

## Article

# Past as Prophecy: Indigenous Diplomacies beyond Liberal Settler Regimes of Recognition, as Told in Shell

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**Abstract:** According to a prophecy told in a small, Muskogee-identified community in the US South, the seeds of Indigenous ways of knowing and relating to more-than-human kin will once again flourish in the ruins of colonial orders. Even settlers will be forced to turn to Indigenous knowledges because “they have destroyed everything else”. Following this visionary history-future, this article asks how Indigenous diplomacies and temporalities animate resurgent possibilities for making life within the fractures (and apocalyptic ruins) of settler states. This demands a rethinking of the global and the international from the perspective of deep Indigenous histories. I draw on research visiting ancestral landscapes with community members, discussing a trip to an ancient shell mound and a contemporary cemetery in which shells are laid atop grave plots. These stories evoke a long-term history of shifting and multivalent shell use across religious and temporal differences. They speak to practices of acknowledgement that exceed liberal settler regimes of state recognition and extend from much older diplomatic practices.

**Keywords:** archaeological ethnography; Southeastern United States; community-based research; Native American peoples; indigenous transnationalisms; trans-Indigenous; Indigenous diplomacies; mounds; resurgence

## 1. Prophecy

In a small Native American community in the US South, whose members are descended from Muskogee (Creek) families who avoided Removal (the Trail of Tears), there is a prophecy about the resurgence of Indigenous ways of life within the ruins of colonial orders. But to understand this prophecy, one first needs context from this community’s oral traditions. Long ago, four beings canoed across the Great River (the Milky Way) (Figure 1). These entities, the Hayvhlket—the Beings of Light or Original Teachers—traveled to a certain place, Etowah, in what is now the state of Georgia (Bloch 2018a, pp. 149–56) (Figure 2). Today, Etowah remains an important place to many Native American peoples in the Southeast, including Muskogee and Cherokee communities.

According to the story, the people (or peoples) living in the area were constantly bickering, fighting, and warring with one another. They did not know Creator’s teachings or how to live together peacefully. When the four beings arrived, they gave the people the teachings of the four directions, songs, stories, and dances. However, the people proved too hurt and troubled by their simmering conflicts to retain these important teachings. Three times, the people forgot the teachings and slid back into war and strife. On the beings’ fourth attempt, the sweetgum tree helped by taking up the people’s burdens, their hurt and their sorrow, so that they might have room inside themselves for the Hayvhlket’s gifts. This time, the teachings stuck. The people were able to live peacefully together.



**Figure 1.** A shell engraved by a community member, Simon. The design is based on a shell cup excavated from Spiro Mounds, a site in Oklahoma dated to c. 940–1540 CE, which depicts four persons (omitted in Simon’s rendition) in canoes. Simon and others in his community interpret this design as representing a constellation of the four Original Teachers that circles the North Star. The rectangular motifs atop the upper canoe are interpreted as seed boxes, while the four-pointed motifs on the other canoe are interpreted as stylized turtles. The circles are described as top-down views of the cosmos. Photograph courtesy of Simon.



**Figure 2.** Etowah Mounds, Bartow County, Georgia (c. 1000–1550 CE). Photograph by author.



Before they left, the Beings of Light placed ten seeds inside each living being. These seeds grew into the senses: Awareness, hearing, *hosokle* (horniness or sexual intimacy), movement, pain, sight, smell, taste, tiredness, and touch. Some beings nourished these seeds to maturity within themselves. But in others, some seeds were neglected and even died. Life was not perfect or easy in the years that followed, but the Hayvhlket's teachings provided a path to peace.

One day, I received an email from a *heles-hayv* (Maker of Medicine, a spiritual specialist). This man, Hakope, described a memory from his youth in which a group of elders discussed a prophecy:<sup>1</sup>

It is said that when the Europeans came, they caused us to change, damage or lose our important abilities. We could no longer see the now-unseen, hear the silent voices, understand when trees speak, interpret the wind or chat with the animals or understand the lessons offered by birds, snakes, fishes and all the insects. The culture that was our home, our house, was pulled down and scattered. We thought we would soon be no more but the oldest among us remembered beyond our time. They remembered the seeds [given by the Hayvhlket] and taught us how to nourish them, tend the growth because they were buried deep within our souls, our spirits, our hearts—things they could not destroy because they were not physical. As the seeds grow, flower or fruit, their knowledge and wisdom will once again be ours. We were the first citizens of this land, the first citizens of liberty. Now we will become its teachers and the colonist will listen. They will have no choice as they have destroyed everything else.

The prophecy theorizes settler colonialism as a logic of severing peoples from the land and their more-than-human teachers and relations: A bodily regime that enacts apocalyptic ruin and devastates worlds by interrupting the sensory means of Indigenous ways of knowing and being in relationship (see (Davis and Todd 2017; Watts 2013; Whyte 2017) for similar analyses of settler colonialism). These regimes of separation threaten what Hakope calls “the culture”. Beyond mainstream anthropological definitions, Hakope's usage of this word is close to what Zoe Todd (2018) calls Indigenous law: Teachings offered by more-than-human kin that are not legislated but embodied through the practice of living well together. The Beings of Light's seeds constitute the visceral perspectives through which people relate to others, human and otherwise. This is to say that the Indigenous knowledges and diplomacies articulated in these oral traditions are inseparable from the embodied, sensory activity of living together in more-than-human worlds. Even in the apocalyptic violence of colonial logics of separation, some continued to cultivate these seeds, remembering “beyond our time” to worlds beyond settler power structured by Indigenous modes of citizenship. Situated within timespans that dramatically exceed the colonial moment, these seeds and memories nourish resurgent possibilities for Indigenous worlds within the ruins of colonial orders (Alfred 1999, 2005; Simpson 2011).

The prophecy says that settlers will turn to Indigenous knowledges because there will be nothing left: “They will have ... destroyed everything else”.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the world we inhabit today would seem to be one on the precipice of apocalypse, characterized by resurgent fascism and disastrous climate change. Yet critics note that such world-ending political ecologies are nothing new to Indigenous peoples: Constituting apocalypse as a historical rather than future event that has unfolded across the Americas over the last four hundred years (Whyte 2017; Davis and Todd 2017; Roanhorse 2018; Wildcat 2009). If there is anything special about the current moment, it is that those who thought themselves secure are finding their own existence increasingly precarious (Tsing 2015, p. 2).

<sup>1</sup> Hakope expressed regret that his account was only a “poor paraphrase”.

<sup>2</sup> For a similar take on Anishinaabe prophecy, see (Kimmerer 2018, pp. 42–43).

