INDIGENIZING THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE-
UNLEARNING SETTLER COLONIAL HISTORY
ON NATIVE LANDS

by

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ABSTRACT

"Though rarely recognized as such, the national parks constitute one of the largest programs of adult education in the United States" –Robert Pahre

Each year, millions of people retreat to what are now known as (WANKA) America's national parks and their units. This escape from the settler-colonial lives of our capitalistic economy and imperialistic mindset is often touted as a much-needed respite for overworked, stressed-out adults and technology-addicted youth- a result of our "more is better" lifestyle and demand for instant gratification. The learning opportunity afforded, although unconventional, provides space with which to bring the voice of Indigenous Peoples to the forefront of the narrative of national parks' history and the legacy of displacement.

PEOPLE AND PLACE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am writing from the ancestral homelands of the Atakapa band of Akokisa and the Kanakawa of the Galveston Bay, Lower Trinity, and San Jacinto Rivers of Coastal Texas (now known as the Houston metro area). The state of Texas is also home to the Alabama-Coushatta, Kickapoo, and Ysleta de Sur Pueblo Nations, as well as relatives of many other Nations who call these lands home and have stewarded them since time immemorial. I give thanks and prayers to those who have taken care of the Land and everything above and below and have achieved balance in their relationships with everything in the universe, to the benefit of us all. May we open our ears, minds, and hearts to their wisdom and knowledges for the spiritual and physical well-being of generations to come.

CHAPTER ONE

ALL LAND IS NATIVE LAND

In 2022, 312 million people visited the 423 National Park Service sites, including its 63 national parks. Since the service's inception in 1916, almost 16 billion have escaped to "wilderness" areas for mostly aesthetic and recreational reasons (U.S. Department of the Interior, *New National Park Service report finds shifts in visitation patterns, 2023).*

National Park Service sites incorporate a Western ideological framework when presenting history – non-Anglo stories are made to fit the tales of the courageous pioneer and the mythological wild frontier, what Dr. Robert Pahre describes as an assimilated Anglo narrative (Pahre, 2012), thus perpetuating the continuation of false narratives and settler innocence.

As an educator in a middle school social studies/history classroom in south Texas, I have seen firsthand the misconceptions and misinformation brought to the table by not only my 12-year-old charges, but cohorts, administration, parents, and community.

Sourcing the National Park units as opportunities to re-direct the telling of park service history and that of the Indigenous Peoples who have stewarded those lands and waters since time before memory is a vital move to Indigenize and re-think the concept of "America's Best Idea".

CHAPTER TWO

APPROACH, THEORY, AND METHODOLOGY

As a non-Indigenous scholar and inquirer, I strive to carry an Indigenist mindset in not only my academic and professional life but my personal life as well. I recognize that all Land and everything and everyone above and below has a purpose, whether I choose to recognize that purpose at the time of contact or experience or later when it chooses to reveal itself and its wisdom.

As a White person engaging with Indigenist methodology, I am not claiming an Indigenous worldview, but rather making a commitment to participate in a relational framework, engage respectfully with Indigenous Knowledge and Indigenous Peoples, and do the ongoing work of learning how to behave myself properly" (Hughes et al., 2022).

The above words are spoken by Margaret Hughes, co-author along with Shawn Wilson and Stuart Barlo, of *Preparing for the Research Ceremony: Indigenist Researcher Training,* but align with my positionality as an aging colonial settler and one who finds herself at a crossroads in life – what can I do to make this world a better place when I leave it? For my children, grandchildren, and future great-grandchildren. For all things, animate and inanimate.

When envisioning a complete Indigenous research paradigm, I have attempted to sketch a visual representation with as few components as possible while still acknowledging the vital elements, most of which are connected and circle back around time and time again. I focus on theories and works that have impacted me while considering my topic and the archival research I

will be diving into. Following Kathy Absolon's (Anishinaabe and Midewiwin) theory of a whole, ecological, cyclical, and relational framework, I will consider each element as vital to achieving balance, peace, and living a good life. (Absolon, 2020).

As Dawn Marsden (Anishinaabe) so poetically states, "If we know who we are, that all life is connected through Spirit, and if we learn how to live good lives, then by extension we will act responsibly toward the creation of harmonious and sustainable (healthy) relationships in this world" (Marsden, 2017).

Approach

While Marsden's theory requires both Indigenous Knowledges and a recognition of ongoing colonialism and its effects, I am using my positionality to form an Indigenous mindset while acknowledging the latter in all aspects of my life and work.

After the process of recognizing oneself and placing the ongoing effects of a settler colonial world into everyday contexts and relationships, I began to become more conscious of how I take in information. Dylan Robinson speaks of the "tin ear of settler colonialism in his piece *Hungry Listening* (Robinson, 2020). As a middle school educator for several years, I would welcome ANY listening from my pre-teen charges, and have found myself asking them to "settle" down numerous times a day- was I turning a "tin" ear to my kids? Not listening to what they had to say? Only placing value on words that they spoke that were related to poetry analysis, plot development, characterization, verb conjugation, or whatever the lesson was for the day? Have I taught them to be "Hungry" listeners, filling their minds with "required for state testing" content but not satisfying their hunger for peace, comfort, connectedness, and safety? I

only learned in the last year that as a student myself, I need not annotate and fill notebook after notebook with reflections on every journal article, book, and lecture I experience – I need to relax and read, relax and listen, relax and take a breath – it will all come together and I will not forget what I take into my heart and practice in my actions. Robinson describes "Hungry Listening" as the capturing of the certainty of information over the affective feel, timbre, touch, and texture of sound" (Robinson, 2020). As I think about delving into the history of interpretation in the National Park Service, I wonder how much of what has been displayed, relayed, and portrayed in and at these sites has been aimed at visitors hungry to hear about the greatness of our country, although the lands that they are standing on were the genocidal massacre sites of Peoples and cultures. And what about "hungry speaking", the ongoing speak of settler innocence and the destructive narrative spun in our National Park System? The NPS could potentially be a vast educational resource for re-educating those who have spent years being spoon-fed single-lens doses of an imperialistic diet rich in false chronicles.

