



SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
Department of Religion/Office of the Chair

15 June 2020

Mayor Ben Walsh,
Syracuse City Hall
233 E Washington St
Syracuse NY 13202-1473
Mayor@SyrGov.net

Dear Mayor Walsh,

The past few days has seen a surge in support for the removal of the Columbus Monument at Columbus Circle in downtown Syracuse, sparked in large-part by nationwide efforts to remove confederate and other Columbus statues as part of Black-led movements to combat police brutality and systemic anti-Blackness. The number of signatures on the petition for its removal exceeds 10,800, including an overwhelming majority of respondents from Syracuse and those who have ties to this place. There is also widespread support across the state and both nationally and globally. For these reasons, it is now time to consider next steps and the future of this statue.

The significance of Christopher Columbus gazing westward and standing atop the horrifying iconography of decapitated caricatures of Indigenous peoples' heads is an outright symbol of genocide, colonization, and European supremacy. We cannot allow symbols of oppression to reign over downtown Syracuse on the ancestral and unceded lands of the sovereign Onondaga Nation, whose territory has been reduced and relocated a few miles south of this city. The American Psychological Association, National Congress of American Indians, and other organizations confirm that iconography--such as those of the severed heads on the statue--impact the mental health of Indigenous Peoples. The imagery posits Indigenous Peoples as relics of the past, contributing to the national discourse of erasure of Indigenous Peoples that allows violence against them, highest among any demographic, to continue without reproach. As long as the statue remains, it maintains allegiance to not only this ugly past of genocide, but to ongoing erasure of Indigenous Peoples and justification of exclusion, oppression, violence, and racism in the present.

Christopher Columbus serves as a figurehead to the Age of Discovery and its legal construct, the Doctrine of Discovery, which justified six hundred years of violent colonization by Europeans who used sexual and gender violence among other horrors to suppress, subdue, dehumanize, and seize land from those they deemed "Barbarous." The victims of these acts were Indigenous Peoples of what are now called the Americas and Indigenous Peoples of what is now called Africa through colonization of the Americas and the transatlantic slave trade, but the reach extends also to the Christian Crusades. The Doctrine of Discovery is still upheld today in U.S. property law and at its core, its philosophy justifies ongoing land theft; sexual and gender violence against Indigenous Peoples; anti-Black racism and violence against Black people; among other forms of xenophobia, Islamophobia, ethnocentrism, and racism we experience today.

The foundational importance of the Doctrine of Discovery to oppress Black and Indigenous Peoples in the United States was recognized by civil rights leader Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his 1964 book *Why We Can't Wait*. He wrote:

“Our nation was born in genocide when it embraced the doctrine that the original American, the Indian, was an inferior race. Even before there were large numbers of Negroes on our shores, the scar of racial hatred had already disfigured colonial society. From the sixteenth century forward, blood flowed in battles over racial supremacy. We are perhaps the only nation which tried as a matter of national policy to wipe out its indigenous population. Moreover, we elevated that tragic experience into a noble crusade. Indeed, even today we have not permitted ourselves to reject or feel remorse for this shameful episode. Our literature, our films, our drama, our folklore all exalt it. Our children are still taught to respect the violence which reduced a red-skinned *[sic]* people of an earlier culture into a few fragmented groups herded into impoverished reservations. . . It was upon this massive base of racism that the prejudice toward the nonwhite was readily built, and found rapid growth.”

As a contingent of Black and Indigenous Peoples from across various continents, but now living in Syracuse, we have been prompted by the COVID-19 public health crisis to comprehend our inextricable interconnection with each other and the natural world. Black and Indigenous Peoples have been hit hardest by this pandemic. In the midst of this, our communities are still experiencing state violence with Native and Black communities brutalized, killed, or incarcerated by the police at the highest rate of any demographic. Gender violence against, and disappearance or murder of, Native women and non-binary people is highest among any demographic and that is a pandemic in itself. The recent killings by the police of Black lives such as Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and George Floyd have sparked a national cry to end the institutional oppression and genocide of Black people. Through this we have witnessed confederate statues coming down across the nation in cities such as Montgomery, AL; Richmond, VA; Louisville, KY; Jacksonville, FL; and Houston, TX among others as well as Columbus statues coming down in Boston, MA and St. Paul, MN. Here in Syracuse we, too, have such a statue representing systemic racism; it, too, must come down. Removing this statue is one necessary step in the process of dialogue, healing, and ensuring the well-being of the people of Syracuse. This is what the Indigenous Peoples and their neighbors have been asking for decades.

