

“#7 I WILL FOLLOW ON:” TRACING CULTURAL CONTINUITY THROUGH THE  
ONEIDA HYMN SINGING TRADITION

by

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts at George Mason University

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## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my great-grandmother, Lucy Cornelius, who spoke Oneida quietly,  
but sang it proudly.

The strength of your voice still carries today.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In truth, my acknowledgements could (and really *should*) exceed the length of my paper as I am indebted to a host of people. I first have to thank my mother, Candi Carmi, who not only supplied so many of the sources used in this paper, but acted as a constant resource, herself. Perhaps more important, I would have no concept of strength and resistance without her example. I will not soon forget the time spent around the dinner table with my grandmother, Shirley Downs, whose enthusiasm for this paper constitutes, in my mind, the highest grade I will achieve. And while any attempt at thanks would be insufficient, I must express my gratitude to both Dr. Carol Cornelius, who so happily shared her knowledge with me, and Arleen Elm, who went above and beyond in her support of my research, even after having sustained an injury! Oneida strength, indeed! I will cherish the conversation I shared with Gordon McLester III a lifetime and cannot thank him enough for teaching me all that he did. And finally, to Alex Constantine for his ceaseless support and encouragement: graduate school would have been a far less rewarding experience without you. Thank you for listening to my rants, reading my papers, and never forgetting to feed Luna.

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## ABSTRACT

“#7 I WILL FOLLOW ON:” TRACING CULTURAL CONTINUITY THROUGH THE ONEIDA HYMN SINGING TRADITION

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This thesis analyzes the long-standing tradition of Christian hymn singing by the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin as a form of “everyday resistance.” A term used by James C. Scott in *Weapons of the Weak* to describe small-scale, informal, and covert acts initiated by lower classes in opposition to an established authority, “everyday resistance” is applied, here, for the preservation of Oneida values and culture that Christian hymn singing enabled. Although this effect might appear paradoxical, the overall goal of this thesis is to dismantle the binary that distinguishes Native Americans from Christianity and to suggest that the Christianity practiced by Oneida people, in particular, can be understood as a promise and commitment to the Oneida community and its well-being. This thesis positions itself, then, within the larger project to depict the Native American identity as a dynamic one through its emphasis on Native adaptability as a strategy of Native resistance.

## **#154 THIS IS MY STORY**

From August 2016 through February 2017, nearly 8,000 people gathered in protest at the Oceti Sakowin Camp located on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota (“DAPL, Indigenous Rights and Environmental Justice”). Indigenous citizens across the Americas, representing hundreds of tribes, assembled at Oceti Sakowin to halt the construction of the Dakota Access oil pipeline. Slated to run under the Missouri River, the pipeline’s proposed course would carry crude oil within one mile of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, threatening the quality of the tribe’s drinking water while also destroying sacred sites lying in its path (Hawkins). As the world watched via their Facebook and Twitter feeds, protestors, or “Water Protectors” as they came to be known, withstood attack dogs, tear gas, and the spray of water cannons in subfreezing temperatures; meanwhile, journalists reported the infringement of protestors’ basic human rights by police and pipeline workers (Hawkins). After a particularly brutal standoff with police, spurred by the announcement of President Trump’s memorandum reviving the Keystone and Dakota pipelines, Anishinaabe activist and writer Winona LaDuke gave a rallying cry that summarized the Water Protectors’ sentiments: “This is our moment to stand up and to protect everything that we value, because if we do not, things are not going to go well for us...I just encourage people, find your courage. Stand



up. Be strong. And let us vanquish evil back to where it came from” (“I’m Afraid They Are Out To Kill”).

1,500 miles away from Oceti Sakowin, in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. and in the warmth of my home, I read *The Communist Manifesto* for school, muting the news during commercial breaks and unmuting it, again, to hear from Standing Rock Sioux Chairman David Archambault II. As Water Protectors marched on DAPL barricades and dodged rubber bullets, I meandered my way across campus to discuss the London riots of the 1970s. I could not have been more aware that fall semester of my own hypocrisy.

But as I’ve come to realize, and intend to argue in this paper, acts of resistance and protest should not be measured only and always in terms of their scale or their publicity. As James C. Scott maintains in *Weapons of the Weak*, there exist “everyday” forms of resistance, forms which “make no headlines,” but like “anthozoan polyps [which] create, willy-nilly, a coral reef,” produce in their haphazard multiplicity “political and economic barrier reefs of their own” (xvi-xvii). Thus—and with no applause to myself—we might read my academic pursuits and the study of my ancestors as forms of resistance: I am both defying a colonialism which would prefer that I had forgotten the achievements of my tribe and I am overcoming imposed barriers which have excluded Native peoples from higher education.<sup>1</sup> However, I must acknowledge that my own everyday acts of resistance are simply the latest in a long series and can only be the result of everyday forms of resistance undertaken by those who came before me. In what follows, I will argue that the long-standing Oneida tradition of Christian hymn singing is

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<sup>1</sup> Among the many possible choices, I use “Native” which functions as the shorthand for my preferred “Native American.” Accordingly, I keep it capitalized throughout.

an everyday form of resistance—“everyday,” in that, it was too familiar and acceptable for the encroaching white, Christian world to recognize its potential for subversion; “resistant” because it allowed newly converted Oneidas to preserve tribal values.

I want to be clear that, in no way, is this argument made to justify or excuse my absence from the protests at Standing Rock, nor is it meant to diminish the courage of those who selflessly confront colonial violence and aggression firsthand (I, personally—and respectfully—concede any title of bravery to the Water Protectors). Rather, my intent here is simply to locate resistance beyond what is often formally recognized, whether by history books or media outlets; it is to say that Native peoples, and in this particular case the Oneida people, have continuously engaged in protest since the onset of colonization. Michael D. McNally begins his introduction to *The Art of Tradition*, stating, “It is surely one of the principal ironies of American history that Native Americans have survived as distinctive peoples” (xi). While it may be ironic, our survival certainly wasn’t accidental. It is to our ancestors’ endless resistance that we can attribute the strength of our presence today.



My work follows that trend set by recent contributors to the field of Native American and Indigenous Studies to look locally. Therefore, I concentrate my research at the level of a community-based program, one that I argue was organized, albeit informally, in response to the larger, national project of assimilation and, ultimately, annihilation. In this instance, though, to “look locally” functions doubly: I am a member of the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin and Oneida hymn singing is a tradition my

great-grandmother, Lucy Cornelius, participated in up until her passing in 1995.<sup>2</sup> The potential for bias is clear, but in this case, might be more beneficial than would be expected, for a second objective of this paper is to challenge the widespread perception that the Native identity is a static one.

While I argue that Native acts of resistance are evident well beyond the battlefield, courtroom, or campsite, I have no desire to promote the notion that Native resistance constitutes a resistance to *change*. In her study of Christian hymn singing by Eastern Woodland communities, Beverly Diamond-Cavanagh reveals the importance of studying what are often regarded as “non-traditional” art forms: “As is indisputable, even the silences about contemporary traditions often speak loudly of attitudes that implicitly freeze cultures in the past and refuse to let them grow and change” (381). A wealth of work testifying to the colonial project of “freezing” Native peoples in the past has been published in the past several decades, Philip Deloria’s *Indians in Unexpected Places* perhaps one of the most well-known. But the popularity and corresponding authenticity granted to a “pure” or “uncontaminated” Native identity remains and, pertinent to this paper, Christianity, in especial, has been deemed a particularly noxious contaminant.<sup>3</sup>

Like Creek theorist Craig Womack, I am weary of postmodernist cries of strategically fabricated, socially constructed illusions. Although these arguments have been beneficial, like most everything else in the world, it might be better if they were

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<sup>2</sup> There are Oneida communities in Canada and New York, but my research here focuses exclusively on the community in Wisconsin. While some of the research here will reflect the experience of all Oneida, it should be understood that my focus is only on those located on the Oneida Reservation located just outside of Green Bay.

