

Southern Appalachian Yearly Meeting (SAYMA) Gathering 2019—URJ Clerk’s Report

I predicted a fight on the floor of Sessions over whether I would be nominated as clerk of SAYMA-URJ.

This excerpt from the SAYMA Handbook, a separate document from Faith and Practice, explains it all. Where Faith and Practice speaks mostly about Quaker values and principles, the Handbook guides procedure.

“Committee Clerks 1. Are recommended by the Nominating Committee and approved by the Yearly Meeting in session 2. Conducts committee meetings in the manner of Friends and all actions, reports or statements of a committee should be approved in the manner of Friends by the members of the committee as a whole 3. Submits a Report annually to the Yearly Meeting on the work of the committee 4. Submits a budget to the Finance Committee to request funds to support the committee’s work. 5. Seeks support from the Yearly Meeting Clerk when the committee sees a change in its function or cannot carry out the concerns placed upon it.”

There is something very wrong about this, because it puts the SAYMA Uplifting Racial Justice (SAYMA-URJ) committee’s choice for clerk in the hands of the majority of white color-blind racists. There was already a fight over whether SAYMA-URJ should be allowed to function as an all Friends of color committee. However, based on the ugly racist behavior of a few white Friends in that discernment process, it was approved.

Considering the derailment and exclusion tactics employed against me assuming any kind of leadership role during the SAYMA-URJ formation process, I’m was sure there would be opposition to me becoming the clerk of this new Yearly Meeting standing committee. Even though the original proposal to form a Yearly Meeting level racial justice committee was my initiative. Even though I did most of the ad hoc committee’s work, organized the Friends of color retreat where the Spirit-led formation process took place, drafted the Vision statement, Mission and Goals, which were eventually approved by Friends of color and SAYMA.

SAYMA Friends, even some Friends of color, have complained about my supposed attitude and personality problems since the beginning of my sojourn with SAYMA, instead of focusing on the racism of white Friends and internalized racism of Friends of color. Yet at the last URJ meeting (see attached notes) it was decided, by Friends of color in attendance, including the current interim clerk, that I am the best choice to clerk SAYMA-URJ moving forward. In full disclosure, SAYMA-URJ is so new, no members have been nominated yet, so only those Friends of color—most of whom are lapsed Friends, legacy Friends, or new, not yet convinced Friends of color-- attended the Meeting. This is why I foresee a fight on the floor of Sessions 2019.

I see the coming argument over the leadership of SAYMA-URJ as another attempt to sabotage the work of this new committee, whose approved Vision, Mission and Goals are as follows:

SAYMA-URJ (Uplifting Racial Justice)

Vision: SAYMA-URJ envisions a Yearly Meeting community where every Friend of color feels welcome. We see a SAYMA community where the divine Light within every Friend of color is affirmed, their unique history, spiritual journey and lived Truth is honored, where our messages and concerns are heard and respected with due consideration. We see a SAYMA community where Friends of color are empowered

to build close spiritual Friendships, appreciation, love and support for the weighty responsibilities we carry as people of color, embodying Quaker Testimonies. Within and outside of the Religious Society of Friends.

Mission: To help SAYMA become a welcoming place for Friends of color. The committee will do this by providing a safe place for Friends of color to bring issues and concerns regarding racism within their monthly meetings and SAYMA, to find support and advocacy. The committee will also work to raise awareness about White Supremacy aka racism within SAYMA, by compiling and disseminating educational resources.

Goals: (The following goals were compiled by canvassing SAYMA FOC. We asked what they felt they needed to feel welcome among Friends.)

1. Help navigating Quaker culture and process--like a FOC welcome committee, a printed guide to Quaker culture for newcomers and or assigned mentors.
2. Opportunities to connect with other FOC to build a community of support, share experiences and get emotional and tactical support from other FOC.
3. Commitment to addressing the concerns of FOC/Respond to concerns in a timely manner, with sincere listening not avoidance, "management" and process violence.
4. Develop a conflict resolution/reconciliation process that does not expect victims to facilitate or take responsibility for what happened to them. STOP blaming victims for their own oppression.
5. Hire skilled facilitators for private FOC only sessions, to help FOC understand and heal from generational racial trauma and develop personal and group empowerment.
6. Arrange dismantling racism workshops for everyone in SAYMA.

