

MONUMENTAL MEMORIES: THE BEAR RIVER MASSACRE,
GENDERED SETTLER-COLONIAL VIOLENCE, AND
DECOLONIZATION IN PUBLIC HISTORY

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to the many family members, friends, and other loved ones in my life who have supported me through the research and writing process. To my family, who have cared for me through every part of this work, including the long, probably very boring rambles about my research: thank you. I love and appreciate you endlessly.

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Additionally, I dedicate this work to the victims, survivors, and survivor descendants of the Bear River Massacre. I hope that this work honors who you were and are.

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ABSTRACT

Though the Bear River Massacre (also known as the Baker Massacre or Marias River Massacre) remains an important part of the tribal history of the Blackfeet Nation today, the only permanent American public historical representation of the massacre is a marker installed by the Montana Department of Transportation. Through examining the Montana Historical Highway marker program's development from tourist attraction to public historical tool, my work revealed the entanglement of collective memory, Native peoples, and gender in Montana history. I examined the role of Piikani women in surviving the massacre and current-day massacre commemorations. I also analyzed current-day decolonization efforts at public historical institutions, including museums and historic marker programs. Through reframing the massacre from the perspective of Piikani women, I showed how Native women's stories are silenced in public history and how women of the Blackfeet Nation push back on these silences. I also revealed how violence against Native women, including suppressing or erasing tribal history, is part of a broader process of settler-colonialism and the attempted extermination of the Blackfeet Nation. Overall, my project discussed how marker programs can function as sites of decolonization, especially when markers center the voices of Indigenous peoples and recognize both colonialism and survivance in Indigenous history.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

“Memory
is stone, very quiet,
like this,
a moment clenched tightly
as knuckles
around gunstock
around steering wheel.”

Simon J. Ortiz, *From Sand Creek*¹

Driving on Montana roads on a crisp April morning is a beautiful, if chilly, affair. From frost glittering along tree branches to snowy fields refracting prismatic rainbows across the windshield, Montana’s landscapes are both breathtaking and deadly cold. As I drive, a brown wooden sign in the distance, battered by the high winds, catches my eye. It proves to be one of the few things that could convince me to step out of my Jeep on a day like this. I pull off the highway into a small turnout, curious about what I might learn. As I walk toward the marker, I follow in the footsteps of hundreds of Montana tourists and residents before me who were also interested in the Montana Historical Highway markers. The Big Sky State’s highways are dotted with small brown roadside markers that tell Montana’s history. While they may seem unremarkable at first glance, these markers are a valuable part of Montana public history. In this

¹ Simon J. Ortiz, *From Sand Creek* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1981), 23.

thesis, I examine the Baker Massacre marker, which describes an 1870 massacre of the Piikani people on the land now known as Montana.

The Bear River Massacre² is also known as the Marias River Massacre, Baker Massacre, Piegan Massacre, and/or Blackfeet Massacre. The massacre occurred on January 23, 1870, when the U.S. military slaughtered over 200 Piikani people. The massacre is particularly significant because of its historical importance to the Piikani tribe, lack of recognition in European-American histories of the American West, and connection to sexual exploitation of and violence against Native women. The Piikani history of the Bear River Massacre remained untold for decades because of settler-colonial violence and misrepresentations of the massacre. However, the massacre did not extinguish the Blackfeet Nation. Carol Murray, a Piikani scholar and former president of Blackfeet Community College (BCC) who dedicated much of her life to studying and commemorating the massacre, said, “I think the intended outcome was genocide. But as we say, ‘They failed.’”³ The testimonies of Chief Heavy Runner’s descendants and other Piikani survivors still survive today in Piikani oral histories and Montana Historical Society (MHS) collections. Many of these eyewitness accounts come from Piikani women. However, the historic

² Many Piikani people use the name “Bear River Massacre” to refer to the massacre, so I will follow that convention in this thesis. The name “Bear River Massacre,” according to Lea Whitford, refers to the Piikani name for the river before the Lewis and Clark expedition renamed it the Marias River. I will also use the term “Piikani” to refer to people from that specific tribe in the Blackfeet Nation, in line with the terminology provided to me by Iva Croff. I will use the term “Blackfeet Nation” when I am referring to the Blackfoot Confederacy as a whole. I will use the term “Blackfeet” when I am unsure of the person’s exact tribal affiliation within the Blackfeet Nation.

³ Nora Mabie, “Blackfeet Feel Baker Massacre's Effects 150 Years Later,” *The Washington Times*, January 22, 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jan/22/blackfeet-feel-baker-massacres-effects-150-years-l/>.

marker documenting the massacre near Shelby, Montana does not include the voices of women or discuss the event from survivor perspectives. The Piikani tribe has regularly commemorated the massacre since 1970 and hosted many site visits, but the Bear River Massacre and the survivors who preserved the stories of the massacre are largely forgotten in Euro-American public history.

This historical forgetting and erasure is part of a larger pattern of remaking and reshaping American Western public memory into the settler-colonial image. Public historical institutions are an important part of broader narratives about American identity, including who is included in the definition of “American.” Widespread access to and deep trust⁴ in public historical organizations make them particularly important in the clash between settler-colonial and decolonized narratives. Historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen wrote that, “Americans believe they uncover ‘real’ or ‘true’ history at museums and historic sites,” which generates “an associative process of recalling and reminiscing about the past that connect[s] them to their own history.”⁵ In the past, public historical institutions often represented Indigenous peoples as two-dimensional bit players in a story about Euro-American settlers. In these narratives, Indigenous peoples are depicted as one monolithic, primitive culture stuck in time or tragically vanished from the Americas. These representations “render them [Native peoples] both voiceless and

⁴ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998): 21, 91.

⁵ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, 32.

invisible.”⁶ American Western narratives that cut out or minimize Native peoples also serve to support settler-colonial claims to Western land, resources, heritage, and history.

In particular, removing Native women from American history or misrepresenting their stories is associated with current-day prejudice against Indigenous peoples in the United States. Many public historical sites in the West, including several markers in the original Montana Historical Highway Marker Program,⁷ once used the term “squaw” (hereafter referred to as sq**w), a slur for Native women that denigrated them as promiscuous, lazy, ugly, and subhuman. According to Char-Koosta News, the official newspaper of the Flathead Indian Reservation, constant reminders of a slur in the physical landscape of the American West contribute to poor self-esteem and mental health issues for Indigenous women.⁸ The slur is not only harmful on an individual level but also on a systemic one, as ignoring Indigenous women's voices or stereotyping them as sq**ws is linked to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) crisis.

The MMIWG crisis is the term for the well-documented problem in American society of Indigenous women going missing or being murdered without any significant press attention or law enforcement assistance. MMIWG is connected to sexual harassment, assault, and sex trafficking of Indigenous women. Like erasing Indigenous women from public history, MMIWG

⁶ Liz Mineo, “Museums of Native Culture Wrestle with Decolonizing,” *The Harvard Gazette*, November 19, 2020, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/11/museums-of-native-culture-wrestle-with-decolonizing/>.

⁷ Robert H. Fletcher, *Montana Highway Historical Markers* (Helena, MT: Naegele Printing Co, 1938).

⁸ Liz Dempsey, “Removing the 'S' Word from Place Names,” *Char-Koosta News*, September 30, 2021, http://www.charkoosta.com/news/removing-the-s-word-from-place-names/article_3b5d17fc-223e-11ec-81a1-bf0b867f7dba.html.

is also an issue of public "forgetting" or active suppression. The crisis is linked specifically to stereotypes of Indigenous women as sq**ws and more broadly to the trauma of colonization over hundreds of years. While of course not all racism against Native peoples is exclusively due to failings in public history, public historical narratives affect modern perspectives on Indigenous peoples. Referencing the sq**w stereotype, cutting Indigenous women out of the historical record, and glossing over historical and present-day violence against women contributes to ignorance and points toward settler-colonial campaigns to destroy Native cultures and nations.

As of 2022, a highway marker on U.S. 2 east of Shelby, Montana at Milepost 283 is one of the few places where the massacre is publicly remembered. The marker is several miles away from the massacre site, since the site is currently located partially on private land owned by the Judisch family and partially on land owned by the Bureau of Land Reclamation. The Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), which manages the Montana Historical Highway Marker program, installed the marker in 2007. Like most MDT markers, the marker is deep brown with white lettering. The marker details the murder of Malcolm Clarke, the massacre itself, and its lasting impact. It also notes that the event is important to Blackfeet history and acknowledges that the massacre was a massacre. However, it calls the massacre the "Baker Massacre,"⁹ thereby centering Major Baker rather than the Piikani victims and survivors of the massacre, and tells the story from a settler-colonial perspective. The marker also reduces the experiences of Native women to a single line recording that soldiers fired on "women, children, and the elderly."

⁹ Since the marker program lists the massacre as the "Baker Massacre," I will call the marker the "Baker Massacre marker" in this thesis to avoid confusion. I will also refer to it as "the marker" or "the Montana marker." The marker itself is referring to the Bear River Massacre, even though it uses a different name.

