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Commentary

Everyday Acts of Nation Building: A Conversation

DIANNE BAUMANN, KARLA EITEL, CODY ARTIS,
DORY GOLDBERG, AND ABDEAN SMITH

MUCH ATTENTION HAS BEEN given to diversifying the academy and broadening participation from historically excluded groups, yet institutional processes and assumptions continue to undermine or directly disrupt goals of nation building and tribal resurgence. What we refer to as nation building varies greatly across individuals, communities, and within institutions. Bryan Brayboy, Jessica Solyom, and Angelina Castagno (2014) refer to tribal nation building as the “political, legal, spiritual, educational, and economic processes through which Indigenous Peoples engage in order to build local capacity to address their educational, health, legal, economic, nutritional, relational, and spatial needs” (p. 578). Institutions of higher learning, historically created within the construct of settler colonialism, build nations that erase the participation and contribution of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPoC). Indigenous administration, faculty, staff, and students act as tribal nation builders with their continued presence in the confines of academia. This increasing Indigenous presence, voice, and activity push back against the paradigm of the settler colonial nation.

In this special issue, Dr. Brayboy (2021), referring to his own personal challenges working within institutions of higher education, writes: “I came to see these clashes as sites of possibility and promise. The promise and possibility did not negate the problems. They did, however, change the way I thought about my work.” The students who participated in the conversation documented in this commentary expressed some similar thoughts. While nation building and academia may be seen

as a contradiction in terms, the work documented in this special issue explores how some tribal communities and citizens create space within academia to strengthen their skills, broadly speaking, so as to maintain, revitalize, and expand their own cultural knowledge. Dr. Rebecca Tsosie (2021), also in this special issue, writes: “For much of this nation’s history, education has been an instrument of assimilation. Today, it can and must be an instrument of self-determination, but what will that entail?” She provides many examples of continued patterns of assimilation as well as ideas about how education can be an instrument of self-determination. Both of these concepts resonate with student perspectives expressed in the conversation documented here.

This commentary focuses on the roles Indigenous graduate students envision for themselves and others as nation builders both inside and outside of the academy. To explore the concept of tribal nation building in higher education from a student perspective, three graduate students and two faculty members who attended the Tribal Nation Building in Higher Education (TNBHE) Convening, hosted by the guest editors of this special issue, came together in conversation one year following the convening. The University of Idaho faculty members, Dianne Baumann and Karla Eitel, facilitated the conversation with three graduate students, Cody Artis, Dory Goldberg, and Abdean Smith. Dr. Baumann, a registered descendent of the Blackfeet Nation, is assistant professor of cultural anthropology and American Indian Studies within the Department of Culture, Society, and Justice. Dr. Eitel is director and research associate professor within the College of Natural Resources. Cody Artis and Dory Goldberg, of the Diné/Navajo Nation, are graduate students within the College of Law specializing in Native American law. Abdean Smith, an enrolled member of the Assiniboine tribe, is a graduate student within the College of Education, Health and Human Sciences and a scholar of the Indigenous Knowledge for Effective Education Program (IKEEP), with a focus on secondary social studies education.

We (Dianne/Karla) approached the students (Cody/Dory/Abdean) with the idea of their perspectives offering a valuable contribution to this special issue, and we include them as co-authors in this commentary that builds around their knowledge, experiences, and ideas. We approached this commentary through the frame of the conversation as method (Kovach, 2009), and in our conversation, we touched on concepts of representation, land, self-determination, and navigating the culture of institutionalized education. This is our effort to elevate tribal students in higher education as daily nation builders. The following is

an edited conversation with the students. Dianne/Karla's prompting questions can be seen in bold, below, followed by students' responses.

In what way do you feel you build up your tribal community's knowledge within your degree program?