## 2. Introduction

The prophecy speaks of resurgent ways of life that are embodied through the teachings of Indigenous diplomacies and peacemaking practices, the gifts of the four Beings of Light. Following this visionary history-future, this article attends to Indigenous diplomacies and temporalities that on the one hand emerge within the fractures of settler colonial orders, but on the other also extend from much longer historical processes that cannot be reduced to those regimes. I draw on research with members of Hakope's community, which I call the "Talwa" people. The pseudonym is derived from a Mvskoke-language word for a kind of spiritual and political community (*etvlwv*).<sup>3</sup> As descendants of families that avoided Removal, Talwa people are not part of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation in Oklahoma. They do not speak for all Muskogee peoples. Yet their particular historical conditions provide a powerful vantage for thinking about practices of acknowledgement beyond liberal settler orders of recognition (Koons 2019).

I have worked with Talwa people since 2010, studying their ongoing relationships with ancestral landscapes in the Southeastern United States. Drawing on interventions in community-based and Indigenous archaeologies (Atalay 2006, 2012; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008; Silliman 2008; Smith and Wobst 2005; Watkins 2000), this project seeks to recenter the study of ancestral places in the Southeastern United States in Talwa ways of knowing and caring for land (Bloch 2018a). I adopted an ethnographic approach (Castañeda and Matthews 2008; Dowdall and Parrish 2003; Hamilakis 2011; Hamilakis and Anagnostopoulos 2009) in which I visited about three-dozen ancestral sites across the US South and Midwest with community members, listening to their oral traditions and personal stories about these places (see Basso 1996; Ferguson and Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2006; Laluk 2017; Mojica 2012; Howe 2014; Allen 2015a, 2015b; Knowles 2014). The sites we visited represent a wide range of time periods and cultural groups who lived across Southeastern North America over the last six thousand years. I argue that as Talwa people return to ancestral places (Clifford 2013; Howe 2014), these landscapes refuse to be fixed within a terminal, prehistorical past removed from a settled modernity, insisting instead that the deep histories of the Native South remain unfinished (Bloch 2018a).

According to Talwa prophecy, the Indigenous diplomacies carried by the Beings of Light are embodied through relationships with the land and more-than-human relations and take shape through the caring labor of taking up another's burdens in order to bring peace, as the sweetgum tree did. These practices exceed the boundaries of imperialist nation-states, cultivating the seeds of other worlds that can emerge from the ruins of colonial orders (see also Alfred 1999; Todd 2018; Watts 2013; Whyte 2017). Resurgent diplomacies emerge as descendants return to ancestral places and sites of memory and are drawn into an Indigenous *longue durée*. As the Talwa community is not recognized by the United States government, these diplomacies necessarily operate outside of the logics of liberal settler colonial politics of recognition (Coulthard 2014). However, my aim is not to point to static cultural forms but rather the possibilities afforded by historical processes that dramatically exceed colonial timescales and temporalities. This demands rethinking the hubris of settler colonialism: The assumption that colonial power exercises a monopoly on world history and constitutes the apex of human progress. The Talwa prophecy speaks of futures unthinkable within colonial models of progress, as a mode of existence afforded by the deep histories of Indigenous knowledges and diplomacies.

As Zoe Todd (2015) might say, these are stories told in the bodies of shellfish, or what Talwa people might call "shellfish's teachings". Talwa elders tell me that during certain parts of the year, stars are shells and pearls within the Celestial River traversed by the Hayvhvlket. Archaeological research and

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<sup>3</sup> Talwa people are one of many different communities in the US South that claim Muskogee ancestry. I use a pseudonym for this community to respect my agreement with the ceremonial leadership to ensure the privacy of its members as best as I am able. Maintaining privacy has historically been a matter of survival for Talwa people, as I discuss below. In my experience, some researchers outside the community have been able to identify specific individuals upon learning the name of the community: Hence the use of a community-level pseudonym.



oral traditions suggest that shells were historically important items of exchange across eastern North America, intimately intertwined with diplomacy practices through which autonomous peoples made peace with one another (Bloch 2018b). This context situates the use of shell in this article's discussion of a visit to Shell Mound on the Gulf Coast of Florida and a contemporary cemetery used by a different, autonomous community that also claims Muskogee ancestry. Like Talwa people, this other community is not recognized by the United States federal government. Although the politics of claiming Native American identity in these contexts is complex and tense (Sturm 2011) and one would be remiss to "cut out" the Muskogee Nation from such diplomatic reckonings, these moments nevertheless remain evocative and establish the importance of practices of acknowledgement within post-Removal landscapes that operate in the fractures of liberal settler regimes of recognition. Indeed, Talwa people inhabit a particularly complex position of multiple erasures, which includes the erasure of Indigenous peoples within settler states, assumptions that Muskogee peoples all Removed from the region long ago and none remain east of the Mississippi River, and anxieties across Native American nations about non-Native people falsely claiming Indigenous identities and subverting self-determination efforts. When Talwa people visit the cemetery of a distinct, non-federally recognized community that claims Muskogee ancestry, they navigate fractures and wounds of not only death and mourning, but also the complex and contested politics of Native American identity in the post-Removal South. Such wounds mark the possibility of making life within the slow apocalypse that is the settler state when one's existence has been preemptively declared finished.

I am particularly interested in how material things like shell exercise affective force that enroll Talwa peoples into relationship and breathe life into Indigenous diplomacies. I try to evoke this power through story and photographs, foregrounding the materiality of mourning, care, and acknowledgement while inquiring into what political possibilities these forces might animate. Scholars across the humanities and social sciences increasingly work to theorize this kind of "thing power" (Bennett 2010; Latour 2005; see also Alaimo 2010a; Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Chen 2012; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010). Yet as Indigenous and ally critics note, dominant discourses in this scholarship often ignore or depoliticize Indigenous cosmologies and ways of knowing/being (Sundberg 2014; TallBear 2017; Todd 2016). The vision of such accounts is limited by assumptions about the naturalness or at least finality of settler colonial orders.

Yet Talwa prophecy situates Indigenous ontologies in relation to a critique of settler colonial political ecologies. In his work on #NoDAPL and the Water is Life movement, Nick Estes writes that "prophecies do not predict the future, nor are they mystical, ahistorical occurrences. They are simply diagnoses of the times in which we live, and visions of what must be done to get free" (Estes 2019, p. 14). While Talwa people *do* speak of prophecies as having real predictive force, this one does also diagnose our contemporary moment and what must be done to arrive at a future beyond colonialism. Specifically, it theorizes settler colonialism as a practice of severing the place-based, more-than-human relationalities, similar to what Amanda Kearney (2017, p. 3) describes as a "disconnect [from place] that manifests in the failure to care or a denial of kinship as that which ensures responsibility and mutuality". These separations are also those between peoples, family members, and places constituted by nineteenth century policies of Indian Removal (Rifkin 2012). But perhaps moments of visiting ancestral places and contemporary ceremonies create conditions in which the teachings of the four Beings of Light can once again flourish. As Jay Johnson and Soren Larsen (Johnson and Larsen 2017) argue, the land calls diverse peoples into presence, moving them to attend to the wounds of colonial violence as a labor of learning to coexist within a pluriverse of entangled worlds. The seeds of futurity—Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike—identified by the Talwa prophecy are affective and sensory, constituting the bodily means of connection in more-than-human worlds. In these moments, forces exercised by shell bodies—as beings that traverse water and land—entice Talwa people to provide acknowledgement to other Native American peoples, animating small resurgences of Indigenous diplomacies and peacemaking practices.

