

“So that humanity can continue”: Indigenous Interventions with Colonial Farming Practices

A Dodge Ram commercial from the 2014 Super Bowl drew criticism for its shameless pandering to middle America’s nostalgia for the family farm, a powerful memory-image embedded in the United States’ historical narrative. The domestically-inflected term “family farm,” however, elides the corporate control of agri-business and its highly raced, profit-driven global designs. The ideological underpinnings of the midwestern family farm might be traced to the late nineteenth century’s treatment of the American Indian. Erratic and subjective changes in federal policy regarding land and water use, illustrated by the Dawes Allotment Act (1887) and Winters Doctrine (1908), continue to influence questions of environmental justice and food sovereignty. This presentation considers how American Indian authors at the turn of the twentieth century produced textual interventions with these colonial-settler ideologies. Further, these texts might inform our own public and private behaviors in a climate-crisis age.

After tracing the federal policies and mismanagement by institutions like the Department of the Interior, Land Management Office, and Bureau of Indian Affairs, I investigate how two Sioux activists—Charles Eastman (Santee) and Zitkala Ša (Yankton)—champion traditional Indigenous ontologies in maintaining ecological balance and food sovereignty in the seismic shifts of the (post)modern age. More specifically, Eastman’s involvement with the out-of-doors movement and Zitkala Ša’s short semi-autobiographical story, “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” point to trans-national and ecologically conscious ways of seeing and being in a world that was becoming increasingly, and quite literally, canned.