Theory and Methodology

Dian Million, Tanana Athabascan, speaks of Felt Theory Analysis as "one that creates a context for a more complex telling" (Million, 2008). While she is referring to Native American women writers employing their writing as a way to decolonize the script of colonialism, I believe this is also imperative in the NPS, centering Indigenous voice in the survival of these "pristine" lands – the survival of which is a result of the stewardship and relational centering of all things as vital to the survival of all generations.

"To decolonize means to understand as fully as possible all the forms of colonialism take in our own time" (Million, 2008). I would like to add "and places" to Million's statement, places

not as geographical spatialities designated by Western lines drawn to indicate ownership and power, but as stories, experiences, and sacred cultures in constant motion. Gerald Vizenor (Minnesota Chippewa Tribe) describes what he calls Native Transmotion as "a visionary resistance and sense of natural motion over separatism, literary denouement, and cultural victimry" (Vizenor, 2000). I can think of no better place than the lands now known as National Park Service Lands, "America's Best Idea" (according to Wallace Stegner), ancestral lands of millions of Native Americans, to push this resistance into action in the form of Indigenous voice, stewardship, land acknowledgment, and re-naming.

Mishuana Goeman (Seneca) and Vizenor both assert geographies, mapping, and virtual cartography as vital spaces to make room for when addressing Land and the interrelatedness of all things as the core of Tribal Ecological Knowledges (TEK) and Indigenous ways of Knowing. Goeman posits, "Even if we were to recover the historical and legal dimensions of territory, for instance, I am not so sure that this alone would unsettle colonialism" (Goeman, 2013). I ponder the inscription on the Roosevelt Tower at the North Entrance to Yellowstone National Park in Gardiner, MT – *For the Benefit and Enjoyment of the People* – and imagine an alternative inscription, *For the Truth and Transparency of the Cultural History of These Lands.*

In his work, *Research is Ceremony* (Wilson, 2008), Shawn Wilson, Opaskwayak Cree, upholds the need for balance between Indigenous and Western academic worlds that respects the relational accountability of an Indigenous research paradigm. His conversational narrative, including letters to his sons, focuses on relevant topics and respectful protocols when forming relationships while maintaining responsibility and reciprocity with what is learned. As a non-Indigenous, but Indigenist, student and scholar, as well as an educator who supports an

educational pedagogy that respects all relationships, I also take note of what Wilson et al. define in their book, *Research and Reconciliation* (Wilson et al., 2019), as an Indigenist research paradigm where both methodology and axiology are about relational accountability. When creating my positionality statement, the words of Wilson helped me to be honest about my background and how that has helped me position my axiology- what I value most and create a balanced life that honors those values.

With *Decolonizing Methodologies,* (Smith, 2021), Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou, Tūhourangi scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith presents an opposing narrative to dominant Western colonial-based research methodologies that produce Indigenous realities empowering students and scholars to employ cultural epistemology in their work**.** Smith offers not just a deconstruction of Western imperialist inquiry, but the materialization of an Indigenous framework addressing social justice, self-determination, and decolonization through the critique of prevailing colonized methodologies and a narrative of Indigenous projects as models of centering physical and cultural survival. Smith advances the use of critical epistemology to support survival struggles using Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing and focusing on not just the method, but the foundational methodologies. Again, the focus is on relational spaces that center on not just how things are done (method), but the idea behind them (methodologies), moving the paradigm away from a Western-based capitalistic lens.

CHAPTER THREE

AMERICA'S BEST IDEA

Coined by Wallace Stegner and the title of Ken Burn's wildly popular video and book project, "America's Best Idea" began to morph even before the official creation of the Department of Interior division in 1916 – a foundation was being laid to create spaces protected for their aesthetic properties and "For the Enjoyment and Benefit of the People" (NPS Organic Act 2015). Before the signing of the National Parks Service Organics Act creating the department, John Muir, the "father of conservation" and Yosemite preservation advocate, declared that it was important to maintain a "balance of nature" within wilderness areas (Yonk, 2016). This balance excluded Tribal Nations that had stewarded the land for generations, including the Miwok of the Yosemite Valley. Muir's imperialistic idea of maintaining this "balance" (sans humans), became so engrained in the Western mind that it spread to other protected areas, including WINKA Yellowstone National Park. Shoshone, Bannock, Crow, Nez Perc, and Sheep Eater, living and thriving on the land for millennia, were pushed to reservations outside of their sacred homelands, thereby setting the stage for future removals as the national park ideal spread.

Colville Confederated Tribe member and co-author of *All the Real Indians Died Off and 20 Other Myths about Native Americans,* Dina Gilio-Whitaker states,

> The lingering result of the Yellowstone story is that coded within the language of preservation, 'wilderness' landscapes are, or should be, free from human presence. But

> this logic completely evades the fact of ancient Indigenous habitation and cultural use of such places. When environmentalists reiterate narratives about pristine national park environments, they are participating in the erasure of Indigenous peoples, thus replicating colonial patterns of white supremacy and settler privilege (Gilio-Whitaker, 2022).

As the title of her book suggests, the myth of the "savage" and wild Indian as a mark on the pristine "wilderness" playground for European settlers, who somehow equated the beauty and wonder of wilderness as a white-only privilege, is perpetuated by the lack of an Indigenous voice, representation, stewardship, and the place-name theft of sacred geographic features within the system today.

