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Beyond #LandBack: The Osage Nation's Strategic Relations

Jean Dennison

In January 2016, Ted Turner announced that he would be selling his 43,000-acre ranch on the Osage reservation (Bluestem Ranch) and that bidding would begin in thirty days. Turner had acquired the reservation land through a series of purchases from other Oklahoma ranchers in 2001 but now wanted to consolidate his bison ranching operation further north.[1] Multiple people I spoke with during this time suggested that Turner really should be repatriating this land to the Osage Nation, especially given his commitment to land restoration and the fact that he had never sold land before.[2] Osage leadership went as far as to suggest this option to him via text message, but he did not take them up on this proposal.[3] Turner's commitment to restoration evidently did not extend to Indigenous peoples' territories; this was still very much a business decision for him. The only way Osages were going to be able to regain this land was by buying it back. The Osage Nation ultimately bought this land for $74 million dollars. This acquisition reversed the colonial trend of Osage land loss that had begun when the Nation signed the Treaty of Fort Clark in 1808, its first treaty with the United States. Prior to the nineteenth century, Osage territory included most of what is now Oklahoma, Kansas, Arkansas, and Missouri. Through various colonial processes, by 2015 the Nation owned less than seven percent of the land on its own reservation, which the state of Oklahoma claimed was Osage County, Oklahoma, but which the Osage Nation continued to argue was reservation land.[4] Such ongoing battles over geographic authority are a fundamental part of why Native nations are motivated to buy land.

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I argue that the Osage Nation utilized *strategic relations* to get land back. By strategic relations I am referring to relationships that are built specifically to facilitate a larger goal. Such relations are often quite fraught, leading to further entanglements with settler authority, capitalism, and other colonial structures.[5] Here and in my other published work, the term *entanglement* offers a way of naming the current situations in which we Osage and other Indigenous peoples find ourselves, which are not generally of our own making but which we continue to remake into something both beautiful and uniquely our own.[6] This article focuses on strategic relations as a tool to name and focus our attention on how Native nations are navigating such entanglements. Ultimately, this article argues that Osage leadership uses strategic relations as steppingstones toward rebuilding the essential relations that the Land Back movement enables. Naming these as strategic relations is thus a way to honor both the ongoing creativity of Native nation leaders and to try to open as much space as possible for Native futures.

While this land purchase could certainly be claimed as part of the #LandBack movement, this article explores the important differences between Native nations' efforts to buy land back and the movement surrounding the hashtag, expanding understandings of what *land back* currently entails. Strategic relations are rarely discussed in #LandBack efforts and are undertheorized in the larger body of Indigenous studies literature. While relationality is a common theme within these spaces, the focus is generally on more idealized relationships, especially with nonhumans rather than with colonial actors. This disparity is illustrative of tensions that exist between activist movements, scholars, and the work happening within Native nations, as Indigenous peoples are using many different strategies to navigate ongoing colonialism. Understanding these different approaches helps us to tell fuller stories about the varied motivations, tactics, and outcomes that #LandBack involves for Indigenous peoples today. In telling fuller stories, we not only better represent the current realities Indigenous peoples are facing but we ensure that our scholarship does not work to foreclose Indigenous futures.

Before delving into the specifics of the Osage context, this article begins by grounding my discussion of strategic relations within Indigenous studies scholarship and movements. Specifically, I look at how this concept fits within existing literature on relationality, land, various #LandBack efforts, and wider relations with colonial actors and forces. I then spend some time contextualizing this twenty-first-century #LandBack effort by describing Osages' relationships to land in our stories and histories. This article then returns to a discussion of how acquiring land in the twenty-first century required the Osage Nation to forge many strategic relationships, both internally and externally. Such strategic relationality is far from ideal and often has lasting consequences, but for the Osage Nation it has been the main tool for getting land back and, ultimately, ensuring our survival. The final section of this article looks at Osage discussions about how the land will be used. Rejecting the idea of strategic essentialism, this article instead seeks to understand how such future visions are both strategic *and* essential. This article is thus about the almost impossible and deeply fraught relations that Native nations are building to ensure our future.

Strategic Indigenous Relations

Scholars in Indigenous studies frequently talk about relationality.[7] It may, in fact, be the core tenant of the discipline. Relationality is an Indigenous framework for approaching the world that focuses on creating a balance between all beings, including those that colonialism dismisses as nonsentient, inanimate, or supernatural. Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson summarizes much of this research when she writes that "relationality is grounded in a holistic conception of the interconnectedness and inter-substantiation between and among all living things and the earth, which is inhabited by a world of ancestors and creator beings."[8] Indigenous studies scholars demonstrate how relationality works toward reciprocal relationships and mutual responsibility, whereas colonial relationships are too often based on and working toward extraction, independence, and isolation.[9]

A fundamental part of Indigenous relationality is land. Natives often see the land bases of our nations as both representations and extensions of our people.[10] Land is vital not only because it is what colonial systems have most directly targeted but because it is often central to our political, social, physical, and spiritual relationships. Land is often at the core of Indigenous identity and who we are planning to be into the future.[11] In her chapter "Land as Life," Tonawanda Seneca Nation scholar Mishuana Goeman points out that "maintaining a relationship to the land is at the heart of Indigenous peoples' struggles."[12] Contributing to Goeman's and other Indigenous scholars' theories of land's worth as existing outside its property value, Native nation leaders have long pursued their land bases as an existential necessity rather than a financial investment. So many of our ways of creating health are tied to the land, including what we eat, what practices have sustained us as cohesive polities in the past, and the impact of nature on mental health.[13] These are the territories from which we govern, enact sovereignty, and ensure the future of our nations. These homelands are what make the nation a reality.

