



## **This Colonization is (Not) a Death: Grief, Love, and Regenerative Relationality of Indigenous Seed Keeping through Climate Change**

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### **Abstract**

For Indigenous communities where agriculture is historically or contemporarily a component of their food systems, Indigenous seed keepers provide for the continuation of food production, food cultures and teachings, and the health and sustainability of the ecosystems that receive, germinate, and influence the seeds. To be an Indigenous seed keeper is to be a steward and a carrier of many things. We lovingly dedicate ourselves to our seed relatives' survival by carrying our peoples' ancestral inheritances of seed varieties, seed stories, and seed songs through colonialism. Through love for better futures that are necessarily both familiar and different to us, we steward the seed varieties we belong to towards climate change adaptation, partnering with the seeds as co-authors of current and future seasons' harvests. We are carriers of long and often interrupted seed histories and legacies that have shaped the states of survival and traits that our seed varieties and seed teachings are in today. Indigenous seed keepers intimately know and are exceptionally impacted by all that colonialism and climate change has altered and continues to take from our agricultural food systems. This commentary offers insight on how Indigenous seed keepers, facilitated by our love for the seeds that sustain us, are healers of collective food grief, ensuring the perpetuation Indigenous seed relationships through relational climate adaptation.

### **Birth and Death in Indigenous Seed Keeping**

Just as Indigenous peoples list our family names and map our geographies of belonging to locate ourselves to others, Indigenous seed keepers name and map this belonging for the seeds, invoking community citations of care by identifying the lineages of seed keepers, nations, and places who stewarded the varieties before us. In carrying and stewarding (with) our seeds, we shape our food sovereignty futures. Seeds are synonymous with birth and life in many of our nations' teachings. The role of Indigenous seed keeper is sometimes referred to as being a midwife to the seeds (White, 2018). Seeds are much like infants: within each seed coat exterior is a little being spending brief-yet-immemorial time with us earthside and holding a close proximity to ancestral wisdom, offering complex knowledge and yet being reliant on us as life-nurturing partners to tend to their early germination and development.

The enduring relationship between Indigenous seed keepers and seeds is one of shared reliance and nourishment. Each seasonal crop cycle involves birth and death, sometimes many times over, but always with mutual trust and treaty between seed relatives and seed keepers that our loving care throughout the seeds' life cycles, and their reciprocated yields in return, will ensure the potential for future plantings and both partners' continued life. Indigenous seed keepers are stewards and carriers of this life but also of its death by holding and record-keeping loss, allowing this loss to change us in responsive ways, and alchemizing our grief into love-led action in land-led<sup>1</sup> governance. As seed keepers, we hold grief for all that our communities should have access to. In everything we do, we are reminded of ongoing violence against all of our food relations, as well as the ways we are intentionally kept powerless. In this work, it often feels like closure is impossible; there is never a lessening of the pain over time, because the violence never ends. Making peace with this loss can feel like a concession. As Indigenous seed keepers and food growers defending our food systems through colonialism and climate change, the harm that has been done to our territories and our food relatives requires us to respond to collective food grief without accepting the violence and losses that cause it. Both humans and seeds are record-keepers of the traumas to the territories and the bodies that mark our shared histories, serving as intergenerational witnesses to the colonization of our food systems while maintaining the food cultures that make meaning of our relationships. As seed keepers, our movement through this significant and cumulative loss is mobilized by our love for the seeds, and we know that they too love our relationship, as expressed by their generosity towards us.

### **Climate Violence and Colonization: Interruptions and Losses to Seed Keeping Cycles**

In our sacred work together, we and the seeds are libraries of shifting seasons and ecosystems and of the loss that accompanies these cycles. Climate change has and is profoundly impacting the seasonal signs many Indigenous seed keepers look to in the ancestrally-guided and land-led rhythms of this work. Temperature changes and seasonal shifts are resulting in losses to the ecosystem markers that make our inherited planting teachings relevant and applicable. These include the life and death cycles of the native species that indicate when it is time to tend to the spring soil, plant, and winterize for our gardens' deep rest. Growing seasons have increased by as much as two weeks in the last hundred years, with western parts of North America experiencing these changes more markedly (Bragg, 2017). While invasive species have significantly adjusted

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<sup>1</sup> *Land-led* is presented here and used instead of the predominant term *land-based* to suggest a move in literature beyond land as a venue or context to instead position land as the active and leading partner in Indigenous ways of being, in alignment with many Indigenous worldviews.