Finally, the marker does not discuss tribal representations of the massacre or incorporate a Blackfeet perspective on the massacre. Like many modern museums and monuments, the Baker Massacre marker indicates an initial commitment to diverse history that has not yet flowered into a truly decolonized historical narrative.

*Figure 1: Wide View of the Baker Massacre Marker Near Shelby, Montana. Quincy Balius, *The Baker Massacre Marker*, photographed April 22, 2022.*



Figure 2: Close-Up View of the Baker Massacre Marker Near Shelby, Montana. Quincy Balius, The Baker Massacre Marker, photographed April 22, 2022.



Marker programs can be fruitful sites of inquiry when considering recent significant cultural efforts to acknowledge and re-evaluate difficult and violent histories. Recent events like the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests at Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia have ignited debates over racial justice within public history and prompted a new wave of new diversity and inclusion efforts at public historical sites. Many museums have reconsidered how they preserve and interpret history and how they engage with social justice. Within the context of public history, decolonization can have a variety of definitions, but it generally entails reframing historical narratives to include Native perspectives, sharing authority over stories with Native peoples, and simply putting Native museum professionals in a position to tell their own cultural

stories.¹⁰ Amy Lonetree (Ho-Chunk), a history professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz, wrote about the complexities of decolonization in her seminal text *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America and Tribal Museums*. She argued that the urge to portray Indigenous peoples as either vanished victims or always resilient superheroes is problematic. Instead, public historical institutions must represent Native histories as multifaceted and complex and acknowledge the impacts of colonialism on Indigenous populations.¹¹ Lonetree pointed out that avoiding the violence of settler-colonial conquest of the Americas and choosing only to focus on the survivance¹² of Native peoples is to participate in the forgetting of American Western history in a new form. While confronting the reality of American colonization can be difficult for European Americans, it is imperative when constructing inclusive histories of the American West. We cannot shy away from our shared history.

Public historical sites bear a special responsibility to accurately represent multiple perspectives on the past. The American Alliance of Museums's Code of Ethics states that museums should "be resources for humankind and in all their activities to foster an informed appreciation of the rich and diverse world we have inherited" and "respond to the pluralism of

¹⁰ Elisa Shoenberger, "What Does It Mean to Decolonize a Museum?," *MuseumNext*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/>.

¹¹ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 6.

¹² Survivance means survival and resistance, with a particular focus on denying victimization. The term was first used in Native American Studies by White Earth Ojibwe scholar Gerald Vizenor in 1999. Vizenor used the term to draw attention to not only Indigenous survival but also Indigenous resistance and thriving in the modern day.

society and respect the diversity of the natural and cultural common wealth.”¹³ While many states have historical marker programs with specific rules and regulations, I have not been able to find a formal state code of ethics for historical markers, let alone a national code of ethics. However, several American Western state marker programs have recently prioritized importance on diversity and inclusion efforts in their markers. Some of these programs now focus on core values like “content & complexity, accessibility, cultural humility & accuracy, and honesty & transparency”¹⁴ (Oregon) or representing a “diverse” heritage¹⁵ (Nevada). Washington’s historic markers and monuments are undergoing a statewide audit to investigate whether they meet values of “scholarship and diversity.”¹⁶ New Mexico’s marker program incorporated a new focus on women’s history in 2010 with the New Mexico Historic Women Marker Initiative.¹⁷ The Utah State Historical Society started a blog in 2021 to “understand the nature, meaning, and uses

¹³ AAM Board of Directors, “American Alliance of Museums Code of Ethics for Museums,” Ethics, Standards, and Professional Practices, published January 15, 2018, <https://www.aamus.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/code-of-ethics-for-museums/>.

¹⁴ Oregon Historical Marker Committee, “About Historical Markers,” Oregon Historical Markers, Oregon Travel Information Council, updated 2022, <https://oregontic.com/oregon-historical-markers/about-historical-markers/>.

¹⁵ Rayette Martin, *A Guide to Nevada’s Historical Markers* (Carson City, NV: Nevada State Historic Preservation Office, 2021): preface.

¹⁶ “Monuments and Markers Project,” Across Washington, Washington State Historical Society, published September 9, 2021, <https://www.washingtonhistory.org/across-washington/monuments-project/>.

¹⁷ “Historic Markers,” New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs, New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs, published 2015, <https://www.newmexicoculture.org/preservation/historic-markers>.

of historic markers”¹⁸ in Utah and consider “recent public attention to race and diversity.”¹⁹ Other state programs, like Idaho, California, and Alaska, have no specific stated values. In Montana, several different organizations sponsor, research, and assemble markers. The only formal state-managed marker program is the Montana Historical Highway Program, which is managed by the MDT and has no virtual database. Despite the differences in marker programs among states, many of these programs also exhibit recent moves toward diversity and inclusion in public history.

Currently, public historical institutions are struggling to find their place in a nation increasingly aware of privilege, inequality, and interlocking systems of oppression within its borders and increasingly bifurcated along those same lines. Should these organizations strive for impartiality in their preservation, curation, and interpretation? The 2019 book *Museum Activism*, edited by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell, discussed the myth of neutrality and how museums are actually both non-neutral and active in shaping public thought about historical events.²⁰ Following Janes and Sandell’s arguments, I argue that there is no neutrality in the stories we tell. Instead, we often mold the past to fit our present. Acknowledging the biases inherent in history is key to creating historical narratives that truly encompass our shared past.

¹⁸ Jedidah Rogers, “Markers & Monuments,” Utah Division of State History, Utah Department of Cultural & Community Engagement, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://history.utah.gov/inquire-2/markers-and-monuments/>.

¹⁹ Jedidah Rogers, “Blog Series on Historical Memorials,” Utah Division of State History, Utah Department of Cultural & Community Engagement, published January 6, 2021, <https://history.utah.gov/blog-series-on-historical-memorials/>.

²⁰ Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell, “Posterity Has Arrived: The Necessary Emergence of Museum Activism,” in *Museum Activism*, eds. Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell (New York City, NY: Routledge, 2019), 8.

When we write these narratives, we must acknowledge our positionality and ensure that we are not creating objects out of subjects. The language of forced neutrality, rife with passive voice and “the view from nowhere,”²¹ is also the language that tells a single story without room for nuance or multiperspectivity and contributes to dominant settler-colonial narratives.

In this thesis, I examine the Bear River Massacre in Montana public history. I draw on the Baker Massacre historical marker as a specific example to discuss how suppressing and/or misrepresenting Native histories contributes to settler-colonial campaigns to destroy Native nations and replace them with settler communities. I take an American Studies approach to the marker, acknowledging the interdisciplinary effort to create and maintain the markers as well as their impact on the present. I use the massacre marker as a case study that investigates American Western public memory’s entanglement with settler-colonial views about Native peoples, particularly women. More broadly, I study interpretation and re-interpretation at public historical sites as a means of decolonization. I argue that the misrepresentation or removal of Native histories from public historical sites, particularly massacre sites, remakes American Western history to favor the settler-colonial perspective, contributes to erasure and suppression of Native histories, ignores the connections between violence against women and attempted extermination of Native peoples and cultures, and harms present-day understandings of and experiences with Indigenous peoples. I also discuss Indigenous resistance to settler narratives and re-interpretation and decolonization efforts. While perhaps settler programs like the historical marker program can never be fully decolonized, I believe that revision and re-interpretation can begin the process

²¹ Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1986).

of decolonizing. I am especially interested in how decolonization efforts surrounding public historical interpretations of traumatic events can create space for education and healing.

I hope to engage in what American Studies scholars Erica Meiners and Therese Quinn call “defiant memory work”: pushing back against traditional cultural practices and narratives that contribute to erasures of marginalized communities and individuals.²² The Bear River Massacre is an excellent example of the complexities of decolonization, especially the need for decolonization to be an ongoing process instead of a single event, at public historical sites.

Positionality, Identity, and Audience

While I am not a Native person, I believe that my work with decolonization, settler-colonial violence against Native women, and settler and Native public memory is still valuable. My work does not aim to tell Piikani people their own histories or speak for or over Piikani tribal members. Instead, following the example of settler-colonial scholar Margaret Jacobs in her 2021 book *After One Hundred Winters: In Search of Reconciliation on America’s Stolen Lands*,²³ I am a non-Native person speaking to other non-Natives. I advocate for centering Native perspectives when interpreting Native histories. I encourage future historical marker programs and other public historical institutions to form honest, transparent, and genuine relationships with Indigenous communities that benefit both parties. Along with Lonetree, I call for public historical institutions to accurately represent both the impacts of colonization on Indigenous

²² Erica Meiners and Therese Quinn, “Introduction: Defiant Memory Work,” *American Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (June 2019): 353-361, doi:10.1353/aq.2019.0029.

²³ Margaret Jacobs, *After One Hundred Winters: In Search of Reconciliation on America’s Stolen Lands* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

communities and tribal survivance into the current day. Indigenous histories are not a single monolithic story of victimization or resilience but rather multiple complex narratives that encompass centuries and extend into modern life.