Although UNDRIP, in 2007 "establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity, and well-being of the Indigenous Peoples of the world and it elaborates on existing human rights standards and fundamental freedoms as they apply to the specific situation of Indigenous Peoples" (*United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples | division for inclusive social development (DISD)*), the fact that the United States was one of four countries to initially refuse to adopt the declaration speaks volumes as to the continuation of a colonial capitalistic mindset, one that endures and continues to shape mindsets and policy when it comes to the National Park System – it is a business to attract consumers and make a profit, in essence making this unbridled beauty available for consumption. Does this mean that certain uncomfortable narratives are left out so that settler innocence can allow us to bury our heads in the sand – to ignore the genocide enacted in creating an aesthetically and recreationally pleasing playground?

A Brief History of Interpretation in the National Park Service

The foundation for National Park Service interpretation began well before the park idea and the subsequent actions taken against Native Americans to clear the land of the "savage" were commenced to make way for colonial settlers to be able to enjoy the wonders of nature, undisturbed by humans. The flow of the focus of interpretation- from conservation/preservation to aesthetic beauty to recreation, and back to conservation/preservation, has continued, for the most part, to leave out non-white cultural aspects of the life of the land.

The concept of wilderness has played a major role in the interpretative design of the National Park service. Mark David Spence, in *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, notes that early artists/preservationists such as George Catlin and Henry David Thoreau not only envisioned protected wilderness landscapes, but protection for the Indians who had lived on the lands and waters for millennia (Spence, 2000). Spence posits that "wilderness" is an American invention - and that historian Alfred Runte's idea of national parks as "worthless lands" with no commodious value is the impetus for misgivings. That WANKA national park lands were but places passed through while searching for game does a great disservice to the honor and sacredness of such lands for Nation gatherings and Tribal ceremonies and celebrations. Environmental historian and professor William Cronon notes that "the removal of Indians to create 'uninhabited wilderness'- uninhabited as never before in human history of the place- reminds us just how invented, just how constructed, the American wilderness really is" (Spence, 1996).

Between a longing to compete with Europe's ancient ruins and historical architecture, a push for patriotism and settler pride, and the fear of men becoming "too soft" with the urban lifestyle, the concept of the pristine and untouched wild frontier was just what the insecure country needed to make themselves confident to fulfill their destiny of imperialism.

Freeman Tilden, known as the father of heritage interpretation, crafted his book *Interpreting our Heritage* in 1957 at the request of then NPS director Newton B. Drury. Drury approached Tilden at a time when both Tilden and the NPS were at a crossroads – Tilden himself was ready for his "next big challenge" professionally, and the park service lacked any official manual or code of standards for the ever-changing focus of interpretation. The result was Tilden's still-used guidebook (Baker, 2011).

In his work, which had its third edition reprinted as recently as 2008, Tilden outlines six major principles that have been the foundation of interpretation for decades and were a key resource in developing the National Park Service. Tilden wanted to provide visitors the opportunity to form a connection with the land, not just be force-fed facts (admin-2, 2023). Principle number five states, "Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase" (Tilden, 1957). He further posits in the chapter titled *Past into Present* that when in the parks, we tend to admire the beauty and aesthetic of a place, but not the "acts of men and women, where the story is told of courage and self-sacrifice, of dauntless patriotism, of statesmanship…" (Tilden, 1957). Nowhere is it mentioned the people who stewarded the land before the European invasion and later, under manifest destiny turned the above into a capitalistic venture, one of commodity over community.

Even today, the business-like vision of the National Park Service areas as playgrounds for the primarily white, Anglo population prevails (Lamb, 2023).

Moving into more recent literature, Barry Mackintosh, National Park Service historian, focuses primarily on the interpretation of historical sites in the East but still offers insight into the movement of the service to recognize units as not only natural but cultural in his 1987 work, *The National Park Service moves into Historical Interpretation.* Here, Mackintosh references the 1935 Historical Sites Act and FDR's letter of support to Congress for its passage claiming that patriotism would be stimulated by activities related to the act.

The preservation of historic sites for the public benefit, together with their proper interpretation, tends to enhance the respect and love of the citizen for the institutions of this country, as well as strengthen his resolution to defend unselfishly the hallowed traditions and high ideals of America (Mackintosh, 1987).

Was this a push to wartime pride and patriotism, or the continued self-held myth of settler innocence? Mackintosh's choice of references while putting together the timeline of historic interpretation in the Park Service was no doubt influenced by his employment as a National Park Service historian, but may very well mirror his ideals as well. Further along in his essay, he posits, "As Ronald A. Foresta has noted, the service is not the keeper of the nation's history but some of its major historic resources: '(O)nly part of the past lends itself to interpretation through physical remains…this past…is the proper realm of the Park Service'. The park system is indeed imbalanced, but this is not necessarily bad (Mackintosh, 1987).

In the fall of 1990, *Interpretation,* a now-defunct professional journal that was the combined effort of the Washington Division of Interpretation and the Regional Chiefs of Interpretation of the National Park Service, published their "Education" issue, inviting regional directors of park service units as guest editors. The subject? Interpreting Native American cultures. As I read through the entries, all of which will be useful reflections going forward, one that caught my attention was by the then Southwest Regional Director, John E. Cook. As I skimmed the submission, a phrase leaped off the page and punched me right in the gut – "Indian Parks", as in "There truly are differences in managing Indian parks" (Cook, *Interpretation 1990).* The generally offensive term was John E. Cook's (Cherokee and Navajo), way of discerning between Federal lands on or near Indian trust lands and those that are not, which in reality do not exist as all of these Lands are Indian Lands. This publication has provided a depository of voices from the "front-line" workers of the National Park Service, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, and the fact that the journal is now defunct makes me wonder if they (the NPS) were silencing those voices as they were being raised and listened to, resulting in the discontinuation of the publication. (Cook, *Interpretation 1990).*

In 2021, *The Atlantic* published a transcript titled, *The Experiment Podcast: Should We Return National Parks to Native Americans?* Journalists Julia Longoria and Tracie Hunte have a conversation with Ojibwe historian David Treuer and delve into Treuer's narrative of the land that now makes up our national park system and their stewardship being returned to the Native peoples. Treuer grew up on the land now known as Voyageurs National Park, learning the ways of his ancestors and their relationship with the lands and waters that sustained them, especially the rice that nourished their bodies and represented the bounty provided them spiritually. He recalls not being fond of the tiresome, sometimes uncomfortable process of harvesting rice as a

child, and his mother's insistence on him being able to return to the Nation after pursuing an education and still being able to survive on the land, to know that it is not only possible but necessary.

