Identity, Resistance, and Belonging:
A Policy History of Native Americans in Portland, Oregon

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A companion piece to *Balance and Belonging: Empowerment Economics and Community Development at NAYA*

Introduction

The land on which Portland, Oregon, resides has provided abundant resources to Native communities for time immemorial and is a place which many Native Americans still call home. As one of the largest urban Native populations in the United States, Portland is currently home to approximately 90,000 Native Americans from over 400 tribes.[1] Though Portland is recognized as an urban Native hub, the history of how it became a place of belonging for many Native Americans is one of both structural oppression through settler-colonial policies that stripped away land and sovereignty, as well as stories of resistance, resilience, and pride rooted in Native cultural identity. Settler-colonial policies and practices have sought to erase Native Americans' sovereignty through forced removal and tribal termination. Nevertheless, urban Native Portland residents continue to fight against erasure and build a community rooted in belonging.

This brief summarizes a complex yet sobering and appalling policy history that all Oregonians should know, highlighting several significant federal assimilationist policies that still have direct repercussions for the Native community today. Native-led organizations like the Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA) and others have actively resisted assimilation by developing programs that focus on building shared culture, community wealth, and systemic policy changes.[2] This brief demonstrates how Portland's urban Native community has established a strong and growing identity and presence in the city through these actions. It was originally developed as a literature review for a study conducted by the Institute for Economic and Racial Equity in partnership with NAYA, as part of the Empowerment Economics research portfolio. Empowerment Economics requires that we understand how intergenerational histories, cultural narratives, and systemic oppression shape the current realities of communities of color, and how a community's specific assets interact with this history. The research and literature synthesized here offer the grounding and orientation needed to fully understand the importance of NAYA's work in Portland's urban Native community today, as illustrated in *Balance and Belonging*.

People and Place

Portland, Oregon, sits at the juncture of two major rivers, the Willamette, and the Columbia. To the east lies the Cascade Mountain Range, with Wy'East (Mount Hood), Klickitat (Mount Adams), and Loowit (Mount St. Helens) silhouetting the eastern skyline while the western coastal range sprawls into the Pacific Ocean.[3] The Portland metro area extends south into the Willamette Valley, an area of rich agricultural resources that has sustained Native Americans in the area for centuries. Oregon's unique and vibrant landscape has offered abundant resources for the many Native American tribes both past and present, and hopefully well into the future.

Portland, and more broadly, Multnomah Country, resides on the traditional lands of the Multnomah, Kathlamet, Clackamas, Cowlitz, Tualatin Kalapuya, Molalla, Chinook, and Wasco, along with many other tribes who have called and continue to call this region home.[4,5] These and other Native tribes and bands have lived in this region for generations upon generations. Northeast Portland, specifically the Cully Neighborhood where NAYA's offices currently reside, is situated on lands traditionally used by the Multnomah Chinook for fishing. Located along the Columbia Slough, the thriving fishing village of Neerchokikoo was the site of approximately 126 dwellings and structures, including a building for larger gatherings.[6] The Native people living in Neerchokikoo and other Native villages in the area subsisted on the diverse and abundant resources including salmon, deer, elk, Wappato root, berries, and other local vegetation.[7] Widespread Chinook trading networks wove along the coastline from Southern California to Alaska, and as far east as the Great Plains, creating a prosperous and vibrant Native economy.[8] Shortly after initial contact with settlers, the Chinook communities in the area experienced devastation from disease brought by the settlers. The subsequent generations confronted further upheaval through forced displacement from their homes and communities onto reservations. Due to the centuries of paternalistic and assimilationist policies, many of the living relatives of these tribal communities currently lack federally recognized status. [9] Nevertheless, the Multnomah Chinook's descendants continue their tribe's traditions and culture.