Other decisions the ad hoc committee made at the SAYMA-URJ formation retreat:

1. Folami Adams and Sharon Smith will be co-clerks
2. Meet every quarter (4 times a year) A schedule has yet to be approved.
3. Only FOC can be "voting" members of the committee.
4. SAYMA/URJ encourages white Friends to play supportive roles, as non-members. (Maybe form an auxiliary group)
5. Create an operating budget, with enough cash so that we can dispense grass roots reparations, as needed. (Occasional rent/mortgage money, gas money, travel expenses etc.) Not to mention cover the cost of a pre-SAYMA gathering, and skilled facilitation.
6. SAYMA-URJ should have its own bank account, so that SAYMA is not all up in our financial business. There have been problems in Asheville with the Racial Justice Committee not being able to access its money, because the treasurer is hostile and other examples of white people controlling resources, are abundant.

Every step of the way to get SAYMA-URJ off the ground and operational has been contentious. Friends of color have been divided against one another over white folk's feelings, imaginary threats to their safety and cultural addiction to control, especially the process of undoing their racism. Just as in Sandwich Monthly Meeting/New England Yearly Meeting, I have become a target and scapegoat, while others have been tokenized to maintain white dominance. For more background, read my SAYMA-URJ report on the formation process.

What Happened at SAYMA Sessions 2019

This year's theme was, "Seek the Light; Act Boldly. As predicted, there was indeed a fight on the floor of Sessions over my nomination as clerk of SAYMA Uplifting Racial Justice (SAYMA-URJ). The arguments against came from a former SAYMA clerk, and a very small contingent of teary eyed White women, supported by one visiting Friend of color, who was possibly invited to SAYMA for that very purpose. However, after all was said and done and in spite of their quite dramatic performance, URJ had already approved me as the best possible choice to clerk the committee. SAYMA-URJ has been without a strong clerk for the last two years. Plus, after an interview with the SAYMA Nominating Committee, they were clear that the right thing to do was respect URJ's wishes and put my name forward. Ultimately, Uplifting Racial Justice got what it wanted because, in my opinion, the body was so ashamed of the behavior of those in opposition.

I arrived at the Annual Gathering on the campus of Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa North Carolina, on Thursday afternoon. It should be noted, that Warren Wilson College, Swannanoa, Black Mountain and Asheville all sit on my stolen eastern Siouan ancestral lands. Swannanoa is a Yesanechi Siouan word. My people's name for the Blue Ridge was, Ahkon'shuq, or "highlands," from the words Ahkon: meadows and Shuq: hills. We have been here for thousands of years. Scholars refer to our language as the Latin of Dacotan languages, which includes a long list of indigenous languages, including Biloxi, Kansa, Ponca, Osage, Missouri, Winnebago or Hochunk, Lakota, Dakota, Nakota or Assiniboine, Mandan, Crow, and Catawba, just to name a few. We are descendants of the mound builders. There is even an "Indian burial ground" on Warren Wilson's campus where some of my ancestors lie.

So, there I was, an Indigenous elder, standing on my ancestral ground at the Southern Appalachian Yearly Meeting of Friends/Quakers, who four years ago, said they were going to unravel their racism and work to become a more welcoming, multicultural anti-racist faith community. And, for the last three years, SAYMA has blocked me, an Indigenous elder, from providing any leadership on that front, using every passive aggressive and creative strategy imaginable.

What that means is, even though I did the lion's share of the work involved in crafting the Vision, Mission and Goals of the new committee, wrote the founding documents, most of the meeting minutes, and documented everything about the formation process of URJ, which **SAYMA approved in 2017**, I have consistently been blocked from becoming clerk of the new standing committee by highly questionable and yes, racist Quaker processes, or what I call "Process Violence." This year, my name was finally up for nomination, and this is my story about what transpired.

I arrived in time to attend John Adam's (Atlanta) plenary presentation. Brother John opened his presentation by modeling appropriate traditional tribal protocols the world over--except Europe--by asking the elders (He chose Hector Black and myself) for permission to proceed. In my mind, what he did was Spirit's way of reminding me that I was at SAYMA in my capacity as Native Elder, which carries specific responsibilities. Brother John then delighted us with his easy-going presentation style, using PowerPoint slides and music to tell us stories about his life growing up in Tuskegee Alabama. John, who is both Black and Lakota, was born in the mid-1960s and came of age during extremely turbulent times for both Black and Native people. Though he covered some hard material for white conflict-averse Quakers, his presentation was informative, and entertaining.

The traditional way John opened his presentation also reminded me that Pat Johnson (Asheville) had not consulted me, invited me nor asked my permission as THE local Native elder at SAYMA, to conduct a workshop on Right Relationships with Indigenous Peoples. I awoke Friday morning, still disturbed by Pat's clear breach of proper indigenous diplomatic protocols and an undeniable impression from my indigenous ancestors that it was my responsibility, as elder, to shut her workshop down. I sat with it over breakfast and decided to find Pat as soon as I got to campus to discuss the matter with her.

