindiannation.org/history/perseverance/>; Robinson, "A Narragansett History," 87.

<sup>4</sup> DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 176-177; Robinson, "A Narragansett History," 87.



application. These factors must be proven using records approved by the federal government, and often exclude oral histories and accountings. The definitions the Office of Federal Acknowledgement relies on are political constructions of “tribalness” and “Indianness,” and do not take into account any self-definition made by applicants. Meeting these requirements can take decades, cost millions of dollars, and if a positive ruling is made, it is not necessarily made in perpetuity. Both the Schaghticoke and Chinook nations—of Connecticut and Washington states, respectively—achieved federal recognition, only to have it revoked the following year. Federally recognized tribes, numbering over 500 in the United States alone, usually have the benefit of a government-to-government relationship with the United States as sovereign nations in their own right, bypassing most state regulations. They have access to federal funds, and as long as the state they reside in has not outright banned casino gaming, federally recognized tribes can usually open various gaming operations without a state permit. The operations can create revenue to support revitalization efforts within the community, as in the cases of the Mohegan and Mashantucket Pequot tribes in Connecticut. Historically, tribes have also been able to place lands into federal trust, but a reinterpretation in 2009 of the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act has complicated this possibility for many tribes. The 1934 Act stated that Native tribes “now under Federal jurisdiction” were eligible to have lands taken into trust; the 2009 *Carciari v. Salazar* case reinterpreted that phrase to mean only tribes that were federally recognized *prior* to 1934. This decision means that any tribe who gained federal recognition after that date is no longer eligible to have land placed in trust, and any tribe who had already done so now faces the possibility of having that land taken away.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 177, 188-189; Robinson, “A Narragansett History,” 87; O’Brien, “State Recognition and ‘Termination,’” 161; Angela A. Gonzales and Timothy Q. Evans, “The Imposition of Law: The Federal Acknowledgement Process and the Legal De/Construction of Tribal Identity,” in *Recognition, Sovereignty Struggles, and Indigenous Rights in the United States: A Sourcebook*, Amy E. Den Ouden and Jean M. O’Brien, eds. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 37, 41-42, 55.

### **Conflict with the State: Repressive Authenticity Continued**

The Narragansett had hopes of opening a gaming operation. With high unemployment rates among tribal members, a casino promised to create both jobs and revenue, as those opened in Connecticut by the Mohegan and Mashantucket Pequot had done. The state, however, had other ideas, and contested the project on the grounds that when the tribe had reclaimed some of their lands in 1978, they had not been federally recognized. Local non-Natives contested the proposed casino as well, inciting unfounded fears of “annexation” by the tribe of privately owned lands. Non-Natives also employed prominent stereotypes of Indigenous people as inherently “in touch” with nature to challenge the authenticity of Native people who wanted to pave over land and construct a business seen as strictly capitalist. Protesters latched onto environmental rhetoric, realizing that it held more sway with the extended public, while also decrying increased crime, traffic, noise, and light pollution. The process became bitter. Days before the anniversary of the Great Swamp Massacre, an act of arson burned the Narragansett Church. The Narragansett levelled accusations of racism against the state, and most especially against Rhode Island Senator John Chafee. Randy Noka, then First Councilman of the Narragansett, recounted a meeting where Chafee told him he planned to “do whatever I have to do to keep you people from gaming.” Chafee then slipped a midnight rider through on a federal spending bill, and it was approved without contest. The rider defined the Narragansett reservation as non-Indian land, meaning it would be subject to state regulation. The fight dragged on for four years and made it to the United States Supreme Court before it was finally settled for good in 1996. Rhode Island won, and the casino would not come to pass.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 178-182; *Oversight Hearing Before the Committee on Resources House of Representatives*, 105th Cong. 45 (1997) (statement of Randy Noka, First Councilman of the Narragansett Indian Tribe).

