

JUSTICE NOT GESTURES: FLAGSTAFF MOVES TOWARD RECOGNIZING INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S DAY

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PHOTO BY KLEE BENALLY

Flagstaff, Arizona is part of a growing list of cities attempting to reconcile their tarnished relationships with Native American communities by recognizing the second Monday in October as “Indigenous People’s Day.” The idea of Indigenous People’s Day began as — and in many ways still is — a celebration meant to disrupt and counter Columbus Day. At least nine cities celebrated Indigenous People’s Day for the first time this year, including Albuquerque, Portland, St. Paul, MN, and Olympia, WA.

Northern Arizona University professor of English, **Jeff Berglund** said, “honoring the legacy of Columbus is little more than a symbolic ritual celebrating Manifest Destiny and the legacies of colonization.” Diné activist and musician **Klee Benally** said, “If you celebrate Columbus Day, you’re celebrating the genocide of Indigenous People.”

However, when **Flagstaff City Councilwoman, Eva Putzova** approached Mr. Benally and other local Native activists in September to hear their thoughts on recognizing Indigenous People’s Day, she was met first with skepticism. Addressing a packed room of students, faculty and community members at NAU’s **Native American Cultural Center**, Mr. Benally addressed the reasons why Native people might be reluctant to embrace the push to celebrate Indigenous People’s Day in Flagstaff. “We recognize that we need something to celebrate,” said Mr. Benally.

The Guardian recently reported that the **United Nations** will “investigate the plight” of Native people in the United States. Mr. Benally pointed out, “UN CERD previously called for the ending of Snowbowl’s contract due to the infringement on Indigenous People’s rights.” The 2.7 million Native people who live on federally recognized tribal areas are plagued with the highest rates in the country for unemployment, diabetes, alcoholism, and suicide. In fact, rates of suicide have jumped so dramatically that the Navajo Nation has recently declared a state of emergency. Beyond that, Native communities face land and resource conflicts with federal and state governments with near-constant frequency. In Northern Arizona, **SB 2109** is a coercive bill attempting to manipulate Hopi and Navajo people from their rights and access to the water flowing in the Little Colorado River. **Peabody Coal** has been mining Black Mesa, collapsing aquifers and poisoning springs since the early ‘80s.

The legacy of uranium mining continues to poison communities living anywhere near one of the 521 abandoned mines. Tourism and recreation on sacred sites such as the San Francisco Peaks and the proposed development at confluence of the Colorado and Little Colorado Rivers have disrespected and further marginalized the culture and spiritual identities of regional Native people.

Anti-homeless and “loitering” laws disproportionately affect Native people. In 2013, local lawyer **Mik Jordahl** noted, “in local police records over a recent eleven month period, 133 arrests were made under the ‘loitering to beg’ law. Of those arrests 70% were of Native Americans,” he said. According to the **United States Commission on Civil Rights**, because of lack of access to adequate council and racial profiling, the incarceration rate of Native Americans is 38% higher than the national rate.

Mr. Benally reminded the audience that it wasn’t long ago when one could walk through downtown Flagstaff and see signs hanging in the windows of businesses that said, “No Indians or dogs allowed.” “We need to address historical trauma from settler colonialism,” he said. “We must recognize that Flagstaff is not just a bordertown,” a term often associated with Flagstaff as the largest city bordering the largest reservation in the country. “It’s occupied stolen lands from Indigenous people,” he said.

The terms colonization or colonialism typically conjure up stories of the past, and among general audiences it is often regarded as something that took place long ago. Post colonialism has been described by scholars as “prematurely celebratory,” and ultimately doesn’t allow us to critically engage with the complex ways in which colonialism occurs today. Scholars such as **Scott Morgensen** and **Andrea Smith** have more recently deployed the term “white settler colonialism” in order to focus on the obvious and complex ways colonialism is performed and reinforced every day, how it is embedded in everything from law and policy to seemingly innocent interactions between native and nonnative ways of being, and how colonialism is part of the everyday lived experience of native people. They note that when white settlers came to this land, they didn’t just bring their bodies. They brought with them their histories, values, and ethics. They brought their ideas about gender and sexuality, and other hierarchically organized supremacist systems. They brought their own ideas of nature and their relationships with the land as property. They brought their own ideas of what is normal, what is natural.