The Spirit of my ancestors must've been walking with me—well shucks, I was carrying more than enough Native Juju on me—because the first person I saw when I got out of my car, was Pat Johnson. I asked her if I could speak with her for a minute and she said yes. I explained how deeply disturbed I was by the idea of Pat Johnson from Asheville Friends Meeting conducting a workshop on “Relationships with Native Americans” considering two factors:

1. Asheville Friends, including Pat Johnson, have treated me with extreme disrespect ever since I came to Asheville. They never even tried to be in “right relationship” with me.
2. Pat failed to consult me, invite me or ask my permission.

When I said, “You do not have my permission” she looked totally shocked. The first thing she said was, something like, I don't need your permission because I'm operating from a “higher authority.” And that was the moment my PTSD kicked in. I shouted, “WHAT!?” Then she told me Mark Charles gave her permission. So I had to explain that, Mark Charles is a Navajo man; as in, he ain't from around here. I am the Native elder here, and I said NO, you do not have my permission. Next, she spoke of a workshop she attended at Pendle Hill (A Quaker religious retreat and conference center outside of Philadelphia) on “Right Relationships with Indigenous People”, where Native folks from Canada and other places taught her how to be in “right relationship.” She said she had made a commitment to them to share what she learned. I repeated, “I am the Native elder here, and you do not have my permission. How can you be in right relationship with Indigenous people if you are not in right relationship with me?”

But Pat Johnson persisted. She said, “I was going to ask for permission.” I said, “Who were you going to ask, Pat?” She wavered, “Well you, if you will come.” I told her I had not intended to attend her workshop, but now I might have to, in order to shut it down. She was incredulous. She said, “You wouldn't do that.” I said I would indeed, if she insisted on conducting the workshop against my wishes. That's when she started to cry and explain to me how she was Spirit led to do this workshop, blah, blah, blah. She left me no choice but to warn her, that if she insisted on moving forward with the workshop, I would be forced shut it down. Pat was furious. I said, why don't we discuss this with the clerk (Barbara Esther, also from Asheville)? I took her hand and walked with her toward the main building on the look-out for Barbara. Spirit was still with me because as we approached the double doors to the lobby, Barbara was on her way out.

Bear in mind, I did not really expect Barbara to understand the situation. I sojourned with Asheville Friends for four years and knew she was in complete denial about the Meeting's complicity with Native removal and genocide, or Indigenous social norms and protocols, structural racism, institutional violence, and many other disagreeable things. But I wanted to model a reasonable approximation of appropriate anti-racist/counter-colonial praxis at SAYMA, nonetheless.

Not surprisingly, Barbara did not understand why Pat needed my permission to lead a workshop she said she was Spirit led to do. So an argument ensued between me and these two White women, right in the main lobby between the Cafeteria and the Auditorium where Meetings for Business were held. That drew the attention of Campus Security, of course. The security guard who came to see what all the commotion was about was a large Black man, this time.

I say this time, because at SAYMA three, maybe four years ago, someone called campus security on me, for loudly swearing profanities in front of the same building. Why was I loudly swearing profanities? Because that year's theme was "Unraveling Racism" and these Southern Appalachian White Quakers insisted on doing it in a way that was all about protecting their white colonial settler privilege, comfort and convenience. They completely disregarded the concerns I raised and my advice, then cherry picked which Friends of color they wanted to work with and listen to, which plucked my last nerve.

That year, the campus security guard happened to be Eastern Band Cherokee—which worked out well for me. When he rolled up on me, we talked for less than two minutes and he recognized me as an Indigenous sister, understood exactly why I was so angry and why I was screaming expletives out in front of the building. It was absolutely a culturally appropriate response, under those extreme circumstances, and he understood that. So after we talked, he politely tipped his hat and said, "Y'all have a good evening, now." and drove off in his jeep...leaving everyone but me standing there with their mouths open.

This time, as soon as the security guard entered the lobby, Pat walked up to him, took his arm and basically did a really good poor terrified white woman impression as I continued to argue with Barbara. He listened to Pat, keeping one eye on me and Barbara. Then he came over to me and asked what the problem was. I explained, that these two White women were refusing to accept my authority as the Indigenous elder here, at the same time they claim to be more welcoming to people of color. Both Pat and Barbara looked stricken, and immediately denied my summation of what the argument was about. I asked him if he understood what I was saying and he said he did. But his concern as campus security, was that we were disturbing the peace and people would soon be coming in for lunch. He quickly realized the situation was far beyond his pay grade, and called for his supervisor, the facilities manager. And the argument continued.