In 1991, the tribe purchased thirty-one acres in Charlestown, and shortly after began construction of a housing project for the elderly. The Narragansett argued that since they were federally recognized, and the parcel was not part of the 1978 settlement, they did not need to obtain a variety of permits from the town or state. The state intervened, bringing construction to a halt on the basis that the land in question was not sovereign Narragansett land, and as such the construction required state and town approval. In 1997, the tribe requested that the land be taken into federal trust under the Indian Reorganization Act, and the request was approved in 1998, removing it from Rhode Island's jurisdiction. The state, led by Governor Donald Carcieri, responded by suing the federal government. Though the state was initially unsuccessful, in 2009 the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the decision that redefined the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act as applying only to tribes recognized prior to 1934. The *Carcieri v. Salazar* decision meant that the thirty-one acre parcel was not, in fact, sovereign Narragansett land, and was subject to state and local regulations. The elderly housing project was never completed.<sup>7</sup>

In 2003, Before the *Carcieri* decision was made final, the tribe opened a tobacco shop on their land. Tobacco products were imported from the Mohawk Nation, and sold at low prices achieved by omitting state taxes. As with the elderly housing, the tribe understood this land to be sovereign Narragansett territory, and not subject to state taxes and regulations. The shop was open for less than two days before the state police conducted a violent raid using police dogs. Governor Carcieri ordered the raid. Many were arrested, and of those several suffered injuries. The shop was not reopened. Those arrested were charged with disorderly conduct, assault, and other charges. Verdicts were finally reached in 2008. Though no jail time was imposed on tribal

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<sup>7</sup> Delucia, *Memory Lands*, 188; Legal Information Institute Supreme Court Bulletin, "Carcieri v. Kempthorne (07-526): Statutory Interpretation, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Indian Land, Indian Casino, Indian Reorganization Act," by Kathryn Worthington and James McConnell, accessed March 2, 2019, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/cert/07-526>.

members, Matthew Thomas, then the chief sachem, was ordered to do community service. He used the required time as a platform to speak to local student groups about Narragansett history and present, hoping to educate non-Native youth about his people at a time when it seemed the state had again become hostile to their presence, as it had centuries before.<sup>8</sup>

The ongoing efforts of the state to prevent the Narragansett from exercising their rights as a sovereign nation are undeniably racially motivated. Just over the state line in Connecticut, the Mohegan and Mashantucket Pequot Nations were able to construct casinos as well as a number of other associated businesses. The revenue generated enabled other enterprises, such the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, a state-of-the-art facility the Mashantucket Pequot use to educate the public about their history and culture. The research efforts supported by the museum are not limited to the Mashantucket Pequot, but extend to include “all Native peoples of the United States and Canada.” The revenue from the Mohegan’s various holdings enabled them to restore the Tantaquidgeon Museum, the oldest Native owned and operated museum in the country. Both nations have been able to fund community health programs, financial programs to support the elderly and other low-income citizens, and the improvement and upkeep of infrastructure. Though the casinos are not taxed under Connecticut law, they generate massive amounts of income for the state. By agreement, they contribute a quarter of their gross revenues from slot gaming to state coffers, totaling millions of dollars a year. Rhode Island had the opportunity to come to a similar agreement with the Narragansett, which would have benefitted both tribe and state, as Connecticut had done. The State not only decided against such an arrangement, they actively fought against it. Then, in 2012, the state granted permits to

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<sup>8</sup> DeLucia, *Memory Lands*, 183, 187-189; John Christian Hopkins, “Troopers Lead Attack on Narragansett Reservation,” in *Dawnland Voices: An Anthology of Indigenous Writing from New England*, 530-533, edited by Siobhan Senier (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 530, 531-533.

two existing race tracks, allowing them to expand into full-blown casinos. Neither are owned by Native communities, and neither faced the same hurdles placed in the way of the Narragansett—just a simple vote.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Crandall Minacommuck Farm**

Through all of these challenges, the Narragansett persisted as they had done many times before. While community revenue would have been welcomed and provided untold benefits for the tribe, they did not allow their efforts to end there. In the early 1990s, Irving and Arlene Crandall of Westerly, Rhode Island, contacted them. The Crandalls owned a piece of property that was originally Narragansett land, but had been in the Crandall family since the 1600s, when Elder John Crandall was granted the right to use it. According to tribal member Dawn Spears and her son, First Councilman Cassius Spears Jr., the Crandalls wanted to return a few acres to the Narragansett. Following a conversation with several tribal representatives, they changed their minds. Instead of a few acres, they deeded the entire property to the tribe, reserving the right for themselves or any other Crandall descendent to live out their remaining years on the property. When Irving passed in 2015, the land was returned to the Narragansett. While the land belongs to the tribe, they have been approaching their care and use of it with the Crandall's memory in mind. "I think we were treading cautiously and carefully, is the way I say it, still trying to be respectful, because it was still fresh, you know, I still feel like Irving was there. I still felt like Irving was there, and I wanted to make sure that we were being respectful and not doing