Past and Present Policies: Dispossession, Displacement & Discrimination

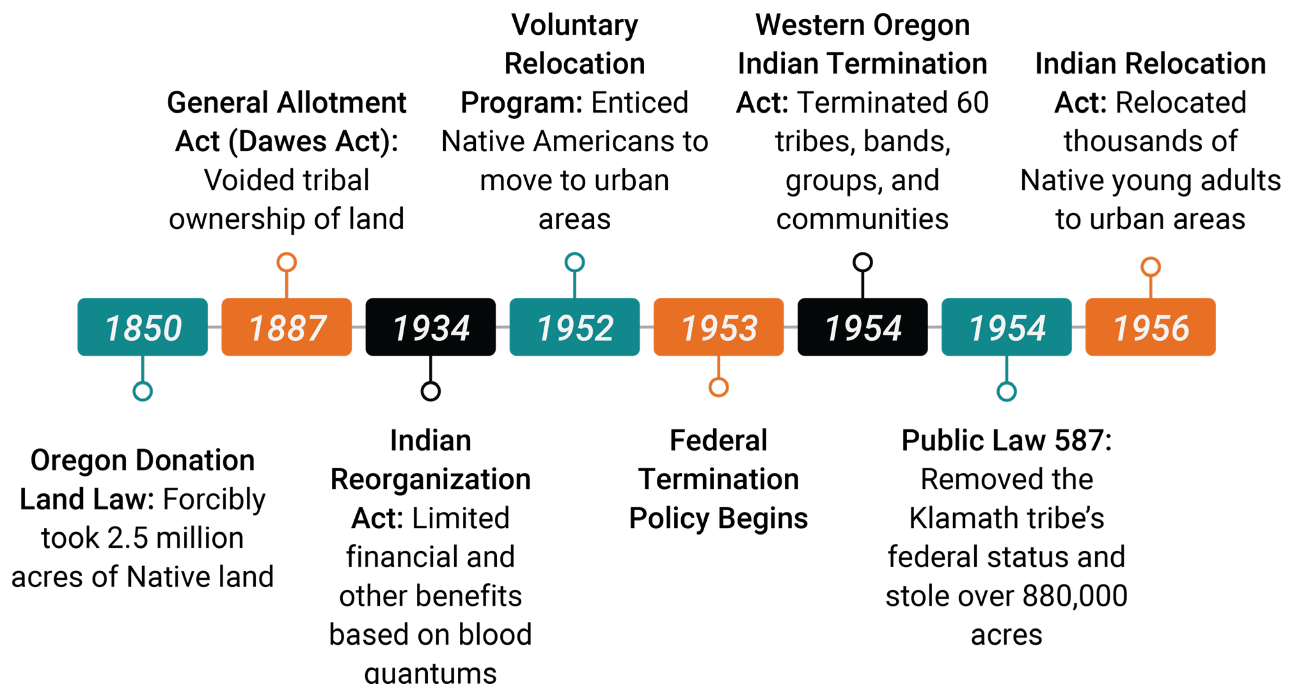
Dispossession: Stripping Native Sovereignty and Native Wealth

Since white colonizers landed on the shores of Turtle Island, Native Americans have confronted settler state policies meant to dispossess Native land, community, and sovereignty, through displacement and discrimination. The settler state policies regarding Native Americans during the 19th century was one of confinement through a "divide, conquer, and contain" strategy. During this time, displacement occurred through forced relocation to reservations, removal of tribal lands, and tribal termination, all of which limited spatial and economic mobility.[10]

In 1850, Congress passed the Oregon Donation Land Law, which provided land claims for white settlers, and the dispossession of tribal lands from Native Americans. Through this law, Congress passed legislation to terminate Native American land titles and remove tribes from the "most desirable portion" of land and offer it to white settlers. To further entrench Oregon's racist history, the Oregon Donation Land Law denied African Americans or Hawaiians from accessing land claims. Within five years after its passage, the Oregon Donation Land Law increased Oregon's population by 30,000 white settlers. During this time, these settlers accessed approximately 2.5 million acres of land, most of which was in the Willamette, Umpqua, and Rogue Valleys.[11] The Oregon Donation Land Law reshaped the Oregon territory by stripping away land from Native American tribes and establishing white supremacist policies that helped to shape Oregon's history, both past and present.

Following on the heels of the Oregon Donation Land Law was one of the most detrimental policies the federal government implemented, the General Allotment Act of 1887. Also known as the Dawes Act, this policy sought to further disperse Native Americans from their tribal homelands. Through the Dawes Act, communal tribal ownership of land was voided and allotted to individuals, who could sell, give, or transfer the land to non-Native Americans after 25 years. Land that was deemed "surplus" was taken from tribes and opened for white settlers to use for homesteading.[12] Although Oregon had already begun seizing land for white settlements through the Oregon Donation Land Law, with the passage of the Dawes Act, the federal government forced many tribes in Oregon to surrender hundreds of thousands of acres of land. Tribes including the Siletz, Grande Ronde, Cayuse, Umatilla, Walla Walla, and others lost their traditional lands used for hunting and fishing, as well as thousands of acres of valuable timber.[13]

