



Cornell University

American Indian and  
Indigenous Studies Program  
450 Caldwell Hall  
Ithaca, New York 14853  
p. 607-255-6587  
f. 607-255-6246  
[www.aiisp.cornell.edu](http://www.aiisp.cornell.edu)

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Dear President Rawlings, Dean Kleinman, and Professor Mergold

We the undersigned faculty members of the American Indian and Indigenous Studies Program (AIISP, formerly the American Indian Program [AIP]), renew our call for Cornell University to officially recognize its location on the traditional homelands of the Haudenosaunee, more specifically the Cayugas, one of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. For the last several years we have asked for this recognition at major university events, particularly fall Convocation and spring Graduation. However, our request for recognition has been consistently ignored. Now, the recent art installation by Professor Mergold has clearly demonstrated the negative consequences of this lack of acknowledgment of our institution's presence on Indigenous traditional territory.

Official recognition of our being on Cayuga territory would be more than an act of respect for Cornell's neighbors, that is, the people of the Confederacy; it would be an act of education and integrity. Cornell students, staff, and faculty should at the very least know their relationship to the historical and contemporary Indigenous peoples who belong to the land upon which Cornelians work and education is conducted.

As history tells us, this ground was taken by force and fraud: genocidal warfare and illegal treaties. Exemplifying this warfare was the Sullivan-Clinton campaign of the American revolutionary army, which took place in the summer of 1779, destroying both human life and the economic infrastructure of 40 Iroquois villages.

There now appears on the south end of Libe Slope an installation, *American Spolia*, representing this force and fraud. The work references the Sullivan-Clinton campaign on one side of its structure, and a 1792 Simeon DeWitt map laying out two million acres of land in twenty-eight townships on the other side. The installation leaves silent the necessary connection between the theft of Haudenosaunee land and the map.

This installation was erected by Professor Aleksander Mergold of Cornell's Department of Architecture and its description can be read at the website *Aleksandr Mergold: America Spolia: Crossing the Line* (<http://aap.cornell.edu/news-events/aleksandr-mergold-america-spolia-crossing-line>). The text at the web site certainly acknowledges that the map "played a part in destroying the livelihood of the native population — the Six Nations of Iroquois" and the role that Sullivan played in preparing for the map, as well as his role in decimating the population: "General Sullivan was sent to both survey the area and destroy the native population. The quotes on the *American Spolia* structure refer to that event." But, in explaining the Latin term *spolia*, the text concludes by noting: "The ancient Romans, whose names these lands still bear today, celebrated their conquests by erecting temporary triumphal arches composed of the spoils, or *spolia*, of their victories. This structure, therefore, is part triumphal arch, built from 200 years' worth of settlement debris found in the area, and part memorial."

We find this part of the explanation of the installation not only offensive but historically inaccurate. First, the Haudenosaunee were never "conquered" by the United States. They have

remained an independent people, and however hemmed in they are by U.S. federal Indian law, the Confederacy continues to resist the validity of such limitations. Second, it is unclear as to what, exactly, the installation memorializes. If it is a “memorial” to the “triumph” of the U.S. in its genocidal war with the Haudenosaunee, then, as noted, from the Native perspective, there has been no triumph. If, on the other hand, the installation is conceived as a memorial to the people of the forty Haudenosaunee villages destroyed by Sullivan, it is up to the Haudenosaunee people to construct such memorials if they wish. For others to do so not only disrespects Native autonomy, but could also be interpreted as a celebration of genocide.

We note that Professor Mergold and his sponsors have postponed the official opening of the installation. However, the installation itself has been erected in the public space of Cornell University without proper consultation with the AIISP faculty, staff, and students, or the Cayuga Nation. We understand that Professor Mergold did make contact with some faculty members about the project, and that in these contacts there was some discussion about involving the Cayuga Nation in the installation. We also understand that he made no attempt to seriously follow through with these contacts, or with the students from the Native American Students at Cornell (NASAC), who raised substantial criticisms of the installation. In light of this lack of consultation, which has resulted in the work looking less like a work of art, and more like a bias incident, the AIISP requests that Dr. Mergold remove the installation.

Furthermore, we request a formal statement from Cornell's administration clarifying its relationship to the artwork. As it sits, the effect of *American Spolia* in public space suggests that the university endorses the installation and its message of “conquest” and “memorialization.” This implicit endorsement of the installation (whatever the intent) reflects poorly on Cornell, its educational mission, and is an affront to the AIISP, Indigenous peoples in general, and Cornell's Haudenosaunee neighbors in particular. Moreover, it appears to be consistent with the history of Cornell's refusal to officially recognize the relationship between itself and the Cayuga Nation, whose traditional homelands support and nurture us all.

Finally, as a small step toward remedying this affront, we request that beginning with Graduation and Convocation in 2017, the administration acknowledge that Cornell is situated on the traditional homelands of the Cayuga Nation.

Sincerely,

Jane Mt.Pleasant, Interim Director American Indian and Indigenous Studies (Horticulture)

Jolene Rickard, Director AIISP (on leave), (History of Art, Art, AIISP)

Eric Cheyfitz, (English)

Fred Gleach (Anthropology)

Denise Green (Fiber Science and Apparel Design)

Billie Jean Isbell (Anthropology)

Kurt Jordan, (Anthropology, AIISP)

Karim-Aly Kassam (Natural Resources, AIISP)

Sarah Murray (Linguistics)

Jon Parmenter (History)

Troy Richardson (AIISP)

Gerald Torres, (Law)

Chad Uran (AIISP)

Carol Warrior (English)