Decentering the settler state, Talwa prophecy demands a rethinking of “the international” and “the global” in the context of deep Indigenous histories and diplomacies. This speaks to Chadwick Allen’s (Allen 2012) concept of trans-Indigenous relations, which attends to mobility and interaction between Indigenous peoples. The term foregrounds aesthetic forms and modes of life that are grounded in the “specificity of the Indigenous local”, but also in movement *across* localities (xix). Reimagining the “international” in relationship to Indigenous nationhoods that may differ from the genealogy of the nation-state, the trans-Indigenous refutes modernist claims to the “universal” view from no-place and attends to how place-based relationalities and worlding projects travel (see also Johnson and Larsen 2017). This also requires locating globalization within specifically colonial orders. While globalization may increase certain modes of translocal connectivity, it does so by severing and redirecting Indigenous transnational networks and more-than-human relationships (Davis and Todd 2017; Whyte 2017). Likewise, “the global” is a culturally positioned project. If new constructions of the global became possible following new technologies such as photographs of earth taken from space (see Turner 2006), these discourses are also premised upon the disavowal of Indigenous realities as mere myth or superstition (Watts 2013). What does the global look like from the interplanetary vantage of the Celestial River or the four Beings of Light? And what does living well with others in intercultural worlds look like in reference to Hakope’s use of culture as not simply a system of arbitrary signs and practices, but more-than-human modes of citizenship and right living afforded by the land as an animate and animating being and milieu of relations (Coulthard 2014, pp. 13, 60; Johnson and Larsen 2017; Ortiz 2018; Watts 2013)?

Talwa prophecy imagines world history in a way that renders settler nation-states a fleeting moment in Indigenous memory. Against Eurocentric temporalities that would presume to extend a settled modernity into the future, such acts of storytelling demand that we ask what other possibilities might take shape for making life together in the intergenerational fallout of apocalyptic orders.

### 3. Recognition

If the Talwa prophesy speaks of a time when settlers will turn to Indigenous teachings because there will be nothing left, it may seem that such a moment is already upon us (Kimmerer 2013, 2018; Wildcat 2009). There is growing—if still controversial—attention in scholarly and conservation communities about Indigenous peoples’ ecological knowledges and research that extends from Indigenous ways of relating to others (Aikenhead and Ogawa 2007; Cajete 2000; Kimmerer 2013; LaDuke 1994; Smith 2012; Turner et al. 2000). At the same time, recent discourses about more-than-human relations and the animacy of the material world (Bennett 2010; Ingold 2011; Latour 2005) would appear to have at least a superficial resonance with Indigenous cosmologies. However, critical perspectives note that mainstream treatments usually ignore Indigenous knowledges and cosmologies. When mentioned, dominant discourses usually “flatten” Indigenous realities by treating them as mythical in nature and miss their political and legal content in relation to struggles for sovereignty and self-determination (Sundberg 2014; Todd 2016; Watts 2013).

Indigenous knowledges and modes of being are often commensurate with embodied and place-based relationships with more-than-human others, a concept that I intend to evoke a kincentric ecology (Martinez 2018) that includes not only plants, animals, and insects (Haraway 2008; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010), but also animacies such as spirits, geographical formations and materials, bodies of water, and atmospheric phenomena (Kimmerer 2013, 2018; Ortiz 2018; Watts 2013; Whyte 2017). As Robin Wall Kimmerer (2018, p. 28) argues, all beings have their particular gifts, and Indigenous knowledge systems encourage humans to approach these teachings “not as dominators, but as humble students of earth’s other beings”. This is to orient to the world not as ecosystem services or natural resources awaiting extraction, but as an “ongoing gift exchange” between beings based on reciprocity and respect for one another’s mutual self-determination (see also Sundberg 2014). Drawing on Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee oral traditions, Vanessa Watts argues that the land is animate, sentient, and thinking. It expresses its thoughts in the form of more-than-human communities,

as a social milieu shaped by treaties governing relationships between species (see also [Ortiz 2018](#)). In a similar vein, as discussed above, Zoe [Todd \(2018\)](#) writes of stories embodied by fish and other animals as constitutive of “Indigenous law”, or teachings for living well in more-than-human worlds. These scholars outline alternatives to accounts of law as a system of rule, demanding a rethinking of what counts as political in relation to Indigenous knowledges, oral traditions, and everyday practices. In a similar vein, Kyle [Whyte \(2018, p. 63\)](#) argues that Indigenous knowledges can provide powerful sources of guidance for Indigenous governance, future planning, and decision-making processes. They do so by facilitating deeper expressions of self-determination, or “a group’s ability to provide the cultural, social, economic, and political relations needed for its members to pursue good lives”, by providing frameworks for (a) resurgence, or reclaiming and regenerating relational, place-based ways of existing that do not rely on settler economic or political structures and (b) collective continuance, or promoting Indigenous peoples’ capacities to adapt and flourish in the face of hardships imposed by settler colonial and other oppressive structures, including environmental challenges. Moreover, as Kimmerer suggests, such teachings are “both ancient and urgent” in a world of proliferating “environmental change and uncertainty”, as they provide teachings for “healing damaged relationships with the more-than-human world, so that we might all continue on”.

As Kyle Whyte states, “the intent of indigenous governance is to make the values and relationships in our creation stories manifest” ([Kimmerer 2018, p. 35](#)). The Hayvhlket story articulates a Talwa political philosophy of peacemaking and diplomacy. The narrative turns upon the sweetgum tree, which takes up the peoples’ burdens so that they can be more fully present with the Beings of Light’s teachings. Such diplomatic traditions speak to Taiaiake [Alfred \(1999\)](#) call for greater attention to Indigenous modes of governance as an alternative to bureaucratic tribal governments organized on the model of settler nation-states.<sup>4</sup> As he writes:

Indigenous governance systems embody distinctive political values, radically different from those of the mainstream ... We have a responsibility to recover, understand, and preserve these values, not only because they represent a unique contribution to the history of ideas, but because renewal of respect for traditional values is the only lasting solution to the political, economic, and social problems that beset our people. ([Alfred 1999, p. 5](#))

For Alfred, Indigenous governance systems matter not only because they can challenge Eurocentric genealogies in political philosophy, but also because they are vital and necessary for living well together within worlds marked by settler colonial violence. One of the pillars of Alfred’s critique is peacemaking. Drawing on Kahnawá:ke (Mohawk) teachings, Alfred argues that peacemaking begins with condolence or the caring labor of attending another’s mourning and hurt: “they are in pain: they can’t see properly, they can’t hear, and they don’t speak the truth. Something serious has happened to them, and the challenge for the strong-minded, the peacemakers, is to take them beyond pain to a place of peace” ([Alfred 1999, p. xxi](#)). As in Talwa oral traditions, peace must be brought to a person’s troubles and hurt before it can be brought to whole peoples. This centers Indigenous diplomacies on an ethos of healing and care that operates on both individual and collective levels. For Alfred, one must attend to the wounds of colonial violence and find ways of restoring harmony and balance by building Indigenous futures in the embrace of ancestral ways of life.