We in Syracuse have an opportunity to be change leaders drawing on over 1,000 years of Haudenosaunee concepts of participatory democracy and commitment to unity from the establishment of the Great Law of Peace after the Peacemakers’ arrival on the shores of Onondaga Lake. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy’s system of governance was shared with European settlers who later used it as the basis of the United States Constitution, which the U.S. has only recently begun to attribute to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy system of governance. Removal of this statue provides a unique opportunity to move from erasure to recognition including Haudenosaunee contributions to the women’s suffrage movement, Abolition, climate justice, sustainable agriculture, and lacrosse. The gains from these justice struggles have benefitted all of society. Why not elevate this heritage instead?

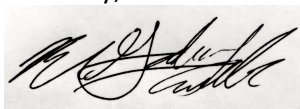
We are calling for the immediate removal of the Columbus Circle Monument. We also request that you allow the Onondaga Nation upon whose ancestral territory we all reside, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and other Indigenous Peoples in this area to stand in solidarity with Black communities, and other people of color to form a coalition to rename and repurpose what is now called Columbus Circle. This space would honor and recognize this as Indigenous land, specifically Onondaga land, while working to remedy the systemic inequities faced by Black, Native, and other people of color within the city of Syracuse. We request, with the removal of this statue, that no decisions made about us are to be made without us as was done with the erection of the monument in 1933, which was funded in part by Mussolini during the rise of fascism. We acknowledge that the removal of the statue will not end systematic racism in Syracuse, but it will mark the effort to do so in a significant way.

On June 5, 2020, you knelt, as Mayor of Syracuse, with a Black-led movement of Black Lives Matter protesters in solidarity with victims of police brutality, dead and alive, near and far. You expressed your

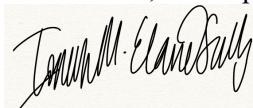
eagerness to focus on issues of racial inequality in the City of Syracuse and a determination to push against systemic racism. Part of pushing against systemic racism is recognizing the harmful iconography and reverence for violent, white supremacist, colonial historical figures has on communities of color, particularly Black and Native. It is important that these issues be addressed not only in our institutions, but also in our understanding of history and the public figures we choose to revere. As you raise up from kneeling, we ask that you lead the City of Syracuse to recognize that Christopher Columbus represents the glorification and celebration of genocide and enslavement of Indigenous Peoples and African Peoples. As you stand, we ask that you DO SO in solidarity with us and remove this genocidal symbol of white supremacy and domination as one powerful step toward healing, speaking truth, and acknowledging the contributions that Black and Indigenous Peoples have made, and continue to make, in the City of Syracuse.

We, the undersigned, are well positioned to assist in this monument removal and look forward to hearing back from you to discuss this matter by noon Friday 19 June 2020.

Sincerely,




Blake Garland-Tirado
MA Student, SU Department of Religion



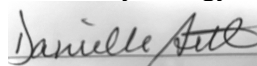
Ionah M. Elaine Scully,
Cree-Métis—Michel First Nation, PhD Student,
Cultural Foundations of Education



Sarah Nahar,
PhD student in Religion at SU and Environmental
Studies at SUNY-ESF



Bria Huff,
B.A in Psychology, SU Dept of Psychology



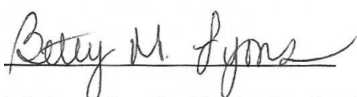
Danielle Smith,
MA Student, SU Dept of Social Work,
Citizen of the Onondaga Nation, hawk clan

Marissa Booth,
Kiowa from the Onondaga Nation,
VP Indigenous Students at Syracuse

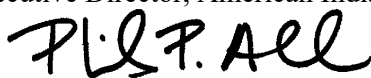
Nathan Abrams,
Seneca Nation,
President, Indigenous Students at Syracuse



Sandy Bigtree,
Officer Indigenous Values Initiative, Skā·noñh—Great Law of Peace Center, NOON,
Citizen of Akwesasne Mohawk Nation, bear clan



Betty Lyons,
Executive Director, American Indian Law Alliance, citizen of Onondaga Nation, snipe clan



Philip P. Arnold, Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Religion,
Founding Director of Skā·noñh—Great Law of Peace Center (www.skanoonhcenter.org)
President, Indigenous Values Initiative (<https://indigenousvalues.org/>)

Supportive Institutional Actors:

Indigenous Values Initiative

American Indian Law Alliance

Syracuse University Department of Religion

Syracuse University Department of Psychology

Syracuse University Department of Women and Gender Studies

Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation (NOON), Syracuse Peace Council

Cc: Ryan McMahon, County Executive, Onondaga County
Dr. Kent Syverud, Chancellor, Syracuse University
Beth Broadway, Director, InterFaith Works of Central New York