<sup>3</sup> The analogy of “contamination” is used by both Craig Womack and Scott Richard Lyons to describe attitudes toward “non-traditional” Native individuals.

applied in moderation. I refuse to conceive of Native Christians, particularly my Oneida Christian ancestors, as dupes and wonder like Ien Ang (although in a very different context), if there is no accounting for pleasure?<sup>4</sup> For a person's and a people's genuine connection to and identification with a cultural form that has been, most unfortunately, co-opted by the ruling class? In his essay "A Single Decade," Womack questions the usefulness, and perhaps even the morality, of always distinguishing American Indians from Christians:

Why does a religious studies scholar need to prove that a Christian Indian is still an Indian? Why would he not be?... Do all Christian Indians have to be converted to Indian Indians before we can include them as worthy studies? Must Christian theology be decoded as a subterfuge for an underlying Indianness? Can tribal sovereignty include an individual's, or a community's, right to choose one's own religion, including Christianity? Are Indians always victims of Christianity? Have they ever made choices about it? (88).

I intend to argue that Oneida hymn singers *did* make a choice, one that did not necessitate the relinquishment or sacrifice of tribally-held values. Rather, in their conversion to Christianity and their performance of Christian hymns in the Oneida language, these Oneidas were, in fact, *ensuring the longevity* of Oneida communal values.

If we continue to "[dismiss] native religious adaptability as tragic acculturation" and deem Native Christians "heretical, inauthentic, assimilated, and uncommitted"—

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<sup>4</sup> In "Feminist Desire and Feminist Pleasure," Ien Ang questions the "political moralism" that dismisses the satisfaction women say they experience in reading romance novels. Ang criticizes those who suggest that there is a pleasure more "pure" and "authentic" than what these readers claim for themselves.

tendencies observed by James Treat in *Native and Christian*—then we, too, are engaging in that project of “freezing” Native peoples in the past and are, thus, guaranteeing their invisibility in the future (9). Native peoples are far more dynamic than history—especially when narrated by colonialism—has allowed. Further, it is their very rejection of stagnancy that has allowed Native peoples to persevere. Native resistance, then, should not be misconstrued as a cause undertaken in the name of stasis, for its success has largely been the result of adaptability. The Oneida, like so many other tribes, did not resist *change*, itself; they resisted the forces that would have them and their values disappear forever. Equating the former with the latter oversimplifies much of Native history and ignores the capabilities, even the desires, of Native peoples.

In this way, I categorize Oneida hymn singing as an “x-mark,” what Ojibwe/Dakota writer Scott Richard Lyons defines as a “commitment to living in new and perhaps unfamiliar ways, yet without promising to give up one’s people, values, or sense of community” (169). Becoming and living as a Christian was certainly new and unfamiliar for Oneidas, but as I will argue below, hymn singing in the Oneida language kept them not only bound to their tribe, but to their sense of themselves as constitutive members of that tribe. Lyons’ work figures heavily in my analysis, even if not cited explicitly, because of his effort to direct attention from “being” to “doing” as regards Native identity (59).

For Lyons, there are several benefits to this shift in thinking, benefits that align with the stated goals of this paper. To focus on “doing” instead of “being” “finally [puts] the question of essentialism behind us;” but, it also offers a “counterattack to the

genocidal implications that are always inherent in the notion of Indian identity as timeless, stable, eternal, but probably in the minds of most people still ‘vanishing.’” As Lyons writes, “Being vanishes. Doing keeps doing” (60). Lyons provides a means of measuring such “doing,” stating that, “To make a good x-mark...means more than just embracing new or foreign ideas as your own; it means consciously connecting those ideas to certain values, interests, and political objectives, and making the best call you can under the conditions not of your making” (70). As I hope to demonstrate, the Oneida did not just make the *best* call that they could in adopting Christian hymn singing; they ultimately made a *successful* one, for the values and language they sought to protect so many generations ago continue to be cherished today.

To illustrate resistance as a tribal heritage and hymn singing as a technique of tribal-preservation, I have structured my paper into three parts, each named for a song in my great-grandmother’s hymnal. In Part I, “#133 In the Hour of Trial,” I discuss the introduction of Christianity to the Iroquois and trace the beginnings of the Oneida hymn singing tradition, attempting to demonstrate that adoption of the form predated Oneida removal from New York to Wisconsin. In Part II, “#96 Coming to the Land,” I analyze the ways in which Christianity figured in the Oneida’s move west and draw upon first-hand accounts to determine how the resettled Oneida understood and made meaning of the church and hymn singing. In Part III, “#40 Calling Today,” I look at the function of hymn singing in the Oneida community over the past three decades and describe current efforts to ensure that the tradition lives on for future generations.

## #133 IN THE HOUR OF TRIAL

Featured in the opening pages of Lucy's 1965 edition of the Oneida hymnal—delicate and worn now, its spine slowly separating from its pages—are two prefaces to the text, one co-written by linguists Morris Swadesh and Floyd Lounsbury, the other by Oneida tribal member and hymn singer Oscar Archiquette. Archiquette's preface serves as an important basis for this research for several reasons, the first of which concerns his writing of a significant, but not very well substantiated claim: "The history of the Oneida Indian Prayer Singers, as they were called in New York, goes back to the earliest white settlers of the United States." I have no doubt that Archiquette, along with his contemporaries and his predecessors, knew this to be true, but reading Archiquette's introduction I also knew that, for the sake of an academic paper, it was imperative that I attempt to find solid, corroborative evidence. As the research and writing of this paper have occurred outside of New York and Wisconsin, where so many relevant documents are housed, this has proven to be a difficult task. I, therefore, do admit that what appears here is an incomplete history and one that only joins together those materials and resources that have been available and accessible to me in the (too brief) course of my research. But the use of Archiquette's preface is also essential for its ability to convey the voice of the Oneida people. I attempt to privilege that voice here and, ultimately, declare its authority whether or not it corresponds with the collected "data."

For the most part, the authors I put into conversation all locate the beginning of Oneida Christianity at Presbyterian minister Samuel Kirkland's arrival to the community in 1766. In his essay "'Turned Their Minds to Religion:' Oquaga and the First Iroquois Church, 1748-1776," historian Daniel R. Mandell convincingly argues that Christianity established itself among the Iroquois two decades sooner, but scholars of Oneida history—Native and non-Native alike—recognize an undeniable, and lasting, influence in Samuel Kirkland's mission. A wealth of work is dedicated to his presence among the Oneida and, ultimately, allows us to paint a picture of the minister working among a very active and, importantly, perceptive tribe.

According to Jack Campisi and Laurence M. Hauptman in *The Oneida Indian Experience*, scholarship on Kirkland portrays a missionary modern sensibilities find "unpleasant," but perhaps not altogether surprising given the realities of missionization. Campisi and Hauptman write, "Kirkland was a zealot. He did believe that traditional Oneida ways were wholly immoral. Kirkland was often stubborn, arrogant, and just plain difficult" (*The Oneida Indian Experience* 6). But as I attempt to do here in my treatment of Christianity—and Womack encourages religious scholars to do elsewhere—Campisi and Hauptman strive to understand why the Oneida might have valued Kirkland, anyway: "Oneidas who knew him recognized those qualities in the missionary. Yet those same people were attracted to him, sought him out, and listened attentively to long, often convoluted sermons. We ought to ask what those Oneidas saw in Samuel Kirkland" (*The Oneida Indian Experience* 6).