I also call for non-Native people to value Native histories and take on the challenge of including Native histories at public historical sites. The Bear River Massacre deeply affected the Piikani tribe, but its repercussions are not limited to the tribe alone. As historian and American Studies scholar Nick Estes (Lower Brule Sioux) wrote in his book *Our History is the Future*, “Indigenous peoples are central subjects of modern world history.”²⁴ It is not exclusively the responsibility of Native peoples to educate non-Natives about Indigenous histories, especially when the events are violent and traumatic for Indigenous communities. Instead, non-Native people can work with Native peoples to teach about events like the Bear River Massacre, and public historical institutions can facilitate education and healing.²⁵

While the Montana Historical Highway Marker program originally targeted a primarily white tourist audience, it is now geared toward all Montana residents and tourists to the area. Re-interpretation efforts in the 1990s demonstrate the Montana Department of Transportation’s intent to make the marker program more inclusive. Though the marker program is not led by tribal members or aimed specifically at a Native audience, it interprets some Native histories in Montana. Continuing to re-interpret and revise marker programs could provide a space for non-

²⁴ Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2019), 21.

²⁵ The Riverside Monument and Healing Garden in Cardston, Alberta is an example of a public historical site as a space of healing and education. This monument will be discussed later in this thesis.

Native people to learn about Native histories and cultures, especially tribally significant events like the Bear River Massacre. Decolonizing the marker program requires centering Indigenous voices, acknowledging colonization and survivance, and providing space for healing. A decolonized marker program would educate non-Native peoples about Native histories in Montana while fulfilling tribal needs and wishes. For instance, expanding the marker into a larger interpretative installation at the Bear River Massacre site and centering Piikani perspectives could support decolonization in the marker program. Before discussing this expansion and revision process, I will discuss the history of the Bear River Massacre, its representation in the Montana Historical Highway Marker program, the ways in which Blackfeet Nation communities have represented the massacre, and the massacre's connection to decolonizing American Western public history.

MASSACRE HISTORY AND SITE LOCATION

History of the Bear River Massacre

According to Indian Country Today, the Bear River Massacre remains the worst massacre in Montana history.²⁶ As with many massacres in Western American history, the Bear River massacre was not a single event but rather a chain of events with a bloody conclusion that fits into a broader structural pattern. On January 23, 1870, in Montana Territory, a group of soldiers led by Major Eugene Baker murdered over two hundred Piikani people, wounded more than twenty people, and took dozens of people captive on the Big Bend of the Marias River near present-day Shelby, Montana. Many more Piikani people died of hypothermia or starvation after the soldiers burned down the camp, along with the peoples' possessions and spiritual items. According to MDT Historian/Interpretive Marker Manager Jon Axline, the massacre is still “an open wound”²⁷ for the Piikani people in Montana.

Events leading up to the massacre began as early as the 1860s in Montana, when rising tensions over land rights and use between settlers and tribes like the Piikani led to an influx of military personnel in Montana. The military took up position in Montana to “prevent any attempted defense of indigenous lands”²⁸ so that settlers could use these lands. Historian Roger Henderson documented several hostile incidents between Euro-American settlers and “Bloods,

²⁶ Alysa Landry, “Native History: Major Attacks Wrong Indian Village, Doesn't Care,” *Indian Country Today*, January 23, 2014, <https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/native-history-major-attacks-wrong-indian-village-doesnt-care>.

²⁷ Jon Axline, email to the author, February 23, 2022.

²⁸ Roger C. Henderson, “The Piikuni and the U.S. Army’s Piegan Expedition: Competing Narratives of the 1870 Massacre on the Marias River,” *Montana the Magazine of Western History* 68, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 52.

Blackfeet, and Piegans” in 1868 and 1869, including multiple murders of Blackfeet men by white settlers.²⁹ However, historians usually trace the massacre catalyst to the murder of Malcolm Clarke by a Blackfeet man named Ne-tus-che-o (Owl Child) on August 17, 1869.

Clarke was a wealthy farmer and rancher who traded with the Blackfoot Confederacy. Clarke married Owl Child’s cousin, Coth-co-co-na (Cutting-Off-Head Woman), in 1844.³⁰ Though Clarke had family ties with the Piikani, many of them did not trust or like Clarke. In Blackfeet author James Welch’s 1986 historical novel *Fools Crow*, the protagonist White Man’s Dog remarked that Malcolm Clarke was “known as a two-faced man, a bully, a dangerous fool who had little regard for the Pikunis.”³¹ Even though Clarke was married to Cutting-Off-Head-Woman, the Piikani had “cut the rope” with Clarke, severing relations with him.³² Among Montana settlers, he was generally well-respected as someone with knowledge of the Indigenous tribes in the territory.³³ After killing Bear Head, a fellow Blackfeet Nation member, Owl Child had been cast out of several Piikani communities, though he lived off and on with Mountain Chief’s band. He stole animals and destroyed property to “make the napikwans [European American settlers] suffer” and considered the Blackfeet weak for signing treaties with the napikwans.³⁴

²⁹ Henderson, “The Piikuni and the U.S. Army’s Piegan Expedition,” 53.

³⁰ Andrew Graybill, “Helen P. Clarke in ‘the Age of Tribes’: Montana’s Changing Racial Landscape, 1870-1920,” *Montana the Magazine of Western History* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 4.

³¹ James Welch, *Fools Crow* (New York City, NY: Viking Penguin Inc, 1986), 156.

³² Welch, *Fools Crow*, 157.

³³ James Welch with Paul Stekler, *Killing Custer: The Battle of Little Bighorn and the Fate of the Plains Indians* (New York City, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 25.

³⁴ Welch with Stekler, *Killing Custer*, 27.

On August 17, Owl Child and several other Blackfeet men approached Malcolm Clarke's ranch. According to most accounts, the Clarke family received the Blackfeet group in a friendly manner and prepared supper for them.³⁵ At some point during the evening, one of the Blackfeet men shot Malcolm's son Horace in the head, and Owl Child killed Malcolm. Cutting-Off-Head Woman and her daughters Helen and Isabel survived the attack.³⁶ Horace also survived, despite his injuries.³⁷ The Clarke family identified the attackers as Owl Child, Eagle Rib, Black Bear, Bear Chief, and Black Weasel, all of whom were part of a band led by Mountain Chief.³⁸

There are two diverging stories about why Owl Child and the other men attacked the Clarkes. In the 1860s, Montana Territory settlers claimed that the killing was the result of a complicated series of horse thefts. In this narrative, an unknown person stole Owl Child's horses while he was visiting a cousin at the Clarke Ranch in 1867. In retaliation, Owl Child stole Malcolm's horses. Malcolm and Horace followed Owl Child back to his camp. Either Malcolm or Horace whipped Owl Child, insulted him, and publicly humiliated him for the horse theft, which drove Owl Child to seek revenge by killing Malcolm.³⁹ The horse theft story is the more accepted narrative about the Bear River Massacre, and it has been repeated on several platforms,

³⁵ Andrew R. Graybill, *The Red and the White: A Family Saga of the American West* (New York City, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 100.

³⁶ Barbara Fifer, *Montana Battlefields 1806-1877: Native Americans and the U.S. Army at War* (Helena, MT: Farcountry Press, 2005), 33-34.

³⁷ Adolf Hungry Wolf, *The Blackfoot Papers Volume 4: Pikunni Biographies* (Browning, MT: The Blackfeet Heritage Center and Art Gallery, 2006), 1041.

³⁸ Hungry Wolf, *The Blackfoot Papers Volume 4*, 1041.

³⁹ Betty K. Henderson-Matthews, "For as long as the sun shall rise and the mountains cast their shadows," (master's thesis, University of Montana, 2005), 40-41, <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2386>.

including the popular history website History.com.⁴⁰ This narrative is also supported by *Fools Crow*,⁴¹ in which Owl Child kills Clarke as revenge for the humiliation of the whipping.⁴²

Some people within the Blackfeet Nation tell a very different story. Piikani informant Kai Okotan (Bear Head, a massacre survivor) said that Clarke had made “sexual advances” on Owl Child’s wife, who was Cutting-Off-Head-Woman’s cousin.⁴³ Carol Murray also asserted that Malcolm Clarke raped Owl Child’s wife.⁴⁴ According to Murray, Owl Child’s wife went to visit Cutting-Off-Head Woman at Clarke’s ranch, where Clarke raped and impregnated her.⁴⁵ According to anthropologist Betty K. Henderson-Matthews, since Clarke married a Blackfoot woman, he was subject to Blackfeet tribal law, under which the punishment for rape was death.⁴⁶ Oral historical evidence such as Yellow Kidney’s account of the killing of Malcolm Clarke, Blackfeet survivors’ testimonies, and Blackfeet descendants’ stories supports this interpretation of the catalyst for the Bear River Massacre.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ “Soldiers Massacre Sleeping Camp of Native Americans,” History.com, A&E Television Networks, published November 16, 2009, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/soldiers-massacre-the-wrong-camp-of-indians>.