They denied it, but, Barbara had just finished telling me, I had no authority here and that Pat did not need my permission to conduct a workshop she was 'Spirit led' to do. I reiterated that I would be forced to shut Pat's workshop down if she persisted in moving forward with it. Barbara was angry. She asked me, "How are you going to shut Pat's workshop down?" I responded, "Don't pretend you've never seen me shut something down before." She thought for a few seconds and petulantly answered, "Not permanently." I thought, my goodness, it was only Friday morning and we still have two more days to go.

The facilities manager arrived. She was another white woman, who miraculously seemed to have a better grasp of the issues than Barbara Esther or Pat Johnson. She asked us if we would be willing to move the argument to another less public venue. I said I was willing, however, I knew continuing to argue with Pat and Barbara would get us nowhere. As far as I was concerned, this conflict was a community issue and should be treated as a teachable moment. Therefore, I said, SAYMA-URJ should attend such a meeting, as well as members of the yet to be identified White SAYMA-URJ support committee. I kept repeating, "How can you be in right relationship with Indigenous people if you will

not respect my authority as the local Native elder?" And the response I kept getting was a sort of deer-in-headlights look of confusion.

The facilities manager tried to arrange a spot for us to meet, but no other Friends of color were available on such short notice, and I did not know who the white supporters of SAYMA-URJ were yet. Almost everyone was in a Worship Sharing group at that time and Lunch was about to begin. So the best I could do was get in the lunch line while looking for other SAYMA Friends of color and sympathetic White Friends to ask if they would attend an ad hoc joint committee meeting on the matter. Lunch came and went, and none of the Friends of color I saw wanted to get involved. One told me she was trying to have a "drama free experience" and I respected her wishes. Another said, I should consider my timing, if I wanted to be approved as clerk of SAYMA-URJ, and pick my battles. There were only about 5 of us on campus on Friday morning, anyway. Only three more Friends of color came later.

The workshops began right after lunch, 1:15 to 3:PM. Pat had told me she was going to do her workshop with or without my permission, so it was my responsibility to make sure everyone in attendance knew Pat did not have my permission to proceed and why.

Once at the "Relationships with Indigenous People" workshop, I allowed Pat to introduce herself and welcome everyone. I even waited patiently until she recognized me before I spoke. Then I said, "As the designated Indigenous elder here, Pat, you do not have my permission to proceed with this workshop, and those of you who signed up for it do not have my permission to be here either." As you might expect, they were not happy with me. One white man shouted, "I am offended!" I shouted back, 'So am I.' They wanted to know what I expected them to do instead, and why was I being so unreasonable, they only wanted to learn, etc. I could have said leave, go for a walk, anything but stay here, except, luckily, there was a couple with two teen age children there, who had lived among the Inupiaq people, and they understood exactly what I was saying. He suggested that we discuss the situation so that other Friends in the room might learn something about traditional Indigenous cultural norms, practices and social protocols. I agreed to that.

In the end, we had a pretty good conversation. Pat spoke of her promise to Mark Charles, and the Canadian Native folks from whom she learned how to be in "right relationship" with Native peoples, at Pendle Hill. (Apparently there is also a Quaker Speak video on the subject.) Pat said they taught her to "study history", "practice humility", and "share what she learns." I explained why it was my responsibility as the local Native elder here, to deny Pat my permission. I gave detailed testimony about my experience among Asheville Friends, and the many ways they disrespected me, even knowingly putting my survival at risk, including Pat Johnson.

I corrected Pat's gross misinformation and misinterpretation of local Native history. As I suspected, all her sources only covered the Cherokees in western North Carolina, when they only arrived in the region after 1700. Before that, this was all eastern Siouan land, from the piedmont area of Virginia all the way through the Carolinas and moving west, into West Virginia, Tennessee, parts of Kentucky and into the Ohio River Valley. I explained the linguistic connections between the eastern Siouan tribes and the people on the plains, now known as Lakota, Dakota, etc. And how the place names in this region are all Siouan names, like Santee, Swannanoa, Occaneechee, Wateree, etc. Pat did not know any of this history, because she did not have access to the same sources I do, yet her workshop description said, "Learn about Indigenous peoples' experiences and history..." Then she had the audacity to demand that I share my references, which I did not.

Eventually, I did allow Pat to share what she learned about the Quaker involvement in Indian boarding schools because she would be talking about Quakers, but nothing else. She was very angry at me because I did not allow her to do what she wanted. She cried and everything. And it was still only Friday afternoon.

