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Myths, Erasure, and Violence: The Immoral Triad of the Morrill Act

THE *LAND-GRAB UNIVERSITIES (LGU)* project leaves us in awe and deeply curious. The result of years of meticulous research, *LGU* points to the fact that fifty-two land-grant universities in the United States would not exist without the dispossession of lands through the violent removal and killing of Native peoples. Much of the existence of these universities has relied and continues to rely on myths, erasure, and violence. We engage these concepts separately, yet it is worth noting that they are interconnected, forming an immoral triad in which each element builds each the other. Their beginnings are steeped in violence, they are marinated in myths, and their continuation is based in erasure. Bryan Brayboy and his colleague Jeremiah Chin have written about the importance of detangling origins and beginnings (Brayboy and Chin 2020). Origins are tied directly to cosmological events. For many Indigenous peoples, emergence is manifested in our origin stories, which are different from our beginning stories (Brayboy and Chin 2020; Vaught, Chin, and Brayboy n.d.). The conditions that make it possible for land-grant universities to exist begin with the violent separation (effectively the erasure) of Indigenous peoples from their lands, a process whose essence is a spiritual and ontological attack. Universities have established beginning stories (often denoted by "est." followed by the date of their founding), which are not the same as origin stories. The beginning stories of universities, pleasurable marinations of myths, omit the origins and write new stories that are rooted in the erasure of Indigenous peoples' connections to place. In our response, we link and unmask the myths, erasure, and violence.

Myths

LGU asks us to rethink what we have come to believe and know about land-grant institutions. Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone write, "Behind the myth [of gifts of free land] lies a massive wealth transfer masquerading as a donation" (2020, 1). This revelation challenges the beginning stories of these institutions through the meticulous analysis of how eleven million acres of land were set aside for their creation. We see the dangers of myths that emerge in this moment. The power of myth (Brayboy and Chin 2020) is not

in its initial telling. Power is in the initial retelling, and the one after that, and the one after that, and so on. In each retelling, the myth edges toward "truth," and there we can see the ongoing harmful wreckage unfolding. The original peoples fade from existence, and the retelling of myths becomes the prevailing truth in their absence. Prevailing "truth" springs from what Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron call "genesis amnesia," the "naïve illusion that things have always been as they are" (1977, 9). As the original peoples fade away, historians interpret and analyze, universities entrench themselves and their stories, and time marches on. The myth becomes "truth."

Lee and Ahtone have offered us a powerful opportunity to revisit the beginning, to question it, reimagine it, and rewrite it.[1] We see and feel the tensions in that rewriting. Tensions reside in the fact that we are both scholars of higher education and have made arguments that Indigenous peoples earning degrees is one way for tribal nations and communities to strengthen and build capacity. We understand the inherent tensions in suggesting that schooling as a way to engage in self-determination. We also understand the messy practicalities associated with knowing that we are both Indigenous peoples and graduates of universities that received some of their land base from the Morrill Act and the other challenges concomitant with the beginnings of our universities. The myths have become truths. We are products of the myths and of lands that were involuntarily turned over for the larger project of higher education in the United States.

We pause to wonder about who benefits from these myths. Language is important; words and text have the power to plant (and nurture) the seeds of myths, casting away groups of peoples and imaginaries. Candis Callison (Tahltan member) and Natalie Diaz (Mohave) provoke us to examine the power of language, its limitations, and its ability to redefine. Callison speaks to the inherent relationship (perhaps the origin stories) that Indigenous peoples have with land, offering an added dimension of thought and practice "about political structures and the ways in which things need to change in relation to Indigenous peoples and access to justice" (Linnitt 2020). Rather than seeing one event as isolated or, in this case, one policy (the Morrill Act) as isolated, Callison posits that events/policies do not stand alone but maintain the social order of injustices. Indigenous erasure was written into the Morrill Act, and *LGU* has helped illuminate the writing (and erasing) on the wall. The Morrill Act was intentional and linked to systemic goals of eliminating Indigenous presence and replacing it with settlers. Natalie Diaz (Global Sports Matters 2020) asserted that the American English language needs to evolve in ways that the country has. This is true in research, policymaking, and practice. How might we create new language? *LGU* urges

us to evolve to a new (yet old) language of origins and beginnings, to do as W. E. B. Du Bois asked of us, "seeking the gain of truth hidden there" (1903, v). Therein lie both tension and possibilities.

Erasure

We want to be clear that erasures can appear in many different forms. In the original theft of lands, erasure was too often physically violent. Indigenous peoples were killed, scalped, maimed, buried (ironic, given the fact that our ancestors were deposited in places that birthed their ancestors before them), and starved—they were literally erased (wasted away) from lack of food or water. Erasure was driven initially by greed and a quest for gold, oil, other natural resources, and property. There were forced marches from Arizona and from the southeastern part of the United States to what is now Oklahoma. There were other marches as well. Marches intensified death and betrayal. The institutions where many of us work are built on the foundation of violent pasts. Those pasts remain into the present, haunting us.

