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Dave Miller: *This is Think Out Loud on OPB, I'm Dave Miller. In the last few years it's become pretty common for companies and institutions in the U.S. to incorporate land acknowledgments in their work. These statements are intended to show respect to the indigenous people who have lived on the land for millennia. As land acknowledgments have become more common, critiques have followed that the work to create them often falls too heavily on the shoulders of Native people themselves, that the statements can be focused on the past and ignore the present or the future, and that they can be seen as an end in and of themselves as opposed to the beginning of decolonization. We're going to talk now to two people who have worked on and thought a lot about land acknowledgments.*

Luhui Whitebear is an assistant professor in the Oregon State University School of Language Culture & Society. She's also the director of the Kaku-lxt Mana Ina Haws; it's a cultural resource center on the OSU Campus. Rachel Black Elk is a junior instructor for the Indigenous Nations studies program at Portland State University. I'm grateful to both of you for your time. Thanks for joining us.

Black Elk: Thank you so much.

Miller: *Rachel, first, I'm curious about a best-case scenario. What to you are the hallmarks of a meaningful land acknowledgement, just in terms of the statement itself, the words themselves.*

Black Elk: Absolutely. And just before we get going, I'll acknowledge my peoples, my ancestors. I'm an enrolled member with the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. I also identify as being Lakota and Lumbee. Lumbee from the North Carolina region, Robeson County, where my family's from. I think there's something interesting about a best case scenario because oftentimes in our classes that I've taught in our program the students are, there's a wide variety. Some are in a younger age range, and then some are actually in the middle of their mid-career or becoming managers and leaders in their own organizations or institutions. I think the best case scenarios are really, in my experience, dependent upon the context of the environment. The legacies of leadership, looking at the work that has been ongoing, and really identifying the power dynamics.

When we talk about best case scenarios I think we do get time in our classes to kind of study out whether there are environments, leaderships, and time resources to really create a best case scenario. We really identify how white supremacy, there's a culture of white supremacy and the sense of urgency can also be an indicator of whether something is given appropriate time, or appropriate time to collaborate in ways that really are respectful. I'll maybe start there and I'm happy to pass it over to Luhui.

Miller: *Luhui, well there's a lot that we'll dig into as we go. But when you look at a statement, or when you help craft one, what are the hallmarks to you of one that you think is more helpful, more thoughtful, more meaningful.*

Luhui Whitebear: Yeah. Haku everyone, I'm going to also acknowledge my peoples. I'm enrolled with the coastal band of the Chumash Nation, and I also have Huastec and Cochimí ancestry. For me, thinking about land acknowledgments some of the most important pieces of it is having information that links to the tribes who are being honored, if they have a web page, so people can continue to learn more. That seems really simple but having that in there, as well as if there are treaties associated with the tribes that are being acknowledged, not all tribes have treaties. That's another thing to keep in mind; that if they don't, mentioning that is also important because it really helps highlight being on occupied land in another way. And really just working in collaboration with them, from the tribes that are being represented, making sure things are how they want, their information presented is really important. I think having those two pieces, if their treaties are not accurate spelling and preferably ways for them to continue to learn more about the tribes, because I think a lot of times people get stuck in that past tense with land acknowledgments and forget about the present tense and the issues that tribal nations and tribal communities are facing now. Also the contributions that tribes to the communities, these lands are being occupied.

Miller: *Rachel, I'm curious about how much you've run into this issue that Luhui is bringing up, and the inclusion of a website is such a good way to think about this and to put it in opposition to the idea that often statements are really situated in the past and as we just heard, can ignore the present lives of Native people today. Is that something that you've run into frequently? Rachel Black Elk, can you hear me? We're going to work on that connection. Luhui hopefully you're still with us - Luhui, can you hear me?*

Whitebear: Yep.