While the battle for getting Native land back is as old as colonialism itself, it took particularly potent form in the United States during the Red Power movement in the 1960s and 1970s. The occupations of Alcatraz Island (1969–71), Fort Lawton (1970), and Bureau of Indian Affairs headquarters (1972), for example, were all done in the name of seeking the return of Native land.[14] Describing the successful Fort Lawton effort, Thomas Kahl writes, "The group took the base with the conviction that land back would provide Seattle Indians the means and the confidence to express their Indigeneity without hesitation."[15] It was not only that so many federal policies were framed around removal, relocation, and other forms of land alienation, but that land has always provided the space necessary to enact our cultural practices and sovereignty.

#LandBack is a recent hashtag offering a rallying cry to this longstanding effort. This hashtag originates from the Indigenous organization NDN Collective and is a call for "returning land to the stewardship of Indigenous peoples."[16] This group grew out of organizing around President Trump's rally at Mount Rushmore on July 3, 2020. At this event, Indigenous peoples called for the recognition of treaty rights, especially the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, which reserved Peha Sapa (Black Hills)

for Lakota peoples. The peaceful action was met with arrests, pepper spray, and rubber bullets from the National Guard, but also international support and media coverage.[17] Building out from this action, the NDN Collective developed #LandBack as an Indigenous-designed metanarrative to "create the critical mass needed for large-scale shifts in mindsets, investments, and policies."[18] They launched their initiative on October 12, 2020, Indigenous Peoples' Day. The #LandBack movement crucially understands *land back* as more than transferring land ownership. It challenges colonial capitalism's structures, especially those created to serve corporate and federal interests at the expense of Native peoples. NDN Collective's Landback Manifesto calls for Indigenous peoples being granted full and informed consent, not just consultation rights, in their historical territories.[19] This move is a vital one, as too often Native nations engage in government-to-government consultation processes with federal agencies only to be treated as one of many stakeholders whose values are in the minority, who can thus easily be ignored. Corporations are particularly good at mobilizing state jurisdiction and resources to deny Native nations' sovereignty.[20]

There are several limitations to such movements, however. First, they rely on non-Native willingness to repatriate these lands, which is both unlikely and fraught. Calls for settlers to "engage in active solidarity by relinquishing control and leveraging access to power and privilege" are powerful, but unlikely to have the desired effect in any substantial way.[21] They certainly are not going to move the needle with landowners like Ted Turner, at least in the short term. Furthermore, the #LandBack movement frequently combines this call for returning lands with a deep critique of capitalism and an insistence that returning lands to Indigenous peoples will "mitigate the impacts of climate change."[22] This movement, thus, too often falls into the trap of justifying land transfer through the assumption that Native peoples exist entirely outside capitalism and that they will utilize this land in a fundamentally different way. Such a move maps neatly onto older tropes of the ecological Indian, tropes long critiqued for positioning Indigenous peoples as part of nature rather than deserving of full rights, especially over our lands.[23]

Many Indigenous peoples are not wholly rejecting capitalism or even extractive industries, but are instead strategically using these as tools for ensuring our future. Speaking directly to these issues of Native relationships to the land and difference, Navajo Nation scholar Andrew Curley writes,

> Critics of tribal governments as inappropriate expressions of Indigenous practices often gesture toward the land, Indigenous relationships with the land, and resurgent cultural practices. However, extractive industries have helped assuage some of the longstanding impacts of genocide, violent displacement, and forced assimilation. For generations, Indigenous peoples were able to survive on their lands through strategic engagement with extractive industries and capitalism.[24]

Native nations today must fight for the ability to make these decisions for ourselves, as much on our own terms and toward our own ends as possible. These decisions don't always feel or look good, but in the context of genocidal colonialism, such strategic approaches are frequently a necessary steppingstone. Like the Navajo, Osages

have long utilized oil extraction and other capitalist endeavors as tools to ensure our continuation as a Nation.[25] #LandBack and other environmental movements seem to foreclose the possibility of Native nations using land strategically. There is a real danger of predicating the return of land to the virtue attributed to Native environmental purity. Sometimes, in the search for a fundamentally different path forward for all peoples, the very tools by which Native peoples have been able to fight off the worst aspects of ongoing colonialism are invalidated.

As Native nations continue to navigate the ongoing settler-colonial capitalist moment, many are choosing to be strategic about how these systems work and finding creative ways to work within them. The sizable increase in casino and other economic-development investments tribes are making today exemplify such strategies, greatly increasing their ability to care for their own citizens, shape regional and even national politics, and buy back land.[26] These fraught choices certainly lead to many precarious entanglements, but they are central to how Native nations are navigating ongoing colonialism.[27] Indigenous studies should be naming how messy and fraught relationality is in practice. As Trawlwulwuy scholar Lauren Tynan points out, despite the "mystique and romanticism" that surrounds relationality, it "is not easy, especially when living in a settler-colony."[28] We must be careful not to mirror colonial scholarship, which has for too long been abstract and removed from daily Indigenous needs and experiences.