Campisi and Hauptman guess that the minister may have offered “a new ideology, a new way to see an increasingly hostile world” (*The Oneida Indian Experience* 6). In “Reverend Samuel Kirkland and the Oneida Indians,” James P. Ronda goes one step further writing that, “The Oneida faithful saw Kirkland as a spiritual director, a guide in the midst of troubled times” (24). At the time of Kirkland’s arrival, the Oneida were plagued by war and its corollaries, suffering not only loss of life, but loss of unity, as well, in a tribal contest of political allegiances. Ronda summarizes the scene: “The endless round of forest wars had taken their toll on Oneida ranks. Despite the steady adoption of captives, Oneida members were not gaining. A declining population seemed to intensify the factionalism and political squabbling that was now so much a part of village life” (26). And while they fought enemies and each other, the Oneida also found themselves at battle with poverty, starvation, and the increasingly widespread use of alcohol (Ronda 26). Given their conditions, it is not difficult to imagine that the Oneida took seriously anyone offering seemingly sound solutions.

In *Conspiracy of Interests*, Hauptman reduces Kirkland’s “long” and “convoluted” sermons to three main points: the adoption of farming, abandonment of alcohol, and increased access to education (39). Ronda writes that in implementing these strategies, Kirkland believed he was “[giving] the Oneidas a lifeboat, a set of survival skills for the coming storm” (29). And by several accounts, the Oneida viewed Kirkland’s mission in this way, too. Hauptman writes that with the support of influential Oneidas such as Laulence and Onondiyo, as well as tribal leader, Skenandoah, who later became his longtime friend, Kirkland pushed his “civilization plan” forward. Hauptman relates

that this support was likely given because, “to some Oneidas such as Skenandoah, a former alcohol abuser, Kirkland offered a new level of self-respect” (*Conspiracy of Interests* 39). When Laulence sent his own son to Kirkland’s Hamilton-Oneida Academy, his sentiments, collected in Kirkland’s journals, express a sincere belief in the efficacy of the minister’s plan: “The strongest wish of my heart...is this, that he [Isaac] may attain the knowledge and love of God, that he may possess true goodness in his heart, that he may get into that path, which will certainly lead him to a happy life in the next world” (Ronda 27).

But as Campisi and Hauptman indicate above, there was no tenderness in Kirkland’s message, nor in his delivery and he certainly made no suggestion that the Oneida meld their own, traditional beliefs with their new Christian ones. As Ronda writes, “Like most missionaries, [Kirkland] believed that religious conversion first required cultural transformation” (27). Indeed, those very same long sermons show an “untiring zeal for...denouncing traditional ways” and reflect “a man determined to shape others to his own course” (*The Oneida Indian Experience* 6). The importance of this point cannot be overstated as it implies that any salvation of Oneida values by Oneida Christians was an Oneida-led effort.

Both Womack and Diamond-Cavanagh bemoan “the missionization narrative, long-standing historically and persistent in the present,” which insists both on a direct opposition between Native Americans and Christianity and the constant victimization of the former by the latter (Diamond-Cavanagh 382). There is no denying that Christian missionaries worked in concert with settlers and later state and federal governments, to

oppress Native communities, dispossess them of their lands and traditions and, generally, “weed out [their] last remnants of Indianness,” as George E. Tinker relates (38).

However, a careful attention to the actions taken by Native individuals might produce a more complex—and, therefore, more accurate—historical narrative. Diamond-Cavanagh writes that “accounts, both past and present, about the encounter between Native people and Christian missionaries suggest that people have experienced this encounter differently and, further, that different subtexts underlay those diverse experiences” (382).

In her introduction to *Musical Repercussions of 1492*—a collection analyzing the function of music in colonized spaces—Carol E. Robertson suggests that we might even think of “the conquered peoples” as convertors themselves, transforming Christianity to “[create] forms of popular religiosity that incorporated Native, African, and European interpretations of the sacred” (24).

As Ronda writes, then, “Kirkland did not plan that his converts would remain Oneida, but they did” (23). While the Oneida agreed with Kirkland that Christianity offered “a means to survive, to persist in a forest of enemies,” this does not mean that they agreed their conversion required the complete sacrifice of their values and traditions (*The Oneida Indian Experience* 6). In *A Spirited Resistance*, Gregory Evans Dowd argues that the notion of cultural capitulation by Native communities is unfounded given their history of exchange:

Few communities existed in utter isolation from others; they were accustomed to exchanges both of thought and of practice. The most profound of these exchanges resulted from the mourning-war complex... Less profound

exchanges would come about in trade, diplomacy, warfare, and more casual encounters. But all of these exchanges rendered a certain dynamism to any Indian community's belief system. Perhaps more important, they gave the Indian communities structures that, far from encouraging stasis, promoted intersocietal exchange (17).

The Iroquois tradition of the mourning war—in which members of enemy tribes were taken as captives, then adopted as a means of recouping losses—provides indisputable evidence that Native, and specifically Oneida, communities ensured preservation by practicing integration. That the Oneida might come to be comprised of previously non-Oneida members did not disturb the tribe's sense of cultural and spiritual continuity. In the same way, neither did conversion to Christianity. As Dowd claims, "To borrow from Indian neighbors, even to incorporate Christian items into Indian ways of getting things done, did not mean to despiritualize, much less to secularize, particularly if native understandings of how things work persisted" (18). It might be fruitful, then, to think that the Oneida recognized in Christian hymn singing a familiar interpretation of "how things work."

In *A Spirited Resistance*, Dowd's analysis of intertribal political movements in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries revolves around the concept of *nativism*. Dowd's definition of the term is not unlike Lyons' conception of "x-marks" in that nativism combines established and recently introduced strategies to produce an effective solution to the problem of "European ambition." For Dowd:

[A Nativist] identified with other native inhabitants of the continent, ... self-consciously proclaimed that selected traditions and new (sometimes even imported) modes of behavior held keys to earthly and spiritual salvation, and...rejected the increasing colonial influence in native government, culture, and economy in favor of native independence (xxii).

Thus, it is possible that in hymn singing the Oneida found a key to salvation: salvation not only from their internal and external struggles, but salvation of their culture. Hymn singing brought the Oneida together—even if in small groups—at a time when they were increasingly being torn apart. Further, it produced a familiar and comfortable space, one in which they could speak and sing in their native language while working collaboratively together. In a sense, then, hymn singing was a means not only of surviving in a changing world, but surviving *as Oneidas*.

According to the website for the Oneida Nation Arts Program, documents belonging to members of the Christian group, the Society of Friends, note “the quality of [Oneida] singing as early as 1795.” In my research, no explicit connections are made between Kirkland and the introduction of hymn singing and Archiquette includes in his preface a second claim that the form was adopted by the Oneida well before the minister’s arrival. Archiquette alleges that in 1709, sixty years after the English Parliament authorized the “Society for the Advancement of Civilization and Christianity Among the Indians of New York,” “Queen Anne ordered that the ‘Common Prayer Book’ and the hymns be translated into the Mohawk Language” (an Iroquoian dialect very similar to Oneida). In their anthology, *The Oneida Indian Journey*, Hauptman and L.