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<sup>9</sup> "Tribal Enterprises," The Mashantucket (Western) Pequot Tribal Nation, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.mptn-nsn.gov/enterprises.aspx>; "Tantaquidgeon Museum," Mohegan Tribe, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.mohegan.nsn.us/explore/heritage/important-sites/tantaquidgeon-museum>; "Connecticut Tribal Casinos: Slot Data," University of Nevada, Las Vegas, updated March 2019, [https://gaming.unlv.edu/reports/ct\\_monthly.pdf](https://gaming.unlv.edu/reports/ct_monthly.pdf); "Rhode Island Casinos," Online United States Casinos, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.onlineunitedstatescasinos.com/states/rhode-island-gambling/>.

anything outside of what he would like. And I can say that four years later, I never felt like there was a problem.”<sup>10</sup>

Now called the Crandall-Minacommuck Farm, the property has not been without challenges. Dawn described the farm as in a state of neglect when she and her family came to it, which required attention before other efforts could get started. She and her husband, Cassius Spears Sr., are two of the primary visionaries of the Narragansett Food Sovereignty Initiative at the farm. Their son, Cassius Jr., is also involved, as are several other tribal and community members. Community partnerships, and strong partnerships with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and the University of Rhode Island (URI), have been vital to getting their vision off the ground. When growing efforts first started, a representative from URI came to the farm to mentor and offer pointers; “I think we could take them or leave them, it was our choice, but it was nice to have someone to bounce ideas off of,” said Dawn. This collaboration introduced the tribe to what Dawn called a “farming cohort” in and around Westerly, enabling the Narragansett to seek mentoring from multiple sources and creating a network of support that has continued since. The NRCS, for whom both Cassius Sr. and Cassius Jr. both work, has provided funding and resources necessary for turning plans into a reality. Their cooperative efforts have in turn benefitted other tribes, who have been able to use Narragansett endeavors as a model from which to begin their own.<sup>11</sup>

One particularly important benefit of NRCS partnerships with the Narragansett and other tribes has been adjustments to NRCS requirements in certain areas, such as building specs. When providing funding, the NRCS typically requires certain practices to be followed, but these

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<sup>10</sup> Dawn Spears and Cassius Spears Jr., “Crandall Minacommuck Farm” (Presentation, Intertribal Food Sovereignty Summit, Pequot Museum and Research Center, Ledyard, Connecticut; and Crandall Minacommuck Farm, Westerly, Rhode Island, August 23, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Dawn Spears, (Narragansett Food Sovereignty Initiative; Northeast Indigenous Arts Alliance, founder), in discussion with author, March 11, 2019.

practices are not always in line with cultural preferences. For instance, the Narragansett would have preferred not to use metal as the framing material for the high tunnels, but due to NRCS requirements they had to. The high tunnels, greenhouses measuring 92 x 30 feet, extend the growing season, enabling the tribe to plant crops that require more time than a New England climate can provide, and to get more yield from what is planted. “I guess you have to choose your battles,” said Dawn, “but I do think, though, that because of tribes stating that [they don’t agree with NRCS requirements] there have been some adjustments into the specs.” In a panel discussion at the Summit, several NRCS and USDA representatives stated that their agencies have been rethinking these requirements, and intend to work with tribes to rewrite them in a way that allows for more cultural sensitivity and adaptation. A large contingent of USDA and NRCS employees attended the summit for the sole purpose of learning how to work with tribal communities in the future, an effort that will hopefully benefit other Indigenous communities.<sup>12</sup>