CODY: One thing I definitely have brought to the University of Idaho, especially the College of Law, is the ability to talk about a lot of problems and shed light on Native issues. For example, we were talking about the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and how these standards are just in place to adhere to a White American standard of reasonableness. I kind of challenged that in class, which was a really interesting challenge because everyone was thrown off a little bit. I think after the summit, I definitely became more outspoken in class and really tried to challenge the settler notions of federal law . . . not having federal Indian law be about property and about the way people see property, but also the ways we see criminalization of people of color. I'm very fortunate to have a professor who is Native, and I'm very fortunate that he's mentoring me. And because of that, my grades have skyrocketed. I think it was solely because I had support and I had these people that were nudging me along and creating these environments for my success. But, when I see my other relatives, other people of color, they do not have that, and they're still in the lower 25th percentile. A lot of them even want to quit. They're like: "This institution's not for me. This law school isn't for me, or the College of Law is not for me." It's just kind of heartbreaking. We're not creating an environment that's open and that's inclusive or including them. But going back to the tribal summit, that's why I was really happy to see that I wasn't alone in facing these obstacles, that everyone else is facing the same thing. And even the whole land-acknowledgement presentation from the tribal member from Maine, I thought that was super cool because they're actually working not just for land acknowledgement but for actual going back to the community, giving back to the Native community there.

ABDEAN: I feel like since I'm so far a distance from my actual tribe that I'm so far from being and haven't done anything with my tribe. But being here in the Northwest and growing up in the Northwest, I've gravitated towards the other tribes and worked with the Kalispell tribe for 18 years, and now recently with the Muckleshoot tribe. Where, through my schooling, I've created a tribal unit with lesson plans with tribal perspectives. I wanted to present it to their school, so hopefully I will apply for their tribal school and hopefully get a

job there. And also since I'm a member [of a tribal nation], I want to use my life experiences and research skills to learn from others so I can instruct in a manner that encourages critical study of history and social studies. The goal is to bring my knowledge into higher education through representation, being a person of color and as a leader, as a teacher, since there aren't many people in the education field like me. Just using my perspective of being a Native and Black person in a society that's dominated by White culture.

DORY: I have to agree with that [Abdean's comment]. For me, coming to Idaho was very, very difficult for me. The culture there was just very, very different. But once we did see that there was other Natives there and that we were on actual ancestral lands of the Nez Perce that actually was just within itself, it was just very empowering and I felt very proud to be there. I feel like me and the other Native students that have been there, we've gravitated to the other Native students that are there. I think we understand each other. I guess bringing my knowledge of what I've learned, just bringing some of those components into the classroom is enlightening to other people because I don't think that they realize the experiences that . . . we weren't brought up in certain things. Even just talking about my grandparents, that there's not running water, there's not electricity. So for a classroom filled with people who've had these things, they don't understand that type of living. We bring about just different components to that to, I guess, maybe open the eyes of different people and how they perceive Native Americans. Actually, there's another component to it, too. There's that imposter syndrome that you bring on when you're in law school, that you're not good enough, you don't belong there. I feel like being in Idaho, I really had a strong onset of that imposter syndrome. I just felt like I didn't belong. But then, I just kept reminding myself: "This is not just about me. This is for my community. This is for my ancestors prior to me." I think about my mom. I think about how my grandparents lived.

As our colleagues so skillfully point out in this issue (Stevens et al., 2021), Native students consistently experience high rates of racism, isolation, financial strain, lack of mentorship, and lack of pedagogical and professional congruency with their goals and values. Cody considers himself "fortunate" to have one Native professor and mentor to work with in law school, while the non-BIPoC law students and professors are so surrounded by people that look like them they may never realize the stigmatization experienced by their classmates. Dory expresses

similar feelings through her experience with “imposter syndrome,” but negotiates that obstacle through thoughts of her family, community, and ancestors. Abdean recognizes the lack of people in education of both Native and Black ancestry, thus reinforcing his desire to represent in a good way. These are unique, yet similar interpretations of representation and self-determination.

Have you faced resistance within academia?

CODY: So, that was one of the things that we brought up is resistance from other students who say “I don’t believe in critical race theory. I don’t believe that racism exists.” They’re all a bunch of White boys. And I’m just like: “These guys.” They get to say these things without any repercussions of course, because the majority of faculty are White. But some faculty would be like: “No. We’re down for the Brown.” We do have White allies in a lot of this stuff. But some groups, they’re just so hostile towards people of color.