Gordon McLester III (Oneida) offer some support to this claim in their passing reference to Oneida hymn singing as a form practiced by the community “ever since the mideighteenth century” (106). I do think it’s worthwhile to note that these three sources are the only ones cited by this research to trace Oneida hymn singing to the eighteenth century and that they are all products of the Oneida Nation.

Elsewhere, the beginnings of Oneida hymn singing are based in the early nineteenth century. In his 1991 study, “The Singing Societies of Oneida,” musicologist Terence J. O’Grady states that documents “trace hymn singing to 1838” (67). This aligns with the findings of Gertrude Kurath, whose work on Ojibwe hymn singing traces the origins of that tradition to the 1820s, when “Protestant missionaries among the Anishinaabeg vigorously promoted translations of evangelical hymns into Native languages as effective tools in what they considered the civilizing process” (185). However, given the presence of Christianity among the Iroquois (and the Ojibwe) one hundred years prior, one does wonder why the adoption of hymn singing was so vastly delayed.

For the most part, it seems non-Oneida scholars associate the Oneida adoption of hymn singing with the publication of missionary Eleazer Williams’ Mohawk translation of the *Anglican Book of Common Prayer and Selections from the Psalms and Hymns* (O’Grady 67). In his study, O’Grady does concede that although “it is to this origin that Oneida hymn singing is usually traced...every Oneida singer...interviewed...insisted that hymn singing in Oneida dates back before the move to Green Bay and the relationship with Williams” (67).

The precise year in which Williams' translation was published is not stated by any of my sources, but Williams was active among the Oneida as early as 1816 (J. Cornelius 130). While his legacy is often overshadowed by the notoriety he garnered claiming to be the lost dauphin of France, Williams is widely recognized as a key figure in Oneida history. Born among the St. Regis Mohawks, Williams' "oratorical ability and knowledge of the Indian languages allowed him to communicate with the Oneida" when he was assigned to serve them as a catechist, lay reader, and religious leader by Bishop John Henry Hobart (J. Cornelius 130). Importantly, Williams is credited with converting Presbyterian Oneidas to Episcopalianism and thus forming the Second Christian Party to Kirkland's earlier First Christian Party (*Conspiracy of Interests* 56). The Oneida reservation's Episcopal Church, later the Holy Apostles Church (which still stands today), was the first church erected in Wisconsin and all the Northwest, according to that church's records, and is "historically the largest congregation in the [Oneida] community" (Holy Apostles Church; O'Grady 68).

Like Diamond-Cavanagh, though, "I wish to emphasize the contemporary interpretations...rather than historical roots" of Oneida hymn singing and so am largely unconcerned with determining the exact year in which the Oneida established the tradition (381). While it's certainly not unanimous, the data does make clear that Oneida hymn singing spans two centuries. If there are gaps in the documentation, we might point to the "everyday" nature of the form as the cause. If Christian missionaries were teaching the Oneida Christian hymns, would their students' absorption of the curriculum have been so remarkable? In the *Art of Tradition*, McNally explains that it is precisely because

the Ojibwe used colonial, and thus “acceptable,” forms of expression that their alteration of those forms’ meanings went unnoticed. He writes, “Identity and tradition can be asserted in performance where they might be unthinkable, and might pass beneath the radar of colonizing powers that would not find such sovereign expression of identity and tradition to be legitimate” (xxx). Robertson echoes this sentiment, but more explicitly discusses how music, in particular, enables “everyday resistance:”

Music has provided the accompaniment, the disguise, the text, and the amplitude of meanings in this dance of give-and-take. African, Spanish, and Indigenous players were occasionally able to bridge the gaps of mistranslation through performance—not because music is a universal language but because music is *not* a universal language. Because it cannot be subjected to literal interpretations, performance allows individuals and communities to name and rename themselves while attributing multiple meanings to the same musical or dramatic representation (25).

Analyzing how, when, and where hymn singing was practiced provides an idea of those meanings the Oneida attributed to the form. But it also allows us to put Robertson’s illustration of agency in context: through hymn singing, the Oneida did not just make sense of their new situation, but also retained the ability to name *themselves*, an important distinction to make in our amendment to the missionization narrative.



## #96 COMING TO THE LAND

Even a brief foray into the history of Oneida removal will convey the centrality of Christianity to the Oneida living in that era. As the Oneida moved in waves from western New York to eastern Wisconsin, they did so in groups joined by religious affiliation. Thus, any history of Oneida removal will (and should) mention the First Christian Party, the Second Christian Party, and finally, the Orchard Party, an offshoot of the Second Christian and Pagan Parties. The argument for Eleazer Williams' significance to the Oneida is strengthened, here, when we learn that it was the missionary who led the Oneida on their way west. While some scholars have suggested that Williams' captainship was inspired by his vision of "an ecclesiastic [Indian] empire," others have argued his intentions were less pure and that he was an ally of conspiring New York officials (*The Oneida Indian Journey* 11). Whatever the case, the Oneida were left little choice but to leave and their Christian faith played a central role in their resettlement west.

Like so many other tribes subjected to removal, the Oneida were pressured and manipulated by enterprising Amer-Europeans.<sup>5</sup> In *Conspiracy of Interests*, Hauptman pinpoints New York state's "transportation revolution" as the precise force motivating

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<sup>5</sup> In this context, I follow the lead of Jace Weaver and use "Amer-Europeans" rather than "Euro-Americans." Weaver defines the latter as "Americans of European descent" whereas the former denotes "Europeans who happen to live in America" (xiii).

land-hungry settlers. In 1784, the center of the Oneida's five million acres of land straddled the Oneida and Madison Counties. As Hauptman relates, this area constituted "a vital transportation crossroads...essential for New York's economic growth after the [American] Revolution." To ensure the fledgling state's increase and success, then, the Oneida had to be moved, a seemingly trivial price to pay according to the area's new residents. Hauptman writes, "To private and state interests, the relatively small number of Oneidas—780 in the Oneida homeland and 30 in the Genesee valley in 1792—stood in the way of 'progress'" (*Conspiracy of Interests* 27).

New York officials employed a variety of tactics to dispossess the Oneida of their land base. Although the Oneida had been guaranteed federal protections at Fort Stanwix in 1784—certainly, the least the government could do given the Oneida's support of the Patriots in the American Revolution—New York state quickly worked to extinguish these provisions (*The Oneida Indian Journey* 10). Between 1785 and 1846, the Oneida lost their lands through a series of "treaties"—the quotation marks, here, denoting their often-illegal nature—predicated upon New York's passing of equally dubious laws (*The Oneida Indian Journey* 10). By 1843, the Oneida retained 933 of their original five million acres, divided between Orchard Park in Oneida County and Marble Hill in Madison County; within eighty years, that number dwindled to 32 (*Conspiracy of Interests* 56).

As the Oneida wrestled with New York officials to keep their lands, they looked to their religious leader, Williams, for support. Having developed a close relationship with members of the First Christian Party—established under Kirkland—as well as the

Second Christian Party—established by Williams, himself, through his conversion of “Pagan” and Presbyterian Oneidas to Episcopalianism—Williams had the ear of a large portion of the Oneida community. We might parallel the trust placed in his solutions to the trust placed in those proposed by Kirkland five decades earlier—and again, do so without questioning, but instead acknowledging the Oneida’s capacity for judgment.