There are certainly Indigenous studies scholars who have named the hard relations Indigenous leaders must forge in the face of colonialism. Indigenous studies scholarship around density, for example, argues for appreciating the strategic ways Indigenous peoples navigate colonial experiences rather than just focusing on Native difference from colonial actors and actions.[29] Perhaps the most widely cited example of thinking through the strategic decisions Indigenous peoples have had to make in the face of colonialism is Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Tribe and the Lower Sioux Indian Community scholar Scott Lyons' conception of X marks.[30] The classic example of an X mark is the literal marking of an "X" on treaties, where an uncoerced assent was not possible, though assent is given nonetheless. He defines the X mark as "a contaminated and coerced sign of consent made under conditions that are not of one's making. It signifies power and lack of power, agency and a lack of agency. It is a decision one makes when something has already been decided for you, but it is still a decision."[31] Lyons expands this notion of X marks to incorporate such institutions as current American Indian nations who are taking on state functions to ensure Native people have a future. For Lyons, today's Native nations have become a powerful means for these communities to assert themselves in the present. Lyons' work points to the long history of strategic relations Native peoples have enacted to try to ensure their future. Such relations may be seen not only in treaties but also in the ways some Native peoples have embraced the fur trade, intermarriage with settlers, battles for citizenship, boarding schools, or military service. Strategic relations build upon this idea of X marks, describing how Indigenous peoples are navigating fraught colonial relations in ways that open space for and enable Indigenous agency in the face of ongoing colonialism.

The Stories of Our Land

Our land has always been at the center of Osage understandings of who we are and who we strive to be. This land-based knowledge is embedded in our clan system, where we learn from the natural world around us to understand the role we need to play in our family and community. It was also embedded in our precolonial practices, with each day centered on land-based engagements such as prayers that took place at sunrise, sun high, and sunset; and of course, health and healing would not be possible without deep relationships with and knowledge of the land. After describing some of these relationships as they were recorded in our 𐓁𐓘𐓚𐓟 𐓗𐓘𐓚𐓟𐓪 (origin stories), this section will describe how colonial forces have attempted to disrupt them, and why Osages were motivated to rebuild our relationships with our land.

My clan, 𐓴𐓝𐓵𐓟 𐓗𐓛𐓡𐓣𐓛𐓚𐓪 (Gentle Sky), has our own 𐓁𐓘𐓚𐓟 𐓗𐓘𐓚𐓟𐓪, which an elder of our clan, 𐓜𐓛𐓵𐓛 𐓛𐓚𐓟𐓣𐓛, offered to Omaha Tribe scholar Francis La Flesche in 1914. This 𐓁𐓘𐓚𐓟 𐓗𐓘𐓚𐓟𐓪 documents how we chose our territory and built the relationships we needed to thrive. In this story, leaders of the clan sent a messenger to find a place where we might become a nation. He descended from the stars in three different locations, but each time it was night and all he saw was darkness. During the fourth trip, the leaders decided they would accompany the messenger. In this location, it was finally light, and the group encountered trees, water, plants, animals, and people. Each of these encounters taught them about the things they needed to become a nation, offered them names, and showed them the way to live long and healthy lives. Ultimately, the group came to a beautiful house that was beyond description, where they knew they could thrive.[32]

This 𐓁𐓘𐓚𐓟 𐓗𐓘𐓚𐓟𐓪 reveals the importance that land played in forging Osage life. It was through this land that Osage built the relationships necessary to thrive. The second being they encountered was a bison, who offered them many teachings about the land, plants, and living a healthy life. Part of the 𐓁𐓘𐓚𐓟 𐓗𐓘𐓚𐓟𐓪 reads in translation, "For a third time the Buffalo threw himself upon the earth, and the white corn, together with the white squash, he tossed into the air. Then spake, saying 'These plants the little ones shall use as food as they travel the path of life. . . . They shall enable themselves to live to see old age."[33] In addition to sprouting various kinds of corn and squash, the bison also connected Osages with several medicinal plants. These plants, the bison promised, would enable them to "make their limbs to lengthen in growth" and to live long and healthy lives.[34] This and other 𐓁𐓘𐓚𐓟 𐓗𐓘𐓚𐓟𐓪 illustrate the ways that Osages at this time understood our animals, plants, foods, and healthy life as all deeply interwoven and emplaced in our lands. These relationships were honored through the regular recitation of this 𐓁𐓘𐓚𐓟 𐓗𐓘𐓚𐓟𐓪 and by our ceremonial practices throughout each day, and they continue to be honored as our people take on clan names. These are the practices that have allowed us to thrive as a people. The land was vital because it was where we had the relationships necessary to not just survive, but thrive. While we changed locations within our territory and created new practices to address 𐓴𐓛𐓁𐓘𐓱𐓛 (chaos) that developed, we continued to connect these relations to place to ensure our health as individuals and as a nation.[35]

Colonialism, in all its forms, disrupted, but did not extinguish, these relationships. From 1808 until 1839, seven treaties stripped Osage control over ninety-six million

acres of land in what would later become Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, and Arkansas, representing 75 percent of the Osage land base; in return, we received only $166,000 in cash, annuities, livestock, and farming supplies.[36] These agreements were frequently made not just under duress but through outright deception. Indian agent William Clark, of Lewis and Clark fame, later admitted that he had lied to Osage leaders in 1808, making them believe that the treaty would only give Americans hunting privileges in Osage territory. The final document, however, signed fifty thousand square miles of land over to US control.[37] In addition to facilitating generational wealth for settlers, including through the removal of other Natives to this territory, Osage land directly supported "land-grant/land-grab" universities. The federal government gifted the lands from the 1808 and 1825 Osage treaties directly to the University of Missouri, Columbia. The US government demanded Osage lands "as an alternative to their extermination," giving Osages only $700 for them. The university was able to sell some of the lands for $363,000, and it is still sitting on fifteen thousand acres.[38] This and other universities then furthered white generational privileges, as they served white populations and created a system of knowledge that supported their dominance.