In a very powerful and relatable anecdote, Treuer asks us to imagine what is now Yosemite being returned to the Miwok, not as one of "America's Best Ideas" but as the "face of America", an America owning up to its mistakes and misgivings.

Well, imagine, you know, if a visitor is going to Yosemite, and they cross onto the park and a tribal person is [Laughs lightly.] checking their IDs to let them in, and they know that the park has been returned to Native people, and they're looking up at El Capitan or Half Dome, and they also know that Miwok Native people were murdered right where they're standing, and they understand that they're allowed to be there because this land has been returned to Native control in recognition of everything that has happened over the past few hundred years, it's gonna shape [Emphasizes each word.] what they see. They're not going to be just gazing at Half Dome or at El Capitan; they're going to be gazing at the face of America itself in a sort of honest way that doesn't elide its dark and troubled history—or its dark and troubled present (Atlantic Media Company *The experiment podcast: Should we return national parks to Native Americans?* 2022).

CHAPTER FOUR

NATIONAL PARK SITE CASE STUDIES

Genocide, colonialism, imperialism, and racism are terms absent from NPS literature, audio, and video, thus propagating the continuance of settler innocence and begging the questions, "What were the causes of westward expansion and the immediate and ultimately ongoing effects on the people who were oppressed, displaced, and massacred?

Gateway Arch National Park

Nowhere is this more obvious than at WINKA Gateway Arch National Park in St. Louis. Established as Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in 1935, the arch grounds were protected as a National Historic Landmark in 1987, but most likely not to acknowledge the ancient Mississippian mounds engulfed and eventually destroyed beginning in 1764 with the establishment of St. Louis, but as an urban, manufactured "pat on the back".

Professor Robert Pahre, in his work *Reconsidering National Park Interpretation of the Great Plains and Trans-Mississippi Midwest,* says that using the starting point of the Lewis and Clark expedition, St. Louis, as a metaphorical "gateway to the West" magnifies the idea of an artificial park unit- one created to memorialize and praise the genocide of Peoples for the fiscal growth through land acquisition for the "new country".

According to the Jefferson Expansion National Memorial Archives, when the arch was dedicated in 1968, the focus was, "on the land, how it was acquired; the men who mastered it,

and the significance and meaning of westward expansion to our nation and our people" (Pahre 2000).

Prominently displayed at the museum is a marquis with the following:

"Whether Lewis and Clark knew it or not, they were the "spearpoints" of an invasion of American Indian homelands in the West. Whether or not their actions were deliberate, they touched off an invasion rarely paralleled in world history, displacing entire peoples and tribal groups with Anglo settlers, backed by the U.S. Army and English land law. It is for this reason that many native peoples see no reason to be happy about the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial, and why this event should be looked upon by all as a "commemoration" rather than a "celebration." For this reason it is also difficult to discuss such a complex topic in a small amount of space. Therefore, perhaps it is best to let the explorers speak for themselves (*Native peoples continued*)

Once again, the NPS has missed the mark- why not have the ancestors and the Indigenous Peoples with whom they had connections speak for themselves? Why must a single-lens account be prevalent when telling the story of the movement West? Cause and effect is a basic concept taught in school, and leaving it out of our NPS narrative is a disservice to the intelligence of our youth who visit these spaces with their families. Our future generations would be better equipped for the challenges of the future if exposed to what is the very foundation of our country's existence -land acquisition for monetary gain at a great human expense.

In a document titled *Foundation Document Overview*, the NPS states that the "park staff is committed to providing meaningful interactive opportunities in the museums, throughout the park, and in the community…The desired outcome for interpretive programming is to reveal

history from multiple perspectives so that diverse audiences make connections from the past to critical issues of the present and consider possible solutions to contemporary problems" (*Foundation document overview - gateway arch national park*). If this is true, then why does the service continue to serve up white-washed narratives that dismiss the cause and effect of manifest destiny?

Glacier National Park

Indigenous voices need to be heard over all others, and my daily "research" inevitably leads me down a rabbit hole – so many strong, beautiful voices to be not just heard, but closely listened to.

Quinn Smith, Jr., Chickasaw, published *A Stolen History, Future Claims: The Blackfeet Nation and Glacier National Park,* in The Wellian Magazine, a journal created and supported by Duke University undergraduates that "seeks to promote political discourse, to provide a forum for current affairs, and to highlight the intersection of our cultural past and present" (*The Wellian Magazine*). In it, he has conversations with Blackfeet elders Ernie Heavy Runner and Darrell Norman chronicling the essential genocide of their people, beginning with the decimation of the buffalo herds that sustained every part of their lives. Faced with the starvation of their children, they were forced to sell the land that is now known as Glacier National Park for half of what they asked, 1.5 million dollars, and in return, our government held the money in trust. The People were considered wards of the state, incapable of managing such funds in a way deemed proper by Anglo standards, and after years of embezzling by corrupt government officials, the tribe was declared bankrupt. To confound the situation, when the land sold was designated a national park, hunting and fishing rights that were promised during the initial sale were rescinded.