Timeline of Selected Harmful Federal and State Policies Toward Native Americans



During the 1950s, the government began implementing its harmful termination policy, which dissolved hundreds of tribes from federal recognition, and sought to eliminate Native identity and confiscate reservation lands. Of the 288 termination bills that entered Congress beginning in 1954, Congress enacted 46, one of which included the Western Oregon Indian Termination Act.[14] This law terminated a staggering 60 tribes, bands, groups, and communities in Oregon, and sold off resource-rich land that was once designated for tribes through reservations.[15] That same year, Congress passed Public Law 587, which targeted the Klamath tribe through "the termination of Federal supervision over the property of the Klamath Tribe of Indians located in the State of Oregon and the individual members."[16] Prior to Public Law 587, the Klamath tribe was one of the wealthiest tribes in the country. Through this act, the Klamath lost hundreds of thousands of acres of rich timberland and have experienced much higher rates of poverty as a result.[17] The termination policy era officially lasted from 1953 to 1970, and during this time Native Americans lost over 1.3 million acres of tribal lands, and approximately 11,466 tribal members lost their political tribal status.[18]

From Rural to Urban: Displacement and Relocation

Before the federal termination and relocation policies pressured Native Americans to move from rural reservations to urban centers, many individuals made their own journeys to urban areas and cities. Between 1900 and 1950, just before the relocation program began, the urban Native population grew from less than one percent to over 13 percent.[19] World War II also acted as a pull for many Native Americans seeking jobs, and Portland experienced a surge in its Native American population during this time. One such example includes the Kaiser Shipyards, built by industrialist Henry J. Kaiser, which attracted workers from across the country, including many Native Americans who moved from rural reservations to Portland to work in the wartime industry.[20]

After the war and in combination with its termination policies, the federal government forced approximately one-third of Native Americans from their homes on reservations to urban areas, thus beginning a period of assimilationist Federal Relocation Policy.[21] In 1952, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) officially launched the Voluntary Relocation Program, which sought to entice Native Americans to move from their homes and communities on reservations to cities with the promise of training, jobs, and housing. Under the reorganization of the BIA, Portland was one of five regional headquarters that oversaw Native lands and policies in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho.[22] Additionally, in 1956, Portland was assigned a relocation office and became designated as an urban area for Native relocation.[23] Four years later, Congress passed the Indian Relocation Act, also known as the Adult Vocational Training Program, which sought to provide Native young adults with two years of training and education.[24] Through this program, thousands of Native Americans moved to cities in hopes of greater economic mobility. The assurance of stable employment and sufficient housing was not realized for many Native Americans, who struggled to adjust to their new urban environment. As Claudia Welala Long (Nez Perce) explains,

For many, the federal programs did not work, and relocated Indians struggled to find jobs, housing, and medical care. While most Urban Indians remained connected to their homeland communities others actively assimilated into their new communities but also maintained contact with families and tribes. Relocation also left thousands of Indians unprepared for city life. They were hampered by social and cultural barriers, including language and spiritual and religious traditions, and had little or no access to resources or services.[25]

Furthermore, the relocation offices meant to provide support for new arrivals were considerably underfunded and understaffed. As a result, many Native Americans did not have the support promised by the BIA to adjust to this new way of urban life.[26] In addition to the hardships surrounding relocation, those who might have wanted to move back to their reservation experienced additional barriers. The BIA refused to provide funding for Native Americans seeking to return, making relocation a one-way journey for many Native families.[27]

Although the federal government's official termination and relocation policies ended in 1973, Native Americans had experienced considerable damage to their communities and tribal identities. As a result, today only nine of the 60 tribes and bands in Oregon have federal recognition and status. These policies attempted to make Native populations invisible through assimilation into urban areas, yet Native people in Portland sustained resilience through Native-led organizations that facilitated Native hubs in the community.

Today, Oregon is home to nine federally recognized tribes, the Burns Paiute of Harney County, the Confederated Tribes of Coos, the Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, the Confederated Tribes of Siletz, the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Indians, the Coquille Indian Tribe, and the Klamath Tribes.[28]

As Native Americans continued to move from reservations to Portland, Native-led organizations began emerging, to serve both Native Americans still living on the reservation, and urban Natives new to the city. These organizations became precursors to current organizations, like NAYA, as they sought to build community, and teach and celebrate Native culture in an urban setting. In addition, many early organizations also offered services and economic assistance for Native Americans who struggled to find jobs and housing in Portland. Two early organizations include the Voice of the American Indian Association (VAIA) and the Portland American Indian Center (PAIC), both of which began in 1959. Though VAIA dissolved in the mid-1960s, PAIC became a powerful organization in Portland, connecting urban Natives to Native culture through programs like annual

summer powwows. In 1970, PAIC's Portland Indian Powwow and Encampment, now called the Delta Park Powwow and Encampment and now run by the Bow & Arrow Culture Club, became a part of Portland's annual Rose Festival, strengthening Native community and culture in an urban setting.[32,33] The Chicano Indian Study Center of Oregon (CISCO) was another social justice organization that began in 1973 in Corvallis, Oregon. CISCO worked with other communities of color to provide education for adults and youth and became one of the foremost Native hubs in the country. The organization was one of the founding sponsors of NAYA in 1974.[34,35] The Native community in Portland grew, and because of these and other Native-led organizations, became strengthened. Though an important movement was growing, Native Americans in Portland continued to struggle with discrimination, high rates of poverty, and issues of miscounting and identification.