Erasure is still achieved by the lack of Indigenous students, staff, and faculty in institutions of higher education. There are too few Native students in "mainstream" institutions and even fewer staff and faculty. From large national datasets to institutional ones, Indigenous students are often defined by an asterisk; they/we are statistically insignificant (see Shotton, Lowe, and Waterman 2013). We have been erased because we are too insignificant to count, erased because we are an afterthought (if we are even a thought) in the realm of higher education. All this in the face of knowing that it was the lands of our ancestors (tied to the violent ways they were eliminated) that made so many of these institutions viable and whole, continuing into 2020. Erasure haunting. Consider what Lee and Ahtone write about the University of Minnesota: "The college shuttered due to debt during the Civil War. But Dakota land brought it back to life" (2020, 9). All this in the shadow of Lincoln's approval of the largest mass execution in the history of the United States when thirty-eight Dakota men were hanged in 1862 (Berg 2012; Chomsky 1990). The erasure, whether through violence or relegation to obscurity or invisibility on campus, is marked.

Stephanie Fryberg and Sarah Townsend, writing about the psychology of invisibility, note, "Thus, invisibility is not just a case of disappearance or of the lack of representation; rather, it is continually reproduced by an active 'writing out' of the story that both reflects and reinforces the status quo" (2008, 175). What is plain to see in the Morrill Act is the *writing out,* the erasure of anything related to Indigenous peoples. Language used in the act signified that lands were public, deeming that "public" lands were readily

available and dispensable for university consumption. Missing from the legislation were the origin stories, the truth-telling that "public" lands were already occupied, that those lands were cared for by Indigenous stewards, and that Indigenous caretakers had been part of the origin stories since time immemorial. Lee and Ahtone are tellers of stories, asking us to deepen our knowledge of "beginnings," especially those that are tied to legislative acts and policies. There are more beginning and origin stories to learn, know, and speak about. We must take up the task of unearthing these stories.[2]

Violence

The beginning stories of many universities are rooted in violence. As noted above, the violence was physical, although there are instances of other forms of violence where an exertion of power proceeded to the death of bodies and spirits. More recently, violence has taken the form of research that portrays Indigenous peoples as inept or primitive, co-opting our knowledge systems in sustainability studies, and the theft of intellectual property. These violences make us feel unimportant and invisible; they refuse to recognize the unique knowledges we bring to campus and to society. Our sense of belonging to places and communities is diminished and shaken, which brings forth another contradiction: the paradox of belonging and simultaneously unbelonging to the place of your birth and emergence.

Violence also erupts in the inherent tensions between the monetary value placed on land—which is treated as a commodity (as property) to be sold and traded, sometimes as cash and in the Morrill Act's case as scrip—and the relational aspects of land for Indigenous peoples. For the latter, the relationships are much deeper and more profound. Lands are the places from which we emerged. Among some Indigenous peoples, umbilical cords are buried in the lands. The burial returns those just birthed to the lands in the same ways that their ancestors were. This is not a transactional relationship where the land serves its owner but a relationship rooted in reciprocity and love where people nurture the land as it nurtures them. Generations of ancestors are buried in the earth, evoking the joys and excitement of connecting umbilical cords to nahasdzáán (a Diné term that refers to the earth taking on a motherly role) and to the sweet sorrows of reconnecting people's bodies when it is time. What happens to the inherent values that are aesthetically, relationally, cosmologically, and spiritually related to the land when land is engaged as it was through the Morrill, Homesteading, Dawes, and a long list of other violent acts?

Conclusion

As we conclude, we are struck by the prominence of paper in the process of land dispossession. Cash and scrip are paper. Land, a multidimensional living entity that we engage through our senses, is relegated to paper and ink. Robin Wall Kimmerer reminds us that "just about everything that we use is the result of another's life, but that simple reality is rarely acknowledged in our society. . . . [A] sheet of paper is a tree's life, along with the water and energy and toxic byproducts that went into making it. And yet we use it as if it were nothing" (2013, 148). The Morrill Act, like treaties, was marked by an X, as Scott Richard Lyons (2010) reminds us. The X marks were written on paper. Paper used as nothing. Yet the foundational component of paper is trees, which grow on many of the very same lands that have been sold, traded, and bartered. The violence of these acts is memorialized on parts of those very lands that have provided sustenance and survival for Indigenous peoples. Paper that generates cash, scrip, treaties, and policies are part of another's life, in sorrow for the ways they are often manipulated to harm and exclude and begging us to restore their beauty and divine relations to Indigenous peoples.

When Indigenous peoples who emerged from lands are violently removed from them and then attend the institutions built on the violence, what should we expect about new, emerging relationships?

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Notes

1. It is worth noting that these data lay dormant and untapped until a partnership between a journalist (Ahtone) and an academic (Lee), with interest from a journalistic outlet (*High Country News*), led to the unearthing of this information. See Callison and Young (2019) for elaboration on this point.

2. We understand that there are sensitivities around origin stories. We are not suggesting that any sacred aspects of origin stories should be shared.