After that, all went according to business as usual, more or less. I reconnected with Avis Wanda McClinton, who was attending SAYMA for the fourth year in a row. She said Asheville Friends had invited her, and that she was staying with Gita Larson—most likely sleeping in what used to be my room. Did I mention that nobody at SAYMA knew Avis until I invited her, four years ago? I hadn't seen Avis in a long while. I was unable to attend SAYMA in 2018 due to the fact that I had recently become homeless, no thanks to Gita Larson. Gita had her locks changed on June 5th, about a week before Sessions, leaving me literally locked out on the street, placing my survival at risk for her white settler colonial property rights, comfort and convenience, AFTER she claimed to love me as her sister. So, it would not surprise me in the least, to learn that Avis was invited to stay with Gita, that year as well. Of course, Gita Larson and Asheville Friends absolutely believe what they did to me was not about racism, because, they were being real nice to Avis. But that is another story for another time.

“If you are silent about your pain, they will kill you and say you enjoyed it.” ~ Zora Neal Hurston

Regardless of all that, I was happy to see Avis. I know Avis is not sophisticated enough to understand that she was being used to cover up Gita's racism. Avis had contacted me about the most recent racist outrage against her in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and told me she had accepted the invitation from Asheville Friends because, like me, she suffers from Racial Trauma/PTSD, and just needed to get away from Philadelphia for a while. I know Avis well enough to have guessed she was staying with Gita, because when I asked her if she was staying on campus, I got no response. Therefore, before I came to Sessions 2019, I told Gita, in public on Facebook, NOT to cross my path, and for the most part, she didn't. Don't get confused. That was self-defense, NOT a threat. I do not speak to Gita Larson at all, except through mediators, because her privileged white woman's word against mine would never work out well for me. And because, just the sight of her name makes my skin crawl and my ancestors roll in their graves. What Gita told Avis, to justify herself, was she had to do it that way--treat me worse than she would treat a stray dog--because her daughter was afraid there might be a scene and Gita might get hurt. I repeat, of course, Gita Larson and Asheville Friends absolutely believe what they did to me was not about racism, because they were being real nice to Avis.

So Avis and I were sitting in my car talking, getting caught up, when Angela Hopkins from the Friends Center for Racial Justice called. She told Avis she was led to fly from Ithaca NY to SAYMA, to support her, due to the latest racist incident that happened to her in Philadelphia YM, about a month (?) before SAYMA. Since Avis was a guest at SAYMA herself, I took on the task of making arrangements for last-minute hospitality for Angela. Which was a challenge unto itself, given that Friends are not known for their hospitality, especially without advance notice. It required me to, again, assert my authority as Native elder. That involved teaching a few Friends that for Indigenous peoples, hospitality is a sacred responsibility and giving them an opportunity to practice their professed allyship and right relationship.

Angela's flight was delayed so it was past midnight when I picked her up at the Asheville Airport. The minute I saw her in the flesh, I remembered how I knew her. We have known each other since New England Yearly Meeting 2005. She had come there to ask Friends to give the Mowa Choctaw Quaker School in Alabama to the Choctaw community, when they wanted to unburden themselves of the

responsibility by selling the property to the highest bidder. As I remember, I stood in solidarity with her, calling NEYM to “Give the sister what she asks for.” I think that was the the same year the Mashpee Wampanoag community on Cape Cod demanded that FGC shut down its Quaker Sweat Lodge. Yes, I supported that too. Friends of color who are Spirit led to be as bold and bodacious as I am are scarce, so it felt positively providential to see Sister Angela again.

As I said, all was business as usual, until Saturday morning, when the Nominating Committee put my name forward as clerk of SAYMA-URJ. That morning, as I approached the main building, the Nominating Committee asked if I would meet with them. Of course I did. I was glad to have the opportunity to sit down with Nominating face to face, because all they knew about me was that SAYMA-URJ had chosen me as the best possible candidate to move the SAUMA-URJ mission and goals forward, and my reputation as a loud, crude and disruptive, “angry Black woman” that many Friends are fearful of. After our talk, I felt they were still a bit nervous about the contention my nomination would cause, but they were clear they were making the right choice.

We expected objection. Brother John, the outgoing interim clerk (Atlanta) and Ivie Osaghe (QVS Fellow, Atlanta) expected it, and Angela expected it. We were all aware that everyone likely expected me to play the angry colored woman role, so I sat in front (Down Stage Right), dressed in all my Indigenous ancestral mojo, next to Angela and Ivie, and simply took notes instead of saying a single word on my own behalf. I did not stand with Asheville at roll call. Instead, when the clerk asked for other Friends to stand and identify themselves, I said, “I declare myself a Friend at large, because Asheville has made it abundantly clear to me that I am not welcome there.” I’m sure that caused some buzz, but nobody said anything. We sat quietly through the committee reports. Then Nominating was up. They wisely saved my name for last. Probably, so we could get the rest of the nominations settled before getting bogged down in an argument over my nomination. It made sense.