The end of the treaty period brought further theft of Indigenous land. As happened with many Native nations, the US government removed Osages from our lands to a reservation in Indian Territory in 1872. These were lands we had likely never used for farming, but only bison hunting. Wild foods, such as *yonkapins*, paw paws, prickly pear cactus, and walnuts, as well as harvested foods such as corn, beans, and squash, were much harder to find or grow on the rocky reservation land than they had been on our former reservation land in what would become Kansas.[39] The twice-annual bison hunt had provided a staple of Osage diets, but during this time bison were driven to near extinction by a combination of economic, cultural, and ecological factors that the formation of the United States had ushered in.[40] As Canadian scholar Danielle Taschereau Mamers notes, "At the close of the eighteenth century, there were between thirty and sixty million bison on the continent. By 1892, the population was reduced to only 456 wild bison."[41] This mass destruction is not only symbolic of the destruction of an ecosystem, but also a symbol of the intentional destruction of Indigenous lifeways and the reign of market capitalism. Taking these hunting, gathering, and harvesting activities away from Osages and other Indigenous peoples also created a more sedentary, less healthy lifestyle. In addition to severing the relationships that sustained us, the United States also created new relationships with foods that have literally been killing us. The commodities promised, and occasionally delivered, in treaties were all exceptionally high in sodium, fat, and sugar. With these forced dietary and lifestyle changes, Osages, like many Indigenous peoples, are at higher risk of obesity, high blood pressure, and diabetes, all of which lead to premature death.[42]

This is not just an historical problem but something Osages continue to navigate. As Choctaw Nation scholar Valarie Blue Bird Jernigan writes, "This reliance continues today through the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, through which the US Department of Agriculture provides canned and packaged foods to around 270 tribes with limited access to the USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). It constitutes the primary food source for 60 percent of rural and

reservation-based American Indians, but the foods tend to be high in fat and sugar. Fresh vegetables are rarely offered."[43] Whether or not Osages rely on SNAP, many of those on the reservation are forced to rely on shelf-stable foods that have the same nutritional issues, since much of the Osage reservation is more than an hour from markets offering fresh food and produce, creating what is often referred to as a food desert. The dietary and lifestyle impacts of being removed to a small portion of our land base and having our relationships severed with the plants, animals, and practices that sustained our health have had a devastating impact on our overall well-being.

Indigenous communities, however, are demonstrating that building relationships to land can heal our bodies, minds, and communities.[44] This movement, generally known as Indigenous food sovereignty, has been growing exponentially in recent years. Writing about her nation's food sovereignty effort on the grounds of a former residential school, Tseshaht scholar Charlotte Coté describes how enabling the land to feed the Tseshaht people transformed the land from a space of suffering into one of care and generosity.[45] Without these connections to the land, cycles of sickness that colonialism has forced on our peoples continue. Through the Osage Nation's land purchase, leadership envisioned a similar process of healing that would enable Osages to build relationships with our lands and all the life they sustain. First, however, they had to find a way to get the land back.

Strategically Building the Necessary Relationships

For Osages to get our land back, Osage officials had to navigate many existing tensions and colonial constraints. Osage officials had to find ways of compromising, understanding what their unique roles were, and working together toward a shared vision. The decisions Osage leaders had to make around the land purchase not only created significant debt but gave rise to a host of tensions that generated additional challenges for the Nation going forward. This section will describe some of the specific challenges #LandBack created in the Osage context, including expanding the Nation's entanglements with the federal government, the hospitality industry, the banking industry, limited liability companies, bureaucracy, and environmentally damaged land. What is more important, the challenges these entanglements created were not understood by Osage officials as permanent traps but rather as temporary obstacles that are a necessary part of getting our land back. Rather than theorizing these as simple entanglements, it is important to understand these as intentionally fostered, strategic relations. Such a move honors the agency within these decisions without losing sight of the power dynamics at play.

The first step in winning the bid for Ted Turner's ranch was that the Osage Nation's Executive Branch, Legislative Branch, Gaming Enterprise Board, and LLC (an independent company formed by the Osage Nation) had to collaboratively plan how much money to offer for the land and decide who was going to manage it. These entities had frequently been at odds with each other, not only because the 2006 Osage Constitution had structured them through a system of checks and balances but because of the colonial legacies of distrust that continued to affect their many

engagements.[46] Quickly building these internal relations, even temporarily, in time to agree on a bid amount required all the actors involved to think strategically. Funding for the land was complicated by the fact that the land itself could not be used as collateral for the bank loan. It was essential to Osage officials that no matter what happened in the future, this land could not again be taken from the Osage Nation, as it already had been multiple times—once during the treaty period and then again throughout the twentieth century. In addition, it was clear that the land was going to be sold well above market value. According to rumors shared with the Osage chiefs during this time, local, non-Native ranchers had significant cash on hand; they were concerned about the Osage Nation expanding its jurisdictional reach and committed to outbidding the Osage Nation.[47] Osage officials thus knew they could not depend on the land to provide enough collateral for this purchase.