While the prophesy makes the political content of Hayvhlket stories more explicit by imagining a future after settler colonialism, these diplomacies can also be understood to animate a mode of acknowledgement that operates beyond the limits of liberal settler colonial regimes of recognition. Some historical context is needed: In the nineteenth century, the United States enacted Indian Removal, a policy of forced relocation in which Native American nations across Southeastern North America

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<sup>4</sup> [Ranco et al. \(2011\)](#) identify a similar problem, which they call the “cultural dilemma”: a double-bind in which Indigenous nations must both reproduce colonial policies and practices of resource management that are legible to settler states while simultaneously performing cultural difference in order to claim rights as Indigenous peoples.



were marched west of the Mississippi River.<sup>5</sup> This march is widely known as the Trail of Tears. Most Muskogee peoples Removed to Oklahoma, becoming what is now the Muskogee (Creek) Nation. Talwa people, on the other hand, are descended from a modest collection of families that avoided Removal. These families survived by obscuring their Indigenous ancestry and “hiding in plain sight” (Koons 2016, p. 46). Some of these families continued to practice ceremony and speak the Mvskoke language outside the settler public’s gaze, while others guessed that a more complete abandonment of Indigenous ways of life was necessary if they were to survive. Today, about twenty families or so continue to gather regularly to hold ceremony, called the busk (from the Mvskoke word *posketv*, “to fast”). During busks, participants take part in songs and dances through which they become and renew good relationships with the more-than-human beings that make up creation (Koons 2016; Koons 2019).

As a result of this history, Talwa people are not recognized as a Native American nation by either the federal or state government. Nor is the community seeking to obtain recognition. Rather, community leaders believe that the best way to maintain a self-determining way of life is to continue practicing ceremony outside the gaze of the settler state. Indeed, federal recognition is an extremely fraught process in which Indigenous peoples are subjected to opaque bureaucratic processes and fixed definitions of what it requires to be counted as an Indigenous nation (Brown-Pérez 2012, 2017; Brown-Pérez and Kauanui 2018; Clifford 1988, pp. 277–346; Cook 2002; Velky and Kauanui 2018). While I argue that settler states do not have the moral authority to determine who counts as Indigenous, I do not mean to downplay the very real kinds of empowerment facilitated by federal recognition nor the complexities of the politics of claiming Indigenous identity.

On the other hand, recognition between Indigenous peoples raises its own complex set of problems. Of course, factionalism, community splits, and complementary divisions (e.g., between peace and war towns or Upper and Lower Creeks) are important aspects of Muskogee social relations that historically place a high value on personal autonomy and keep political power from becoming too centralized (see Blitz 1999; Ethridge 2003; Saunt 1999). But in addition to this, the contemporary politics of Native American identity in the US South are highly tense, characterized by widespread anxieties about settlers (whether malicious or well-intentioned but misinformed) falsely claiming to be Muskogee and interrupting Indigenous nations’ ability to determine citizenship and belonging as sovereign peoples. During my fieldwork, many Talwa people insisted vehemently that others in the region who claimed Muskogee ancestry were “faux Creeks” or “instant Indians”, who were at best people with no “culture” and at worst frauds after money from land claims.<sup>6</sup> I usually tried to avoid these conversations, suggesting that it was not my place as a non-Native anthropologist to police others’ (already overdetermined) identity claims. My Talwa companions usually took this as evidence that I did not truly understand the issue and proceeded to explain their position further and with all the more vigor.

These concerns are not unique to Talwa people, although they are particularly pronounced east of the Mississippi River (e.g., Sturm 2011). To consolidate an extremely complex set of issues, this is not only a question of authenticity and appropriation but also who determines citizenship and belonging within sovereign Indigenous nations (see Barker et al. 2015; TallBear 2018; TallBear and Gupta 2018; Thurman et al. 2015) and (as an MCN official explained to me) the potentially disastrous consequences if busks are conducted by persons without the required knowledge.<sup>7</sup> In a 1992 letter, the Muskogee

<sup>5</sup> The Indian Removal Act was signed into law in 1830, but Creek Removal was set in motion in 1825 with the fraudulent Treaty of Indian Springs. Although the US nullified the treaty and the Muskogee Confederacy sentenced one of the signees to death, the renegotiated 1926 Treaty of Washington still contained large land cessions.

<sup>6</sup> A Talwa community member, David, pointed out that claiming that another person is “not Indian” is a common insult even between enrolled members of federally recognized Native American nations.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the Muskogee (Creek) Nation passed a resolution in 2016 opposing the extension of federal recognition to another organization claiming Creek ancestry in the region, the Muskogee Nation of Florida. The Talwa leadership is also antagonistic to the MNF and recent history between the two communities is fraught with conflict. I have no basis to speak on the MNF’s petition or their claims, but this example helps illustrate the tensions at stake.

(Creek) Nation did recognize the ceremonial knowledge held by Talwa leadership, acknowledging that Hakope had completed the sixteen-year training cycle to become a *heles-hayv* (Maker of Medicine) and stating that his knowledge of the oral traditions of peoples who avoided Removal were treasures to be cherished. But things can change dramatically in a quarter century. Today, Talwa people only maintain relationships with citizens of the MCN on an individual basis.

Self-determination and sovereignty are expressed differently for Talwa people than for federally recognized Native American nations, demanding a theoretical shift to possibilities afforded in spaces of unrecognition. One of the most important expressions of Talwa sovereignty is through the busk (ceremony), in which Talwa people cultivate more-than-human relationships and bodies as a self-determining mode of life ((Koons 2019); see also (Bloch 2018a, pp. 201–23) on the importance of land and soil). Following Ryan Koons (2019) line of argument, busking practices establish more-than-human relationships and political orders in contexts where communities refuse the terms of recognition set forth by the settler state (Simpson 2014). Likewise, Glen Coulthard (2014) argues that state recognition has become a hegemonic discourse for articulating Indigenous sovereignty, a shift that displaced more radical visions for political and economic transformation. Of course, state recognition is profoundly asymmetrical, such that Indigenous nations' sovereign status is always in question in ways that the settler states' legitimacy is not. For Coulthard, state recognition functions to reproduce colonial relations of dispossession in the absence of coercive force by enticing Indigenous peoples into narrowly defined frameworks of cultural rights that can be encompassed within the operations of settler governance and capital. As an alternative, Coulthard speaks of the cultivation of self-determining "modes of life", riffing on Marx's concept of a mode of production (65–66). A mode of life includes the political economic forms that emerge as peoples feed themselves, but also a more expansive understanding of land that Coulthard calls "grounded normativity". This refers to the land as both a material and moral matrix of more-than-human relations that shape place-based practices of right living akin to Todd (2015) understanding of Indigenous law.