As early as 1817, Williams, federal and state officials, and agents of the Ogden Land Company (perhaps the greatest foe of the Oneida at the time) began meeting to discuss where the uprooted Oneida would go (*The Oneida Indian Journey* 12). In 1820 and again in 1821, Williams and an exploring party headed to Green Bay, Wisconsin (Horsman 62). The visits spurred a divide between the Oneidas—already fractured by their allegiances to either the older sachems or the younger warriors who held competing views on how to appropriately respond to the Amer-Europeans and their ideas of “civilization”—but, ultimately, the choice whether to leave or stay was illusory: within twenty years the majority of Oneidas had been removed from New York (“The Oneida Nation” 32).

The first group to move west was, appropriately, the First Christian Party who left New York in the summer of 1823 (Horsman 64). Professed Episcopalians at this point, the group was later joined by the Orchard Party, members of the Second Christian Party who had converted to Methodism.<sup>6</sup> All settled at Duck Creek, which became the

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<sup>6</sup> The Methodist Church at Oneida featured hymn singing groups, as well, but as the majority of Oneidas are and have been Episcopal, there are far more resources available to trace the development of the tradition within that church, specifically.

permanent Oneida reservation in Wisconsin; within fifteen years of their removal from New York, it was home to 654 Oneidas (Horsman 65).

As mentioned above, the newly settled Oneida, largely Episcopalian, very quickly built a church, the first erected in all the Northwest. Raised in 1825, it was a “small, log-constructed” building, located along the banks of Duck Creek and named for the bishop of New York, John Henry Hobart (J. Cornelius 129). That the Oneida almost immediately set aside a portion of their new lands for the establishment of Hobart Church indicates that the resumption of Christian worship was a priority for the Oneida. In *Oneida Lives*, Herbert S. Lewis asserts that the church’s significance was not just limited to its role in Oneida religious practices, but figured centrally in Oneida social life, as well (271). Thus, we might imagine that the Oneida made quick work of the church’s construction so they could have a space not only to assemble in prayer, but to gather in solidarity and work to make sense of their new surroundings together.

Oneida tribal member Ida Blackhawk suggests as much in her 1941 essay “My Beliefs: Religion and Values,” included in Lewis’ anthology. Reflecting upon the religious dedication of Oneida ancestors, she claims:

I think the reason the old Oneidas were so faithful to their church was, first, because they had no other social center; second, because they were in a strange land, surrounded by other tribes of Indians who were more or less hostile; third, they were led out here by a Christian man and they wanted to stand by him in his undertaking (282).

She goes on to say that the Oneida had an investment in the church, having built it by hand, themselves, and so they had a certain “zeal” to support it (Blackhawk 282).

Notably, in all of Blackhawk’s conjectures, we see that it is the Oneida who give meaning to the church and their faith, and not the church and its doctrines that enforce meaning upon them.

Accounts like Blackhawk’s, testifying to the Oneida’s post-removal experience, are granted to us through a special Works Progress Administration (WPA) project, the Oneida Language and Folklore Project, conducted 1938-1941. Led by Swadesh and Flounsbury, the co-authors of that first preface to Lucy’s hymnal, the project hired Oneida speakers to interview fellow Oneida speakers and record and translate their stories (Lewis ix-x). These recollections not only describe Oneida life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but, importantly, do so from the Oneida perspective. Christianity, the Episcopal Church, and hymn singing, as central features of Oneida life, are mentioned frequently in the archive and their treatment by Oneida citizens allows us to draw more accurate conclusions about the meanings given to them. My research, then, makes an important shift here as it moves from scholarly analyses of Oneida history to first-hand accounts.



Interviews and stories in *Oneida Lives* provide substantial evidence of the interplay between Oneida Christian faith and Oneida cultural heritage. For instance, evident in Tom Elm’s interview with Stadler King is the strength of the relationship between the church and Oneida language. An elder at the time of the interview, Elm

relates that growing up, services “always had an interpreter,” who translated the English sermon into Oneida. Elm reasons, “It was a good thing we had [one]” as so many Oneida attendees did not know English (31). According to Clifford Abbott and Loretta Metoxen (Oneida) in “Oneida Language Preservation,” interpreters were present at Oneida church services well into the middle of the twentieth century. Particularly worthy of note, though, is Abbot and Metoxen’s description of these interpreters as bearers of a certain amount of ecclesiastic power: “Bilingual Oneidas in the church acted as local preachers who would travel to small communities on the reservation to preach in Oneida in inclement weather when the people could not get to the church” (4). While some might argue that the relationship, here, between church and language is one-sided and simply proves how determined the church was in its civilizing project, I think a different and more positive perspective is possible: firstly, these accounts would suggest that preservation of the Oneida language occurred *within* the Oneida Christian faith; secondly, we see Oneidas fulfilling the role of religious leader, themselves. In Womack’s search for evidence of Christian Indian “choice,” I might provide the latter point as an example.

As far as Oneida hymn singing, direct references to the tradition are scattered throughout *Oneida Lives* and communicate that it was a practice both respected and beloved by the community. In her 1941 interview, Ruth Baird, a hymn singer and friend of my great-grandmother, relates that the revival of hymn singing by Father Christian in 1937 spurred a similar revival in church attendance: “The first time we sang Indian songs in church it was like the olden times. The people took more interest in their church, and the attendance has been increasing ever since” (230). From our present position, we can

only guess what Baird means here by “olden times:” perhaps she is referencing a period when Oneida hymn singing was looked upon more favorably by the church (O’Grady writes that attitudes regarding use of the Oneida language varied according to church leadership); but it is possible she is referring to an even older time than that, when the Oneida sang in the Oneida language together, before the arrival of the missionaries (68-69). Either way, it is not insignificant that Baird refers to Christian hymns as “Indian songs.” As this description would suggest, the Oneida recognized and *claimed* hymns as their own. That they were not born of the traditional Longhouse religion or authored by Oneida people, did not make them any less “Indian” in the eyes of the Oneida.

But it’s not only the pictures of hymn singing presented in *Oneida Lives* that indicate its status among the community; it is also pictures of the hymn singers, themselves. If hymn singing is a respected institution among the Oneida, it requires and encourages a certain level of responsibility and respectfulness in its participants. In her interview with Ida Blackhawk in 1941, Ida Baird tells the story of her grandfather’s banishment from the choir after a night of excessive public drinking (278). Only after proving his commitment to the church through regular and strict attendance was he readmitted to the choir. Although her grandfather struggled with alcohol until his death, Baird emphasizes that his devotion to the choir and church never wavered. Upon her grandfather’s passing, Baird says that “Father Goodnough gave a good eulogy,” declaring that “as long as [her grandfather] dedicated his talent [for singing] to the church he would be counted with the saints” (278).

Often, then, we see the role of hymn singer paired with the role of community leader or activist, as made evident by Ruth Baird's discussion of the Oneida Episcopal choir's consistently busy schedule. According to Baird, in addition to performing at wakes, funerals, and for the sick, the group regularly organized church fundraisers through its staging of annual plays and participation in singing tours (R. Baird 230-231). Baird recollects that these tours spanned the length of northeast Wisconsin, with performances held in Sturgeon Bay, Wausau, Antigo, Appleton, Fond du Lac, Shawano and Stevens Point. She goes on to claim that the choir made such "a hit wherever [they] went" that they were "always in demand to appear on the programs given by the organizations connected with the church" (R. Baird 231-233). One of these organizations was the church's Women's Guild, of which Lucy and many of her fellow women hymn singers were a part. The community-work they undertook with the choir was extended, here, as the Guild held community dinners and raised money through the sale of handmade goods. According to church records, it was some of the Guild's earliest members that collected a significant portion of those funds needed to reconstruct the old timber church into "The Stone Church," or Holy Apostles Church, which still stands today (Holy Apostles Church 6).