Owning the land outright was also a stipulation required by the federal government for putting the land into trust. The trust relationship is one of the most powerful examples of the strategic relations Native nations use to enact authority. This unique obligation to Native nations stems from the treaty period, where the federal government made promises to protect Native lands, peoples, and sovereignty from other threats.[48] The US Supreme Court itself has acknowledged these ongoing responsibilities, such as when the Court in 1942 determined that the federal government had "a moral obligation of the highest responsibility and trust" to Native nations.[49] Demanding that the trust relationship fulfill these "intertwined moral, political and legal obligations" is a strategic move that has ensured the continued existence of Native nations.[50] In practical terms today, having the land in trust exempts the land from most state laws and taxes. Trust status also offers the highest level of protection against foreclosure or land seizure. To keep local and state authorities out of Native nation decision-making, Native nations have often chosen to strategically work with the federal government, despite the many harms the trust relationship has perpetuated, especially in the taking of Native lands.[51] While the federal government has consistently failed as a trustee, Osage and other Native nations continue to fight for their land to be put into trust.[52] Only through the creation of a broad array of connections can Native nations enact sovereignty today.[53]

Given all these priorities, the bank loan needed to be secured another way. The regular income from the casinos was the best tool available to the Osage Nation in guaranteeing the loan, and thus they were going to have to work with the independent Osage Gaming Enterprise Board to secure a deal that was mutually appealing. Prior to this, the gaming board had already been trying to convince the Nation to add hotel towers to the Tulsa casino. The ranch purchase thus offered strategic leverage to push forward their plans, which required the consent of the Osage Nation Congress. In this way, the land purchase also deepened the Nation's reliance on debt and the whims of the hospitality industry, which concerned some Osage officials and citizens.[54] Over the month before the bid was due, Chief Standing Bear worked with the various parties to finalize their loan terms, including the issues around the earnest money, rate percentage, fees, legal expenses, refinancing options for an existing loan, the possibility of tax-exempt status, and the fact that any equity or property liens to secure the loan

were unnecessary.[55] Osage leadership understood that the long-term debt and deepening investment in gaming generated were necessary strategies to regain Osage land.

Discussions concerning the ranch purchase were complicated by existing tensions between the executive and legislative branches of the Osage Nation, which had festered since the implementation of the 2006 Constitution. In the wake of the move by the United States to consolidate all Osage authority into a single council system of government at the beginning of the twentieth century, Osage officials had to relearn how governance might be divided and authority shared.[56] The tensions during the land purchase, while complex and multifaceted, primarily came down to how financial authority would be distributed between the legislative branch, which the 2006 Osage Nation Constitution charged with appropriating money and setting laws, and the executive branch, which was charged with running the programs. In the face of such strained relations, both the executive and legislative branches had to strategically choose to privilege the land purchase above these tensions. Given this context, congress and the executive branch agreed that the best way of managing the ranch was through the creation of a limited liability company (LLC). Native nations typically utilize LLCs to protect their finances from risky business decisions and appoint knowledgeable specialists to manage the daily operations. Such a structure, however, also adds another level of bureaucracy to managing Native nation affairs and often creates additional roadblocks for realizing the goals of both leadership and citizens.

With the passage of the constitution, the Osage Nation's bureaucracy has grown exponentially, but with limited success. The 2006 Constitution created a system of boards that allows government officials to appoint specialized experts to lead various efforts and creates separation of powers among enterprises and elected officials. While knowledgeable, these board members frequently have other jobs, meaning they have struggled with the workload, especially in getting initiatives off the ground. Furthermore, the exact nature of the relationship between the executive branch and the congress was often fraught, especially for nonenterprise boards that did not have clear enough guidelines for how beholden they were to the mandates of elected officials. The board structure also did not stop corruption and significant financial losses for the Nation.[57] Unfortunately, the Osage Nation ranch was a core flashpoint for the Osage LLC going forward, deepening tensions between the executive branch and congress, leading to the increased instability of the LLC's leadership, and limiting the focus and profitability of the LLC.[58] In this way, this compromise between executive and legislative branches had lasting consequences that are still being navigated today.