The first objection came from Larry Ingle (Chattanooga TN). Larry and Becky Ingle are fairly close Friends of mine. I’ve known Larry and Becky since we lived at Pendle Hill together in 2007, right after I was officially disowned by Sandwich Monthly Meeting/NEYM. I’ve stayed at their home and visited their Meeting. We clearly do not agree on everything, yet--pay attention--disagreement never threatened our Friendship.

Larry said, “Sharon is not a member of any Meeting.” His contention was, that non Quakers cannot serve on Quaker committees and certainly cannot clerk committees. Fortunately, I didn’t have to say anything, because half the room, including the Nominating Committee clerk, said they were not members and it never prevented them from sitting on any Quaker committees, or clerking.

Then Gita McGahey (Celo) stood up. She said “she heard” me tell another person of color that she is not really a person of color, and that she did not think someone like that should be the clerk of SAYMA-URJ. I didn’t know what she was talking about and could only speculate, so I just wrote down what she said in my notes. Besides, in the five years I’ve attended SAYMA, Gita McGahey and I never once had a conversation about anything. She didn’t really know who I was, outside of what she heard from others. Not very Friendly, if you ask me.

Robyn Josephs got up next. (This was the real performance of the day.) She began by saying she believed in the mission of SAYMA-URJ, but, “Sharon told someone they needed her permission to do a workshop she was led to do by Spirit.” Robyn went on to suggest that I attacked her, though I did not

write down her exact words, because I was still thinking about her previous statement. Robyn was not present for my argument with Pat and Barbara, she did not attend Pat's workshop and she never came to me to speak about her concerns. Therefore, her opposition had to be based on hearsay, which is traditionally not something Quakers value. Though in my case, more than the usual amount of malicious gossip has been bandied about, resulting in near hysteria whenever I enter a room whether I say anything or not. And, they usually say racism has nothing to do with it. Robyn was still talking, and yes, crying. She said, "I don't want someone who does not believe in loving their enemies and forgiveness to be clerk of SAYMA-URJ, but I will accept what the body decides."

As Robyn's performance shifted from a few pitiful White woman tears to body wracking sobs, Avis Wanda stood up. She walked over, stood next to Robyn and said, "That Friends speaks my mind." Avis said, "I am probably jeopardizing our friendship by saying this, but I do not think you are ready to be the clerk of SAYMA-URJ" because of your "bad behavior" and "anger management" issues. "Your behavior yesterday was unconscionable. People feel like they are going to be targets." While Avis said all that, Robyn Josephs, looked like she was about to melt into the floor, she was weeping so hard. Ivie wanted to say something, but both Angela and I, as her elders, held her back. Bear in mind, Avis was not present for my argument with Pat and Barbara, or at Pat's workshop, either. And, I had not discussed the incident with her at all.

John Adams, former SAYMA-URJ interim clerk, spoke. He skillfully, brought everyone back from the brink of absolute confusion. (White people always get confused when one person of color opposes another in their presence.) Brother John, invoked the witness of Christ, and said, essentially, that he never sits in judgment of other people of color, because each person responds to their experience of oppression and trauma in their own way and it is not for us to judge them.

The clerk, Barbara Esther (Asheville) stepped away from the clerk's table to say, "Sharon needs a committee. We have put the cart before the horse. Where is her committee?"

Evie Osaghe (QVS Fellow/Atlanta) finally had a chance to speak. I don't write down her exact words, yet she essentially, and also quite skillfully, reiterated what John said, in less Christian terms. She also commented that the body should respect SAYMA-URJ's choice of clerk, as the Nominating Committee had already done. That was it for round one, because it was time for lunch and the clerk wanted Friends to have time to sit with it all, until tomorrow.

So, we broke for lunch and more workshops. SAYMA-URJ called an ad hoc committee meeting to discern our way forward, whether the body approved of me or not. We invited Avis but she chose not to join us. We were not upset with Avis. It is obvious, even to those who just meet Avis that she is cognitively impaired, and we were all familiar with her situation. She had been invited by Asheville Friends, stayed in Gita Larson's home and was expected to leave SAYMA to visit Celo with Gita McGahey, before returning to Philadelphia. We all knew Avis was simply not sophisticated enough to realize what was really going on with these white women, but it was crystal clear to us.

Yet Angela had flown from Ithaca New York to Asheville to meet with Avis and offer her support. So when Angela and I came back to the main building and saw Gita Larson saying goodbye as Avis and her luggage were getting into Gita McGahey's vehicle, Angela said to Avis, "We still need to talk." (I'm paraphrasing here because I don't remember Angela's exact words.) Gita McGahey answered for Avis, and said to us, "I'm taking Avis away." (Like Avis was some sort of pet she was depriving us of.)