Who Counts? Fighting Erasure in the Native American Community

By the 1970s, the urban Native population in the Portland metro-area had grown to between 5,000 and 13,000, though, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Native population in 1970 was only 3,347.[29] This example models a pattern of miscounting and misidentification for Native Americans that continues in current practices. The process of determining who counted and was considered Native American is meant to limit tribal sovereignty and has been supported by the settler-colonial state. Blood quantum became an assimilationist tool used to define who was "Native," and therefore who could access resources as members of federally recognized tribes. Using the eugenics notion that blood could measure how Native an individual was, the BIA linked individual identity to tribal political identity. During the Indian Reorganization Act, blood quantum language was used to arbitrarily determine who was or was not considered Native American. This mechanism relied heavily on Native tropes and harmed tribes by undercounting Native Americans who did not fit a white stereotype of who was considered Native.[30]

Miscounting continues to the present day, leading to the erasure of Native Americans in the Census and other federal and state counting mechanisms. Counting is political and has profound implications on the Native community. Since many governments, organizations, and researchers only count individuals who identify as Native "alone," individuals who identify as mixed race may not get included in the Native community. This erasure leads to policies, practices, and resources that are not comprehensive for the entire community.[31]

An Urban Native Hub: Native Identity in Portland, Oregon

The social and physical environment, historical traumas, and contemporary and traditional Native identity have all helped to shape Native identity in Portland.[36] The Native American community has experienced economic insecurity and lacked both economic and spatial mobility due to state-sanctioned structural violence. Due in large part to the assimilationist policies enacted by the federal government, the majority of Native Americans currently live away from reservations, and many live in large urban areas. As a result, cities like Portland have become urban Native hubs, spaces where Native Americans can build community in the city where they live, as well as connect with their traditional and ancestral homelands.[37] Portland has become one such hub, propelled by the many Native organizations that began this movement in the 1950s, and organizations that continue to serve the Native community. In addition to organizations like NAYA, other organizations serving urban Native Americans have emerged throughout the years, and Portland has over 20 Native organizations serving the community.[38]

As an urban Native hub, Portland's Native American community has established strong values around belonging, shared culture, community wealth, land, and policy changes. Sustaining Native tradition and cultural connection are significant components of the multi-ethnic and multi-tribal Native American community in Portland. The cultural connection among Portland's urban Native community is both interconnected, and multigenerational. The relational worldview model explains how Native identity centers relationships as the root to develop balance. This practice counters the Eurocentric notion that individual asset building are the pillars to economic mobility and sustainability and focuses on economic empowerment through the interdependence of family and community.[39] Much of the Native American experience with settler-colonial history has comprised of asset theft through land, sovereignty, and identity. However, many in the Native American community have defined their own economic development in ways that center the relational worldview model. This model includes cultural capital, physical place, balance, well-being, and interconnectedness between generations and with multi-racial, -ethnic, and -tribal identities.[40] Through this holistic understanding of economic empowerment, the Native community in Portland has become a hub that redefines asset-building to incorporate these important characteristics.

NAYA has helped shape this connection between land, sovereignty, and identity in Portland, and has also done so at the community and neighborhood level. NAYA's campus resides on the northern edge of the Cully Neighborhood on Columbia Boulevard, a busy two lane-road that is used as a thoroughfare for the industrial area. Annexed into Portland in 1985, the Cully Neighborhood is situated in the central northeast neighborhoods of the city.[41] Over half of Cully's land use is residential, with 66 percent of homes classified as single family detached homes. Only two percent of the neighborhood is zoned for commercial use, meaning that residents in Cully must

travel to surrounding neighborhoods to access grocery or dining options.[42] Additionally, the Cully neighborhood is the largest neighborhood in Portland's Northeast District neighborhoods in both physical size and population. The neighborhood is racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse, and includes one of the most diverse census tracts in Oregon.[43] The Cully neighborhood is also considered a high-density poverty area, with over 33 percent of the population living in poverty, and like other neighborhoods in Portland's rapidly gentrifying city, the Cully Neighborhood has seen its share of change in recent years.[44] Though still a part of the Cully Neighborhood, NAYA's location is detached from the neighborhood's residential community. Nevertheless, NAYA is deeply invested in the Cully Neighborhood, creating an important connection between its campus and the surrounding area.