Coulthard calls on scholars and activists to attend to Indigenous practices of recognition that cannot be reduced to liberal settler regimes. Indeed, Talwa elders describe ceremony as a means of honoring, acknowledging, renewing, and giving breathing to others (see also Koons 2016). I take this rubric as foundational to Talwa diplomacies, noting in that the seemingly everyday phrasing of "acknowledgement" is located alongside more the spiritually charged language of "renewing" and "giving breath". In what Kimmerer (2013, 2018) describes as gift-exchange orientation to the world, to exist is to be acknowledged; to be alive is to be given breath. This contrasts with ontologies that locate life as an internal, private property fixed within bounded, self-contained bodies. As such, when I speak of Talwa practices of acknowledgement beyond liberal settler modes of recognition, I evoke acts that are both political and ontological: A mutual constitution of lifeforms and forms of life that literally bring one another into being. I also evoke deep histories that are not and cannot be terminal, because they are not modes of life contained within discrete bodies headed towards termination. In this vein, I ask how Talwa people extend acknowledgement to other Indigenous communities and nations on either side of the Mississippi River, which themselves may or may not enjoy federal recognition, as they return to visit ancestral places. As an expression of grounded normativity and place-based teachings, these moments take shape through acts of returning to place (Clifford 2013; Howe 2014; Johnson and Larsen 2017) that breathe life into deep histories of Indigenous diplomacies as simultaneously residual and emergent phenomena.

While Talwa people often express their aspirations in terms of the maintenance of a way of life rather than a leftist language of dismantling the settler state, their prophecy speaks to a time when these seeds will allow life to grow within the apocalyptic wastelands wrought by colonial orders of separation. These kinds of projects enact a largely unspoken politics of refusal of the terms of interpolation demanded by colonial states (Koons 2019; Simpson 2014), an insistence on self-determining modes of life (Coulthard 2014), and a commitment to Indigenous resurgence and flourishing that cannot be reduced to settler temporalities (Alfred 1999, 2005; Simpson 2011). In this

sense, Talwa diplomacies constitute a resurgent mode of life in the face of the radical hubris of the settler project. The settler state presumes its own centrality, inevitability, and permanence: It assumes the right to recognize others, demanding that its citizens and subjects are always turning to face it (Povinelli 2016). This narcissistic dynamic is extrapolated onto the temporal through the assumption that settler modernity constitutes the apex of world history and human progress, defining the scope of all possibilities for future life. Yet perhaps, in offering acknowledgement, Talwa people also create some small peace and give breath to the political possibilities of life beyond the settler state. In this sense, I ask what kinds of worlds do these modes of acknowledgement animate—what modes of being and relating, what kinds of histories and futures—that may be unrecognizable within settler colonial logics of separation and Removal?

#### 4. Cemetery

One Sunday morning, I met Hakope, David, and others at a fast food restaurant for breakfast. I had not slept well the night before and was mainly focused on the weak coffee in front of me. So I do not remember how, but at some point the conversation turned to a cemetery in Florida within only some hours driving distance. There were a number of people who claimed Muskogee ancestry buried there—members of a Christian community, from what I gathered. Many of the graves were covered with shells, a practice shared by Talwa people.<sup>8</sup> David explained that some of his friends from this other community recently put a lot of work into cleaning the cemetery up and bleaching the aging shells. Perhaps we should go visit, David suggested.

David and I decided we might as well go that day, since he was off work. I often went on these kinds of trips with David, who had a passion for history and, as an unofficial Talwa historian, spent much of his free time in state archives. We regularly made weekend trips to visit Creek Civil War sites and older earthen mounds built across the region, putting no small number of miles of highway behind us as we did so. That day, another community member, an elder named Nancy, happened to be visiting town. Nancy had taught me how to work copper, reproducing repoussé<sup>9</sup> designs from circa 1000–1500 CE while the hot sun softened the sheets of metal. Taking respite from the heat in her home, I sipped black coffee while pouring over letters and documents she had kept since the 1980s. One day, I came across a letter on Muskogee (Creek) National Council letterhead thanking her for a copper piece with a woodpecker design. She reminisced how a number of Talwa men had traveled to Oklahoma, bringing her copperwork for gifts. Nancy is also a lay genealogist. Although she complained often about “faux Creeks” who wanted her to manipulate their family trees (usually, she insisted, to access money from land claims), she loves visiting cemeteries. Others say it can be hard driving with her: Every time she passes a cemetery she will ask to stop and see if she recognizes any names on the headstones. Nancy was staying at another community member’s home, Sarah. Sarah cares deeply about cultural preservation and strives to create records that future generations might turn to as they seek to understand their own ancestors.<sup>10</sup>

David and I invited them both to come with us. “How long is the drive?” Sarah asked when we called. “When are you leaving?” A short while later, the four of us crammed into my car and headed out.

<sup>8</sup> The practice of placing shells on graves is also found in some historical black communities in the United States and is thought to be associated with West African spiritualities, the middle passage, and desires to return to Africa (Creel 1988; Jamieson 1995, pp. 50–51; King 2010). Indeed, there is a long and complex history of interaction between Muskogee and African American people. Many wealthy Muskogee people owned slaves, while people who had emancipated themselves from slavery often sought refuge within more sympathetic Muskogee towns (Saunt 1999). See also Cornsilk and Kauanui (2018); Sturm (2014) on the recent disenrollment of freedmen from the rolls of the Cherokee Nation.

<sup>9</sup> Repoussé is a technique that involves working each side of the copper sheet with wood or bone tools in order to create patterns of relief.

<sup>10</sup> While I recognize the problems of reification inherent within the framework of “cultural preservation”, it is important to also recognize that this language informs many projects within Indigenous nations across the Americas—including the Talwa community.



Arriving at the cemetery, we parked alongside the oaks and pines and walked through the wire fence gate. Just as David had said, many of the graves were covered with dozens of shells arranged in neat rows. Some were grey with age, but many graves had been painstakingly cleaned, shell by shell, until they were bright white (Figures 3–5).<sup>11</sup> The graves were quite different from one another: Some had professionally carved granite headstones while others were marked only with wooden crosses, a plant, or in one case, a menorah (Figure 6). A Confederate flag stood next to a much smaller US flag—so brightly colored that they must have been placed there recently. (Only a couple years later, I would find myself and my comrades facing a line of neo-Confederates and white supremacists decked out in homemade riot gear in the streets of Charlottesville. The post-Removal South is a complex formation, shaped by unexpected convergences as well as contradictions between settler logics of separation/wounding and Indigenous diplomacies).