Despite these tensions, almost all Osage Congress members agreed that this land was a good investment. Shannon Edwards—a three-term elected official born and raised in Oklahoma City and a practicing attorney for thirty-five years—was the only skeptic of the land purchase. Throughout her tenure on Congress, Edwards sponsored numerous bills related to land purchases, but she was deeply skeptical of all investments, wanting to ensure that no special interests motivated the deal, that due diligence had been performed, and that a plan was in place to ensure there would be a return on the investment. With the Bluestem Ranch purchase, she wanted to see comparable sales, an appraisal, and an environmental report, none of which

were generated. Especially given the clear environmental damage to this land and the Nation's struggles with economic development outside of gaming, she was focused on the Osage Congress's constitutional duties to fully assess all proposals on economic terms.[59] Putting gaming revenues that ran the nation on the line, especially for land that was, as she described it, "littered with the remnants of oil and gas explorations and governmental dumping of toxins" did not feel justified to Edwards.[60] Edwards also pointed out that there had been and would be again other lands for sale, both inside and outside the Osage reservation, which would be a better investment. For the majority of Osage Congress members, the land's value couldn't be assessed by a market survey or appraisal, and thus those were not necessary documents to obtain. Instead, the Nation had an obligation to acquire this land at all costs.[61] The future of the Osage Nation felt dependent on outbidding non-Osage landowners and reversing the trend of Osage land theft. Of the twelve Osage Congress members, only Edwards voted against the land purchase.[62]

In addition to the significant financial burden of buying the land, the environmental concerns Edwards pointed out did have lasting consequences for the Nation. In purchasing the land, the Osage Nation became more obligated to care for the land, which had been deeply marred by colonialism and capitalism, especially oil production. Furthermore, the Nation had to figure out how to best utilize and care for the land going forward, something made much harder by the federal government's failure in their trust obligation to directly oversee oil and gas operations and cleanup. Ironically, the federal government used the same environmental damage to stall the Osage Nation's fee-to-trust application. While the nation was able to easily pay down its debt for the land, and the hotel expansion was financially successful, the environmental and governance challenges have continued to plague the Nation. Thus, getting Osage land back required not simply building difficult internal relationships but that all Osage Nation entities had to work in sync to navigate a host of external relationships. Such relationships were approached strategically, with conscious knowledge of the challenges they would bring.

Strategic and Essential

For most Osage leaders during this time, Osage land was an essential piece of our nationhood. [63] Land is what made us who we were in the past and what we needed to have a future. These leaders understood that Osage language, culture, and spirituality were held within the land, and that was its real value.[64] In trying to express to me this importance beyond its market value, Assistant Chief Raymond Red Corn said, "It seems more existential necessity."[65] Rebuilding our relationships with the land was what would enable the Osage Nation to create a healthy community and a future for the nation. This section will look at how these essential relationships with the land were strategically used to obtain the land and envision its future. This section argues against naming these efforts as strategic essentialism, but instead understands them as strategic and essential.

There is significant scholarly debate around the concept of strategic essentialism. Strategic essentialism is defined as "a political strategy whereby differences (within a group) are temporarily downplayed, and unity assumed for the sake of achieving political goals."[66] The common critique of this approach, especially from feminist scholars, is that it may encourage frozen identities that can be used to further inequality. Even when embraced in the short term, these scholars frequently discredit it as a long-term strategy.[67] As Fort Sill Apache Tribe scholar Nancy Mithlo argues, however, in the context of many Indigenous communities there are metaphysical understandings of our relations, especially to landscapes and nationhood, which are very dangerous to dismiss as essentialist.[68] Discussions of identity as constructed miss the relations that are actually at work in Indigenous contexts, where identity is layered and in flux, but still grounded in essential connections.

In early January 2016, Chief Standing Bear had to craft a message that would appeal to the heart of conservationist Ted Turner, who had dedicated his life to restoring native wildlife in the United States. Describing his plan in a meeting with an Osage Nation LLC board, Standing Bear said, "We need to play the Indian card."[69] Standing Bear saw his long-term passion for bison restoration, evidenced in part through his time serving as a trustee of the Oklahoma chapter of the Nature Conservancy, as well as the typical tropes about environmentally conscious Native peoples, as important tools for convincing Turner that the Osage Nation would be the best steward of this land going forward. The January 21, 2016, bid letter to Turner began thus: "On behalf of the Osage Nation, I sincerely hope our bid will be looked upon with favor by you as we seek to regain our lost land and to restore it to the use intended by our ancestors. . . . We do understand the need for use of the bison as a provider of wealth, both monetary and spiritual."[70] Naming the importance of our relationship with bison to Turner was a strategic move that gave the Osage Nation an edge over the bids placed by settlers, but it was also a naming of the relations many Osage understand as ensuring the Osage Nation had a future. The bid letter that Standing Bear sent to Turner is a powerful example of what strategic and essential nation-building looks like in practice. Acting strategically in this moment is what has enabled the Osage to build the relations that are essential to us into our future. While purchasing the land required creating strategic relations with capitalism and the state, relations with plants and animals were the core motivation behind this land purchase. These relations were not only essential for us to be able to heal from the ongoing trauma created by colonialism but, for Osage leaders, they were also what would ensure that our nation would have a future. Here, Osage leaders were taking tools not of our making and using them to build our future; in naming what was both strategic and essential, they were making clear their goals and strategically using them to navigate systems not built for us.