While Ruth Baird emphasizes hymn singing as a project of the Oneida Christian faith, it is not difficult to assume from her comments that the practice also bore a certain social value and it is this element I see in Lucy's adoption of the tradition. While most of my discussion, here, has revolved around Oneida hymn singers located on the Oneida reservation outside of Green Bay, the Oneida also brought the practice to Milwaukee



when they began migrating there in the early 1900s (Doxtator and Zakhar 27). This move south was not only spurred by the opportunity for work in defense and heavy industry—an effect of World War I—but was also motivated by the allotment of the Oneida Reservation (27-28).

Congress authorized the General Allotment Act on February 8, 1887, but allotments were not made in Oneida until 1891 with patents issued in June of 1892 (*The Oneida Indians in the Age of Allotment* 7). The entire reservation—except for lands reserved for churches, cemeteries, day schools, “or...future government boarding [schools]”—was divided into parcels among individual Oneidas; further, a special provision stated that allotments were to be held in trust for a 25-year period (*The Oneida Indians in the Age of Allotment* 7). Fifteen years after this upheaval, the catastrophic Burke Act was passed, making most allotments subject to taxation (*The Oneida Indians in the Age of Allotment* 7). Like other Natives living in allotted communities, many Oneida could not afford to pay these taxes and were either forced to foreclose or sell their land. In 1917, all allotments became taxable when the federal government abruptly and arbitrarily ended the trust period. As a result, “a majority of the nation’s members...were scattered” by the early 1930s, with many having relocated to Milwaukee, Chicago, Detroit, and Minneapolis (*The Oneida Indians in the Age of Allotment* 7).

According to Shirley Downs—my grandmother and Lucy’s daughter—Lucy and her husband, Andrew, moved to Milwaukee around 1930 as part of a government initiative (perhaps allotment, but it is unclear) to move rural Indians into urban centers and “assimilate them into the white man’s world.” In *American Indians in Milwaukee*,

Antonio J. Doxtator (Oneida) and Renee J. Zakhar (Oneida) write that “two-thirds of the 300 Indian people in the 1930 census in Milwaukee were Oneida” (27). As their ancestors had done before them, the newly arrived Oneida quickly established a church community—this time around an existing Episcopal church located on the east side of Milwaukee called All Saints (Downs). In Shirley’s memory, the east side is where almost all the Oneidas were settled and Doxtator and Zakhar substantiate this claim. According to their research, Oneidas in Milwaukee “often lived in close range of each other in enclaves” (28). Based on what we know of allotment and its intent to divide and privatize, the notion of “Oneida enclaves” in Milwaukee is intriguing. Obviously, while it was disastrous, allotment was not entirely successful, for even after they left the reservation the Oneida remained together and, importantly, did so around their church. For Lyons, this is but another example of that “Great Law of Unintended Consequences” whose byproduct might be “everyday resistance” (xi).



Lucy and her family joined All Saints upon their arrival in Milwaukee. About a decade later, she joined the Consolidated Tribe of American Indians, an intertribal organization founded in 1937; shortly thereafter, Lucy began to sing (Downs; Doxtator and Zakhar 7).

If Oneida hymn singing is as long-standing and popular a tradition as I’ve attempted to convey, then it should be no surprise that my great-grandmother joined the Oneida choir in Milwaukee. But in this case, it *is* a surprise, one so remarkable—at least to me—that I was inspired to conduct this research. Because I was so young when Lucy

passed away, all that I know about her was told to me by mother and grandmother and something I remember both of them telling me is that Lucy always spoke Oneida quietly. Lucy and Andrew never taught their 9 children to speak Oneida; both had been sent to boarding schools—Andrew to Flandreau Indian School, Lucy to Wittenburg then Toma Boarding School—and both had been inculcated with the “inferiority” of their native language (Downs). In my interview with Oneida tribal historian—and Lucy’s granddaughter—Dr. Carol Cornelius, Carol shared with me that she had once asked Lucy to teach her Oneida, but Lucy had refused, saying, “The only way you make it in a white man’s world is to speak English.”

I suspect that several factors played into Lucy’s decision to join a hymn singing choir. On the one hand, it provided a sense of the familiar in an otherwise unfamiliar landscape. Uprooted from Green Bay to Milwaukee, perhaps Lucy found in hymn singing a connection to home. Further, as a member of All Saints Episcopal church, as well as the Women’s Guild, it may have been a given that she would eventually find herself a hymn singer, too. But most of all, I like to think that Lucy enjoyed a sense of freedom in hymn singing. After years of being told not to speak her native language, joining the choir allowed Lucy to *sing* her native language and I do think “allow” here is the operative word. Among the characteristics Scott attributes to “everyday resistance” is the “[avoidance of] any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms” (29). As I’ve been arguing here, resistance was both a reason for and effect of hymn singing but, importantly, it was covert. Perhaps Lucy recognized that in this “white man’s

world,” hymn singing—performed in an “acceptable” venue and reflecting “acceptable” behavior—was a form of indirect and unassailable confrontation.

When I told Carol how Lucy’s hymn singing inspired my research, she replied, “Oh, there *is* an interesting story there” (C. Cornelius). The facts of that story are now impossible to know and we can only guess Lucy’s thoughts based on the information we have. Whether Lucy was consciously aware of the possibility for resistance in hymn singing cannot be proven; nevertheless, I believe the results are the same.

## #94 CALLING TODAY

Beyond its preservation of Oneida perspectives, the Oneida Language and Folklore Project benefited the Oneida community in another way: it allowed the tribe to publish the Oneida hymnal. To standardize the transcriptions compiled by individual interviewers, the project devised and employed a spelling system, one later refined by Floyd Lounsbury after extensive research into the workings of the Oneida language (Abbott and Metoxen 6-7). The astute Oscar Archiquette—an employee of the project, as well as a hymn singer and later Oneida Tribal Chairman—approached Swadesh and Lounsbury with over one hundred variously recorded Oneida hymns and collaborated with the linguists to produce them as a collection using the WPA spelling system (*The Oneida Indian Journey* 106). The hymnal was published privately in 1941, but has been republished and expanded several times since (Abbott and Metoxen 7). Still used by the Oneida Hymn Singers today, Hauptman and McLester write that the hymnal “is viewed by the Oneida themselves as a major accomplishment of the project” (*The Oneida Indian Journey* 106).

The most recent edition of the hymnal is not so unlike Lucy’s: it contains a brief history of hymn singing in its opening pages, a note on the alphabet, as well as a key to pronunciation and corresponding examples. But where the cover of Lucy’s hymnal is blank, today’s is emblazoned with the Oneida crest: the Tree of Peace surrounded by

Bear, Wolf, Eagle, and Turtle. Further, Lucy's hymnal is a deep navy blue and today's a vibrant purple to match the colors of wampum reflected in the Haudenosaunee flag.

But if the hymnal remains largely unchanged, so have the hymn singers, themselves. Like their predecessors, today's Oneida Hymn Singers are dedicated community leaders and activists. A prime example is Gordon McLester III, whose name should be familiar at this point as his work is cited extensively in this paper. McLester is not only a former tribal secretary, but a leading tribal historian and coordinator of the Oneida History Conferences which produced so much of the source material used here. McLester has spent several decades researching the experience of the Oneida people, from their origins in New York, to removal, to allotment, and beyond. In my interview with him, McLester emphasized his desire to see Native history written and taught by Native people, a goal to which he has obviously dedicated his life's work and one I, myself, hope to meet (McLester).