Sarah took out her camera and began photographing the graves, working through them more or less systematically. *Ahh, I thought, here is somewhere I can contribute.* In college, I was trained in cemetery survey and documentation under the guidance of Dr. Uzi Baram on a community-based project in a historically African American cemetery, Galilee, in Sarasota, Florida (Baram 2012, 2015, pp. 71–72). On the Galilee project, I worked another student to meticulously create photographic records of each grave maker, as part of a larger documentation effort that Baram (n.d.) describes as emerging from “an ethic that every life represented at the cemetery matters”.



**Figure 3.** Photograph of the cemetery, in which recently bleached shells carefully arranged atop many of the graves. Photograph courtesy of the author.

<sup>11</sup> Some of the bright white shells were associated with graves older than those with more discolored ones. As such, I believe these differences reflect caretaking practices and not natural aging processes.





**Figure 4.** Graves at the cemetery, many covered with shells. Photograph courtesy of the author.



**Figure 5.** On one of the graves, a large shell is engraved with the words, "Big J. HH". Photograph courtesy of the author.





**Figure 6.** Two children's graves arranged with discolored shell. The graves each have a plant at the head, along with a menorah and a cross, respectively. Photograph courtesy of the author.

I began to take photos of the graves on the far end of the lot from Sarah, meditatively focusing my attention on each grave before moving to the next. While many graves had been laid around the turn of the twentieth century, others had been interred only that year. As we made our way, slowly, through the stone markers and scattered trees, David and Nancy called out when they came across the family names of friends—as well as those in Talwa peoples' own family trees. Turning our attention to the small objects placed by many of the burials, David pointed out a child's grave with a toy horse he thought looked like it was running away.

I find cemeteries to be powerfully sweet places. Grave goods left by loved ones speak to intimate connections and personal quirks that I can only guess at. A cedar tree quietly extended its branches outward, offering shade. Some graves were lovingly maintained by family. Others, less so. A small child's was left with a toy boat sitting beside a toppled cross.

Sarah looked up and snapped a photograph of a dead pine tree, its gnarled branches twisting away from the trunk. "Sometimes", she said, "It's the more artistic photos that really capture a place". In the end, Sarah and I only photographed a small fragment of the cemetery. We had not realized that such a small lot of land could hold so many bodies. We spoke of returning to finish the work, but never did.

Late that night, as I wrote my notes into stories (wishing I was sleeping instead), I reflected on visiting this cemetery as an act of creating small archives of memories between communities. In this moment, members of one modest community visited another, recognizing their presence and history in this place in spite of Removal, in spite of everything. In a space that seems at first glance absent of living people, I am reminded of how the land, as a substrate of relations that extend between life and death, calls people into presence with one together (Johnson and Larsen 2017). I might long to reach out for the persons who fill this land through the little things families left behind, even if I can never really know them (Spector 1993). Perhaps an important piece of these diplomacies is, as Lisa Stevenson (2017) might suggest, the act of calling out into absence, calling out to others without fixing them in



advance—a move that honors both the animacy and autonomy of the other (see also [Alaimo 2010b](#); [Sundberg 2014](#)).

I am reminded of a prayer that Hakope sometimes gives when visiting ancestral sites: “Here you are. We know you are here. You’ve been here a long time”.

## 5. Terraform

After leaving the cemetery we made our way to Shell Mound, a much older site built on the historically fluctuating coastline of the Florida Gulf ([Sassaman et al. 2013, 2015](#)). Shell Mound is a massive, U-shaped terraformed ecology ([Sassaman et al. 2017](#), p. 18): A living space and ceremonial landscape that supported new kinds of life on the coast, created as ancient peoples feasted on shellfish acquired through mass capture and mariculture ([Jenkins 2016](#)). The remains, deposited on a dune, grew over the course of many generations to 7 m in height and 180 by 170 m at the base: A landform fashioned from thousands of meals. Shell Mound was built around 200–700 CE, expanding significantly between 400–650 CE. Just five hundred meters west sits Palmetto Mound, a mortuary mound that was first built after c. 400 BCE, and which remained in use even after 700 CE ([Sassaman et al. 2017](#), pp. 19–20). Other mounds made from shell in the region date to as long as five thousand years ago—demarcating a period referred to as the “shell mound Archaic”. Researchers debate whether these constructions should be understood in terms of monumental architecture or the residue of everyday life ([Marquardt 2010](#)), although some situate shellworks within relations with more-than-human persons that exceed sacred/mundane dichotomies ([Moore and Thompson 2012](#)). Noting that the scale of shell terraforming increased across the Florida Gulf Coast circa 200 CE, [Sassaman et al. \(2017\)](#) argue that architecture such as Shell Mound were likely created as peoples were drawn into growing regional spiritual and economic networks, which could have required hosting more and larger feasts and gatherings. They argue that these patterns provide important insights for understanding human adaptations to changing climates: While the material intensification of shell mound construction may have provided some protection from rising sea levels, they also “fixed persons, deceased and alive, in locations subject to [sea-level] change”, making earlier adaptive strategies that relied on movement problematic ([Sassaman et al. 2014, 2017](#), p. 24; see also [Sassaman 2012](#)).

[Sassaman et al. \(2017, p. 18\)](#) do not exaggerate when they speak of shell mound constructions as terraformed ecologies. Covered in dense foliage growing from the dark, organic soil between its mass of shells, we could not so much *see* the mound as a whole as walk along its contours (Figures 7–9). We ambled along a walking path that twisted and turned through the site while David discussed recent archaeological research he had learned about while attending public lecture events. My companions occasionally pointed out plants like yaupon, cedar, and others, which they identified as providing important foods and medicines (Figure 10). Butterflies flitted about, never pausing long enough for me to get a picture (“There must not be much nectar in the flowers, or else they would hold still long enough to drink”, Sarah suggested). We lamented as we came across a massive trench in the mound, realizing it was likely mined and hauled off in the construction of some highway. When we returned to the car, Nancy gathered up a few plants. Placing these in containers and packing them in the truck, she said she would plant them in her garden to see if they would grow.

By the time we left, the sun was getting ready to set. We stopped to grab a bite of eat at the nearby town and Nancy and Sarah insisted on paying for my dinner. They said they wanted to thank me. Never the most apt at apprehending subtext or appreciation, I was confused. After all, they were helping me with my doctoral research. I should be thanking them!

Sarah laughed: “Because it was fun!”



**Figure 7.** Shells visible under plants growing on Shell Mound. Photograph courtesy of the author.



**Figure 8.** Stratigraphy of shell and dark organic soil peaking out from beside the walking path at Shell Mound. Photograph courtesy of the author.