Standing Bear also deployed this strategic and essential approach as he navigated the internal tensions that arose after the purchase of the land about what the best usage of the land should be. On August 24, 2016, the Osage Nation held a Bluestem Ranch celebration in which Standing Bear gave a speech that detailed the process of buying the land and the duties of the Osage Nation to ensure this land was not

destroyed. He argued that some proposals for the land, such as introducing 7,000 wild mustang horses, while lucrative, would cause too much damage to the land. He wanted to see the land as "a classroom for Osage people, especially youth, a home for the bison, a place to grow cattle, and a place where Osages could hunt and fish."[71] In arguing for the importance of this vision, Standing Bear went on to say that, while profit was important, it was not the primary value for the Osage Nation. He argued thus:

> Many of us carry the clan names of our people. These names come from the world important to the Wah-Zha-Zhe. . . . Importantly, you will not find among us names such as profit, rent, or return on investment. Those are words fitting for our Osage casinos, and they mean much for providing the money to our education scholarships, our health benefits, our traditional dance arbors, police, elder nutrition programs, and land purchases. . . . Our traditions, our language, our land all mean something special when put together. That alone has a value which is priceless. I believe we can do great things in saving ourselves from becoming only a remembrance of history. One hundred years from now we will continue to be known as the Wah-Zha-Zhe, and people can say, the Wah-Zha-Zhe have their own culture, they have their own language, and they have their own lands.[72]

In this powerful definition of what has value and what is in fact priceless—land, language, and traditions—Standing Bear clearly articulates the necessary strategies to realize this essential vision. To regain our land, the Osage Nation must engage in systems of profit but must not let those systems of profit become the guiding force. This careful navigation of capitalism and colonialism is a powerful example of what creating strategic relations looks like in practice.

Native nations have few choices but to figure out strategic ways of moving forward. This requires a constant weighing of the best options available to enact the future envisioned by those who came before. Standing Bear explained to me that his primary goal continued to be to achieve "our ancestors' vision of the land that they saw—the same land we see today."[73] This land was not only our territorial base but also a home for the wildlife, including bison, that are core to our 𐓏𐓘𐓚𐓘 𐓴𐓘𐓚𐓘𐓪, names, relations to place, and, ultimately, health. While the Osage Nation had long been a food desert, the real instability of reliance on external entities for food was made clear during the COVID pandemic.[74] Responding to these concerns, the Osage Nation filed a Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act grant application through the US Department of the Treasury in 2020. This funding was part of a large-scale effort by the United States to provide fast and direct economic assistance to Americans. The Osage Nation saw applying for federal assistance as key, not only for food security but ultimately for sovereignty. Again, it was through strategically strengthening our relationships, including that with the US government, that the Osage Nation felt it could best care for its people. An Osage Nation employee task force was formed to administer the funds awarded to the Nation under the economic stimulus bill passed by the 116th US Congress, funds totaling more than $44 billion. Of this funding, Osage officials allotted around $17 million to address food security, which included a meat processing plant, a greenhouse, an aquaponics building, farming equipment,

bison, cattle, fences, pens, and feed lots for finishing cattle for meat processing.[75] Osages would later receive more than $100 million in additional federal funds from the American Rescue Plan Act, which included additional funds earmarked for the bison preserve and food sovereignty efforts. These food security investments enable the Osage Nation to have more control of the food chain for both fresh meats and vegetables, thus asserting sovereignty over our foods and ensuring a healthier future.

By 2021, the remaining debt on Bluestem Ranch—renamed the Osage Nation Ranch—had been entirely paid off, and contained more than 3,000 head of cattle and over 200 head of bison.[76] During his 2021 State of the Nation address, Standing Bear featured the ranch and new facilities as part of his administration's core efforts in the last year. He described the importance of prayer before the first bison slaughter, as marking the significance of the relationship between Osage and bison. He also talked about the importance of food sovereignty, saying, "This bison is feeding our children and our elderly, as we have done for thousands of years."[77] In addition to feeding the Osage people and selling meat to pay the costs of the facility, the Nation has made the hides and other parts available to Osages for important practices such as drum making. By bringing together federal funding, Osage management, and casino profits, the Osage Nation began to offset some of the challenges created by ongoing colonialism, especially for our foodways. Food sovereignty means more than access to healthy foods. At the heart of this sovereignty for the Osage is building relationships with the bison, cattle, plants, and land, in addition to the federal government, so that the land can once again foster health, both physical and mental, in its people. Despite the many challenges inherent in enacting strategic relations, the Osage Nation continues to use all such tactics to enact those relations that kept us healthy in the past. Such practices are not only at the core of what it means for Osages to care for each other in the present, but they are also part of what our ancestors gave us to take us into the future.

Conclusion

Throughout my conversations with and observations of Osage leaders, it was impossible to deny the challenges of their work or their commitment to ensuring that the Nation keep moving forward. Too often Indigenous studies scholarship has missed the opportunity to name or to share these fraught choices and many contingencies of Native nation governance. The constant improvisations and vast expanse of knowledge that this work requires is something that should be appreciated, especially as these nations find creative ways to ensure their future. This article offers a close look at what else, beyond refusal or capitulation, our Nations are regularly engaging in. Ethnography is a particularly useful tool for seeing and appreciating both the strategic and the essential.

This Osage Nation story provides a powerful window into the strategic efforts that are enabling Indigenous nations to build relations with our lands. Too often in the process of describing Indigenous relationality, we only focus on the stories of fundamental Indigenous difference. Naming Indigenous relations to more than humans is

vital, but should not be the only story we are telling of Indigenous relationality. The unrepresentative focus on decolonizing efforts risks contributing to the colonizing trends that limit the options available to Indigenous peoples. The story I have shared instead describes how in the process of gaining land back, the Osage Nation had to strategically navigate both capitalism and colonialism.