That was Saturday evening and SAYMA would not be over until Sunday afternoon. On Each of the three previous years Avis attended SAYMA Gathering, she stayed till the very last minute and took great joy in saying goodbye to all her many SAYMA Friends. So, it looked to me like both Gitas were making decisions for Avis. She did not have an opportunity to say goodbye to her SAYMA Friends and followers and she was probably not even asked if she wanted to meet with Angela Hopkins, of the Friends Center for Racial Justice, who had flown all the way from Ithaca NY to Asheville NC on her own money to meet Avis in person. There are names for this type of White behavior. White savior-ism and White paternalism are classic manifestations of racism.

It was deeply disturbing for me to watch this happening to Avis, again. Because this was not her first time being surrounded by well-meaning White women who claim to love her and want to help her, when their love and care turns out to be conditional, based on whether they can get Avis to do things their way, because they know what is best for her. AND, when the going gets rough, they consistently leave her to fend for herself, claiming they are uncomfortable or afraid, or some other fragile White nonsense. It was painful for me to watch.

Most Friends only know of me in a limited context. They do not know that I have a degree in multicultural education and child development. They do not know I have many years of experience working with young people who are labeled "at-risk," many of whom are cognitively disabled, like Avis. I knew Avis was highly impressionable and also deeply traumatized by the racism she is still experiencing in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. That is why I found it so deeply disturbing, that both Gita Larson, who incidentally, is Pat Johnson's close Friend and neighbor, and Gita McGahey, used Avis as they did. I do not know what their connection with Robyn Josephs is, and there may be none. What I do know, is that Robyn has been actively trying to block me since before Shahina Lakhani stood up on the floor of Sessions 2017, and complained that she would not support me, Folami Adams or Lisa Bennett moving forward as part of the SAYMA-URJ, the standing committee, because it was run like a "dictatorship" and her ideas were not valued because she is not Black. To this day, Robyn has never spoken to me face to face, only about me, behind my back.

Except, ever since Avis asked me to clerk her support committee, nobody has been more of a Friend, sister and advocate for Avis than I have. Contrary to popular myth, I NEVER made decisions for her and I never did anything she did not first ask me to do. Now, I feel sorry for Avis, but I will not be sucked into that toxic vortex again. I have been traumatized enough myself, by our uniquely Quaker brand of passive aggressive racism, what with the gas lighting, scapegoating, and all. The best thing I could do for Avis, right then, was to let her be. Because, I'm pretty sure that is not what those angry, teary eyed white women expected.

The next morning (Sunday, June 16th) The clerk wisely put the SAYMA-URJ Report ahead of Nominating Committee business on the agenda. There it was, clear as the day, that SAYMA-URJ had chosen Sharon Star Smith as its clerk. The minutes of that meeting were up on the screen, along with a support letter from Atlanta Friends, which included the signatures of John Adams, the outgoing interim clerk, and Folami Adams, former co-clerk of the SAYMA-URJ ad hoc formation committee. There was nothing anyone could say to refute URJ's choice, but, someone did ask who the current members of SAYMA-URJ were and whether or not they attended a Meeting.

So I explained: SAYMA-URJ was approved as a Friends of color only committee. Even after Angela and Evie arrived, there were only about seven adult POC at the Yearly Meeting. We already knew that not

many Friends of color, from anywhere, were led to do the work of SAYMA-URJ, largely because they witnessed the hostility I faced in Asheville Friends Meeting and SAYMA, during the URJ formation process. So, IF SAYMA wants to be more INCLUSIVE, instead of EXCLUSIVE, it needs to be more open to viewing things differently, more creatively. I said, there were people of color willing to serve as members of SAYMA-URJ, who did not necessarily want to attend a mostly white Meeting for Worship as a direct result of the racism and racism denial they have personally experienced and seen me deal with. Some of these Friends of color are “Legacy Friends” some are lapsed Friends and some are curious yet not quite convinced Friends, who have committed to the work of SAYMA-URJ but have no interest whatsoever in attending any SAYMA Meeting community.