**Figure 9.** The view from Shell Mound. Photograph courtesy of the author.



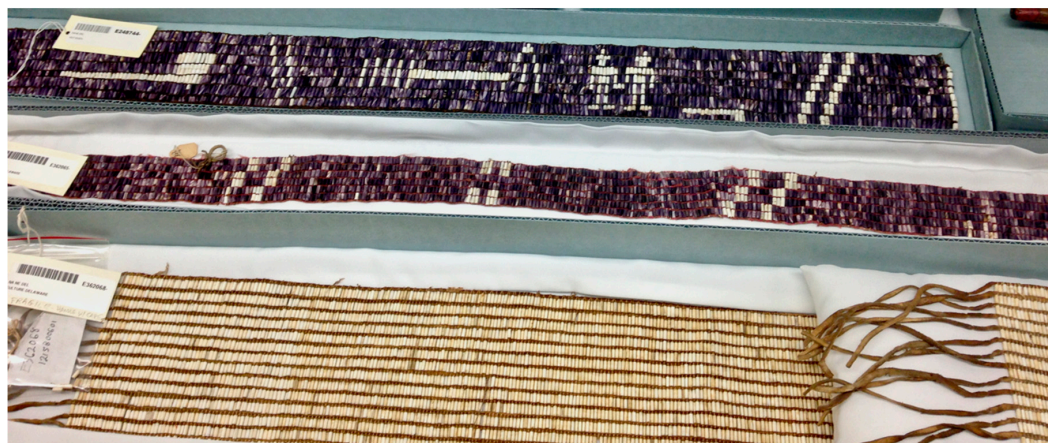
**Figure 10.** Yaupon plant growing on Shell Mound. Photograph courtesy of the author.

## 6. Deep Time

Our drive between the cemetery and Shell Mound traced a deep history of Indigenous presence and diplomacy told in dried exoskeletons of shellfish (sensu [Todd 2015](#)). A small, last minute decision to visit a cemetery became an act of acknowledgement, even within the fractures of settler regimes of recognition. Shell Mound situates the significance of shell within long histories spanning fifteen hundred years, even as this place itself rose from the sea as part of an even longer history of shell mound construction that had begun millennia beforehand, circa 3000 BCE.



In the same historical moment that Shell Mound came into being, expansive trade networks reached across the region, spanning from the Great Lakes to the Gulf Coast, the Atlantic to the Ozarks. These networks were not necessarily unified, cohesive entities, but rather a shifting patchwork of connectivities between peoples that contracted and expanded and rearranged themselves both in this and coming eras (Carr and Case 2006; Wright 2017; see also Pauketat 2007). These trade networks reached their material zenith not only during this period (the Middle Woodland or Hopewell Period), but again between 800 to 1600 CE (the Mississippian Period). Within these manifold networks, shell was ubiquitously valued and moved in large quantities across the region. At a site in what is now Tallahassee, Florida, dated to c. 1000–1500 CE, archaeologists excavated bushels of beads manufactured from shell (Jones 1982). Marine shells traveled far inland, arriving in places like Cahokia (c. 850–1350 CE) and Spiro Mounds (c. 940–1540 CE) in what is currently Illinois and Oklahoma, respectively, where artists carved them with elaborate designs. According to Talwa oral traditions, the traders who carried these materials were skilled diplomats (Bloch 2018b). Drawing on their knowledge of diverse languages and customs—as well as the political economic situations of different peoples—they helped mediate conflicts between warring communities. Indeed, these stories suggest that exchange was an important part of a constellation of practices whereby conflict was transformed into peace. Much like the well-known example of wampum (shell) beads traded between peoples further north (Figure 11), which were woven into stories and treaties, shell in the Native South was intimately intertwined with practices of making peace.



**Figure 11.** Wampum in the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History’s collections (cat no. E3052068, E362065, E248744). Photograph courtesy of the author.

On the other hand, this ubiquitous value of shell provided a foothold for emerging forms of capital in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this period, European traders flooded the Native South with cheaply manufactured, mass-produced glass beads. The desirability of commodity glass beads grew out of older value systems: Political economies and diplomacies built on the trade of shell beads. As European traders insinuated themselves within older economic and affective orders, the slow destructive forces of private property took hold in ways that no person at the time could anticipate. The spread of fences and locks across the Muskogee Confederacy during this era speaks to the growth of increasing economic inequalities, not to mention new forms of chattel slavery and indebtedness to European traders (Saunt 1999). The overhunting of deer for skins—which could be traded for beads—combined with the introduction of new livestock species likewise transformed the forest ecologies of the region (Ethridge 2003).

In 1813, these tensions erupted into a civil war between factions allied with the fledgling United States and those who sought a return to ancestral spiritualities and ways of life, rejecting what Claudio Saunt (1999) calls the “new order of things” premised on private property (see also Martin 1993). When the latter faction lost the war, General Andrew Jackson betrayed his allies and demanded

massive land cessions from the Muskogee Confederacy as a whole in return for US military assistance. Removal would begin just over a decade later. It is only in retrospect that one can see the political and economic transformations embodied by the glass bead trade, in which emerging globalizations premised on private property and colonial relations grew parasitically upon older, Indigenous translocal and transcultural networks, as a project of appropriating, redirecting, and severing the very relationships constitutive of Indigenous sovereignties and diplomacies (see also [Sahlins 1994](#); [Thomas 1991](#), pp. 83–124).

In visiting places like Shell Mound, Talwa people locate themselves and other Native American peoples within these deep histories told in shell. These histories extend thousands of years into the past, encompassing but irreducible to the colonial moment. Just as the Talwa prophecy anticipates a future that emerges from seeds given by the four Beings of Light, these landscapes offer a temporal perspective “beyond our time”. Dominant archaeological discourses and interpretive resources in parks tend to represent places like Shell Mound as belonging to a terminal, prehistorical past, teleologically assuming that their futures have been foreclosed ([Mojica 2012](#)). Indeed, the “prehistory” concept, as a textbook example of Eurocentricism, organizes the Indigenous past around the presence or absence of Europeans and obscures long-term processes that cannot be contained by such chronological boundaries ([Lightfoot 1995](#); [Schmidt and Mrozowski 2013](#)). This is similar to what Shannon Lee [Dawdy \(2010\)](#) calls “modernist exceptionalism:” The construction of temporalities in which modernity is understood to be qualitatively distinct from antiquity, constituting a (continual process of) breaking off from the past (see also [Sassaman 2012](#)). Yet Talwa prophecy and the deep temporalities of shell demand rethinking this exceptionalism as a specifically colonial construction, in which the future is defined as an extension of a (settled) modernity that is qualitatively distinct from a (prehistorical and Indigenous) antiquity. In declaring the now as exceptional and unlike what came before, settler temporalities foreclose alternative futures that emerge from deep Indigenous histories, imagining that which is to come as more of the same (that is to say, a myth of worlds defined by complete colonial encompassment). Mark [Rifkin \(2017\)](#) calls this dynamic “settler time”, as the production of a universal spacetime measured in absolutes and severed from the more fleshy matter of place, body, movement, and momentum that erases Indigenous modes of being in time. Rifkin argues it is not enough to simply assimilate Indigenous peoples into a shared “now” defined by colonial encompassment, calling for greater attention to what he calls “sovereign” Indigenous spacetimes that cannot necessarily be reduced to settler time. Settler nation-states, such accounts assert, have no monopoly on history—and by extension, futurity.