⁴¹ James Welch’s novel *Fools Crow* relies on the oral testimony of his grandmother, Red Paint Woman, who was a massacre survivor, along with additional research into the massacre.

⁴² Welch, *Fools Crow*, 209.

⁴³ Blanca Tovías, “Diplomacy and Contestation before and after the 1870 Massacre of Amskapi Pikuni,” *Ethnohistory* 60, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 272-273. doi:10.1215/00141801-2018954.

⁴⁴ Nora Mabie, “A Story of Genocide, Survival and Resilience: Blackfeet Nation Remembers Baker Massacre,” *Great Falls Tribune*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.greatfallstribune.com/story/news/2020/01/16/montana-blackfeet-nation-tribe-baker-massacre-150th-anniversary/4434910002/>.

⁴⁵ Carol Murray, interview by Kainai High school, March 12, 2010, Blackfoot Digital Library, Kainai Studies Archives, Red Crow College, Canada, <https://www.blackfootdigitallibrary.com/digital/collection/bdl/id/234/rec/2>.

⁴⁶ Henderson-Matthews, "For as long as the sun shall rise and the mountains cast their shadows," 42.

⁴⁷ Hungry Wolf, *The Blackfoot Papers Volume 4*, 1041.

Historian Andrew Graybill's 2013 book *The Red and the White: A Family Saga of the American West* used the Clarke family as a case study into kinship and marital relations between Native peoples and European American settlers in the American West. Graybill noted the varying accounts of Montana settlers and Blackfeet people regarding the murder of Malcolm Clarke and remarked that "it is not possible to square these divergent accounts."⁴⁸ Graybill presented the evidence supporting the Piikani narrative of Clarke raping his wife's cousin's spouse in 1867 and added that oral history and present-day memories of Piikani people claim that Clarke also impregnated the Piikani woman. According to Piikani history, Owl Child's wife gave birth to a child with fair hair and blue eyes nine months after the rape.⁴⁹

Additionally, in a list of significant historical treaties and events, the 2018 Blackfeet Climate Change Adaptation Plan described the Bear River Massacre as "an early morning massacre of over 200...all because one non-Indian was killed by a Piikuni man."⁵⁰ The document criticized Malcolm Clarke for being "kicked out of a military academy due to his erratic behavior and unwarranted violence" and "beat[ing] his wife [Cutting-Off-Head-Woman] often (the sister of the man - Owl Child - who killed the non-Indian)."⁵¹ Reframing the massacre by centering Piikani women brings new issues to the fore. While I have not discovered other sources that claim Clarke abused Cutting-Off-Head-Woman, it is possible that Clarke not only

⁴⁸ Graybill, *The Red and the White*, 100.

⁴⁹ Graybill, *The Red and the White*, 99-100.

⁵⁰ Blackfeet Nation, *Blackfeet Climate Change Adaptation Plan*, published April 2018, https://bcapwebsite.files.wordpress.com/2018/04/bcap_final_4-11.pdf, 14.

⁵¹ Blackfeet Nation, *Blackfeet Climate Change Adaptation Plan*, 14.

sexually exploited his Piikani tribal relations but also physically assaulted Cutting-Off-Head-Woman.

Graybill's work on marriage and kinship, along with the tribal history laid out in the Adaptation Plan and oral historical evidence from Piikani people, provides a starting point for further investigation into how massacres are represented at public historical sites. Usually, the story of the Bear River Massacre begins with Owl Child killing Malcolm Clarke. However, if we reframe the narrative to begin with settler-colonial hostilities against the Blackfoot Nation and Malcolm Clarke abusing and raping Piikani women, we can tie the Bear River Massacre to a long history of settler-colonial sexual exploitation of Native women and erasure of Native histories. Here, I expand on Western historian Roger L. Nichols's argument that massacres are part of a settler colonial process by considering how this process includes violence against women.⁵² Rather than fragmenting structural settler-colonialism into several discrete events with specific causes, which generates motivated "forgetting" that facilitates underrepresentation of Native history, I examine how these specific events come together to form settler-colonial structures. Public memory of the Bear River Massacre, a bloody event on par with Wounded Knee and Sand Creek, is now about more than competing narratives and intentionally forgetting violence against Indigenous peoples. Now it is also about how settler-colonial remembrances of the West specifically erase violence against Indigenous women and how public history can be complicit in settler-colonial violence. It can also help us construct genealogies for contemporary violence against Native women that are rooted directly in historical settler conflicts. We can also

⁵² Roger L. Nichols, *Massacring Indians: From Horseshoe Bend to Wounded Knee* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021), 2-3.

use the roles that women have played in commemorating the massacre to counter narratives of Native women as helpless victims.

According to Henderson-Matthews, both versions of the story assert that Mountain Chief and Heavy Runner believed that Owl Child's murder of Clarke was justified.⁵³ However, there is some disagreement about whether Heavy Runner and Mountain Chief truly agreed with Owl Child's actions. Bear Head said that the chiefs did not agree with Owl Child's actions.⁵⁴ In his 1994 book *Killing Custer: The Battle of Little Bighorn and the Fate of the Plains Indians*, James Welch wrote that the chiefs were trying to avoid conflict with white settlers but understood why Owl Child killed Clarke.⁵⁵ Montana settlers viewed Clarke's murder as a violent action by hostile Indians who threatened the territory. In response to the killing and alleged horse theft, settlers pushed for the territorial legislature and federal military to take action against the Blackfeet. In October 1869, a grand jury indicted five men from the Blackfeet Nation for the murder of Malcolm Clarke. However, these men were never brought to trial. In his 2016 book *Blood on the Marias*, historian Paul Wylie wrote, "that matter of due process did not even enter the discussion where the Piegan were concerned."⁵⁶ Tensions rose in Montana Territory, and some settlers called for the army to assemble a militia and hunt down Owl Child.⁵⁷

⁵³ Henderson-Matthews, "For as long as the sun shall rise and the mountains cast their shadows," 41.

⁵⁴ Bear Head Affidavit, Heavy Runner Records, 1914-1921, MF 53, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁵⁵ Welch with Stekler, *Killing Custer*, 28-29.

⁵⁶ Paul Wylie, *Blood on the Marias: The Baker Massacre* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 147.

⁵⁷ Piegan Indians: Letter from the Secretary of War in answer to a resolution of the House, of March 3, 1870, in relation to the late expedition against the Piegan Indians, in the Territory of

Historian Blanca Tovias argued that Clarke's murder was not just a violent event that sparked off conflict between white settlers and Indigenous peoples but also a symbolic "rallying point" for Montana settlers who wanted Indian lands.⁵⁸ Despite the reality of Clarke being a less than savory character who may have sexually assaulted and physically abused Piikani women, he took on a mythic persona as an innocent man unjustly murdered by the Piikani. Settlers saw his murder both as an act of violence by dangerous Indians and as a means to acquire land and resources from the Piikani. Here, we can link the Bear River Massacre to settler-colonial campaigns to destroy Native nations and take their land for settler use.

General Philip Sheridan used civilian calls for retribution for Clarke's murder as an excuse to begin a winter campaign against the Piikani people, part of his broader military crusade against Native nations during the Indian Wars. Sheridan was a Union Army General during the Civil War and a major player in the Indian Wars. The quote "The only good Indian is a dead one" is often attributed to General Sheridan, though he denied ever saying it.⁵⁹ By 1870, Sheridan was the Lieutenant General of the Army of the United States and Commander of the Military Division of the Missouri. Sheridan knew that the only people left in villages during the winter would be "women and children and decrepit old men," and he had already successfully attacked Native camps during the winter in other parts of the country.⁶⁰ For instance, Sheridan

Montana, H.R. Exec. Doc. No. 269, 41st Congress, 2nd Sess. (1870), University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons, <https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2903&context=indianserialset>.

⁵⁸ Tovias, "Diplomacy and Contestation before and after the 1870 Massacre of Amskapi Pikuni," 274.

⁵⁹ Kansas Historical Society, "Philip Sheridan," Kansapedia, Kansas Historical Society, published March 2013, <https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/philip-sheridan/17323>.

⁶⁰ Henderson, "The Piikuni and the U.S. Army's Piegan Expedition," 55.

chose to carry out a winter campaign against the Cheyenne and Arapaho peoples in Oklahoma specifically to target women and children, not just fighting men.⁶¹ By targeting women and children, Sheridan hoped to exterminate not only current Native peoples but also future generations. The Oklahoma campaign resulted in the Washita Massacre, with a death toll ranging from fifteen to 150 people, including a significant number of noncombatant women and children. In a letter to Kansas Governor Samuel Crawford on September 26, 1868, just a few months before the Washita Massacre, Sheridan said that he wanted to “chastise the Indians” by “killing as many as we can.”⁶² Similarly, by attacking the Blackfeet at the Bear River, Sheridan intended to destroy both possessions and bodies as part of a broader campaign to “force them [the Blackfeet] onto the reservations”⁶³ and demonstrate settler-colonial supremacy over Native peoples.