### **From the Ground Up**

When the Crandalls returned the farm to the Narragansett, it had been farmed continuously since their ancestor acquired it centuries before. Though Irving and Arlene no longer farmed it themselves, they rented fields out to people who did. Over the years, practices such as monocropping and other extractive farming methods drained nutrients from the soil. Rhode Island soil is already poor, and this long-term neglect had left it in need of restoration. The tribe, in conjunction with the NRCS, has implemented a soil health plan intended to be completed over a five-year span, now in its second year. Steps include clearing the land of overgrowth as well as debris such as old vehicles, planting nitrogen-fixing crops like buckwheat and rye, and planting native species. Some areas, such as where abandoned vehicles may have

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<sup>12</sup> Spears, discussion; “USDA Leadership: Q&A,” (Panel Discussion, Intertribal Food Sovereignty Summit, Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, Ledyard, CT, August 21, 2018).

leached toxic chemicals or heavy metals into the soil, may never be able to be planted safely. Instead, these areas have been earmarked as sites to construct buildings in the future, such as a community center—their current center is not large enough to host the entire community at once, limiting the scope of tribal events.<sup>13</sup>

The community center would be a boon not only for meetings and social occasions, but possibly for the installation of a commercial kitchen. The community space would generally allow for meetings, workshop events, and events for youth that would help pass on Narragansett stories and traditions, but a commercial kitchen could tie these happenings back to food and health. With an on-site space to prepare food, the tribe would have the potential to bring in Native chefs from other communities as well as their own to teach members how to utilize the produce they grow right outside the door. This approach would boost interest in the farm, foster community relations, and provide nutrition education on a broader scale than is currently possible. A kitchen would also create potential for large-scale canning efforts, which would help preserve the farm's bounty, in turn enabling more planting while providing members with storable, healthy foods.<sup>14</sup>

In keeping with their holistic approach to restoring the farm, the tribe is also working to revitalize the health of hydrologic features of the property. “Water is life,” Dawn explained. They are working with the NRCS to assess stream health, and to install or repair culverts to restore the health of the cedar swamp that surrounds the farm. A well with a solar-powered pump draws water into an above-ground storage tank that can hold three thousand gallons. Located on a slight elevation, gravity brings the water down to irrigate the plants and the high tunnels below. The choice to use solar energy and gravity rather than electricity was intentional, described as the

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<sup>13</sup> Spears, discussion.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



more culturally sensitive option that was more respectful to the land. The choice to utilize certain modern technology is illustrative that Narragansett traditional fluidity, a recurring theme throughout their history, is still present today. The contents of high tunnels also demonstrate continued fluidity and selective adoption, as the Narragansett do not limit plantings to pre-colonial or regionally native cultivars. For example, one high tunnel is home to a few small pineapple plants—definitely not typical New England vegetation. Others hold tomatoes, peppers, greens, cucumbers, beans, broccoli, and other more familiar fare. While these vegetables may not all be native to this region, the point was to grow healthy food, not to adhere to strictly traditional plantings. As Dawn explained, “last year’s focus was really building community, and getting them [the Narragansett community] to understand what can happen in those high tunnels. We were really thinking how can we teach the community what this is here for, and the potential here.”<sup>15</sup>

The effort seems successful, and perhaps most importantly it has already begun to reach the younger generations. “I have to keep telling [my grandchild] that McDonald’s is not where we get our food from, that traditionally you eat the food that is grown from the land that you come from, that’s what you’re supposed to do, that’s what makes you healthy.” When she began bringing her grandchildren to the farm, however, they quickly learned where to find the tomatoes and carrots to snack on, even learning how to pull carrots and wash them. “What I really like is seeing these guys and how they react and respond to the plants growing. I have six grandchildren, and all the way down to the two year old. . . they’d all be walking around chomping on these fresh carrots.” A common thread among Indigenous food sovereignty movements is the importance of bringing in youth, and in this the Narragansett initiative is no

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

different. To help foster inter-generational learning, a raised-bed garden is planned for the future that will be specially designed to allow elders using mobility devices to navigate and access the beds. One has already been built near the existing community center, and is being used with great success.<sup>16</sup>