But before I proceed into my discussion of Oneida hymn singing today, I should note a change in terminology. Up to this point, I have been treating hymn singing as a practice of various groups of Oneida. While it was most often seen in the church and so can be thought of as the craft of a church choir, hymn singing occurred outside of the church, as well, particularly when less accepting and more stringent church leaders arrived in the community (McLester). Further, as Part II demonstrates, a Milwaukee hymn singing group was established in addition to those present on the Oneida Reservation; given more research, perhaps we will find there were also groups in Chicago, Detroit, and Minneapolis, too. Thus, membership was not particularly formal,

and did not become so until the mid- to late-twentieth century with dues required of those wishing to join the Oneida Singers, specifically (O'Grady 70). The group I discuss here, the Oneida Hymn Singers of Wisconsin, is the culmination of all preceding groups and while formally organized, is still fluid in its membership.

The Oneida Hymn Singers, then, not only carry on the use of the original hymnal and remain committed activists, but continue to perform at the community's request, visiting the tribal nursing home, local schools, and personal residences for wakes (O'Grady 70). In my interview with singer Arleen Elm—Lucy's niece and my grandmother's cousin—Elm emphasized that the group does not go anywhere unless asked. While this is certainly a sign of respect on the Hymn Singers' part, it also highlights the nature of the group as a type of service provider for the community: the Singers are there to offer support when it is needed.

But the Singers serve the community in another important way: they preserve the Oneida language. In his essay "The Singing Societies of Oneida," O'Grady relates that "both members and nonmembers...stress the role of the group in perpetuating the Oneida language in the community" (86). Like so many other Native languages, Oneida is spoken less and less every year and is at risk of disappearing. This is the result of boarding schools—we see their influence, here, in Lucy and Andrew's refusal to teach their children Oneida—as well as "economic pressures" (Abbott and Metoxen 11). Previous Oneida generations were often forced to leave the reservation to find work; they not only learned English in the process, but deemed it superior to Oneida which they came to associate with suffering (Abbott and Metoxen 11). The reservation's proximity

to the city of Green Bay is, of course, an additional factor as it fostered a cultural exchange between Oneidas and non-Oneidas and continues to do so today (Abbott and Metoxen 4).

Current Singers are a product of this era with most unable to speak the Oneida language. O'Grady found this to be the case in the early nineties, as well, stating, "Singers under fifty years of age—like their counterparts throughout the community—tend not to be fluent in the language and frequently do not understand what they are singing, even though songs and the tradition have been familiar to them since childhood" (72-73). Indeed, in my conversations with both McLester and Elm, I found that both were exposed to Oneida hymn singing when they were very young via grandparents or family friends. But Elm relates that even if she is unaware of what she is singing all the time, sometimes one can guess based on the tune, as is the case when singing "Amazing Grace."

The Oneida language of Christian hymns may not be of a conversational nature and may only be used by a small portion of the tribe; nevertheless, its presence in the community is maintained in each of the Hymn Singers' performances. Further, as this paper has attempted to demonstrate, the tradition is "strictly Oneida," to use the words of one singer interviewed by O'Grady (73). While other tribes, such as the Seneca and Choctaw, practice hymn singing, they too have interpreted and adapted the form in their own unique way, with their respective languages playing a large part in that process. As the Oneida language falls into disuse and members move off-reservation, the Singers are striving to ensure that the tradition lives on for the cultural preservation it makes possible.



One effort to pass on Oneida hymns to the next generation is found in the Oneida Youth Singers program. An initiative of the larger Oneida Nation Arts Program (ONAP)—a service of the Governmental Services Division of the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin—Oneida youth are taught Oneida hymns alongside Iroquois Social Songs (“Children’s Music Program”). According to ONAP’s website, the Oneida Youth Singers do perform for small groups like their elder counterparts (“Children’s Music Program”). Carol Cornelius related to me that there are about 10-12 participants whose ages range from 4 to their early teens. She remarked that she’s seen their presentations and thinks they’re “just beautiful.”

Only time will tell if these young singers develop into Oneida Hymn Singers, themselves. Currently, the Oneida Hymn Singers are experiencing dwindling numbers, a worry expressed by both McLester and Elm. Elm estimates that there are about 25 to 30 participants today, but that most are elders, with few young to middle-aged adults expressing interest in joining. Admittedly, joining does require dedication. According to Elm, there are no instructions provided or directions given: one must simply show up to a scheduled practice and pay attention. This aligns with O’Grady’s finding that hymns are passed on “by rote repetition with the assistance of the hymnal in rehearsals only...exactly as they have been learned” (81). McLester worries that this method is deterring possible new singers, that not enough is being done to gain more. When I ask him about what other techniques could be employed, he replies, “Anyway we can keep the singing alive, I’m all for” (McLester).

In a way, perhaps, this paper is an argument for why Oneida hymn singing *should* be kept alive. I think Carol Cornelius says it best when she states that hymn singing is an example of the tribe’s talent for “Oneidacizing” [sic] (Hoef 151). She explains, “When we see something, we Oneidacize it. You give us tennis shoes, we’re going to put beads on it. Give us t-shirts or hoodies, we put our designs on it. Well, that’s what our people did with the church, because the hymns are in Oneida” (Hoef 151). Before I even told Carol the approach I was taking to Oneida hymn singing, she simply said to me, “Look at it as an act of resistance.” Because of its “everyday” nature, perhaps it has been overlooked as such, even by our own community. If we reframe hymn singing as a form of what Jace Weaver refers to as *communitism*—a neologism joining “community” and “activism”—perhaps it will be clearer why preserving the tradition is so imperative (43).

Of course, further research would likely provide stronger evidence of hymn singing as a *communitist* strategy. Unfortunately, outside the scope or ability of this project (and researcher), an analysis into the quality of the Oneida translation of English hymns could be illuminating. In his essay, O’Grady compares the English version of “Bringing in the Sheaves” to the English translation of the Oneida version (76). A simple reproduction, here, of the first verse in each version is enough to illustrate O’Grady’s conclusion that the Oneida hymn places “an even greater stress on community:”

English version: Sowing in the morning, sowing seeds of kindness...

Oneida version translated to English: We will plant for each other love... (77).

According to Carol Cornelius, work began a few years ago to translate the hymns, but is incomplete—understandable as the hymnal now contains well over 100 hymns. She did

relate that translators have found O’Grady’s above conclusion to be largely accurate, indicating that the Oneida found yet another way to claim Christian hymns as their own.



In 2008, the Oneida Hymn Singers of Wisconsin were named a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) (“NEA”). According to the NEA’s website, the Fellowship “[recognizes]...recipients’ artistic excellence and [supports] their continuing contributions to our nation’s traditional arts heritage” (“NEA”). The Singers were flown to Washington, D.C. and performed at the Strathmore in Bethesda, Maryland along with that year’s other winners. My mother, sister, and I attended the performance and watched proudly from the audience. As the Hymn Singers went through their program, my mother did her best to sing along, using Lucy’s hymnal as her guide. When Lucy was around 80 or 85 years old, my mother says that Lucy sat down with her and “went phonetically through the hymnal” (Carmi). My mother took notes and is capable today of singing a few of the hymns.