By December 1869, the Montana territory government and military officials agreed to organize a military mission to punish the Blackfeet for Clarke’s murder. Welch wrote in *Fools Crow* that the “seizers” (European American settlers) wanted Mountain Chief’s band to pay for the crimes of Owl Child⁶⁴ and that they “would have all the Pikunis killed off, blameless or not.”⁶⁵ Sheridan assigned Major Eugene M. Baker to the mission. In a telegraph to Inspector General of the Military Division of the Missouri James Hardie, Sheridan said, “tell Baker to

⁶¹ Stephen Black, “Washita, Battle of the,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=WA037>.

⁶² Letter from Philip H. Sheridan to Samuel J. Crawford, September 26, 1868, item 210674, Box 5, Folder 5, Military History (Coll. 617), Kansas Memory, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, <https://www.kansasmemory.org/item/210674>.

⁶³ Henderson, “The Piikuni and the U.S. Army’s Piegan Expedition,” 55.

⁶⁴ Welch, *Fools Crow*, 159.

⁶⁵ Welch, *Fools Crow*, 215.

‘strike them [the Blackfeet Nation] hard.’”⁶⁶ Major Baker and four cavalry companies left Fort Ellis and headed to Fort Shaw, near Great Falls, on January 6, 1870. The companies joined up with mounted infantry men and a company of the regular U.S. Thirteenth Cavalry. A total of 355 soldiers departed from Fort Shaw and began marching toward the Marias River, accompanied by three scouts: Joe Kipp, Joseph Cobell, and Horace Clarke.

Joe Kipp’s mother Earth Woman was a Mandan tribal member, and his father James Kipp was a trader with the Blackfeet. Kipp himself was a fur trader and guide for the United States, and he was married to a Native woman. Kipp’s role was to serve as an interpreter and guide for Baker, who knew very little about different Native bands and tribes in Montana.⁶⁷ Joseph Cobell was an Italian man whose horses were allegedly stolen by Blackfeet.⁶⁸ Cobell was married to Blackfeet leader Mountain Chief’s sister, Black Bear Woman. The third scout was Horace Clarke, who wanted vengeance on Owl Child for his father’s murder.⁶⁹ Surprisingly, Horace would later prove to be a significant ally to the Blackfeet by writing an affidavit to the Indian Office about the violence and wrongfulness of the massacre.⁷⁰

Kipp found Mountain Chief’s band camped on the Marias River, and he reported their location to the soldiers. The group marched to the Teton River and camped there, then moved to the Marias two days later. By this time, according to Bear Head, Mountain Chief’s band had

⁶⁶ H.R. Exec. Doc. No. 269, <https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2903&context=indianserialset>.

⁶⁷ Henderson, “The Piikuni and the U.S. Army’s Piegan Expedition,” 56.

⁶⁸ Wylie, *Blood on the Marias*, 182.

⁶⁹ Graybill, “Helen P. Clarke in ‘the Age of Tribes,’” 5.

⁷⁰ Henderson, “The Piikuni and the U.S. Army’s Piegan Expedition,” 65.

moved ten miles down the river, and Heavy Runner's band had taken its place.⁷¹ The surprise attack on the camp began near dawn on January 23, when most of the people were still sleeping. Kipp realized that the band camped on the Marias was Heavy Runner's band, not Mountain Chief's band. Under orders from Fort Shaw commander Colonel Philippe Régis de Trobriand, Heavy Runner and his band were not to be attacked.⁷² Though Kipp told the soldiers that Heavy Runner's band was peaceful, Baker refused to stop the attack⁷³ and threatened to shoot Kipp if he tried to warn the Blackfeet camp.⁷⁴ According to Bear Head, Baker said, "that makes no difference, one band or another of them: they are all Piegans and we will attack them."⁷⁵

At this point, soldiers present at the massacre and historians who later analyzed the event agree that Baker was drunk, a fact that would later be used to argue that Baker was unable to make sound decisions about the attack.⁷⁶ However, American Studies scholar Jody Pepion (Amskapi Piikuni) argued that the concept of soldiers attacking Indigenous peoples as a "mistake" or in "error" is a theme of the U.S. government's treatment of Native peoples.⁷⁷ She troubled the traditional narrative that the Bear River Massacre was a mistake and that Baker

⁷¹ Bear Head Affidavit, Heavy Runner Records, 1914-1921, MF 53, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁷² Letter from Regis de Trobriand to Eugene Baker, January 16, 1870, SC 1201, Regis de Trobriand Papers 1869-1871, box 1, folder 2, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁷³ Tristan Scott, "Remembering the Marias Massacre," *Flathead Beacon*, January 15, 2020, <https://flatheadbeacon.com/2020/01/15/remembering-marias-massacre/>.

⁷⁴ James Willard Schultz, *Blackfeet and Buffalo: Memories of Life Among the Indians* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 304.

⁷⁵ Schultz, *Blackfeet and Buffalo*, 304.

⁷⁶ Henderson, "The Piikuni and the U.S. Army's Piegan Expedition," 65.

⁷⁷ Jody Pepion, "Aawaatowapsiiksi 'Those People that Have Sacred Ceremonies' Indigenous Women's Bodies: Recovering the Sacred, Restoring Our Lands, Decolonization" (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, December 2009), 12.

attacked the wrong group of people. Pepion pointed out that no matter whether Baker attacked the “right” group or not, he and his soldiers committed an act of extreme violence against Native peoples. Jack Gladstone, Blackfeet musician and co-founder of the Native American Speaks program at Glacier National Park, also pushed back on the narrative about Baker’s troops making a mistake. Gladstone insisted that “everybody wants to say how it was the wrong band, that Baker’s men went after the wrong band of Blackfeet, but there is no right band. You don’t slaughter women and children. We should not have been massacring any tribe of human beings at rest near a river on a landscape that we occupied for 13,000 years.”⁷⁸ Pepion’s work shows that these “mistakes” were part of a broader campaign of violent American Western settler colonization, intended to replace Native peoples with Euro-American settlers. The fact that Baker was drunk did not necessarily mean that he “did not know what he was doing.”⁷⁹ Instead, we might read Baker’s intoxication not as an excuse but as a complicating factor in the massacre.

After Baker overruled Kipp’s objections, Cobell fired the first shot at the camp.⁸⁰

According to Spear Woman, Chief Heavy Runner’s daughter, Chief Heavy Runner emerged from the camp and “walked quietly toward the soldiers with his hands uplifted.”⁸¹ Heavy Runner held up his good conduct papers and medals and called for the soldiers to cease the attack, since

⁷⁸ Scott, “Remembering the Marias Massacre,” <https://flatheadbeacon.com/2020/01/15/remembering-marias-massacre/>.

⁷⁹ Horace Clarke Affidavit, Heavy Runner Records, 1914-1921, MF 53, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁸⁰ Theda New Breast, “Bear River Massacre Commemoration and Healing,” *Indian Country Today*, January 27, 2012, <https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/bear-river-massacre-commemoration-and-healing>.

⁸¹ “Spear Woman,” *The Billings Gazette*, April 3, 1932.

he was peaceful and had always been “a friend of the whites.”⁸² However, the soldiers ignored the papers. Cobell shot Heavy Runner when he came out of the camp and walked toward the soldiers. Black Bear Woman, who was not present at the Baker Massacre but whose testimony comes from oral histories passed down in her family, claimed that Cobell shot Heavy Runner because the chief had taken his horses.⁸³ In Spear Woman’s narrative, Heavy Runner was shot in the heart, and the other soldiers began firing.⁸⁴ In Good Bear Woman’s account, Heavy Runner handed his papers to Baker, who tore them up and threw them away. When Heavy Runner turned around, soldiers fired on him and killed him.⁸⁵ In Carol Murray’s account, Baker waited until Heavy Runner approached him so that he could shoot the chief at point-blank range.⁸⁶ Whenever and however Heavy Runner was killed, he died almost instantly. After murdering Heavy Runner, the soldiers began firing into the camp from the ridges surrounding the area.

After firing “for the better part of an hour,”⁸⁷ the soldiers advanced down into the camp, where they attacked Piikani people with axes and bayonets. Very few Piikani people returned fire. Only one unnamed dying Piikani man shot Private Walton McKay, who was the lone European American casualty.⁸⁸ Most of the able-bodied men in the camp were out hunting, and

⁸² Henderson, “The Piikuni and the U.S. Army’s Piegan Expedition,” 57.

⁸³ Black Bear Woman Affidavit, Heavy Runner Records, 1914-1921, MF 53, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁸⁴ “Spear Woman,” *The Billings Gazette*, April 3, 1932.

⁸⁵ Good Bear Woman Affidavit, Heavy Runner Records, 1914-1921, MF 53, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁸⁶ Carol Murray, interview by Kainai High school, <https://www.blackfootdigitallibrary.com/digital/collection/bdl/id/234/rec/2>.