their growing cycles to these changes, namely to warming climates, Indigenous species are maintaining the growing cycles of a previous, less colonized ecosystem (Welshofer et al., 2018). With increasing temperatures, some species, particularly those that flower before the summer solstice, are flowering as much as a week earlier in some regions than they did a century ago (Bertin, 2017). Other research suggests that invasive species are blooming about a month earlier than they did a century ago, while some Indigenous species are only blooming about a day earlier than they did a century ago (Nijhuis, 2013). With invasive species blooming earlier, these plants gain first access to nutrients, water, pollinators, and space, and consequently, they risk displacing Indigenous species and posing challenges to pollinator communities (Nijhuis, 2013; Bertin, 2017). Many of our more-than-human guides are still deeply in tune with the drumbeat of an earlier time, before rapid anthropogenic climate violence, before their world became a hazmat settler-colonial playground, before capitalist land production industrialization and its deployment of chemical weapons of fertilizers and pesticides, and before their offerings became only revenues, rather than a sweetly laborious treaty offering.

As a mixed ancestry Sauteaux-Métis and white settler seed keeper working to be in conversation with the land where I grow, my own land-led seed keeping rhythms are guided by the soil and sky relatives I'm accountable to. I know to look to nimble red-winged blackbirds and pushy grackles to plan the seed garden; persistent fleabane to prepare the soil; budding spruce tips to prepare for planting; showy asters to prepare for harvest; and seasonal constellations in the night sky to mark summer's strenuous labours and winter's deep rest for humans and seeds alike. Each relative in this ecosystem works together to create an interdependent calendar that guides my seasonal seed responsibilities in defiance of colonial concepts of time. In my own seed keeping practice, this year's seed keeping cycle, like so many others, was out of step with my ancestors' climate cadences. Our seed keeping ancestors always practiced seed adaptation, but conditions in my generation have varied and shifted at a faster pace than seed keepers and our seeds relatives can fully adapt to. Unseasonably warm spikes in temperature coupled with prolonged wet weather extremes interrupt my deferential conversations with the land. These interruptions force me to have to look to unpredictable weather patterns to guide my partnership with the seeds in isolation from our interspecies network as we work to catch up and adapt to the rapid, industrial shifts of the anthropocene. In this way, climate change is an extension of colonialism, pressuring Indigenous seed keepers towards human-centric and human-dominated seed keeping over a cultural way of being that works in humble veneration of greater, other specied wisdoms and leaders. Our pull to an ancestral pulse is often seen as a maladaptive dance, out-of-step in a colonial trajectory of civilization, industrialization, and biological determinism, but in truth, it keeps alive

our politics of consent and regenerative relationality with those that help feed us. When climate change is too rapid to allow all our relations to adapt together or in conversation, entire seed keeping and food culture knowledge bundles - including seasonal stories, food teachings, and ceremonies - hang in the balance, and the losses can feel too devastating for us to garden our grief through in remediating.

Indigenous seed keepers, acutely aware of the increasing pressures and impacts of climate change on our roles and responsibilities with the seeds, are working tirelessly to adapt both our practices and seed varieties themselves to ensure our seed partnerships and our food sovereignty pasts and futures survive. Seeds model resilience that mirrors and surpasses that of our own. Rooted in the relational ecosystem tempos we belong to, changeable but belonging to place, we and our seed relations are tenaciously committed to the reciprocal nourishment of our companionship through all challenges. Indigenous seed keepers share a love for being witnesses of these changing paces as an act of seed-love itself. In upholding our seed governance responsibilities as representatives of our species, Indigenous seed keepers talk about the climate changes we observe and compare notes with one another across territories, searching for themes in trying to anticipate how to support our harvests' best odds. We select for traits that might best prepare our seed varieties for the climate changes we are observing, such as tighter husks, drought-tolerant fruiting, more moisture-resistant pods, and disease-resistant vines. We lovingly and meticulously sort through our harvests, setting aside the strongest, most climate-adapted seeds for future plantings. While other traits that many of our ancestors would have had time to shape and select for - such as taste and texture - have to take lesser priority as we prioritize climate responsiveness and variety revitalization, Indigenous seed keepers are ensuring the continuation of our seed relationships by adapting in tandem with the seeds through collective loss.

