Decolonizing Agriculture Film Treatment Write-up

Abstract

We were taught in school to believe that Indigenous peoples were only nomads and hunter-gatherers. The image of a Native American was one that lived in harmony with nature and left almost no footprint on the land. This is due to the "Pristine" myth. The myth persists that in 1492 the Americas were a sparsely populated wilderness, a world practically untouched by man. But there is substantial evidence to prove that Indigenous peoples had heavily managed and tended the landscape. Forest composition had been modified, grasslands had been created, edible plant species had been tended, and most notably, organized agriculture had been established. But this myth allowed settlers to argue "terra nullius" or "nobody's land" in order to colonize it. Colonization erased Indigenous culture and removed them from their lands, practically eliminating Native Americans from practicing traditional agriculture. Their food systems were destroyed and replaced with a capitalistic monoculture system of plantations to grow cash crops like sugar, cotton, and tobacco for the European market. No longer was food grown to nourish local populations but to export to others. And under this monoculture system, soil was degraded, plantations were vulnerable to plant diseases that would wipe out entire crops, and biodiversity was diminished or was lost entirely as forests were cleared. Hundreds of years later, as this extractive system has continued, it has become a large contributor to the climate crisis. And as a solution, the Regenerative agriculture movement began to pick up steam. But the heavily white populated movement draws heavily from Indigenous agriculture techniques. Their techniques were whitewashed and appropriated as a climate solution to the destruction that the same Eurocentric system had caused. Somehow the movement fails to question the people and their values that have led us to this point. Regenerative agriculture's enduring whiteness,

unacknowledged use of traditional farming practices, and its sole focus on the environment without addressing social justice is a pervasive issue. And this omission of social justice and land justice, will majorly reduce its impact. In order for real change to happen, regenerative agriculture must address the oppressive history of agriculture in America. This is because regenerative farming was born under capitalism. So, without addressing this history, regenerative agriculture risks becoming just another form of exploitation and profit making when it should be about subsistence. Thus, this story focusses on Indigenous agriculturalists who are fighting to decolonize agriculture. Who are fighting to make it about respecting the land and fueling our bodies, not filling our pockets.

Project Overview

As a Film and Media Studies and Environmental Studies Double Major at the University of California, Santa Barbara, my predominate interests have become documentary making and alternative agriculture. For this project, I wanted to combine my two interests of filmmaking and agriculture in some fashion. My goal of this project was to create a Documentary Film Treatment for a documentary on Decolonizing Agriculture. A Documentary Film Treatment is essentially a blueprint for a prospective film. It outlines the story, provides an idea of the visual style, includes the film's subjects, crew, budget, etc. Treatments are an essential tool for pitching to investors, finding crew, and getting your thoughts organized. But since this film is in the very early stages, I chose not to include a budget section or a distribution plan section. Instead, this treatment is aimed to be shared with potential crew members to gage their interest. Once I do have a strong team of people, including a producer, I will be an able to construct a more formal treatment that will be aimed at potential investors. I do plan to share with faculty members in UCSB's Film and Media Department to see if any professors who work in the documentary industry wish to work

on the project or know people who might. My intentions of this project are to reveal the truth behind the history of Indigenous agriculture and advocate for the Decolonization, Indigenization, and Rematriation of agriculture through land justice. While do want to co-direct and be a part of the creative process of the film, I want to ensure that the film's subjects have control over how their stories are told in process that is reciprocal rather than extractive. I am aware of the issues around predominantly white film teams, and therefore wish to find an Indigenous co-director to help build this reciprocal relationship. Some of the biggest challenges I had while creating this film treatment was that I had quite a difficult time finding Indigenous subjects and Indigenous filmmakers to work with. This isn't entirely surprising due to how suppressed these communities' voices have been. I did find quite a few farmers who have been advocating the decolonization of agriculture after conducting a lot of research. But there are very few **acknowledged** Indigenous directors who specialize in documentary making. I did find two award winning directors that I would be honored to work with, but this just proves how much film needs to be decolonized as well. There are many Indigenous directors out there, but they are constantly overshadowed and pushed to the sidelines. While the two potential directors I listed in my presentation have been able to make a name for themselves in the industry, this is very rare. And I am completely open to working with any Indigenous person who has the passion needed to tell this story. Overall, I am very proud of the outcome I created for this class, and I am looking forward to working on it more to make this film come to life.

Research

I conducted a large amount of research in preparation for constructing this film treatment. I wanted to completely understand how and why regenerative agriculture was created by the whitewashing and appropriation of Indigenous farming techniques that have existed for

thousands of years. As someone who works on a regenerative student farm on campus, I have an immense passion for Regenerative agriculture and agroecology. During my time in college, I have learned that our food system contributes to a large portion of greenhouse gas emissions and that alternative styles of agriculture like regenerative agriculture could be a solution to fighting the climate crisis through carbon sequestration, improved water storage, and biodiversity reintroduction due to agriculture techniques that increase soil health. But had no knowledge of the Indigenous history behind these deeply traditional techniques. And the more I read about the cultural suppression of Indigenous agriculture during the colonization period, the more I realized that regenerative agriculture is just another form of colonization's cultural oppression of Indigenous peoples by refusing to acknowledge regenerative agriculture's Indigenous roots, leaving Indigenous peoples out of the conversation, and not returning land to Indigenous peoples to farm on. While I still believe that regenerative agriculture is essential to solving the climate crisis, it will not succeed without Indigenous voices. It's funny because I've been talking about how I'll focus on my career in agroecology until I find a passion project in film I wish to work on. This is that passion project.