Belonging and Shared Culture

The idea of "belonging" is that everyone feels welcome because Native culture, values, and community are centered in decision-making and actions. With over 400 tribes and Indigenous groups represented in the Portland-metro area, the idea of belonging is multi-tribal and multi-ethnic and embraces those who self-identify in the community. Native leaders have also actively built inclusive coalitions with other BIPOC leaders, recognizing that Native identities are not mutually exclusive from other racial and ethnic identities. Within Portland, physical places of belonging are also significant, as they create spaces for community to come together and build cultural connection. One such example includes NAYA's Neerchokikoo Powwow, hosted each year to honor the land on which its campus resides and the Native community that made this area their home.[45] Belonging is not merely a physical space, but one that incorporates spiritual, cultural, emotional, and mental aspects. This interconnectedness of each of these qualities of life is an example of the relational worldview model that incorporates balance and belonging within the Native community.[46]

> **NAYA facilitates Native members' sense of sovereignty. While sovereignty has many meanings to Native people, one way it is expressed is through a collective sense of self-determination.**
>
> **People who join NAYA's programs develop a greater belief in their ability to create a better or different future from what they once expected not just for themselves, but for all Native people.**
>
> *-Balance and Belonging*[47]

Community and Land Wealth

Fostering Native identity through physical spaces includes intentionality around community economic development. Community wealth incorporates access to land, homeownership, access to entrepreneurial resources, and business development as various mediums for family and community wealth-building. Through the Cully Boulevard Alliance program, NAYA has helped facilitate economic growth that focuses on inclusion, sustainability, and equity through business development.

Additionally, the Cully Neighborhood has a vibrant Native community, due in large part to NAYA's proximity and connection to the neighborhood. Native businesses such as Bison Coffeehouse and NAYA's Native Made Pop-Up have helped to establish a Native business corridor in Cully.

> NAYA's strategic positioning and advocacy in political spaces are critical to the organization's systemic efforts to build Native wealth. While the IDA has assisted many individuals and families in the community, at the current rate, it is nearly impossible to keep up with the increasing gentrification and inflated housing prices in Portland. NAYA's emphasis on policy advocacy and coalition work distinguishes it from many other IDA providers. NAYA is acutely aware that structural—policy—change is needed if the Native community is to prosper and effectively access community wealth-building initiatives, now and in the long run. In tandem with meeting current IDA participants' immediate needs, NAYA seeks to build a better tomorrow for future IDA participants.
>
> *-Balance and Belonging*[48]

Policy Change and Coalitions

The Native community in Portland has strong levels of civic engagement and collaborates with other BIPOC communities to work around policy barriers that limit access to economic mobility. Historically, policies have been weaponized against Native Americans, but the Native community uses policy to intentionally change the status quo and shape the political landscape to benefit the community and bring about greater well-being. For example, each year NAYA hosts a Legislative Day of Action to advocate for policies that improve social and economic well-being for Native Americans across Oregon. Through these efforts, Native Americans have a seat and a voice at the table and are actively working to shift the narratives toward more inclusive policies and systems that enhance the holistic well-being of the community.

Conclusion

Over the decades, as Native Americans moved to Portland either for jobs, through forced relocation, or for many other reasons, the city developed into an urban Native hub. How Portland became an urban Native hub has roots in settler-colonial policies and practices but is also a story of resilience, endurance, and restoration. This brief offers an initial look into countless examples of how Native Americans in Portland and beyond are combating erasure and how organizations like NAYA help cultivate spaces of belonging for the Native community. *Balance and Belonging: Empowerment Economics and Community Development at NAYA* provides an in-depth analysis of NAYA's culturally specific approach to wealth-building through its Individual Development Account program and the work of its Community Development department. The urban Native community in Portland has resisted harmful narratives and policies and, in part through organizations like NAYA, has built a multi-generational, culturally rooted community centered on Native identity and belonging.

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This policy history brief was initially produced as background research for *Balance and Belonging: Empowerment Economics and Community Development at NAYA*, a case study on the Native American Youth and Family Center's (NAYA) Community Development department that was funded by Northwest Area Foundation. This work fits into a methodological approach to understanding specific local expressions of systemic oppression, which is part of the analytical approach used to understand Empowerment Economics (PI: Jessica Santos). This brief was designed by Sylvia Stewart.

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