

September 3, 2020

The Center for Native American and Indigenous Studies wishes to make the following statement in response to the remarks of University of Colorado President Mark Kennedy, who referenced “a trail of tears” in a recent meeting with Faculty Council:

Colloquial phrases tell us a lot about how a society understands itself and its history. Although individuals perpetuate them, they are normalized by a broader speaking community, and thus reflect widespread views among certain populations. Native Americans make up less than two percent of the U.S. population and thus often struggle to convey accurately their lived experiences and perspectives to the American public. As such, many Americans do not think twice about certain figures of speech that have their origins in racial stereotypes or historical atrocities. Phrases like “Indian giver” and “let’s have a powwow about that” are notable examples. Another is the diminution in colloquial speech of genocidal events, like the Trail of Tears.

Throughout U.S. history, numerous Indigenous nations experienced forced relocations from their homelands at the hands of the military and backed by federal policy. For many southeastern Indigenous nations, these forced marches became known as the Trail of Tears, or the Trail Where We Cried. Thousands of Native people died due to exposure, malnutrition, disease, and gunshot wounds. The Cherokee Nation alone lost more than one quarter of its population on the Trail during the harsh winter of 1838-39.

For anyone to use the phrase “trail of tears” flippantly represents ignorance of these atrocities at best, and willful verbal harm at worst. Although we acknowledge that President Kennedy issued an apology in response to initial criticisms, for our highest-ranking University leader to do so calls attention to the need for systemic efforts at the University of Colorado to counter such damaging conceptions of Indigenous history and present issues.

We at the Center for Native American and Indigenous Studies work tirelessly to create safe spaces and community for Native students, faculty, and staff at CU Boulder, in addition to our primary charge to be a hub for innovative research and scholarship in the field. Indeed, this instance highlights the fact that this work should be understood and supported, especially among the top leaders of our institution. We look forward to future dialogues about how such initiatives can be pursued.

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