Mr. Heavy Runner believes it's an elder's job to instruct the Blackfeet youth. However, teaching traditional practices ranges from being difficult to downright impossible with current restrictions. While it's true that some traditions are not explicitly barred from taking place at Glacier National Park, tribal members still report feeling spiritually excluded. They described this exclusion as "traumatizing", "degrading", and "alienating." Glacier Park emphasizes many non-Indigenous activities, but the religious needs of the Blackfeet people are not a priority. Collecting herbs is illegal at Glacier Park without a special permit. As a result, many Blackfeet must collect plants illegally, from lands that are rightfully theirs (Smith, Jr., 2020).

In 1992, Ed DeRosier (Blackfeet) began giving van tours of Blackfeet archeological and historic sites within the park, commencing in Browning. The park issued him a citation for illegal operation of a business without a permit. This was after he tried to legally obtain a permit and was turned down but with the offer of a bus driving position for an already established tour concessioner. Worried about bad publicity and their bottom line, non-violent protests by supporters on the lawn of the Glacier Park Lodge were enough to jolt the powers that be into issuing a "sub-contract" in 1993, followed by a full concession license the following year. Today, Going to the Sun Tours is celebrating its 32nd year as not only a Blackfeet Business but an official National Park Service concessionaire. With a short window – tours run mid -May through September – DeRosier and his guides pack as much Blackfeet Knowledge into the journeys as possible, knowing that nowhere else in the park is the whole story going to be told. Focusing on not only the aesthetic beauty of the area, care is given to explain the importance of the flora and fauna that have provided sustenance and medicine and sacred spaces and ancestral ceremonial grounds, including not only Blackfeet but neighboring Salish-Kootnaei. "All of our

narration is about the park through the eyes of the Blackfeet, past and present," DesRosier says. "We identify what is unique about it, what is sacred about it, and how the Blackfeet related to it. It's almost always tied to the Blackfeet, but also to the Salish and Kootenai and other tribes which roamed the area in generations past." DesRosier said the tribal interpretation is needed, in part, because many non-Indians falsely believe that Native Americans avoided the ice-sculpted peaks and valleys of Glacier because they were supposedly afraid of "evil" spirits that lurked there. He says the information, spread for decades by non-Indian tour guides, couldn't be further from the truth ((Seldon, 2018).

On the East side of the park is the St Mary Scenic Overlook, situated on trust land in East Glacier, was completed in 2012- a joint effort between the Park Service and the Blackfeet Nation. Landscape designer Kent Watson, hired by Native-owned engineering firm Northern Engineering and Consulting, Inc., collaborated with the Blackfeet Nation members including Chief Earl Old Person and THPO John Murray on the layout and signage, including the paved red stone path that leads visitors to sculptures by Blackfeet artist Duane After Buffalo (*The Landscape Expo: Landscape news* 2021). Shortcuts from the parking lot cut through native vegetation directly to the "view" and photo-ops, and I can't help but think about how it seems typical to take the road more traveled, easier, and stomped down– the speedy and easy way rather than the good way of the Red Road. (*The Landscape Expo: Landscape news* 2021).

A short distance away, improvements were made to the St. Mary Visitor Center beginning in 2007 (*Park receives approval for St. Mary Visitor Center improvements* 2007). As you enter the parking lot, which is also the Eastern entrance to Going-To-The-Sun Road, flags from the U.S., Canada, and Blackfeet Nation flow in the wind. Upon entering the building,

floor-to-ceiling pictorial biographies of Nations living on the land since time immemorial capture your attention. Phone banks give visitors the privilege of listening to Native voices speaking stories and truths. Rounding the corner, a teepee with audio/visual displays continues the oral storytelling and Native narrative. Missing from the gift shop, however, are any Indigenous stamps or stickers, and this has me picturing the day when the National Park Passport station has people and place acknowledgment stamps as well as stickers to document in a newly designed passport book.

Rocky Mountain National Park

I had hit a wall in my writing a few months ago and realized after talking with my daughter that I was struggling because I had originally wanted to use WINKA as Yosemite National Park as a jumping-off point when diving into interpretation/Indigenous voice history. I have never been to the Ahwahnee Valley, ancestral lands of the Miwok. I was unable to make a connection to place. Unable to place myself in a relationship with a land and people whom I've never interacted with, as well as thinking back and re-reading Montana State University Professor Matt Herman's words of guidance, aided me in re-focusing not on an (attempted) chronological re-telling of facts, but placing myself in a position to create dialogues with places and people I am familiar with and which hold a special place in my memories and soul.

My axiology has influenced my topic, and I have reflected deeply and often on the relevance and usefulness of such a project to Native Americans. What stimulated my interest was my own experience with the National Park Service and the fact that most of my childhood memories, as are those of my grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren, are centered on

family and extended family (sometimes four generations) time together in Rocky Mountain and Grand Teton National Parks. This was even more pronounced when my parents retired to Estes Park, Colorado, in 2000. My kids have never known a "vacation", it's always been a family visit. My dad passed away in 2005 and his ashes are spread in the park by his favorite tree – *Papa's Tree.* Photographs record all of our important life events celebrated at this tree – graduation pictures, baby pictures, wedding pictures, proposal pictures, and so many more memories. All of this makes the memories bittersweet…If we as Western settlers carry this land in our hearts to the extent that we do, how must the Indigenous Peoples feel about the lands upon which their ancestors are buried, their sacred ceremonies performed, and rites of passage such as vision quests experienced, a land that supported the flora and fauna that nourished, clothed, protected and healed them? And why are these units of the National Park Service so glaringly devoid of Indigenous voice?

I reached out to Brooke Neely, writer, research fellow at the Center for the American West at the University of Colorado in Boulder, and principal investigator for a project titled *Indigenous Connections at Rocky Mountain Park* and on a crisp fall day last August, we met for coffee and she filled me in on the progress being made in Rocky Mountain National Park to collaborate with the Cheyenne, Ute, and Arapahoe Nations in bringing Indigenous voice, recognition, and stewardship to the park.