⁸⁷ Robert J. Ege, *Strike Them Hard!: Incident on the Marias, 23 Jan. 1870* (Bellevue, NE: The Old Army Press, 1970), 44.

⁸⁸ Good Bear Woman Affidavit, Heavy Runner Records, 1914-1921, MF 53, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

the few who remained were very young men or boys. Most of the people killed in the attack were elderly men, children, and women. Soldiers “freely killed women and children,”⁸⁹ including infants. While Baker reported that 173 people died, witnesses estimated the true death toll to be over 200. By Kipp’s count, the soldiers had killed 217 Blackfeet people by the end of the attack.⁹⁰ The soldiers also burned bedding and clothing, lit wounded people on fire,⁹¹ and destroyed food (including “more than a ton of prepared buffalo meat”⁹²) and other supplies. The soldiers even burned sacred medicine bundles.⁹³ According to Mrs. Frank Monroe (Kills-on-the Edge)’s account of the attack, soldiers also stole robes and blankets from the camp.⁹⁴ After the attack, Good Bear Woman recounted that the soldiers tore down all the lodges and lit them on fire, then captured the band’s horses to prevent any Blackfeet people from escaping.⁹⁵

The violence did not stop with the initial attack. Soldiers also took prisoners from the camp. According to Baker’s official report, the soldiers took more than one hundred women and children captive. In his book *Empire of Shadows: The Epic History of Yellowstone*, journalist and author George Black wrote that Lieutenant Doane ordered his soldiers to kill every prisoner with axes rather than guns the night after the attack.⁹⁶ The next day, Doane told Baker that many of

⁸⁹ Fifer, *Montana Battlefields 1806-1877*, 36.

⁹⁰ Tovías, “Diplomacy and Contestation before and after the 1870 Massacre of Amskapi Pikuni,” 274.

⁹¹ Mrs. Frank Monroe Affidavit, Heavy Runner Records, 1914-1921, MF 53, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁹² Ege, *Strike Them Hard!*, 46.

⁹³ Hungry Wolf, *The Blackfoot Papers Volume 4*, 1041.

⁹⁴ Mrs. Frank Monroe Affidavit, Heavy Runner Records, 1914-1921, MF 53, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁹⁵ Good Bear Woman Affidavit, Heavy Runner Records, 1914-1921, MF 53, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁹⁶ Bear Head’s affidavit also includes information about soldiers killing prisoners with axes.

the prisoners had been killed trying to escape.⁹⁷ When the soldiers realized that the camp was infected with smallpox, they released the surviving prisoners, mostly women and children, into freezing weather with no food, shelter, or other supplies. Though Major Baker supposedly left “several boxes of hard-tack and bacon” for the survivors, this was probably not enough food for the Piikani people.⁹⁸ Western author Barbara Fifer wrote that the temperature “hovered at forty degrees below zero.”⁹⁹ “An uncounted number”¹⁰⁰ of Piikani people died from hypothermia or starvation while struggling to find help in the surrounding areas, including the Fort Benton military outpost ninety miles away.¹⁰¹

Following the massacre, the soldiers attempted to find Mountain Chief’s band, but they had already escaped. Instead, Baker’s group began the journey back to Fort Shaw “on the evening of January 24.”¹⁰² The violence of the attack and its effect on Piikani survivors lingered even after Baker’s soldiers moved on. According to an oral history passed down through generations of Piikani women and eventually recounted to the Billings Gazette, a small group of survivors secretly followed the soldiers. Spear Woman, her siblings, and her mother were starving and struggling to find any food to help them survive. Spear Woman remembered that “to stay in the camp was to die,”¹⁰³ so she and her family followed the soldiers. Each night after the

⁹⁷ George Black, *Empire of Shadows: The Epic History of Yellowstone* (New York City, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2012), 258.

⁹⁸ Ege, *Strike Them Hard!*, 46.

⁹⁹ Fifer, *Montana Battlefields 1806-1877*, 31.

¹⁰⁰ Black, *Empire of Shadows*, 259.

¹⁰¹ New Breast, “Bear River Massacre Commemoration and Healing,”

<https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/bear-river-massacre-commemoration-and-healing>.

¹⁰² Wylie, *Blood on the Marias*, 200.

¹⁰³ “Spear Woman,” *The Billings Gazette*, April 3, 1932.

soldiers moved on, the little group searched the abandoned camps for small bits of leftover food. During one of these forays, Spear Woman's baby sister died.¹⁰⁴

Rewriting History and the Aftermath and Significance of the Massacre

From the moment the soldiers left the Marias River, the U.S. military and federal government worked together to frame the massacre as a hard-won victory over “hostile” Indians who were threatening settlers. Officials lied about the number of people killed, claimed that the majority of victims were male warriors, argued that the military did their best to protect women and children, changed the narrative to assert that women and children also fought against the soldiers and died in battle, falsified statistics about the ages and genders of the victims, and ignored reports from survivors and sympathetic allies like Horace Clarke. In his initial report, Major Baker claimed that 173 Blackfeet died in the attack and that most of them were able-bodied men.¹⁰⁵ Alfred Sully, a military officer, ordered Indian agent William B. Pease to interview survivors and officers. Pease reported that most of the deaths in the massacre were women, children, and elderly men and that only fifteen men between the ages of twelve to thirty-seven were killed, which directly contradicted Baker's claims. Vincent Colyer, the secretary to the Board of Indian Affairs, wrote a letter to board chairman Felix Brunot detailing Pease's findings. Colyer noted that only fifteen men were “what might be called fighting men” and that

¹⁰⁴ Wylie, *Blood on the Marias*, 201.

¹⁰⁵ H.R. Exec. Doc. No. 269,

<https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2903&context=indianserialset>.

the camp was infected with smallpox.¹⁰⁶ The New York Times published the letter on February 23, 1870, thereby turning the massacre into a national controversy. Sympathetic humanitarians in the East raised questions about the massacre and expressed outrage over the actions of the soldiers involved. Montana settlers celebrated the massacre, calling the Piikani people “savage robber foes” and claiming that they deserved the “punishment” of the massacre.¹⁰⁷ Despite the Eastern consensus that the massacre was a tragedy, no disciplinary action was taken against any of the soldiers involved in the massacre.¹⁰⁸ Even Major Baker, who soldiers and historians alike agreed was inebriated during the attack, never suffered any consequences for the “mistaken massacre.”

The massacre did prevent the transfer of Indian affairs from the Department of the Interior to the War Department. Following the attack and Eastern outrage concerning the actions of the soldiers involved, President Ulysses S. Grant declared that Indian agents would be civilians rather than military officers¹⁰⁹ in the continuing struggle to colonize the American West. The massacre also resulted in huge land losses for the tribe. Grant issued an Executive Order in 1873 that reduced the size of treaty lands and “established an undivided reservation for

¹⁰⁶ "Massacre of Indians: Colonel Baker's Attack on an Indian Village -- Men, Women and Children Slaughtered -- Ninety Women and Girls Killed," *New York Times*, February 23, 1870, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/massacre-indians/docview/92590243/se-2?accountid=28148>.

¹⁰⁷ David Murray, "Blood at Bear River: Blackfeet Commemorate Massacre of 1870," *Great Falls Tribune*, January 26, 2014, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/blood-at-bear-river-blackfeet-commemorate/docview/1491755780/se-2?accountid=28148>.

¹⁰⁸ Murray, "Blood at Bear River: Blackfeet Commemorate Massacre of 1870," <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/blood-at-bear-river-blackfeet-commemorate/docview/1491755780/se-2?accountid=28148>.

¹⁰⁹ Fifer, *Montana Battlefields 1806-1877*, 38.

the Blackfeet, Gros Ventre, Assiniboine, and Sioux.”¹¹⁰ In 1874, Grant issued another Executive Order that moved the southern reservation border north to the banks of the Marias River. While Grant restored some of these lands in 1875, President Rutherford removed the restored land and handed it to Western settlers in 1880.¹¹¹

The massacre spread fear throughout communities within the Blackfeet Nation and was a turning point in the “white conquest of the Piegans.”¹¹² In a telegraph to General Sherman, Sheridan said that he thought the massacre would “end Indian troubles in Montana.”¹¹³ According to historian Andrew Graybill, the Bear River Massacre “permanently ended Blackfeet resistance to American expansion on the northwestern plains.”¹¹⁴ Dr. Walter Fleming (Kansas Kickapoo), Native American Studies department head at Montana State University, explained that the Piikani were unable to mount a defense against the American military because of the devastating impact of a smallpox epidemic on the tribe, which happened at the same time as the Bear River Massacre.¹¹⁵ The massacre also fractured family structures, and the Blackfeet Nation

¹¹⁰ Montana Office of Public Instruction and the Blackfeet Tribe, “Blackfeet Reservation Timeline,” Indian Education for All, published 2017, <https://opi.mt.gov/Portals/182/Page%20Files/Indian%20Education/Social%20Studies/K-12%20Resources/BlackfeetTimeline.pdf>.