Between the rapid pace of climate change and colonialism's impact on our remaining seed varieties, innovation and creativity in the creation of new varieties, or in the re-creation of old ones, can feel like a luxury while we race to secure the surviving seeds that are urgently in need of our focused and attentive teamwork. Climate pressures are compounded by the devastatingly destructive histories and continuations of settler seed theft and knowledge appropriation. Through historical and ongoing colonialism, we have been separated from or have lost entirely the seed varieties that our ancestors cultivated for us. What does it mean to revitalize and adapt our food systems in a time of aggressive colonial occupation and climate chaos? It means finding traplines through the monocrops, medicines in the beadwork, and seeds in the cellars, catalogues, and archives. So many of our seeds are held hostage by settler businesses and museum archives, in branded packaging and in test tubes, extracted from trusting hands and burial sites. The seeds we

still carry, or that are retheytriated/rematriated/repatriated to us, do not always arrive to us by our own peoples' hands or with traits our ancestors intended or that we would have coaxed and cultivated ourselves. One of our responsibilities as seed keepers is to keep alive the memories of previous generations' seed variety creations that have been impacted by colonialism and climate change, and to carry shared grief for the knowledge of varieties that have been lost. It is also our role to cultivate this grief into generative future-building, leaning on our love for our seed ancestors' blueprints to promote the survival of our remaining seeds and teachings, and to adapt with the seeds towards vibrant possibilities.

### **Relational Adaptation as Indigenous Seed Keeper Governance**

Colonization and the climate traumas inflicted on Indigenous food systems has buried many things, but this colonization is (not) a death. It is a grief we can never bury, but that we can sow, tend to, harvest, and return to the earth. The land can hold this grief for us. We try to be reciprocal relations by repurposing its grief in return like the greens of cover crops, forking and turning over and under its harvest back into the soil to heal the land. Our grief is both observed and remediated daily through our year-round cycle of seed keeper responsibilities. Our rites for this loss are embedded in the year-round love ceremony that is planning, praying, planting, signing, nurturing, harvesting, threshing, storing, trading, feasting, and on it goes, cyclically, in the seasons of our lifetimes, through colonization and climate change.

Our seed relations share a truth with us: seed keeping is not a death to sovereignty through domestication or human dominance, it is a collaborative conversation and co-cultivation through life, loss, and possibility. As Indigenous seed keepers, we come to our seed relatives as land-led treaty partners, as care-givers and care-receivers, as students of knowledge far more ancient than our own, as relatives that still believe in land-led love, and as representatives of our recovering nations and our destructive species as a whole. Like us, our seed relatives in the seasonal cycles of their lives are both Knowledge Holders and students, infants and Elders. When we assert our seed keeper governance against all odds, we rekindle sleeping seed contracts of reciprocal respect that we are signatories to, by the love and leadership of seed keepers before us, even and especially through grief. We gather with each other and with the seeds and deliberate: What needs to be pruned and selected for? Who is growing into space at the expense of others' growth, and who needs more space to flourish? Who needs help and support in the harvest of their offerings? What are the amendments needed to our collective soils? What are these changing conditions asking of us, and how do we prepare each other through this? Through this dialogue with the seeds, we remember that, despite colonial violence to our food system and territories, our mutual touch can

nurture life. All sovereign nations, human and more-than-human, converge at our inherent and inherited sustenance agreements. All we have lost earthside under colonialism, from human to seed, meet at the soil. Through seed variety revitalization and adaptation, we birth familiar and new food realities that are shaped by but are more than our shared grief. This relational adaptation to grief by means of love is Indigenous seed keeper governance.

Partnering with seeds in confronting these violences means being apprentices to our seed relatives themselves, as well as to the other relations that are part of their inner kinship circles of death and rebirth: the winged beings who are the seed spreaders, the crawlers who nurture the soil and balance life cycles, and the wind who carries pollen in waves of crescendo like a conductor over a corn orchestra. In my experience “apprenticing myself to the seeds” (White, 2020), I have been humbled in my learning that seeds too are stewards, carriers, and archives of life and loss around us. Through our seed keeper responsibilities to adapt our varieties through changing climates, we remember our humanity and the humility in our dependency on the land, and we remember our tenderness in a world that dissects us from the love that feeds us. In the words of Cree and Métis scholar Tabitha Martens, “this work means putting your heart on the line every day” (2018). Our seeds, as our time-tested partners through heartache, make our food systems possible as we remediate each other through the shared climate grief that runs through our intimate interspecies sovereignties. As our seed relatives teach us, our climate adaptation wisdom is a practice of blood memory that has seen us fed to today. Adaptation is a love song to the seeds and to each other, not a concession to colonial climate violence.

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