



Structural Racism: Erasure of Community in San Juan County

February 8th, 2019

Representative Kim Coleman is sponsoring a bill, HB 93 in the Utah State legislature which would allow a minority population of a county to withdraw from, and create a new county without consent of the entire county. This is a sad and discriminatory reaction to the election for the first-time of a majority Native American commission in San Juan County, Utah. The Native American majority has been disenfranchised for more than a century. Maps have erased these communities in the past, and now that they are visible, the northern communities in the county that are predominantly white are considering forming a new government. HB 93 would harm everyone in San Juan County, but most especially the Native Americans who live in the southern half of the county.

Structural racism refers to “[a] system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequality.”¹ They present structural barriers that stand in the way of racial groups securing quality housing, healthcare, employment, and education. In San Juan County, Utah, these barriers to equality persist and have a variety of root causes. Awareness is the first step in trying to solve these important challenges. While major Supreme court cases have provided some guidance in addressing the most egregious inequalities in the United States over the past 40 years, such as in voting rights and education, structural racism still exists in San Juan County and it must be addressed.

Can maps be racist? Yes, and in regards to San Juan County, they often are because they fail to reflect Native American communities.

Utah’s unmapped communities- Visit maps.utah.gov to see that government departments in Utah consistently map white towns with smaller populations, and leave larger Native towns off the maps.

Town	Population	Larger than what mapped town?
Oljato	979 people	Bigger than Green River, UT
Dennehotso	746	Bigger than Huntsville
Aneth	490	Bigger than Wanship
Halchita	489	Bigger than Eureka
Red Mesa	480	Bigger than Veyo
Navajo Mtn	462	Bigger than Springdale
Montezuma Creek	389	Bigger than Scipio Note- Strangely, Montezuma Creek often shows up on maps.
White Mesa	132	Bigger than Dutch John Note: White Mesa . gets mapped sometimes too.
White Rocks	106	Bigger than Brian Head
Westwater*	70*	Bigger than Ophir.

Source- United States Census Bureau. B01001 SEX BY AGE, 2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey Office. Web. 6 December 2018. <http://www.census.gov/>. *Not a census data point.

¹ The Aspen Institute: Roundtable on Community Change. “Glossary for Understanding the Dismantling Structural Racism/Promoting Racial Equality Analysis.” <https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/files/content/docs/rcc/RCC-Structural-Racism-Glossary.pdf>



While there are 8,000 Native Americans across ten communities in San Juan County, Utah, most on-reservation towns do not appear on maps, despite having hundreds more residents than the average mapped white communities in Utah. Many veiled terms are often used to justify denying services to Native Americans, and in this case, the term you hear most often is “dispersed communities.” Many Native American communities are not provided services because they have been labeled “dispersed communities” while towns that white communities live in are provided these services.

This represents one among many examples of structural racism. Invisibility on maps impacts everyday lives and this exact issue was at stake in the San Juan County redistricting court case in 2017 and 2018. Native American communities should never be disappeared.

San Juan County Native communities are not large (based on 2017 Census estimates), but we have for too long suffered the indignity of invisibility on maps. San Juan County Native communities proudly go by names such as: Aneth, Montezuma Creek, Westwater, White Mesa, White Rocks, Mexican Water, Halchita, Dennehotso, Oljato, and Navajo Mountain. However, the government in San Juan County has historically chosen to ignore the people of these places. Our needs are overlooked and ignored, and it is difficult to bring services to towns and citizens who do not appear to exist.

If you want to understand Native American Utahns better, learn where we are, who we are, and that we exist. Approximately, **40% of people in our communities lack running water and electricity.** These are forms of structural racism too. The State of Utah, and the Utah Congressional delegation each has a role to play in elevating and finding solutions to these challenges. Local communities are ready to lead.

This matters because when communities cannot get the services they need through political channels, they have only one option, which is to go to the courts. On November 15th, 2017, San Juan County attorney Jesse Trentadue argued before Judge Shelby that the, “reservation is not necessarily a community of interest. Oljato and Mexican Hat, yes, but not the whole reservation.” Throughout his discourse, he seems to suggest that Native Americans do not form legally recognizable communities because people live across “dispersed areas.”

This logic is extremely flawed and is based on a lack of understanding of Navajo community structure. The community layout of Navajo people is based on cultural norms, no different than how Blanding or Monticello are laid out. Traditionally, Navajo are sheep herders and each Hogan and family is spaced according to cultural beliefs, the browsing needs of their sheep herds, and the needs of their family (including extended family), to name a few. In addition, there is a community network build around the availability of water, grasses, topography, elevation, and climate that has been in place since long before Mormon pioneers arrived. These cultural building blocks of community are what Navajo people adhere to today. Mormon settlers similarly have applied their own cultural norms to the towns of Bluff, Blanding, and Monticello with density determined by locations of churches, businesses, government buildings, gardens, social systems, and many other factors. So, the question is, **why are Native Americans in San Juan County not mapped, and how do we change this form of structural racism?**



Evidence of other forms of discrimination in San Juan County:

#1. Voting Rights. San Juan County is among the last places in the United States that granted Native Americans the right to vote (in 1957), and last year, in 2018 was among the first in Utah to accuse Native Americans of using their racial majority to discriminate against white people (even before the election granted Native Americans control.) On December 6th, 2017, during court proceedings San Juan County Attorney, Jesse Trentadue stated that “Non-Native Republicans should enjoy protection under the Voting Rights Act as a minority, in a majority-minority district.” The plaintiff’s attorney Steven Boos responded saying, “We have no evidence of white minorities in SJC being the objects of discrimination.” San Juan County went on to lose this case, and today for the first-time in Utah history there is a majority Native American Commission.

#2. Translation. There are times when translation services fail Native people, for example during the Monticello jurisdictional hearing on November 16, 2017. A Navajo elderly woman said that the county has a history of discriminating against her and her family. The translator, tried to make her statement sound neutral so as to not offend. UDB recorded this elder’s comments on video and can offer to accurately translate what this elder said to compare against how different the translator conveyed it. In translation, it sounded as if she was against redistricting which is not what she said. [\(Link to video\)](#) Indigenous languages have existed in San Juan County since time immemorial.

#3. False Narratives. On November 16th, 2017, at the same public hearing on redistricting in Monticello and at another in Bluff, non-Natives came out and complained that Native Americans do not pay taxes and therefore do not have the same rights to county services like education, public safety, roads, water and electrical infrastructure, and voting. These statements are incorrect. Native communities provide millions of tax dollars to San Juan County, yet receive only a fraction of the service dollars, the government jobs, and the political voice.

#4. Failure to Notify. In November, 2014, UDB assisted the County in posting flyers at Chapter Houses, running radio announcements, and providing translation services for public meetings hosted by San Juan County across the Utah portion of the Navajo reservation. The county intended to mail letter announcements for the public meetings to every San Juan County resident, but UDB observed that many Utah Navajos did not receive them. UDB was surprised when the county told us that they were unaware that a large percentage of Native Americans picked up their mail in Arizona. During the past 100 years, the problem seems to be that the County has never taken responsibility for knowing or researching what it would take to provide the necessary county services to its Native American population, and for coordinating provision of services across complex jurisdictional boundaries. Inevitably, when it has found itself in court, it has had no choice but to defend its past oversight of Native people, and it has lost or settled every court case.



Bears Ears National Monument Reduced by 85%

ORIGINAL BENM

ILLEGAL BENM