Other projects include cultural planting efforts—planting cultivars that are culturally important but not strictly food, such as sweetgrass. Wild edibles are also being encouraged through efforts to clear areas of invasive species that threaten other plants’ habitats. Fruit-bearing trees and shrubs have been planted, as well as other flowering plants to encourage pollinator populations. In that vein, they maintain a small apiary on the farm. Through an NRCS program, they were also able to have a weather station, called a T-SCAN (tribal soil climate analysis network), set up. The T-scan program installed thirty weather stations on tribal lands across the country, each at least one hundred and fifty miles apart. Able to measure wind direction and speed, soil temperature and moisture levels, solar radiation, humidity, and temperature, the unit is run entirely on solar power. The NRCS also provides training to care for and use the stations, which is helping to bring hands-on STEM experience to tribal youth. Through the information provided by the unit, tribes will be able to track weather data, identify seasonal trends, and use the information to aid agricultural strategies. In the words of Cassius Spears Sr., they will “be able to tell when the cabbage moths are hatching.”<sup>17</sup>

### **“Bringing Back the Songs We Need”**

Of all of these undertakings, arguably the most immediately impactful was planting a field of traditional Narragansett flint corn. While the corn had been grown by individual community members, it had not been grown communally on tribally-owned land in over a

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> USDA, *Tribal Soil Climate Analysis Network (Tribal Scan)* (Pamphlet, 2018); Spears, discussion.

century. The impact went beyond just accessing a traditional food source. In Dawn's words, "it's bringing back the songs we need." She later elaborated:

You know, when you're a minority, trying to still maintain your culture and traditions with a very strong dominant culture, you make adjustments because you're trying to fit in, and you don't have the time to do what you would naturally do. So the corn is another example, where we've grown this corn independently, families have, but we've never grown it collectively. So we were able to harvest it in the fall, sing the songs, do the community exercise, I'll say, of gathering, of braiding, the food that was there. And just that comradery, I guess, that comes with that activity, we just don't do that kind of stuff anymore. . . . so when I was talking about the songs, there's planting songs, and there's songs that you sing that we hadn't had the opportunity to sing as a group anymore because we were just doing it by ourselves. So this was a significant way to carry that tradition on to the next generation. It is, it's really bringing our songs back.

In the Narragansett worldview, the human community was not the only one affected:

The realization as I was watching it grow and realizing that this corn was really happy, and thriving, and it was just phenomenal. And it dawned on me, pun intended, that it's home, it's back in the community being farmed by the community, and I felt like it knows it, you know, that seed, that it was back with us. And we consider the plants and animals our brothers and sisters, and I felt like, there you go, that's the perfect representation of that. And people don't understand that harmony, that balance, needs to be there, and it just naturally is there. When you're around the plants all the time, you really notice the difference.

The harvested corn was braided to dry, and sent home to community members to be stored for winter. In the spring, the corn will be planted again, continuing not only the corn itself but the cultural traditions surrounding it.<sup>18</sup>

All of these projects were made possible by the return of Narragansett lands to the tribe. Without access to a land base as a starting point, as well as cooperation from the NCRS and support from the local farming community, nothing that followed could have been accomplished. Despite these efforts, however, land access continues to be an issue in other areas, such as access to the ocean. South County, not actually a county at all but rather a reference to the Rhode Island towns that sit along the coast, is the wealthiest area in the state. Boasting one hundred miles of

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<sup>18</sup> Spears, discussion.

coastline, the area has become a destination for tourists and seasonal residents who buy up ocean-front properties for their second—or third—homes. “As new owners come in, they don’t understand . . . that access was always there for us, so when new people come in, they go ‘no, you can’t go this way anymore.’ And that’s been happening for thirty-five years, that I can say I recall, trying to do it with my husband and my family. I’m sure the generation before me could say the same thing.” While some of these property owners in Westerly have given access to the Narragansett, it has been with a list of conditions, such as time of day. Another restriction has been the number of people who can access an area at any given time. Even if the property owners do not specifically set a limit, the properties themselves are not large enough to feasibly host the entire Narragansett community. “And it’s not just us as a tribe,” Dawn explained, “it’s all the tribes that are on the ocean. Just give them that courtesy to get their food.” “Food sovereignty,” she explained,

overall is our focus, and I’d say that people need to understand that we are the Indigenous people of this land, and that a lot of our access to our foods has been taken from us. So, the ability to go as a group, as a community, for example, doesn’t happen. It can’t happen. The ability to do any of it, any of that shell fishing or even fishing, we cannot do that as a whole community, and that’s sad. And if you can think of the leaps and bounds that were made with the corn, how can we work to get those other areas, make those same kinds of advance in those other areas? Who is responsible for that? How do we get people to understand that? I feel like we’re always the invisible population, and we’re always fighting to maintain, not succumb. Because that’s really what’s happening, you just become the one percent, and we’re just trying to swim upstream really. How can we raise awareness for people to understand?