Miller: *Great. So while we work on the connection with Rachel, one of the things that I've been thinking about and struggling with is the implications of calling this a land acknowledgement itself, as opposed to centering indigenous people in this whole enterprise. How do you think about that?*

Whitebear: Personally, I think that the connections to land and waters are really important. I won't say I speak for all indigenous people of course, but those connections to lands and waters are really important and knowing how we move across spaces. So for myself, I'm originally from my tribe's homelands in the California, Santa Barbara area, but I'm also up here in Oregon now and it's been a good portion of my life up here. And grew up primarily a lot of my adult, or younger life over in Siletz area on the coast in Lincoln City. Understanding that I was on Siletz land and knowing the connections and histories of the land and the waters themselves, not just only the tribal histories that were appropriate for me to learn from my family over there, but from those connection pieces as well. I think that it's a little bit of both, and that calling it a land acknowledgement is acknowledging your presence on another person's territories. I think sometimes people forget that this has historically been a longstanding kind of practice.

For a lot of indigenous people around the world, when you travel and when you move to another place, to understand and know those connections and to acknowledge whose lands you're on, and whose waters you're around. I think

that the acknowledgement piece can be okay but not just be it, you know what I mean?

Miller: *This is an important point though, because I think for a lot of people in white or dominant culture, land acknowledgements are a relatively new thing. You're saying that's not the case for Indigenous peoples all around the world.*

How long have you been doing versions of land acknowledgments?

Whitebear: I think a lot of times people think about a land acknowledgement as just a statement that's red, or that's a statement on a web page or an email signature. When a land acknowledgement in practice means understanding those connections, honoring the people whose lands and waters you're around as well. For me moving to Oregon with my family, my stepdad is a Siletz elder. In understanding his histories, my extended family's histories, was important and knowing what are the important issues, based by the people to me that is actually practicing, it's a land acknowledgement, it's not just saying the word. They're saying I'm a guest here. It's also understanding what's important to the tribes that you're around. I can give a couple other examples from campus base work, but I want to make sure I'm not taking up too much space too.

Miller: *Well I think that Rachel Black Elk is back with us. Can you hear me, Rachel?*

Black Elk: Yeah, can you hear me all right?

Miller: *I can, Zoom is back. Let me also remind folks who I'm talking to.*

We're talking about land acknowledgments right now. Rachel Black Elk is a junior instructor for the Indigenous Nations Studies program at Portland State

University. Luhui Whitebear is an assistant professor in OSU's School of Language, Culture & Society.

Rachel, let's take this up where Luhui Whitebear had just left off because this gets to something that is related to, but maybe separate from institutional statements. What we've just been hearing about is the way these statements can be thought about or practiced in individual lives, I'm curious what that's meant for your own life.

Black Elk: Absolutely. For my own life, I think I echo many sentiments of Luhui around having connection to place. I'm federally enrolled in a tribe that is - I'm not in my homelands presently. I think something that, when I talked to our students and when I've had my own experience being both a student, asked to write land acknowledgements, and then as a professional, I had a lot of learning to do. I think something for me that was really transformative about being engaged with this conversation, I was maybe someone who didn't particularly favor or like land acknowledgements. I think what was interesting though was I was fortunate enough to see land acknowledgments given by both Native Indigenous people and the non-native settler folks, and I think really feeling the impact of what the context is in those experiences. I was lucky enough to have mentors and community who were able to really help me study out what are these emotions that are coming up, whether they were positive or negative or neutral. I think that was really important for myself, to really learn about how conflict is either avoided or minimized or can be engaged within ways that are very healing and really affirming. I think for me I learned a lot about when we're talking about our communities, there's a responsibility for the words that we speak.

I think that's something I'm very thankful for because when I was asked to start writing land acknowledgements or giving feedback and critique, or supporting people in that process, I think for me I really wanted to understand how it could be manifested in daily actions. Also, there's kind of this notion of settler moves towards innocence. We work with a scholar, Eve Tuck, and their writings, kind of about understanding that there are strategies and positionings that happen. Kind of this, quote-unquote, like post-colonial, or time, and I think it's really an attempt to relieve feelings of guilt and shame. When I became a part of these processes that was something I really took note of, is how much what gets in the way of something being successful. Or what gets in the way of students or community members hearing something that you've either written or been a part of and really looking at their reactions. And doing that community-based research of getting humbled sometimes, or being humbled, that someone would trust you to give their feedback.

Miller: *If we had- we're talking back before you did some of this work - at a time when, as you said, you didn't like the idea of land acknowledgments. How would you have explained that back then if I had said, "What do you think of land acknowledgments?" What would you have said?*

Black Elk: I think I would have said, just kept it really simple which is, well give the land back.

Miller: *So this is such an important point because, correct me if I'm wrong, but I think it's possible to read a lot of these statements, some of which are a number of paragraphs.*

You could boil a lot of them down to say, we are operating on stolen land. But what they don't normally say is, so we're going to give it back. What does it mean for a statement to have in a sense that first sentence, but not have the second?

Black Elk: Absolutely. That's kind of the point of settler moves towards innocence, and I think just kind of covering settler colonialism. It's a system that banks on eradicating and embracing invisibilizing Indigenous peoples, because land as property is a really huge schema to try to disrupt in the collective American dream, or consciousness, but really we call it settler colonialism. I think in that when I've worked with students, especially my non-native students, who are trying, you hear these similar phrases like, "I don't want to offend anyone" or, "I don't want to make a mistake". Not being perfect is something that can cause reactions of fragility in many people, but especially our non-native students.

I think when we've reviewed work before or have had space with them something we talk about is, well, are they willing to give up land, power or privilege? Are they including Indigenous people in the decision making? Are they providing resources? That's something that it's a really good question around who should be crafting these land acknowledgments. I think Luhui uplifted a really important part which is, working with tribal nations is something that a lot of institutions are very unfamiliar with. Being able to understand the seriousness and having a skill set to navigate that kind of space. There are now people who are trained in indigenous governance, and being able to work with organizations, to work with tribal

nations in a more respectful way. And I think ultimately what we're seeing is, when I say I didn't like land acknowledgments it was because I could, in my lived experience, I could identify where how power structures and power dynamics were very present. If you said something like, "Well, give the land back", you can get many reactions. Or, "We want this power back", or, "We want this privilege to be given to our community". I think in those conversations you really see the integrity of an organization.

I think that's something that also came from my community and my family, was to look for and be discerning of words and actions aligning and being really responsible for how we carry these stories of conflict and pain, but also how we carry forward and uplift the strategies and resistance that our communities are doing. With my indigenous students, sometimes it was about talking about those boundaries, or when I had an assignment that we spent time writing land acknowledgements and I had an indigenous student say, "I don't want to do this". I said absolutely, can you share with me what you would say, what would be a short sound bite and then what would be the long version? I think that is something that Eve Tuck also talks about, is refusal to research sometimes, refusal to participate in projects that are going to further harm, or tokenize, or exceptionalize individuals or communities. That's kind of something that takes a lot of time and skill to have, these conversations with an array of people because you are assessing their power, privilege and access to land.

Miller: *Luhui, I want to go back to something you said, which is so tied to everything we've just heard from Rachel. At the very beginning you said one of the hallmarks of a meaningful land acknowledgement statement is that it was the product of collaboration with the Native peoples of that land. This wasn't just imposed by a dominant culture, by white people, it was the product of actual conversations. The flip side of that though, is if I understand correctly, a lot of Native tribes and Indigenous people are being asked often now to weigh in. To do work, some of it unpaid - maybe a lot of it unpaid - with this collaboration in mind.*

How do you think about that tension between the need for collaboration and then the kind of inequity of forcing more work on the people who don't need to do your work for you?

Whitebear: Over here at OSU the land acknowledgement itself was being worked on more grassrootsy from indigenous faculty. Not just me. I want to make sure people don't think it was just me working on this. Also students, like they said in practice we're already honoring and giving gratitude and recognition. That understanding of Kalapuya land here. I was also taking students as part of their annual training over to the tribes working in partnership with them to help the students have that understanding of this is where the people are now, that are alive descendants as well as other tribes of course, because they're confederated tribes and not all Kalapuya. This is some of the stuff that's important to them in current times as tribal nations and those relationships were already built into practice. I think that's the biggest part, is it's not just the statement itself that is... I think it's important to have a statement and understanding as a baseline for people to go from but there needs to be also more, like what are you doing to continue to engage in learning and what kind of trainings are you offering? That helped teach that where it doesn't always weigh on the tribes themselves, or if you know that one native person that you're always reaching out to, that's not always on them. But like Rachel said, do your own research and you know what's available out there. A lot of people are surprised that tribes have web pages, which is an unfortunate stereotype about technology and knowledge in tribal communities. There is great information on a lot of the travel web pages themselves that present their history in the ways that they want it told, also that highlight current day things that the tribes are excited about. There's also social media to follow for a lot of tribes, not all of course, but it's there. I'd say that over here it did start as that effort before it was institutionalized, and there was a lot of hesitation about what it means to institutionalize the statement. We're kind of - what else is next, right? I think it also offers an opportunity to ask institutions and companies and businesses to do more for Indigenous people that are part of those organizations or institutions, but also more for communities in helping balance everything else.

I think for your main question about where does that, with that tension, I think it's hard to get around and what are some ways that you can... if you can't monetarily compensate somebody, how can you offer services or provide some kind of exchange of gratitude. It doesn't have to always be what people would think of paying a few \$100 for consulting or something like that. It could be in other ways too or actually developing a relationship with people and tribes and sustaining them, not just saying thanks for the land acknowledgement and calling it good, but sustaining relationships as well. So hopefully that has helped answer what you're asking, but I think it is a tension. It's also one like people are scared of messing up. I think we've mentioned earlier, I think a lot of people understand that and do want to help the best way they can.

Miller: *Rachel, I want to finish with a phrase you used a couple of times. Your fear, and not yours alone, that these statements can be a form of settler moves toward innocence. Write a couple paragraphs, wash your hands of the stain and move on, if I understand that correctly. What's the alternative to settler moves toward innocence?*

Black Elk: I think that's a really beautiful question and that's something I'm really thankful to have space with students and community to really look at the context. To not homogenize solutions. There are guiding documents that people have put out. I believe IllumiNative and many other organizations have crafted like, here's some best practices and then, here's where you need to actually create the time to self-study and reflect critically and engage and yes, creating relationships and supporting. I think ultimately when you look at treaties or other documents surrounding tribal nations it can also look at the ways that life ways of Indigenous people are being supported.

Some of the things that we really uplift in my courses are depending on who you are, learning how to follow Indigenous leadership. As best as we can, making sure that tribal people and tribal nations are not having to repeat themselves time and time again. I think that's about - we say, "Oh, I'm going to listen and acknowledge that", but it's also making sure that these things, or critiques, they aren't having to be stated over and over again. I think really looking at all the time and labor where a lot of us really do want to spend our time. We want to make sure resources and decision making, in hiring and representation for communities progresses, and also knowing that sometimes recolonization can happen if we're putting all of our eggs in a colonial basket.

We're really looking at what is most important and I think we're in a time right now, we're in an era of climate change impacting our indigenous communities. When we look at, well, what do we do next, or what do we do? I really believe that our communities are very well versed, very well studied, and should be leading research that really answers a lot of these questions. I think sometimes it's important to ask questions, but it's even more important to know how to receive what people or communities will tell you. I think that sometimes it can be an area where it can be contentious, or it's not. You'll see that integrity part kind of show up. So that's just my perspective, and yeah, something I think about a lot but we can go deeper in a classroom about that.

Miller: *Let's do that someday, Rachel Black Elk and Luhui Whitebear. Thanks very much.*

Whitebear: Yeah.

Black Elk: Thank you.

Miller: *Rachel Black Elk is a junior instructor for the Indigenous Nations Studies Program at Portland State University. Luhui Whitebear is an assistant professor in the OHU University School of Language, Culture & Society and director for the Kaku-Ikt Manu Ina Haws, a cultural resource center on the OSU campus.*