Started in 2016, the initial phases included workshops with Tribal representatives, officials from RMNP, and University of Colorado students and faculty. Along with the Center for the American West (CAW), the Center for Native American and Indigenous Studies (CNAIS) at Boulder is spearheading this movement towards the decolonization of interpretation

in the park by active acknowledgment in signage and interpretative programs and displays of the nine associated Tribes who call the area home (*Indigenous connections* 2023).

The second phase (2018-19) saw the groups collaboratively gathering primary documents and existing research, along with continued conversations with Tribal members and elders, which I am hoping focused on the latter – I will be in touch with Ms. Neeley often as I continue my work. Unfortunately, this phase and the subsequent third phase (2020-present) were sidelined because of Covid. According to Neeley, some contacts and relationships were lost during the pandemic, but are being renewed and strengthened in this new phase of creating new interpretive exhibits and programs in the park (personal correspondence, 2022).

In September of 2023, the Beaver Meadows Visitor Center at the east entrance to the park was the site of a cultural celebration, introducing many to one of the first Native American-led programs to be held in the park. Husband and wife Shelley Morningsong (Northern Cheyenne) and Fabian Fontenelle (Zuni/Omaha) graciously told their stories, sang their songs, and shared their culture with park guests and locals, including my mother, Carol. The program was part of the Indigenous Connections Program and funded by the National Park Foundation's Inclusive Storytelling grant and the Rocky Mountain Conservancy (*RMNP to host a weekend of native songs and dances from Fri.. Sep. 8 through Sun. Sep. 10* 2023).

This first-person storytelling is crucial in the acknowledgment of Indigenous voices, as too many of our bookshelves are filled with Western lens views of history, and those who carry the memories of people and events that shape our country are left with little more than a supporting role in the telling of those histories.

Those who paint the most believable portraits of this vague and early segment of our historical profile are members of the most recent generation of archeologists. Painstakingly reconstructing the past, archeologists examine artifacts ranging from stone projectile points and knife blades to ill-formed granite chips. Results of their studies now make it certain that man has been entering these mountainous regions for thousands of years (Buchholtz, 1983).

Only the support of the continuation of programs like Indigenous Connections will knock Western science off the pedestal as the most "believable" of accounts.

Yellowstone National Park

In 2022, in celebration of WINKA Yellowstone National Park's 150th anniversary, several groups and individuals collaborated on activities and presentations to acknowledge the establishment of America's "First National Park".

On a warm later summer evening in August of 2022, I left Bozeman and traveled to the West entrance of Yellowstone and to Madison Junction, where Mountain Time Arts was hosting an evening of art, storytelling, and the music and dance of Crow Nation member Supaman (Christian Parish Takes The Gun).

As I looked around, I saw families and groups of all ages and backgrounds, several with school-age children – nary a cell phone or tablet in sight. I was instantly transported back in time… memories of not only my own three children, but myself and my siblings waiting patiently for whatever ranger or park program our parents had packed us in the car to attend. As the oldest of three, I never questioned the itinerary and soon became a "brown sign chaser" as my mother referred to my father and me on our constant pursuit of the NPS/NHS signage.

Seeing those families gave me hope- maybe the pandemic made space for a re-evaluation of what “American” values are, and what side of those values we want to be on.

Mountain Time Arts, based in Bozeman, is an organization that utilizes public art to bring the community together with the common goal of honoring not only the aesthetic and healing beauty of the area but also the cultural significance and vital knowledge of the traditional Nations that have taken care to keep balance for generations.

Mountain Time Arts (MTA) drives change through the cultivation of bold and engaging art projects and programs that explore the history, culture, and environment of the Rocky Mountain West and its Sovereign Nations. We are committed to social and environmental justice. We understand collaborative and inclusive inquiry as a means to generate new knowledge and work towards solutions for all (*Home*).

Commencing with the anniversary celebration in 2022, Yellowstone Revealed is now in its third year and will no doubt bring more families and individuals closer to the real revelations of WANKA our national parks – not just recreational playgrounds but home to generations of People that we never learned about in textbooks and information that our children today are still being sheltered from.

The Yellowstone Tribal Heritage Center, strategically located near the Old Faithful Inn and geyser spectacular, was established by a collaboration between the National Park Service and Yellowstone Forever, a non-profit organization born from the marriage of the Yellowstone Association and Yellowstone Park Foundation. As one of the most popular destinations in the park, the Tribal Heritage Center provides another space for Indigenous artists, storytellers, and

musicians to bring to life the vibrant culture of not only the past, but present. This also creates a space for hands-on, interactive activities for visitors and encourages conversation. (*Yellowstone Tribal Heritage Center* 2024).

CHAPTER FIVE

CURRENT INITIATIVES

Government

Official DOI reports have provided a grasp of the current status and goodwill attempts at collaborative efforts to make space for Indigenous voice and stewardship in the system. With the Biden administration and the appointment of Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) as Secretary of the Interior and Chuck Sams (Umatilla) as director of the National Park Services, these spaces have expanded and have provided a gathering space to bring forward the important conversations regarding Indigenous stewardship of Indigenous lands. In a press release statement by Sams on behalf of the Department of Interior, he explains-

The Biden Administration is committed to strengthening the role of Tribal communities in federal land management, honoring Tribal sovereignty and supporting the priorities of Tribal Nations. On November 15, 2021, Secretary Haaland and Secretary of Agriculture Vilsack issued Secretary's Order 3403: *Joint Secretarial Order on Ful*fi*lling the Trust Responsibility to Indian Tribes in the Stewardship of Federal Lands and Waters*. This Secretary's Order recognizes that federal lands were previously owned and managed by Indian Tribes and that these lands and waters contain cultural and natural resources of significance and value to Indian Tribes and their citizens; including sacred religious sites, burial sites, wildlife, and sources of Indigenous foods and medicines. In addition, many of those federal lands and waters lie within areas where Indian Tribes have the reserved right to hunt, fish, gather, and pray pursuant to ratified treaties and agreements with the United States (Sams, 2022).