To begin this process, I first researched the history of Indigenous land management and agriculture prior to colonization. That's when I discovered the book *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* by Charles C. Mann. In which, Mann argues that contrary to what Americans learned in school, the Indigenous peoples that populated America before 1492 were more numerous, had arrived earlier, were more sophisticated, and shaped and influenced the land around them more than what was previously believed. He also discusses the "Pristine Myth." "Much of the environmental movement is animated, consciously or not, by what geographer William Denevan calls "the pristine myth"—the belief that the Americas in 1491

were an almost untouched, even Edenic land, "untrammeled by man," in the words of the Wilderness Act of 1964, a U.S. law that is one of the founding documents of the global environmental movement" (Mann, 2006, 15). This book along with *Braiding Sweetgrass* and *Tending the Wild* prove that Indigenous peoples were not the sparsely settled, primitive individuals that fended off the pristine wilderness as hunter-gatherers like the history books claim. Rather, long before the arrival of European settlers, Indigenous populations did indeed transform their lands through land management and farming practices that protected local ecosystems and preserved biodiversity. One of the biggest examples of Indigenous agriculture is The Three Sisters. According to Robin Wall Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the concept of The Three Sisters is an Indigenous technique of companion planting and intercropping, consisting of corn, beans, and squash grown together. "I hold in my hand the genius of Indigenous agriculture. The Three Sisters. Together these plants – corn, beans, and squash – feed the people, feed the land, and feed our imaginations" (Kimmerer, 2016, 00:03:37-00:03:53). Kimmerer explains that settlers discredited the work of the three sisters, just like they dismissed other Indigenous innovations to fit their colonizing agenda. "For millennia, from Mexico to Montana, women have mounded up the earth and laid these three seeds in the ground, all in the same square foot of soil. When the colonists on the Massachusetts shore first saw Indigenous gardens, they inferred that the savages did not know how to farm. To their minds, a garden meant straight rows of single species, not a three-dimensional sprawl of abundance" (Kimmerer, 2016, 00:03:57-00:04:23). But I argue that this isn't simply settler ignorance towards Indigenous agriculture, but a ploy to argue "terra nullius" or "nobody's land." According to A-dae Romero Briones, the director of the Native Agriculture and Food Systems program at the First Nations Development Institute, "Native Americans across the country, who cultivated sophisticated

agricultural systems that often relied on regenerative practices, were not considered 'farmers'…because their agriculture was less intensive and didn't include commodity crops grown commercially. Later generations saw Native people as 'noble savages' living on untouched, virgin land with little impact on the environment" (Wozniacka, 2021). Colonizers fabricated history with the pristine "myth" to fit their Eurocentric agenda. After this discovery, I wanted to further research how colonization erased Indigenous agriculture for the European capitalistic agenda, and how this impacted the environment. I discovered that "the white settlers who took over Native villages, farms, and landscapes killed or expelled their original inhabitants. Unlike Indigenous people whose agriculture was for subsistence purposes, many of the settlers grew cash crops for sale, including tobacco, wheat, or other grains. Because they often grew a single crop year after year and did not improve the soil in any way, the settlers quickly depleted it. By the 1800s, the soil of the original colonies was so exhausted that it became unproductive and most farmers headed west to steal even more land" (Wozniacka, 2021). Then came the slave trade and "African people, themselves stewards of long-standing Indigenous food systems on their own continent, were kidnapped and enslaved, forced to grow agricultural commodities for White landowners" (Carlisle, 2022, 10). All this evidence led me to believe that regenerative agriculture was in no way a new concept. "*All* of these practices are part of Indigenous land management. And yet they get presented like somebody just figured them out overnight" (Wozniacka, 2021). According to Liz Carlisle from *Healing Grounds,* "practices commonly promoted within regenerative circles as new innovations had been used for many hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of years—not just in far-away ancient civilizations but *continuously* and right here on the North American continent" (Carlisle, 2022, 8). "It had always been here, but on the margins. Pushed to the edges of industrial agriculture, these practices had been

sustained by people pushed to the edges of society" (Carlisle, 2022, 11). But "Regenerative agriculture has become a way to save the day without addressing our white privilege…The present-day regenerative movement is—much like agriculture in general—'inherited, guarded, and perpetuated by white men'" (Wozniacka, 2021). Since this "new" alternative agriculture movement was constructed under the same capitalistic, extractive, and oppressive system as conventional agriculture, I question how it can be successful without Indigenous involvement. "The present-day regenerative movement has diluted and weakened the traditional approach to land management…For us, the land is a resource the entire community depends on, so it's the responsibility of the community to take care of it…There was no market economy, no reason to abuse it, no reason to plant a monocrop or take all the fish out of the river." (Wozniacka, 2021). Carlisle argues that "Cultivating this kind of regenerative farming will require reckoning with our nation's agricultural history—a history marked by discrimination and displacement. And it will ultimately require dismantling power structures that have blocked many farmers of color from owning land or building wealth" (Carlisle, 2022). "Without addressing this history and the inequities that stem from it, regenerative agriculture risks becoming just another form of exploitation" (Wozniacka, 2021).

After conducting this research, I contacted the author of *Healing Grounds* and my former Professor, Liz Carlisle, for advice on how to proceed with the information I had gained. She advised me to first think about how to decolonize the filmmaking process before creating a story about decolonizing agriculture. This was a very insightful point that I certainly agreed with. As I mentioned above, I want this film to be a in collaboration with Indigenous peoples and for it to made in a respectful and reciprocal manner. I wish to provide a platform for Indigenous agriculturalists to speak on this issue on their own terms. It would be incredibly disingenuous to

create a film around the subject of decolonization without recognizing the decolonization that needs to take place within filmmaking. So, I hope that I can provide a safe, respectful, reciprocal space for Indigenous voices during this process.

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