From the very beginning of our engagements with colonists, Osages have used capitalism toward our own ends. It was through our insistence that trading posts were built. In addition, we quickly determined how best to secure our territorial authority by monopolizing trade. Similarly, it was only through entering the market economy that we have been able to get our land back in the twenty-first century. These purchases were not solely to expand our wealth, however, but to ensure that Osages could have the essential relations necessary with the land. This land was not an economic investment but an investment in who we are as a people. Through the development of a host of strategic relations, including with ranchers, bankers, and the gaming and hospitality industry, the Osage Nation has been using capitalism to ensure that we have the essential things we need for our future.

While Indigenous studies should continue to be a place for what Tanana Athabascan scholar Dian Million calls "intense dreaming," in which we can envision a world not driven by colonialism or capitalism, it should also be a place to name and discuss the strategic relations our nations are currently enacting.[78] As this world is marked by deep inequalities and conflicting aspirations, relationality must be a commitment to being uncomfortable and working through the current realities as much as envisioning a future fundamentally different from the present.[79] In sharing everyday stories about contemporary Osage experiences, my goal has been to offer a view into the relations Indigenous leaders must navigate as they make the almost impossible decisions about moving our nations forward.

Notes

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2. This article is based on ethnographic research I have done with Osage Nation governing officials since 2004. As part of this research, I was in Oklahoma meeting weekly, if not daily, with Osage officials from January 4, 2016, through September 2016, while this purchase was taking place.

3. Raymond Red Corn, Executive Office Staff Meeting, Pawhuska, Oklahoma, January 25, 2016.

4. At the time of this publication, the Osage Nation's *McGirt v. Oklahoma* ruling is under adjudication.

5. Theories of racial-settler capitalism allow us to see how the devaluation of racialized life and labor works in tandem with colonial territorial dispossession and genocide to create the systems of oppression that exist in the United States and across the globe today. Sarah E. K. Fong, "Racial-Settler Capitalism: Character Building and the Accumulation of Land and Labor in the Late Nineteenth Century," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 43, no. 2 (May 1, 2019): 25–48.

6. Jean Dennison, *Colonial Entanglement: Constituting a Twenty-First-Century Osage Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

7. Matt Wildcat and Daniel Voth, "Indigenous Relationality: Definitions and Methods," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 19, no. 2 (June 2023): 475–83.

8. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "Relationality: A Key Presupposition of an Indigenous Social Research Paradigm," in *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies*, ed. Chris Anderson and Jean O'Brien (New York: Routledge, 2016), 69–77.

9. Kim TallBear, "Disrupting Settlement, Sex, and Nature" (Future Indigeneity Lecture Series, Montreal, Canada, 2016), http://indigenousfutures.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Kim_TallBear.pdf; Lauren Tynan, "What Is Relationality? Indigenous Knowledges, Practices and Responsibilities with Kin," *Cultural Geographies* 28, no. 4 (October 2021): 597–610.

10. Courtney Lewis, *Sovereign Entrepreneurs: Cherokee Small-Business Owners and the Making of Economic Sovereignty* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

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12. [9] Mishuana Goeman, "Land as Life: Unsettling the Logics of Containment," in *Native Studies Keywords*, ed. Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle Reheja (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2015), 71.

13. Charlotte Coté, *A Drum in One Hand, a Sockeye in the Other: Stories of Indigenous Food Sovereignty from the Northwest Coast* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021).

14. Kent Blasset, *Journey to Freedom: Richard Oakes, Alcatraz, and the Red Power Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020); Thomas Kahle, "'It's Not a Treaty, It's a Legal Binding Agreement': Fort Lawton, Red Power, and the Struggle for Indigenous Land Reclamation" (Thesis, University of Oklahoma, 2023).

15. Thomas Kahle, "'It's Not a Treaty, It's a Legal Binding Agreement,'" 3.

16. Claire Elisa Thompson, "Returning the Land: Indigenous Leaders on the Growing 'Land-Back' Movement and Their Fight for Climate Justice," *Grist* (November 25, 2020), https://grist.org/fix/indigenous-landback-movement-can-it-help-climate/.

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18. Pieratos, Manning, and Tilsen, "Land Back," 53.

19. "Landback," accessed February 20, 2021, https://landback.org/manifesto/.

20. Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London and New York: Verso, 2019).

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22. Thompson, "Returning the Land."

23. Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1992): 1707–91; Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: Norton, 2000); Michael Eugene Harkin and David Rich Lewis, eds., *Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on the Ecological Indian* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

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28. Tynan, "What Is Relationality?" 599.

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33. La Flesche, "The Osage Tribe," 280. While the text refers to buffalo, a better translation is "bison."

34. La Flesche, 279.

35. Jean Dennison, *Vital Relations: How the Osage Nation Moves Indigenous Nationhood into the Future* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2024).

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46. Jean Dennison, "Relational Accountability in Indigenous Governance," in *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies*, ed. Brendan Hokowhitu et al. (New York: Routledge, 2020), 295–309.

47. Chiefs' meeting, Pawhuska, Oklahoma, January 5, 2016.

48. David E. Wilkins and K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *Uneven Ground: American Indian Sovereignty and Federal Law* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

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60. Shannon Edwards, personal communication via email, March 7, 2022.

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70. Geoffrey Standing Bear, bid letter to Ted Turner, January 21, 2006.

71. Geoffrey Standing Bear, "Bluestem Ranch Celebration Speech of Chief Standing Bear," August 24, 2016.

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