A short walk around Westerly proved her point about being an invisible population. While there is ample evidence to the town’s Euro-American past—including a statue of Christopher Columbus, who never set foot on this continent—the Narragansett past and present was conspicuously absent.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

Fundamental to the success of food sovereignty movements is recognition of the self-determination of the communities enacting them. Engineered as the movements are to fit the needs and abilities of each community, there should be no recourse for outside manipulation. This should include any organization providing funding, including the USDA and the NRCS. As Dawn Spears noted, some of the construction methods the Narragansett used on the farm were not their choice, but were imposed by the NRCS. In the case of Indigenous communities, attaching stipulations in this vein is tantamount to an act of colonialist extortion, as communities must either accept the conditions or not receive funding. “Why are we always having to adjust our belief system to the more dominant culture?” Dawn asked. “Take what we’re saying into consideration, maybe there’s a value there.”

Elizabeth Hoover argues that “the imperative of food sovereignty is not to simply add social justice components to an environmentally sustainable food system: rather, it conceives of social justice as the foundation from which a food system must be built, in a process working to correct historical and structural injustices.” The issues at the root of food sovereignty movements did not emerge from a vacuum, and cannot be fixed without addressing the forms of colonialism that caused them. In the case of the Narragansett Initiative, it started with the restoration of a small piece of ancestral homelands. Small though it may seem in the long timeline of colonization, the return of the farm stands as an example of food sovereignty being built on a foundation of social justice.<sup>1</sup>

Though great strides are being taken at the farm, there is still much work to be done beyond its borders. The networks the Narragansett are creating with other farmers in the area

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<sup>1</sup> Hoover, “You Can’t Say You’re Sovereign,” 33.

offer a source of support not only for efforts on the farm itself, but for efforts towards visibility and acknowledgement from the local populace. If the non-Native community can be made more aware of the presence of the Narragansett and the ongoing issues they face, like limited access to oceanic resources, perhaps others may step forward to create beneficial partnerships, or support new legislation that would benefit the Narragansett community. Native scholars Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel explain that

the challenge of “being Indigenous,” in a psychic and cultural sense, forms the crucial question facing Indigenous peoples today in the era of contemporary colonialism. . . . Contemporary Settlers follow the mandate provided for them by their imperial forefathers’ colonial legacy, not by attempting to eradicate the physical signs of Indigenous peoples as human *bodies*, but by trying to eradicate their existence as *peoples* through the erasure of the histories and geographies that provide the foundation for indigenous cultural identities and sense of self.

Under this mandate, the state needs to take on the task of unravelling damaging narratives that still circulate, many of which have been present in one form or another since King Philip’s War and were created by the state itself in the form of reports and legislation intended as cultural genocide. This could take the form of refashioning school curriculums, changing or increasing signage regarding local Native history, or providing funding for outreach events. Whatever the method, the onus for creating a restorative historical narrative falls on the state.<sup>2</sup>

To the casual observer, the Crandall Minacommuck Farm appears to be just another old colonial homestead undergoing some efforts at revitalization. By placing the farm into historical and cultural context, the multiple layers of meaning begin to become clear. The farm is not just a parcel of land; it is a place with which the Narragansett have complex relationships, and a place inscribed with complex meanings. In spite of nearly four centuries of colonialism, the

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<sup>2</sup> Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, “Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism,” *Government and Opposition* 40 (2005): 597–614, 598.

Narragansett have persisted in maintaining cultural ties to their homelands. Affected by land dispossession, illegal detribalization, and racist legislation preventing cultural or financial sovereignty, food sovereignty was, it seemed, an aspiration with slim hope of becoming a reality. With the timely return of a small portion of their homelands, and long-awaited cooperation from a government agency, the Narragansett have been able to resurrect practices that, while not forgotten, had fallen into disuse. Intertwined as it is with cultural revitalization, the Narragansett Food Sovereignty Initiative can serve as a vehicle for so much more than just food.

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