¹¹¹ Montana Office of Public Instruction and the Blackfeet Tribe, “Blackfeet Reservation Timeline,” <https://opi.mt.gov/Portals/182/Page%20Files/Indian%20Education/Social%20Studies/K-12%20Resources/BlackfeetTimeline.pdf>.

¹¹² Henderson, “The Piikuni and the U.S. Army’s Piegan Expedition,” 61.

¹¹³ Ege, *Strike Them Hard!*, 126.

¹¹⁴ Graybill, “Helen P. Clarke in ‘the Age of Tribes,’” 5.

¹¹⁵ Landry, “Native History,” <https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/native-history-major-attacks-wrong-indian-village-doesnt-care>.

“suffered language and culture loss.”¹¹⁶ The Bear River Massacre was not only about the murder of Malcolm Clarke but more broadly about Montana settlers’ attempts to exterminate the Blackfeet Nation through physical violence and terror. Croff said that when she teaches about the Bear River Massacre, she explains to her students that the massacre “was never just about Owl Child. It was always about hundreds of people.”¹¹⁷ Though obscured in some tellings of the massacre, the sexual exploitation and assault of Native women is woven throughout the narrative of the Bear River Massacre.

Violence against Blackfeet Women and Settler-Colonial Extermination

The massacre is significant not only because of its importance in tribal history but also because it reveals settler-colonial attempts to exterminate the Blackfeet people. Importantly, most of the massacre victims were women and children. As addressed in Elizabeth Rule (Chickasaw)’s recent article “Seals, Selfies, and the Settler State: Indigenous Motherhood and Gendered Violence in Canada,” settler-colonial campaigns seek to end the “intergenerational reproduction of Indigenous culture”¹¹⁸ through violence against Native women. Rule’s work analyzes a 2014 digital campaign that challenged settler-colonial “environmentalist antisealing rhetoric demonizing Indigenous cultural practices”¹¹⁹ where audiences threatened Inuk singer

¹¹⁶ Mabie, “Blackfeet Feel Baker Massacre's Effects 150 Years Later,” <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jan/22/blackfeet-feel-baker-massacres-effects-150-years-l/>.

¹¹⁷ Iva Croff, interview with the author, April 18, 2022.

¹¹⁸ Elizabeth Rule, “Seals, Selfies, and the Settler State: Indigenous Motherhood and Gendered Violence in Canada,” *American Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (December 2018), 741, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2018.0061>.

¹¹⁹ Rule, “Seals, Selfies, and the Settler State,” 741.

Tanya Tagaq and questioned her fitness as a mother after she posted a selfie of her child lying next to a dead seal. Rule's work focuses on Native motherhood but can be expanded to broadly analyze how past and present violence against Native women is connected to settler campaigns that attempt to extinguish Native peoples, cultures, and histories. Settlers in 1870 recognized that assaults on Native women's bodies could end future generations of Native peoples. An article from the *Owylee Avalanche* in Idaho Territory celebrated the Bear River Massacre and said to "kill the sq**ws [censored by author] so the accursed race may cease to propagate."¹²⁰ The Bear River Massacre is an example of attempted disruption of Blackfeet culture and extermination of Blackfeet people centered in sexual exploitation of and violence against women.

This exploitation and violence goes beyond the alleged rape of Owl Child's wife and abuse of Cutting-Off-Head-Woman. For instance, de Trobriand claimed that the Blackfeet women who died in the massacre were killed by their husbands, not U.S. soldiers. He argued that these women's husbands killed them "to save them...from tortures among the white men which are inflicted upon white women when captured by those Red fiends."¹²¹ From this report, we can infer that de Trobriand claimed that Blackfeet men killed their wives to protect them from the threat of rape by U.S. soldiers. Though de Trobriand couched that claim in the long-running myth that White women were kidnapped, sexually assaulted, and forced into marriage by Native men,¹²² he admitted that White men assaulted Native women in times of intense trauma and

¹²⁰ Quoted in Nichols, *Massacring Indians*, 109.

¹²¹ Henderson, "The Piikuni and the U.S. Army's Piegan Expedition," 64.

¹²² Andrea Smith, "Not an Indian Tradition: The Sexual Colonization of Native Peoples," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 7.

violence. Historical examples of obscuring violence against women in the Bear River Massacre both survive and mirror contemporary examples.

More broadly, the Bear River Massacre is connected to one aspect of the MMIWG crisis: that of stereotyping and lack of representation of Native women. According to scholars Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (European-American) and Dina Gilio-Whitaker (Colville Confederated Tribes), “one in three Native American women has been raped or experienced attempted rape, and the rate of sexual assault on Native American women is more than twice the national average.”¹²³ Legal scholar and advocate Sarah Deer (Muskogee Creek Nation) claimed that the actual rate of sexual assault against Native women is higher than federal statistics. She added that in her advocacy work, she heard multiple women say that every woman in their community had been raped.¹²⁴ Sexual violence connected to murders and kidnappings is underreported by the American media for a variety of reasons, including erasure of Native lives, separation between news stations and reservations, reluctance of Native women to report crimes, and stereotyping of Native women.¹²⁵ According to Danielle C. Slakoff, the media “largely ignores the victimizations of Native American females.”¹²⁶ Underreporting and lack of attention to these crimes puts Native women at an even higher risk of experiencing sexual violence. Stereotyping

¹²³ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Dina Gilio-Whitaker, “What’s the Problem With Thinking of Indian Women as Princesses or Squaws?” in *All the Real Indians Died Off* and 20 Other Myths About Native Americans (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2016), 141.

¹²⁴ Sarah Deer, *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 5.

¹²⁵ Danielle C. Slakoff, “The representation of women and girls of color in United States crime news,” *Sociology Compass* 14, no. 1 (December 2019): 5, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12741>.

¹²⁶ Slakoff, “The representation of women and girls of color in United States crime news,” 6, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12741>.

and lack of representation result in apathetic public responses to crimes committed against Native American women. Since people disregard news about sexual violence against stereotyped Native American women, the reporting on these incidents drops. The cycle of ignorance and dismissal continues, putting Native women at greater risk.

MMIWG is also connected to attacks on land, as is the Bear River Massacre. Estes wrote that “settler states like Canada and the United States continue to settle the land, raping and killing Native women and Two-Spirit people in order to do so”¹²⁷ and that “the proliferation of violence against the land has been directly related to attacks on Indigenous women’s bodies.”¹²⁸ In both the past and present, Native women are an important part of Indigenous communities. Settler-colonial violence against Native women is part of a broader campaign to eliminate Native nations. I will return to further discussion of representations of Native women in public history and explain how those representations are connected to eliminatory settler-colonial logic later in this thesis.

Marking the Site

Public historical interpretations of the Bear River Massacre are complicated by the decades-long confusion over the site’s precise location. First, massacre victims were laid to rest in an unmarked mass grave near the site. To date, no one knows exactly where this grave is located. Additionally, according to historian Robert J. Ege, “subsequent to 1890, even the actual site of the battle was lost.”¹²⁹ In 1950, Ege discovered several .50 caliber bullets at the Big Bend

¹²⁷ Estes, *Our History is the Future*, 31.

¹²⁸ Estes, *Our History is the Future*, 8.

¹²⁹ Ege, *Strike Them Hard!*, 59.

of the Marias River. He wrote that “later, many .50 caliber shell cases discovered by the author and Northwest historical researcher, Gordon L. Pouliot, by the aid of a metal detector.” Ege argued that these cases provided additional evidence that the massacre was located at the Big Bend.¹³⁰

In a 1974 archeological survey, principal investigator Tom Roll claimed that the site “probably lies within the flood-pool of today’s Tiber Reservoir” but that he had found “no evidence of the massacre in the proximity” of the massacre’s reported location. Local residents maintained that the massacre site was located in “Dead Indian Coulee” near the Marias River, but Roll said that there was no evidence to support their location identification.¹³¹

Twenty years later, in *Killing Custer*, James Welch discussed traveling to Shelby, Montana to locate the site of the Bear River Massacre in 1994 when writing his book *Fools Crow*. Welch claimed that, as of 1994, both non-Native scholars and Blackfeet Nation tribal members were unsure of the site’s precise location. Welch’s friend Bill Bevis discovered Ege’s book *Strike Them Hard!*, which described the location of the site and allegedly confirmed its position by using a metal detector to track down cartridges used by the military in the late 1800s on the Marias River.¹³² Using *Strike Them Hard!* and a photograph of the site taken by Ege, Welch and Bevis located the site on the Marias. Welch described wandering the promontory and

¹³⁰ Ege, *Strike Them Hard!*, 59.

¹³¹ Tom E. Roll, “Tiber Reservoir, Montana: 1974 Archeological Survey, Submitted to the National Park Service, Interagency Archeological Services - Denver in fulfillment of Contract #CX1595-4-0129 (G&C 601) between the National Park Service and the Montana State University Endowment and Research Foundation, 1974-1975,” February 1978, Baker Massacre, 1870 Vertical File, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

¹³² Welch with Stekler, *Killing Custer*, 40.

the flat below, imagining his ancestors in the Piikani village on the Marias.¹³³ Welch recalled thinking about the children, “perhaps because they are truly the innocents,”¹³⁴ and women involved in the massacre.