When Lucy and members of her generation refused to teach their children and grandchildren to *speak* Oneida, they did teach them to *sing* it. We should not overlook this fact, but should instead question why? I believe the answer lies in hymn singing’s role as a form of “everyday resistance.” A covert, indirect challenge to the project of assimilation, singing Oneida was safe where speaking it was dangerous. To preserve hymn singing today is not just to carry on a long-standing Oneida tradition: it is to acknowledge that resistance is part of our Oneida heritage.

## #104 SEEDS OF PROMISE

Clipped to the flyleaf at the back of Lucy's hymnal is a small stack of papers: a printout of the lyrics to "Amazing Grace," a clipping from the local newspaper, two hymns written in Lucy's hand, "Coming Around the Mountain" and an untitled "No. 6," and a small sheet of green paper folded into fours. Unfolded, we find that the paper is a flyer, the title "Gela's Lucky Number Forecast for..." printed across the top with Lucy's name filled in underneath. When Lucy received the form, her lucky number for the next thirty days was 7; her two-digit lucky number was 73; and her three-digit lucky number, 347. There is a four-digit lucky number (7432) and a series of numbers Lucy was to use when playing Keno or the state lottery. Maybe after 30 days, Lucy forgot to dispose of these numbers, or maybe she still liked them even after their expiration. Or perhaps, Lucy kept this paper for a small note written in blue pen on the back: "Today I am the sum total of the things that I want to be!"

The note is not written by Lucy, or at least does not seem to be. Lucy had excellent penmanship and the words written here are in a scrawled cursive. Because the subject of the sentence is "I" and not "you," it wouldn't seem to be a note of encouragement from a friend to Lucy and so I assume it was a motivational saying a peer had maybe read or heard somewhere and copied down for her. Like so much of Lucy's

story, we cannot be certain. But it does seem clear that she valued this paper, keeping it tucked for so long at the back of her hymnal.

For me, the note's presence there is meaningful: it is a statement of agency within the context of Christian faith, or in other words, a tangible representation of this paper's argument! But I also think it provides a valuable lesson in how to approach Native identity, both past and present. If we lead our research and opinions with the notion that Native people are the sum total of the things they want to be, we are ensuring the eradication of essentialism and, by extension, upsetting the colonial narrative. Further, we are replacing that "endless deficit-theory criticism that too often, even if unintentionally, sees [Native people] as the tragic victims of history" ("Theorizing" 383).

Of course, this is a delicate project. At the end of her analysis, Diamond-Cavanagh questions the implications of her research into Eastern Woodland communities and their use of Christian hymns. She asks, "By choosing to present the performance contexts in which Christian hymns are expressive of traditional values, am I inadvertently offering a political message that rationalizes assimilation?" (392). I could ask myself the same question. In *Land Too Good for Indians*, a history of northern Indian removal, John P. Bowes acknowledges the power of settler colonialism, yet reasons, "It is just as crucial to recognize that settler colonialism as evident in American history was not and is not an all-powerful force that leaves no room for resistance or response" (12). From discussions of removal to boarding schools to wage labor, this logic has been applied. Can we not do the same with Christianity?

Perhaps the hesitation to do so stems from the meaning and function of religion, itself. In *Native American Religious Action*, Sam Gill writes that religion is largely associated with the ineffable, the inexplicable, and the intangible and, thus, discourages religious scholars from considering its more concrete manifestations. Gill claims that it is possible to define religion and “not limit any essence or experience” included in its category and he does so in the following way:

Religion is the human assertion of power to shape and to create culture and history so that human life may acquire meaning, even beyond the limits of human existence. Yet while religion involves acts of creating the world and the meaning of life, it also involves acts and processes by which the shape of reality is discerned. Religion then is a distinct mode of creating, discovering, and communicating worlds of meaning (152-153).

If we accept this definition, our attention is shifted away from that unmappable realm of belief, to the more discernable arena of action. In other words, we are moving from an understanding of “being” and asking instead, “What are Native Christians *doing*?” Are they *creating*? *Communicating*? Are they *shaping* culture and *making* meaning?

This sounds familiar! It is the approach Scott Richard Lyons encourages in *X-Marks* and the approach I have attempted to employ here. In *Ojibwe Singers*, McNally eloquently explains how this method benefits our understanding of Native Christianity: “Putting religious practices, rather than religious beliefs, in the foreground can help make more sophisticated sense of the claim that native [sic] traditions, Christianity among them, are not religions, but ways of life” (13). Unaware of Gill’s definition, McNally

does not recognize that religion *can*, in fact, be interpreted as a “way of life.” Regardless, it is his overarching point that is important: focusing on what Native Christians *do* is more generative than attempting to decipher what they *believe* and reveals far more about what it means to be Native and Christian.

For those I have described here, being an Oneida Christian means supporting the community; it means raising needed funds, hosting community dinners, and consoling others in times of illness or grief. It means providing a sense of stability—emotional, cultural, and spiritual—in times of overwhelming change. But “stability” does not mean “stagnancy” or “stasis.” The first Oneida Christians believed that stability would be the result of adaptation. They valued Reverend Samuel Kirkland’s mission because it offered solutions to their troubles—solutions that the Oneida took seriously. Lyons conceives of the “x-marks” Native peoples used to sign treaties as symbols of “promise” (9). For the Oneida, I argue that the adoption and adaptation of Christianity was a promise: a promise to ensure a place for themselves and their people in a changing world, a promise to maintain the community’s well-being, a promise to remember themselves, always, as Oneida.

In “A Single Decade,” Womack expresses his wish to see two things: “discussions of strategies in which indigenous Christianity manages forms of resistance in colonial societies (rather than always being viewed as capitulation)” and thoughtful “[considerations] of what makes Christianity appealing to Indians, assuming Native people have agency” (91). I have attempted to do both here and, admittedly, it has been a daunting task. In essence, I am directly challenging the venerable Vine Deloria, Jr.

(Sioux) who in *God is Red* makes the case that Native religions (read: “ways of life,” per Gill) and Christianity are “polar opposites” (155). Deloria is adamant that the two are antithetical “in every respect and come to different conclusions about the meaning of life and the eventual disposition of the soul or personality” (155). Further, he argues that Christianity emphasizes the individual, while Native religions emphasize the tribe and, therefore, the community. Not necessarily in content, but certainly in tone, Deloria’s work corresponds to that widely accepted “missionization narrative” in which Natives are forever the victims of Christianity. Overcoming the legacy of these sorts of analyses is both difficult and nerve-racking.

Say Deloria is correct, though: maybe the Christianity taught by missionaries intended to produce in Native communities thoughts and beliefs that were the “polar opposite” of what they knew. But, this is certainly not the Christianity Natives, specifically the Oneidas, adopted and now continue to practice. If Christian dogma demanded the abandonment of their tribe, the Oneida resisted and came up with something new. Oneida Christianity evolved as a negotiation—the adoption of some tenets, the rejection of others, the incorporation of their own alongside that of strangers; in other words, it is what Carol E. Robertson calls a “marvelous [combination] of genius” (24).

Native resistance appears in all shapes and sizes: sometimes it is as loud and direct as a Water Protector praying in front of a bulldozer; sometimes it is as quiet and imperceptible as a woman joining a choir. One method is no less powerful than the other and, for both, the message is the same: Today, *I* decide the things that I want to be.



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Marissa Carmi received her undergraduate degree in English Literature and Literary and Cultural Studies from the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia in 2012. Through her coursework, she focused on Native American literature, art, and contemporary life. She is an enrolled member of the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin.