

Becoming Visible: Centering the Native Experience in Solidarity Building



By Janeen Comenote
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What you find in Indigenous communities across the globe is the intrinsic knowledge that everything is interconnected. Silos

don't exist, they don't exist in nature, they don't exist with humans. The intersectional piece of our work is really predicated on this core cultural knowledge that everything is interconnected.

Moreover, when we look at the social sciences and the society in which we live, we can't necessarily disengage ourselves from our families. Our families live intersectional lives. We saw this when we conducted policy roundtables and our communities articulated that housing, education, transportation, leadership development, coalition building, those are all related to one another, and they all have impact on one another. We think intersectional work is the most important work we can do and moreover the most

important work our society writ large in general can do.

I was raised in a very powerful matriarchal household. My Oglala grandmother, she literally told us, "If you don't say something when you see something wrong, it's like you're doing it yourself." That was something she just hammered into us as kids and so that's part of it. For lots and lots of Native people, we find ourselves actually working for our people. That's a very common trajectory for Native American community members all over the country, whether it's 9:00 to 5:00 working, or volunteering on the side, or working with other



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Native families in the school district or on committees. It's baked into our worldview.

Countering Invisibility

Now more than ever, Indigenous communities, as small as we are, need to use this knowledge and connect with Black communities and other communities of color. The single biggest issue that Native Americans in the United States face is invisibility. We are often just ignored in broader policy conversations. In most reports that you see out there from the NGO think tank sphere, we are usually just straight left out.

I helped found the National Urban Indian Family Coalition in 2003 when I realized that American Indians and Alaska Natives get very little attention by anyone. A shocking number of people think that we no longer exist or that we exist only in history and not as contemporary peoples. In the forming of our coalition we realized that urban Indians were even more invisible. Yet those of us who live off of Indian Reservations and in America's large cities

make up about 70% of us. At the same time, we represent a very small proportion of the population in the cities we inhabit, usually in the 3% range. I call us the silent majority in Indian country.

I always tease my friends and say, "Come on guys, we got to put the "I" back in BIPOC."

Stronger Together

Native (and all) communities can be stronger to advance their needs when they work together, rather than on their own, and that is a powerful motivator to build solidarity. We support and encourage all of our members to build relationships with other communities of color in their cities because we make better progress on what our community needs around policy, elected officials, and civic engagement. When you look at education or housing or issue, that's all really pushed by policy; at a very fundamental level policy matters. We're stronger when we focus on policy change and work with other communities of color.



I had the opportunity to experience solidarity work with an organization out of Chicago called the United Congress of Community and Religious Organizations. It's a group of organizations of people of color in the city of Chicago. The American Indian Center in Chicago, again, was added as an afterthought because they forgot about us when they first organized. Years later they're like, "Oh my God, we forgot Indians." They then invited the Chicago Indian Center but the ED at the time couldn't participate, so he asked me if I could. I have never been so glad in my life. It was the greatest experience, but here's what cemented it for me: the Congress is organized around this principle that people of color tend to come together to fight battles; and then once we fight our battles and we do all that work, build all those relationships, when that particular issue has been fixed or addressed or not addressed, we all go back to our silos and we don't talk again until the next battle comes up.

In the meantime, between those two battles we don't know what's really going on in other communities. We don't know what kinds of issues that other communities are facing, and we don't know where our commonalities lie in those issues. When I was working with the folks in Chicago, the principle they organized around is that if I can't tell your story and you can't tell my story, the work we're going to do together is going to suffer because of that.

In a fishbowl exercise they literally put the names of all of the communities of color as well as the religious communities in a bowl. The Black experience, the Mexican experience, the Puerto Rican experience, the Native American, Muslim, Black Christian. So all of those went into this bucket, and we all had to pick one blindly out of a bowl. Then we had to sit in the middle of that circle and talk about our lived experience as whatever that thing that we chose was.

As woke as you think you are, as much as you think you know about some other communities lived experience, you realize really quickly that you don't know anything. I picked Muslim. So I had to sit in the middle of this huge circle of people of color in Chicago and talk about my experience as a Muslim in America. I was like, "Holy crap, I don't know anything." Everybody realized really quickly that we don't know each other's stories. We don't know what that experience for another group in America is like, yet we're organizing as if we do. We need to be more intentional and careful about how we develop these relationships because I want to really



know somebody's story and I need to really know what their experience is and vice versa.

The Four R's in Indigenous Culture

At the foundation of Indigenous cultural knowledge are the four R's: relationship, reciprocity, redistribution, and responsibility. *Relationship* is the single most important R. It's what you lead with. We recognize that not just us as people but us as a world, the globe, all living things are in relationship to one another. Water is in relationship with life. We honor the relationships that we have with one another, that we're building with one another, and

that we have with everything that represents life. We say in our communities that we are all related, and when we say we are all related, it goes beyond just us as humans. It's also to the animals who feed us, to the plants that feed us, to the rain that feeds the plants. All of these are relationships.

The next R is *reciprocity*. The underpinning to relationships is reciprocity. We give back to one another. This includes the plants that feed us, the animals that feed us, and the humans that we work with. Reciprocity is predicated on the belief that one thing or person doesn't take everything. Essentially, it's the antithesis of capitalism.

The next R is *redistribution*. Redistribution is predicated on the knowledge that we redistribute everything. Native cultures were built upon redistribution. There was no such thing as poverty in Native cultures. It simply didn't exist. Redistribution is really the principle of redistributing resources, money, knowledge, food, whatever it is, and human capital. All of these things can be put into contemporary terms.

The last R, *responsibility*, is really about all of us as a collective, that we all have a responsibility to care for our communities. Whatever those communities are. Wherever those communities are. We have a responsibility to care for ourselves and our children and our relatives and our communities. We have this exercise called, *Where Do You Get Your Medicine? Medicine* in native terms is where you get that thing that drives you, that gives you the strength to be the person you're at today. Everybody has medicine,

everybody has a different strength. In order to survive, Indigenous communities had to identify all of the different strengths people brought to the table and work together. For example, if someone wasn't a good hunter, we didn't make them hunt; but maybe they were better at fishing. It's identifying where everybody's inner strength lies, what their specialty is, and what their medicine is. That's why you had healers and hunters and grandmas and all of these different roles. All cultures can use this knowledge. If all of our cultures practiced the four R's, we wouldn't be in half the trouble we're in as a planet.

Shared Historical Trauma

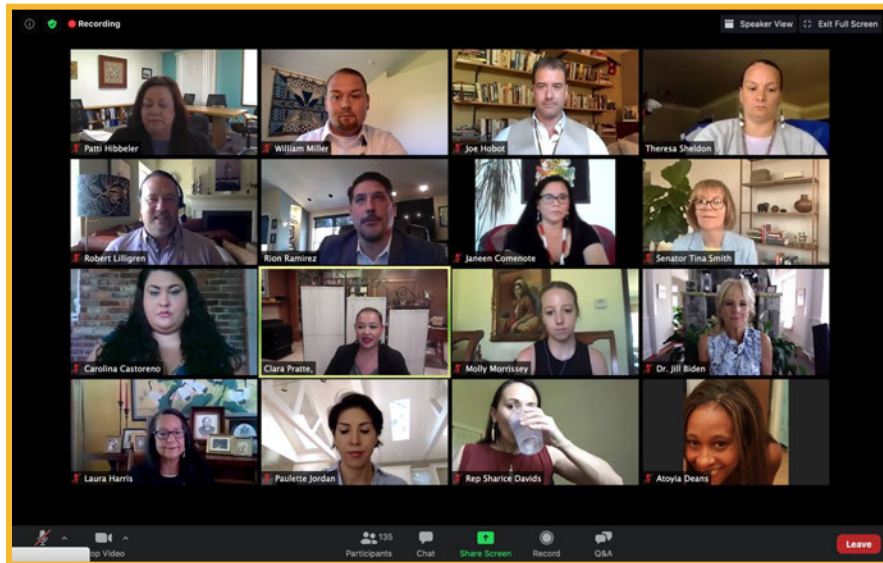
Black Lives Matter and Indigenous solidarity - and the demands for self-determination and sovereignty - are very much intertwined trajectories

for our society. I don't think you can have one without the other. That's in part because we suffer so much of the same historical trauma.

Native peoples and African Americans have a particular connection because of family lineage as well.

This connection is part of lived

experience in both communities and needs to be highlighted. Black Indians are a real thing. Another time I visited the Congress in Chicago, I asked everybody in this room of 400 plus Black folks, "Raise your hand if you have heard that you have Native blood somewhere in your background." I would say of the 400 people about 375 raised their hands. It's that common in the lived Black American experience. I think there's a lot of richness for education between our communities there.



We see the impact of historical trauma in both of our communities in real time today. Where it arises is that Native people really are killed at the same rates and men at higher rates proportionately than our Black relatives. You're dealing with the two groups in America who have the most historic trauma. I can't underline that enough.

This plays out in our communities in very real ways. Native communities often feel that when the same thing happens to our communities, nobody ever says anything. There's no protest.

There needs to be a dialogue and solidarity work between Black communities and Native communities because a lot of Native communities don't know Black history and a lot of Black folks don't know Native history. When we know each other's histories and how those shared traumas play out in our communities, that's when we will find that we actually have way more in common than we have different.

One crucial point to solidarity work between Black and Native communities is the need to center anti-Black racism. I think that Black people should be leading the Black Lives Matter movement. I've have witnessed instances of Native community members (rightly) claiming "Us too!" about police brutality, but honestly, I can't really get behind that. Not because it's not true, it is true, but because the Black Lives Matter movement should not be usurped by other communities.

It takes years of work to build a real coalition of communities of color because at the ground level there's so much that pits us against one another. We don't even realize that oftentimes we ourselves are acting from a lens of white supremacy within our work. It takes time to begin to unravel those threads about how we ourselves approach our work and what it means to do this work in a culture that is a white supremacist culture.

Centering the Native Experience

There's so much other folks can learn from Indigenous cultures, from our core cultural values which are universal. Centering the Native experience in America is really important because it's our land. We're at home. That's a piece of it. What we found particularly in Portland, Oregon, where the Native community started the Coalition of Communities of Color, but also in Minneapolis and some other cities, is when communities of color lead with the Indigenous experience, it actually takes away some of the strange interactions you can have between communities of color. It can act almost as a leveler in some ways. I don't know why that is. I think it's a fascinating phenomenon that I've seen happen over and over and over.

I think that solidarity building is the most important work we can do as a culture in America, period, end of story. ❖

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The National Urban Indian Family Coalition has 45 member organizations in 33 cities across 22 states. The coalition advocates for American Indian families living in urban areas by partnering with American Indian organizations and researching to understand and raise awareness of the barriers, issues, and opportunities facing urban American Indian families.