This Joint Secretarial Order is part of President Biden's Tribal Homelands Initiative, a comprehensive plan to, among other much-needed actions, ensure Tribal governments and Nations have a say in the use and care of all federal lands and waters (*U.S. Department of the interior* 2023).

Tribal Nations

At the forefront of all initiatives are the Tribal Nations, the generations that embrace the responsibility for the continuance of balanced a relationship between all things, animate and inanimate, above and below, crucial to the survival of all. That thousands of Native Men and Women sprung forward to defend a country that committed heinous acts of genocide on their People and Land is paralleled to a People who are now willing to share their Ancestral Knowledges to save not only their future generations but those of the World.

THPO (Tribal Heritage Preservation Office(rs) has been a part of the NPS program since 1990. Although considered an NPS program, it is the Tribal Nation's offices and officers themselves that are the heart of the frontline battle for a majority voice of the People on these Lands. THPOs assume the duties of state historic preservation offices and officers as outlined in the National Historic Preservation Act (*Blackfeet-THPO*).

For the Blackfeet Nation, the THPO also includes a Cultural Resources Department (CRD) and a department that ensures NAGPRA guidelines are being monitored and followed. The office also provides consultation to government and non-government groups in section 106 of the 1966 NHPA and TEK, Tribal Ecologic Knowledge not only locally, but throughout North America. "The vision of the Blackfeet THPO is shaping a secure healthy future by responsibly

exercising sovereignty, investing in our people, preserving and revitalizing our Culture and Traditional ways of life while serving the best interest of all people" (*Blackfeet-THPO*).

In 2010, the Native Organizers Alliance was organized as a network of Native Individuals and organizations that have always focused on Traditional Ecological Knowledge as well as other Wisdoms of generations past to demand relational accountability on all Native Land (all land). It was originally a project of the Alliance for Just Society (Vassar & Fairbanks, 2023).

The Alliance mandates honoring treaty promises, returning sacred sites to the Nations, and making education of park visitors a priority by prominently and permanently centering Indigenous stories and world views, relayed by the Nations themselves and in their language, in all areas of the system including signage, visitor centers, and guest programs. This Native Knowledge should also be compensated to individuals for their time and wisdom, and possibly sharing park revenues with Tribal communities on and near what is now NPS land.

A focus for the Alliance is free, prior, and informed consent, a glaringly overlooked component of Tribal Sovereignty and self-determination required for honest change to occur, with Native Nations and communities as equal partners in all decision-making processes.

In a statement to National Park Service Director Chuck Sams, the alliance states the following:

> As part of the growing movement to re-indigenize our national parks, we're calling for actions including: Co-governing with Indigenous people, including joint decision-making and incorporating traditional Indigenous knowledge in park management and

conservation. Partnering and collaborating with Indigenous peoples to plan what information to share with visitors about each park's true history and about tribes' current connections to the parks (Network).

In August of 2023, the Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon National Monument was created to acknowledge the significance of the area to several Tribal Nations whose ancestral. One million acres surrounding WINKA Grand Canyon National Park Although currently managed by only the BLM and USFS, Sams states that the "proclamation also establishes….a commission to advance the objective of co-stewardship of the monument (Vassar & Fairbanks, 2023).

In a statement following the designation, the Biden-Harris administration underscored their commitment to upholding tribal sovereignty, safeguarding sacred homelands, and duty to center Tribal Indigenous Knowledge when consulting in decision-making going forward.

Today's designation supports Tribally led conservation efforts and helps address injustices of the past, including when Tribes were forcibly removed from lands that later became Grand Canyon National Park" (*Fact sheet: President Biden designates Baaj NWAAVJO I'Tah Kukveni – ancestral footprints of the Grand Canyon National Monument* 2023).

Non-Indigenous Support

Non-Indigenous scholars, individuals, and organizations from all realms have also provided me with a wealth of (western) wisdom and have created spaces for the continuation of the demand for partnership and collaboration after our current administration is replaced. These individuals and groups are not new players in this movement but have been pushing for

Indigenous rights and Tribal Sovereignty for decades. While I do not want to focus on these non-Indigenous individuals and groups, I do want to follow up on those who (seem) to fight to support, advance, and advocate for Tribal Sovereignty and Land Stewardship.

When I first began this journey, I was hesitant yet hopeful to seek out non-Indigenous voices who claimed to support the return of National Park lands to their rightful stewards, cautious before even knowing what I would learn in the following months under the tutelage of my MSU professors, cohorts, and students. Early in my readings, I came upon a 2007 journal article titled *Ethnic Cleansing and America's Creation of National Parks* by Isaac Kantor (Kantor, 2007). His writing appealed to me because of the personal approach he was not afraid to take as a non-Indigenous person. In his piece, he recalls early childhood memories of what is now known as Glacier National Park, first experiencing it as a toddler in a backpack on the back of his father. Originally submitted for publication in the *Public Land and Resources Law Review*, Kantor's focus is not limited to Blackfeet land but also examines the "ethnic cleansing" of Nations in and around what is now known as Yellowstone and Mesa Verde National Parks, as well as other NPS units such as "Devil's Tower" National Monument, where he focuses on the damage of using Anglo-European tags for sacred sites. Kantor posits that the National Parks are an "illusion", created without regard for the People who have lived there for millennia.