I pointed to the names listed on the URJ Minutes up on the screen. Tribal Raine is a direct descendant of Paul Cuffee, and therefore a legacy Black-Indian Friend of color. She is a close personal Friend of mine who has been watching your Quaker racial madness for some time. She wants to support the work of SAYMA-URJ, but has no interest in attending or joining her closest Meeting, in Colombia SC. Tanya Rodriguez, is a Taino sister from Puerto Rico, who lives in Asheville. She attended the URJ meeting held at the Asheville Meetinghouse during the Representatives Meeting in March, stepped inside the building and said, “Wow, the energy is really creepy in here.” I’m calling her a curious, but not yet convinced Friend, because she is curious about Quakerism, in theory, but totally turned off by the racist way y’all treat me, whom she sees as her local Native elder. There are several other people of color, whose names are absent from these minutes because they were unable to attend that particular meeting for one reason or another. Like my daughter, Maya. She has attended Quaker Meetings since she was five years old, either with me or her grandmother. She began to attend Nashville Friends Meeting as an adult. Now she wants NOTHING more to do with Quakers, due to the unfriendly way Nashville Friends treated her at a time when she was undergoing an extremely challenging period of her life. Not to mention the unhelpful ways Nashville Friends treated me, her mother, when I was only there trying to support my child. Maya is a lapsed Friend, who has agreed to support SAYMA-URJ as long as she can avoid interacting with White Friends. So my Friends, IF you wish to be more welcoming to people of color, these are the people you need to welcome.

When the Nominating Committee brought my name forward again, the clerk asked, “Do Friends approve Sharon Smith as clerk of SAYMA-URJ. The response was an immediate, “APPROVED!” There were no arguments. Thank God.

SAYMA-URJ has not had a seasoned or motivated clerk for three years, ever since the body approved it as a standing committee. Because a few Friends opposed my leadership, an inexperienced Friend, who had never clerked a Quaker committee in her life, was approved. At that time, my concerns, that the new committee needed a clerk whose strengths were Quakerism and Critical Race Theory, were ignored. Why? Because a few white women like Robyn Josephs and Gita McGahey along with Shahina Lakhani, a Pakistani woman with no connection whatsoever to our history of racial struggle, cried, and imagined that I had attacked them, because essentially, they did not approve of my relentless, straightforward and uncompromising honesty.

The first URJ clerk was quickly in over her head, because she was not familiar with or prepared for your subtle passive aggressive controlling maneuvers, like I am. She abruptly quit, and is no longer a Quaker. So John Adams stepped in as interim clerk, until a more suitable clerk could be found. Considering how much contention there had already been in the formation process, no other Friend of color in their right

mind wanted the job. But as I said to the Nominating Committee, "SAYMA said they wanted to unravel their racism, and lo and behold, God sent them me." Seriously. What are the chances, a birthright Native and Black Friend of color with years of experience at Quaker process, clerking committees, etc., who is also called to ministry to challenge racism among Friends, would be among SAYMA Friends in the southern Appalachian Blue Ridge area, which just happens to be my stolen ancestral land, at this very time. I am also the closest thing SAYMA has to an authority on Critical Race Theory, the exact combination URJ sorely needs if it is to lead SAYMA toward its stated goal of becoming a welcoming multicultural anti-racist faith community. I was literally born for this.

The first thing I did as clerk of SAYMA-URJ was announce the formation of a SAYMA Friends of color Worship Group, in fulfillment of URJ's Mission to provide a safe and welcoming worship community, and support and advocacy for Friends of color. It is also a handy answer to the question of whether or not URJ members belong to a Quaker Meeting community. Since SAYMA is spread over a wide geographic area, our QVS Fellow, has agreed to set up a way to conduct virtual Meetings for Worship and Meetings for Business, as needed.

Even when SAYMA-URJ was not functioning, due to all manner of derailment tactics, I continued to do its work. I consistently posted edifying articles and blog posts, recommended books for Meetings to read and discuss, and workshops Friends could attend, on the subject of systemic and institutional racism. So the second thing I did, was to ask Friends, how many of them had read, or were reading, "White Fragility: Why It's so difficult for White People to Talk About Racism," by Robin DiAngelo. I already knew Atlanta, Asheville and Berea Meetings were reading it and a good number of hands went up. I reminded them to pay special attention to chapter 11, all about "White Women's Tears."

The third thing, was to nominate Shannon Roberts Smith (Berea KY) clerk of the ad hoc white Friends' SAYMA-URJ support committee. Our paths converged many times over the intense weekend. I saw her consistently paying attention to the racial power dynamics in play. She smoothly followed my lead and took care of me when I needed it. Plus, she is a Smith. Her husband and I were joking around and calling each other cousin all weekend. Spirit made it clear to me that she was the one to organize white Friends who want to support URJ's work and be the bridge between both groups. This group has been patiently waiting for three years, for URJ to work out its issues and step up to provide the leadership they need to move forward as white co-conspirators and/or allies. It has been a hard won fight, yet at this moment, I have good feelings about the possibilities.

Time will tell, and we will see. There is a lot on SAYMA-URJ's agenda. We have a very long way to go my Friends, and "A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step."

In the Light of racial justice,