DORY: I feel at times, I’ve heard from other students who are interested in my culture and who are interested in me, I’ve heard them tell me that they’ve heard other students kind of sighing at the fact, like: “Oh, no. She’s talking again about her culture or talking about her Nativeness or whatever.” So yeah, there is that pushback just from other students. I think within my first year of law school there was another classmate that really just was very against some of the cases and was saying: “I don’t know why we need to learn this. I don’t know why these Indians can’t just get over it and just live within the society that’s built up for them.” In fall semester, during Columbus Day, there was a classmate who remarked to one of my other fellow classmates that he should be wearing a loincloth. I was just so appalled by that because they just still don’t get [how egregious this is]. There were times that I just felt the school just didn’t really understand the severity of [what it means] when these comments are being made, especially about us because we’re still here. It kind of felt like the administration just really didn’t want to get involved and they thought: “Oh, well you guys can just work it out.” It’s just hard, especially with administration, when you’re in a place that is, like I said, the school is on ancestral land of the Nez Perce and you would think that they would really be forthcoming to try and jump on some of these issues, but it doesn’t seem like they are.

ABDEAN: It seems like it’s pretty universal. Feeling like being one of the few Native students that you have to be the representative for everybody at times. I’ve received a lot of support from the Indigenous

Knowledge for Effective Education Program (IKEEP). The classes that I've taken, typically, we don't have anybody saying anything too crazy in those because they're taking those classes out of their own usual interest for Indigenous People. My experience with pushback was more during my student teaching. I'm at [an elementary school here] in Moscow [Idaho]. So, most of those students there are non-Natives. We've had a big unit where we've taught about the different tribes from Columbus through the Trail of Tears. Being online, it's interesting because we have parents a lot of times sitting in the room with their child as we're teaching different perspectives to history. We're teaching perspectives where Columbus wasn't a hero, or Lewis and Clark, we're using the tribal perspectives on those and the Trail of Tears, and just everything that happened in this country. So then we have the families, we ask the kids to interview their parents too, and ask stuff like whose land are you on. We give them a map with a link and it goes back to the tribes that occupied the country before colonization. So, they're seeing what tribe was there and then it's linked to the tribal webpage. We ask them to fill out a graphic organizer on the information from the tribe so that these kids are learning about the tribes. Some of the pushback we've experienced is with the land. One parent even would comment: "Well, all the Indians are dead, so why are we even talking about this stuff?" Yeah, you see the pushback, including: "This is our property. Property of the U.S." They keep pushing back on whose land it was prior to colonization before that was all taken and all these treaties were broken. Yeah, the student teaching just kind of affirms that it's going to be a long uphill battle to try to introduce more of a critical analyzation of history.

Cody and Dory both described feeling hostility or open resistance to them from fellow students, and a lack of support from faculty in addressing issues from other students. Their experience connects with experiences described earlier in this special issue by Brayboy (2021), who reminds readers that institutions of higher education were not built for Indigenous Peoples, and that they are in fact built on a foundation that values ways of knowing and being that are very different from the values and ways of being that are held by many Indigenous nations. Brayboy (2021) reminds us that it is hard work to get institutions to fundamentally shift. And yet, there are examples of programs that are grounded in values and ways of being that are more reflective of tribal values. For example, Abdean speaks of the support he received through

participation as a cohort of IKEEP. However, Abdean describes another context in which he has faced resistance, the K-12 public school system. He explained how he is seeking to challenge students to think differently about their understanding of history, and that while students may be receptive, there is still some pushback from their families. A new generation is open to learning history inclusive of the first people's perspective, while the prior generation refuse to entertain there is a history beyond a settler-colonial bent. The new generation is growing and learning under the nation building by and from our students.

What does tribal nation building mean to you?