Just as Talwa prophecy anticipates a future in which settler colonialism is reduced to a fleeting—however violent—moment in much longer Indigenous histories, places like Shell Mound ground resurgent Indigenous modes of diplomacy and acknowledgement. In this sense, visiting shell mounds and cemeteries becomes a practice of cultivating both memory and possibility, even while Talwa people do not necessarily undertake these trips out of an explicit hope for a radically transformed future as much as that it is simply fun to visit such places with friends. Shells like those placed on graves, eaten and deposited to make Shell Mound, and carried across the landscape by ancient traders are material memories of the teachings of the four Beings of Light. Elders say that during certain seasons, the stars in the night sky are shells and pearls within the Celestial River that the four Beings canoed across. This duality or doubleness between water and sky speaks to the importance of cultivating balance within the world: Shells mark worlds above and below, threading together earth and sky as they move between communities ([Bloch 2018b](#)). Indeed, the teachings of the four Beings’ of Light are about the four directions, about achieving peace by renewing balance.

Of course, the members of the (largely) Christian community whose cemetery we visited that day might not see shell the same way. They might maintain a different self-determining way of life. Even so, in the act of cleaning shells and caring for the dead, they draw Talwa people to come, visit, and provide acknowledgement: Breathing new life into a *longue durée*, extending Indigenous diplomacies beyond the limits of liberal settler colonial regimes of federal and state recognition.

## 7. Conclusions

Talwa prophecy speaks of a future in which the remaining seeds left by the Four Original Teachers can flourish and blossom within the ruins left as settler empires collapse and crumble. Indeed, the resurgent nature of the Hayvhlket's gifts—cared for in some bodies and neglected in others—provide the condition of such futurities. This is not a matter of identifying technocratic solutions to avoid an impending apocalypse: Remembering that apocalypse is a slow historical event and not a future one (Davis and Todd 2017; Roanhorse 2018; Wildcat 2009; Whyte 2017), the Hayvhlket's teachings provide seeds that help Talwa people make life within the fractures of the settler state. This is, according to prophecy, a dystopia wrought in the severing of relations and responsibilities constitutive of kincentric ecologies, knowledge systems, and (more-than-human) gift exchanges: The production of global connectivities that emerge as they inculcate themselves within, interrupt, re-direct, and erase older Indigenous transnationalisms. Even so, the Hayvhlket provide a means for living well with others in worlds shaped by the devastating forces of colonial power. Borrowing from Donna Haraway (2016) language, Talwa prophecy does not offer a salvation narrative but rather a modest and dire hope for the possibilities of Indigenous-led flourishing even when there is nothing left.

Shellfish hold multitudes in their calcified remains, reminders of gifts given by the Four Teachers that sprout even within spaces marked by catastrophic settler colonial violence. Their stories speak of ancient feasts and more recent moments of mourning the dead. They offer teachings of practices of acknowledgement within the fractures of settler regimes of recognition, as a political mode that operates without primary reference to nation-states. When Talwa people visit a cemetery maintained by David's friend's community, they acknowledge others' ongoing presence within landscapes where they are not supposed to exist, as peoples who have become severed from older political bodies and have to find different ways of making life in the wreckage on different sides of the Mississippi River. Yet as Talwa people walk through the landscape of Shell Mound, they locate themselves within deep Indigenous histories that extend far beyond the colonial moment. Such practices of "remembering beyond our time" can denaturalize both the seeming totality of colonial regimes and mainstream (settler) anxieties about environmental catastrophe framed in terms of the collapse of nation-states or "civilization". The stories of Indigenous diplomacies told in shell remind us that the apocalypse of colonial orders is not necessarily only a bad thing (however unevenly distributed this violence is), but that such processes hold their own kinds of possibilities. They remind us that settler states are impermanent things, small moments within much longer Indigenous histories. Perhaps the terraformed ecologies of Shell Mound are particularly important in speaking to how human transformations can support—and not only interrupt—more-than-human modes of life (see also Wildcat 2009; Kimmerer 2013), as we imagine what kinds of worlds people might inhabit another fifteen centuries into the future and what they will say when they look back upon our time.

As Talwa people travel to visit cemeteries and old, ancestral sites, they breathe new life into Indigenous diplomacies and modes of acknowledgement that are not captured within liberal settler colonial regimes of recognition. This is particularly important in a community that does not have federal recognition and which has survived for much of the last century and a half by avoiding the public gaze. These entanglements with shell locate Talwa practices within a deep history that includes feasting at Shell Mound and interregional exchange networks that connected the region: Constituting a practice of cultivating seeds given by the Four Teachers. This is not to say that contemporary Talwa practices are identical with ancestral ones, as if these seeds have been locked in a cryogenic field, but rather that these teachings provide important insights that can guide contemporary action (see also Kimmerer 2018; Whyte 2018). In drawing Talwa people into a *longue durée* of Indigenous diplomacies, shell mounds and cemeteries constitute an alterative genealogy to Eurocentric political philosophies and models of the nation-state. Talwa practices enact a mode of Indigenous sovereignty as a politics that decenters the settler state and turns towards (Povinelli 2016) ancestral modes of political existence (Alfred 1999; Simpson 2011). Disrupting the centripetal logics of colonial regimes, these acts renew

worlds that emerge in turning away from state recognition and towards other forms of being together in place (Johnson and Larsen 2017) within the ruins of imperial orders.

These practices draw attention to Indigenous sovereignties as articulations of international, intercultural, and interfaith connections within and beyond the fissures of settler state power (see also Allen 2015a). These diplomacies are not about achieving homogeneity: While Talwa may speak of stars as shells within celestial waters and invoke the teachings of the Hayvhlket, the mainly Christian people who maintain the cemetery we visited might not see things this same way. Likewise, I do not mean to understate the very real and very fraught politics of claiming Native American identity in the US South (e.g., Sturm 2011), but rather to point to practices of making peace within the wounds of colonial logics of separation and Removal. In the face of dominant discourses that Native American peoples have disappeared, visiting ancestral places becomes a means of being interpolated and constituted within deep histories so often denied to Talwa people. In returning to these places, my Talwa hosts enact trans-Indigenous relationships that draw peoples together without reference to the logics of state recognition or settler time.

From a deep time perspective, the ongoing histories of Indigenous diplomacies evoke resurgent modes of life beyond the nation-state. They articulate a kind of political praxis and connectivity that can sidestep liberal settler mechanisms of interpolation and are not contingent upon the state for their articulation. As the world-destructive logics of settler colonialism proliferate—rendering those who thought they were secure as also precarious in the face of mass extinctions and environmental disaster—mainstream voices speak of futures defined by civilizational collapse. Yet the stories told in shell serve as reminders that nation-states have no monopoly over the present or the future, and that other modes of life can take shape in the ruins of settler governments.

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