In personal communications with Kantor, he expressed that although he wrote the article 15-plus years ago, it has only been recently that he has been contacted personally about its content and he humbly admits that he wrote the piece not as an expert in any way of the legal entanglement of treaty rights, but as a personal declaration of his respect for the area and People, and his acknowledgment and sorrow for those People who are to this day are living with the

historical and generational trauma by the theft. I'd like to believe that the discovery of Kantor's work by myself and others like me is a result of the increase in awareness of the plight of our planet and the Traditional Ecological Knowledge that may very well be our last hope for a future as well as a (slow) move to acknowledgment of the United States' dark history of deception and wrong-doing in the shaping of America.

> Whatever form it may take, in the end I hope for a simple thing: that recognition of the inhabited wilderness which was our national park system occurs. Recognition that the human story of these landscapes goes far deeper into the past than the date the park was created and recognition of the wrong which underlies our national treasures... I still believe that recognition of this deeper history of the parks might yet help us know the land today. I have heard there are bison skulls atop Chief Mountain, some of them very old. The skulls were brought there during vision quests. I have not seen them. The mountain does look a bit different, though, now that I know the skulls are up there (Kantor, 2007).

The National Parks Conservation Association, which was formed as the National Parks Association in 1919 as "the creation of both an agency to unify and manage the nation's growing number of parks and an independent organization of informed citizens to be their voice" (*Our history*). Early members included Robert Sterling Yard, and Stephen Mather, who would become the first director of the National Park Service at its creation in 1916. The group has been an advocate for not only the preservation of flora and fauna but also a champion for Native American, Hispanic, African American, Asian, Women, and other marginalized groups whose

voices and stories have gone unheard in many NPS sites and are more often than not left out of decision making when it comes to current policies and procedures (*Our story).*

More recently, the NPCA has not only acknowledged but demanded action in park areas such as Yellowstone, Bears Ears, Sand Creek, Alcatraz, and Glacier Bay – Their website lists numerous magazine articles calling out the mistreatment and mismanagement of Indigenous Peoples and their Lands. “There is no single narrative that adequately acknowledges the original stewards and inhabitants of our national parks — hundreds of Tribes once lived on the lands we now call the United States, all with their unique traditions and cultural connections” (*National parks are Native Lands*). It is encouraging to have these outside organizations not only recognize but actively pursue change and advocate stewardship.

CHAPTER SIX

RECOMMENDATIONS

Visual Land and People Acknowledgment Placards at Park and Unit Entrances

The iconic, readily recognizable entrances to national parks, thanks to the arrowhead, are an ironic symbol of how national parks were established.

Western Wisconsin-based artist Brittany Tainter is a member of the Lac Courte Oreilles Tribe of Ojibwe. She collaborated on this visual land acknowledgment, which was created for Northwestern University (co-founded by Colorado Governor John Evans, who incited the advance on innocents at Sand Creek).

In personal correspondence with Ms. Tainter, she expressed interest in being part of a movement to create these placards for NPS entrances but insisted that the Nation' artists native to these areas should be consulted and employed in creating their land expressions. Re-imagining family photos at the entrance to WANKA national parks with this beautiful expression would be a step in the right direction towards revealing the true cost of these playgrounds.

Re-Design of the National Park Passport Program Book to Include Land and People Acknowledgments and Alternative Stamp Cancellations

Changing the current layout of the *Passport to Your National Parks,* contracted through Eastern National, beginning with the title, cover artwork, and introductory history, is vital to any educational motive of the NPS. The current cover is navy blue with an embossed eagle and a partial American flag in gold. The first page is identical only in red, white, and blue print and

artwork. A U.S. geographical regions map shades in states by NPS regions. Pages begin with the North Atlantic region and move westward. All NPS sites are numbered and indicated on a regional map, with a summary highlighting 5-6 sites. Sprinkled throughout are quotes from U.S. presidents and other "noteworthy" Americans – mostly male and white. Each regional section has a space for an official cancellation stamp (free of charge at NPS visitor centers) and for a regional sticker, available for purchase at the same locations. As you move westward through the book, you are also told the story of westward expansion by the "brave" settlers- as we move out of the east, away from the patriotic center of the young country, with very little is spoken of the people and culture of the areas, focusing on their natural aesthetic attributes and whatever white American history (triumphs) may have occurred.

To be a true passport, to accurately mark the spaces visited, pages need to include a land acknowledgment, at the minimum, and space for a free cancellation stamp honoring the Peoples whose ancestors stewarded these sacred lands and whose ancestors continue to create balance today.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Eve Tuck (Unagax) and K. Dwayne Yang, in their work *Decolonization, is not a Metaphor,* posit that anything other than the repatriation of land is just another form of settler appropriation that re-centers whiteness and re-settles theory that entertains settler innocence and futures. Not using the word decolonization as a metaphor means not allowing the real and symbolic violence of settler colonialism to be overlooked, and actions, not words, are employed as real acknowledgment, not just the passive act of recognition (Tuck & Yang, 2012). WANKA national parks are repositories for knowledge and historical truths just waiting to be disseminated to those who may not even realize the cost at which these units were created.

In *Red Skin White Masks, Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition,* Glen Sean Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene), describes settler-colonial relationships as "defined as one characterized by a particular form of domination; that is, it is a relationship of power…(one that) has been structured into a relatively secure…hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority" (Coulthard, 2017). The idea of one entity being able to recognize or acknowledge another places the recognizer or acknowledger on a higher plane of power – *I recognize, therefore you are. I acknowledge you, therefore you are worthy of my recognition.*

The myth of the "savage" or "noble" Indian of the past is prevalent in our National Park System, and only by actively acknowledging the voices of Native Peoples past, present, and future will the truth be revealed and respected and the nation -to- nation relationship between the

U.S. and Sovereign Nations be upheld. The National Park Service has the opportunity to inform a new generation, through education and experiences, that will respect and heed Tribal Knowledges that will ensure the earth's continuance for the next seven generations and demand reflection on past and current policies and decisions.

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