“What do we celebrate?” Mr. Benally asks the audience. “We celebrate resistance.” Celebrating what it means to be Indigenous, therefore, necessarily includes resistance to those systems enforced through settler colonialism: white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism. As we celebrate we realize there is a lot of work that needs to be done.” Mr. Benally remembered what it was like to sit in the council chambers in 2002, when the city was deciding whether or not to enter into contract with the **Arizona Snowbowl**, eventually agreeing to sell the ski resort 180 million gallons of reclaimed wastewater a year for snowmaking — a move marked as unacceptable to at least 13 regional tribes of the southwest. “There were many people from the business community that came out and were vehemently opposed to Indigenous people extending ‘religious sovereignty’ over the Peaks,” he said. “Using very racially tinged comments, they preferred short term economic gain over our cultural identity.”

Part of celebrating Indigenous People is allowing them to speak and be heard on their own terms, with an understanding that their words matter. In 1974, at the height of **Summit Properties** attempt to develop “Snowbowl Village” in what is now **Hart Prairie**, then chairman for the Navajo Nation **Peter McDonald**, apparently frustrated with the blatant racism directed



toward him and other Native people said, “If you wear your feather, make Kachina dolls, weave rugs and pose for tourists, you are a good Indian, but if you exercise your rights as citizens, you are a bad Indian.”

Mr. Benally and his family have much experience performing traditional dances in front of white audiences in Flagstaff, at NAU and at the **Museum of Northern Arizona**. “It seems like, in Flagstaff, sometimes our culture is only accepted as entertainment, sometimes our culture is only accepted if it is a commodity, if it’s on a shelf, in a book, behind glass, but we’re here,” he said. “Our voices matter. Our cultures matter. Our ways of life matter.”

NAU professor of Applied Indigenous Studies **Lomayumtewa Ishii** said, “We cannot celebrate Indigenous Day when there is so much injustice going on.” He expanded on the idea of resistance to elaborate on the term brought up earlier in the forum, “survivance.” Referring to the relationship between survival and resistance, “the idea of survivance is centered on the importance of the present, but also is concentrated on stories and narratives of survival, of the brilliance of Indigenous life,” said Dr. Ishii. “These stories concentrate on resistance, the survival of indigenous peoples. Centering also on what it is that enables indigenous peoples to survive despite over 500 years of colonization.” Dr. Ishii asked, “What are those aspects of being indigenous that enable us to survive colonization, least of which is Columbus Day?”

All of this begs the question, what would recognizing “Indigenous People’s Day” actually do for Indigenous People? The “Abolish Columbus Day” events organized by Mr. Benally and other regional Native activists made one point specifically clear: Native people need justice, not gestures. Clearly, there is more at stake than what we call the day.

After talking with Mr. Benally, and hearing the concerns of other Native people, Ms. Putzova told those present at the forum that she learned a lot from them, which led to her withdrawing the request for the City to recognize Indigenous People’s Day in favor of drafting a more meaningful process. She is “motivated by the desire to finally recognize our Native American friends and neighbors as true partners whose voice is reflected in our decisions,” she said. “To treat the Native American community with respect means that we go beyond recognizing their rich cultural heritage only as a contributor to the local economy.” Before recognizing the second Monday in October as Indigenous People’s Day, Ms. Putzova is seeking two things from the City.

1. Update on the status of the implementation of general provisions of the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission and City of Flagstaff MOU and create a plan forward addressing items in the MOU with a specific timeline.
2. Provide public hearing opportunities for engagement with our Native American community to identify proposals the City can implement to make a meaningful, positive impact in the lives of our Native American friends and neighbors.

At the forum, Mr. Benally praised Ms. Putzova. “It’s a rare occasion, unfortunately, that a Flagstaff politician is so willing to consult with us and make this process more meaningful to us.” Dr. Berglund agreed that Flagstaff could do better. “In Flagstaff, we should ask, in what ways do we as citizens fail our Indigenous brothers and sisters? Should we maintain business deals that infringe upon religious freedoms? What should we be doing in this border town to address the needs of Indigenous families? In short, we should be asking, what should we do to support the first peoples on whose land we work and live?”

This year marked a momentous occasion for Alaska, which declared the second Monday in October to be “Indigenous People’s Day.” The proclamation encourages “all Alaskans to celebrate the thriving cultures and values of the Indigenous Peoples of our region and to continue efforts to promote the well-being and growth of Alaska’s Indigenous Community.” Given the concerns raised in Flagstaff, one is left to wonder, what exactly will Alaska do to promote the well being of their Indigenous communities?

“Just switching the name out will do little,” said Dr. Berglund. “We need to have deeper conversations about the truth of history and engage in struggles to change contemporary policies which affect Indigenous peoples.”

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