CODY: I guess going back to my community and using my tools to help them. Whether that's through educating them about federal Indian law and policy, educating them through political ideology or economic ideologies or theories, and being able to give that back to the Native people, but also the people of color there. It's just not Native people, but it's also immigrants who are there on expired visas or ones who have been there since the 1960s, and the ones who have stayed there and made that their home. In our eyes, we have to take a lot of these settlers' tools to deconstruct the mansion that he built, but also using those tools to understand a lot of the things that are probably not going to go away. A lot of these settler institutions are pretty big and pretty enormous, that a lot of people probably argue and say: "Yeah, we knock them down and reconstruct them." But with that reconstruction comes a lot of hardships for a lot of poor and oppressed peoples because they're barely getting by. And a lot of them, if that falls, a lot of them are going to fall with it.

DORY: I think for me, I think it's just basically awareness. When there are people who don't understand things, I always explain to them: "Please go educate yourself on Native American history or even Native American law." I guess for me, I want to bring about awareness. I want to encourage the youth. I want to help other tribal nations, even if it's not within my own, I'm willing to just bring about whatever I can. I mean, I came into law school for a purpose and a reason. And so, for me, I just want to be able to help in bridging I guess certain gaps and make it stronger for us in Indian Country.

ABDEAN: Yeah, I really think, kind of just going from what Dory said, nation building, it's building rapport with the different tribes and establishing that this is to create and share opportunities when they arise. I don't anticipate working for my tribe, but I wouldn't hesitate to reach out and share these opportunities with other tribal

members if I hear of anything. Also, establishing more effective communication between the tribes, which are going to allow different tribes to share their stories and just work on alliances that are going to benefit all tribes. I think building that rapport and those alliances with the different tribes are what I hope to accomplish with nation building.

Evidenced in the shared experiences of these students and other contributors to this collection of articles, nation-building activities might include showing up in colonized spaces, challenging colonial narratives, and building community capacity through education, networking, and advocacy. The students describe a range of activities that they connect to tribal nation building, from direct use of tools and knowledge to giving back to their own community (Cody), to showing up and bringing awareness of Native issues within settler colonial-dominated settings (Dory), to extending one's skills and service to help other nations (Abdean).

The students share experiences in which their presence is passively and sometimes actively resisted, and it is clear that their nation-building work comes at a cost to the student, whether it is in enduring the attitudes of other students who question why a cultural perspective continues to be related, or in having to continually represent and explain a cultural perspective, or in figuring out how to respond to the lack of action taken by administration to address openly racist comments. And yet, each of these students expresses a commitment to continuing this work. They express that they were supported through specific programs that are designed to recognize and value Indigenous epistemologies and pedagogies. They express that they find support from within the community of Indigenous students on campus as well as other students of color, Native faculty, and non-Native allies. They are motivated to be nation builders.

We challenge readers to reflect carefully on the thoughts and words of the participating graduate students. Students navigate the processes of colonialism within academia while actively pushing back with their own nation-building tactics and actions. The extent of compassion towards not only their own communities, but towards all oppressed and erased communities expressed by each graduate participant is astounding and should fill us with hope and direction. We extend gratitude towards the ancestors and relatives who have made it possible for us to engage in this work, and to the future generations who will carry it on beyond our time.

Dianne Baumann is a registered descendent of the Blackfeet Nation and works in the Department of Culture, Society and Justice (University of Idaho) as Assistant Professor of Anthropology and American Indian Studies. Her work revolves around the effects of settler colonialism on American Indian masculinity.

Karla Eitel is of Irish and Swedish descent. She lives and works on the ancestral lands of the Nimiipuu. She is Director of the McCall Field Campus and McCall Outdoor Science School, and a faculty member in the College of Natural Resources at the University of Idaho.

Cody Artis of the Diné Nation is a graduate student at the University of Idaho College of Law.

Dory Goldberg is a member of the Navajo Nation and of Jewish descent. She is a graduate student at the University of Idaho College of Law with an emphasis in Native American Law.

Abdean Smith is an enrolled Assiniboine tribal member of the Ft. Belknap Indian Community. He recently completed his master's in Education, Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Idaho and plans to teach social studies and history at the secondary level in the Seattle, Washington, area.

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