In a 1994 report at the MHS titled “Good Indians,” historian Stan Gibson recounted his frustrations in attempting to locate the site. Eventually, he stumbled upon *Strike Them Hard!* and decided to visit the site himself. Gibson struggled to access the land on which the massacre occurred. He wrote that numerous officials in Montana attempted to prevent him from walking along the Marias River. When Gibson visited the site in 1994, the Judisch family leased it from the Bureau of Reclamation, who had expropriated the site in 1964 for the Tiber River.¹³⁵ According to Gibson, Jim Judisch Jr. allowed Gibson free access to the site and guided him to the location.

Different researchers suggested other locations for the specific site of the massacre. According to a National Park Service battlefields reconnaissance survey from 1998, two National Historic Site Register nominations had been submitted for the site of the Bear River Massacre. Both nominations were rejected because they lacked “on-the-ground verification.”¹³⁶ Survey author Jerome Greene observed and recorded the general area of the Bear River Massacre site on August 20, 1997. At the time of the survey, Greene claimed “precise location of the

¹³³ Welch with Stekler, *Killing Custer*, 43-44.

¹³⁴ Welch with Stekler, *Killing Custer*, 44.

¹³⁵ Unpublished document “Good Indians” by Stan Gibson, August 24, 1994, Baker Massacre, 1870 Vertical File, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

¹³⁶ Jerome A. Greene, *Reconnaissance Survey of Indian-U.S. Army Battlefields of the Northern Plains* (Denver, CO: National Park Service Cultural Resources and National Register Program Services, Intermountain Support Office, September 1998), <http://npshistory.com/publications/battlefield/indian-army-no-plains.pdf>, 84.

village site in the river bottom [had] not been verified either through documentation or archaeologically.”¹³⁷

A 1996 analysis of the Idaho Bear River Massacre provides more context for the difficulties of marking the Bear River Massacre site in Montana.¹³⁸ The National Park Service publication compared the Montana massacre site to Sand Creek because of its lack of documentation and claimed that the site is located either on Bureau of Reclamation or private land. According to the National Park Service, “The site is not listed in the National Register of Historic Places, nor is it interpreted. Blackfeet people currently hold yearly ceremonies at the Bureau of Reclamation site, [sic] and have obtained a grant to do archeological surveys of it, but no other public recognition of the event exists.”¹³⁹ According to Lea Whitford, former Blackfeet Studies Department Chair at BCC, the tribe, especially John Murray, is still seeking a National Register nomination.¹⁴⁰ The tribe completed testing of the area and found some evidence to support the site location. However, these documents are confidential and have not been used to assemble another site nomination as of 2022.¹⁴¹

Even if the gravesite or the precise massacre site is positively located, there are differing opinions regarding what should be done with the site. For instance, Whitford mentioned that

¹³⁷ Greene, *Reconnaissance Survey of Indian-U.S. Army Battlefields of the Northern Plains*, 87.

¹³⁸ There are two different Bear River Massacres in American history. One massacre took place in Idaho in 1863 and the other took place in Montana in 1870. In order to avoid confusion between the two massacres, I will use “Idaho Bear River Massacre” to refer to the Idaho massacre in this thesis and distinguish it from the massacre in Montana.

¹³⁹ U.S. National Park Service, *Final Special Resource Study Environmental Assessment: Bear River Massacre Site, Idaho* (Washington, DC: United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1996), <http://npshistory.com/publications/srs/bear-river-massacre-srs-ea.pdf>, 9.

¹⁴⁰ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

¹⁴¹ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

seeking national recognition for the site might “encourage looting” by the public, which would disrupt “hallowed ground” for the Blackfeet.¹⁴² She said that people at the site should be respectful of the place and how it had been used prior to the massacre. In an interview with the author, Whitford said that her priority is not pinpointing the exact location of the site but rather respecting massacre victims and permanently memorializing the site so future generations of Piikani people understand its significance as a pivotal moment in the history of the tribe.¹⁴³

Conflict over verifying the site from major organizations such as the National Parks Service point toward diverging priorities for historical organizations and tribes and the way these differences complicate decolonization. For the National Register of Historic Places, the goal is to “identify, evaluate, and protect”¹⁴⁴ the exact site. For the Blackfeet Nation, the goal is to interpret and memorialize the event in the general site area for educational and cultural healing purposes. Public historical representations of the massacre vary depending on who is creating them, indicating silencing generated by settler-colonial violence and motivated European American historical “forgetting.” The MDT Baker Massacre marker near Shelby, Montana is an attempt by a non-Native organization to interpret the massacre. Though the Baker Massacre marker is part of the process of decolonizing the historical marker program and telling Native stories, the marker does not fully represent the Piikani perspective on the massacre or serve the purposes of

¹⁴² Gail Schontzler, “Blackfeet Remember Montana's Greatest Indian Massacre,” *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, March 30, 2017, https://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/sunday/article_daca1094-4484-11e1-918e-001871e3ce6c.html.

¹⁴³ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

¹⁴⁴ “How to List a Property,” National Parks Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, published February 10, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/how-to-list-a-property.htm>.

the tribe. Piikani people have engaged with Bear River Massacre history through massacre commemorations, a Canadian memorial, and art pieces, all of which can provide fruitful sources for re-interpretation and revision efforts in European American public historical representations of the massacre.

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BEAR RIVER MASSACRE

Montana's Historical Marker Program

As explained previously, marker programs vary across the American West. While many states have a formal marker program, there is no code of ethics or guiding document for these programs. In Montana, one of the few organized marker programs is the Historical Highways marker program, which began in the 1930s and is still operating today. Other organizations that have erected monuments in Montana include the Daughters of the American Revolution,¹⁴⁵ the Sons and Daughters of Montana Pioneers, and the MHS.

Historical markers have a particular power in the American Western landscape. While they memorialize events, their interpretations are often limited. Highway signs are typically

¹⁴⁵ The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) established an influential Montana monument and marker program. DAR became a key organization in historic preservation in the early 1900s with their work creating “signage to mark historic sites and trails.” [Denise D. Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 103.] Meringolo wrote that originally, the DAR supported “the study of American history as an antidote to the danger posed by the new immigrants” (31). Their preservation philosophy was rooted in concepts of “American history” that excluded marginalized groups like Native peoples. Beginning in 1908, the Daughters of the Revolution installed seventy monuments at various sites in Montana. As of 2019, only 33 of the original markers remained [Montana State Society Daughters of the American Revolution, *Montana's DAR Markers: Honoring Where History Was Made* (Helena, MT: Montana State Society Daughters of the American Revolution, 2019), ii.] The Montana DAR installed numerous monuments to Sacagawea and her contributions to the Lewis and Clark expedition, including the Sacajawea Memorial-Armstead and the Sacajawea Memorial - Three Forks (50, 152). Sacagawea is one of the few Indigenous women who is named and honored at public sites in Montana. The Montana DAR memorialized several military forts and battlefields but did not commemorate any massacres. Instead, the DAR markers focused on honoring soldiers' memories and contributions to various military efforts. For more information on the DAR program, see the books named here and the collections at the MHS and the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives.

restricted by strict word counts that affect how history is interpreted.¹⁴⁶ As the 1994 NPS survey noted, the Bear River Massacre site in Montana has not been substantially interpreted.¹⁴⁷ Historical markers also function outside of an institutionalized setting like a museum or university, which allows them to reach a broader swath of the population. Highway historic markers are located in close proximity to major roads, which makes them accessible to anyone traveling by car. Drivers can read marker text from their cars or pull over to read the text in more detail. This accessibility is tempered by the fact that drivers may not be able to read the complete text of a marker from the road or pull over during their travels. Additionally, the lack of institutionalization that allows for marker accessibility also means that historic marker programs may lack the funding and resources needed to construct meaningful interpretations of historic events. However, historic markers, like memorials, can wield power and influence by “marking social and political interests and claiming particular historical narratives.”¹⁴⁸

In Montana, the only formal marker program that operates at a state level is the Historic Highways Marker program.¹⁴⁹ Publicly accessible information about the MDT marker program is contained in two books, *Montana's Historical Highway Markers* and *Montana's Historic Markers*. Edmund Christopherson published *Montana's Historic Markers* in 1970, and the book

¹⁴⁶ Tony Tekaroniake Evans, “Decolonizing Idaho's Road Signs,” *High Country News*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/53.11/indigenous-affairs-people-places-decolonizing-idahos-road-signs>.

¹⁴⁷ *Final Special Resource Study Environmental Assessment*, <http://npshistory.com/publications/srs/bear-river-massacre-srs-ea.pdf>, 9.

¹⁴⁸ Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press), 9.

¹⁴⁹ The National Historic Site Register (NHSR) program operates in Montana as well, managed by the Montana State Historical Society, but the NHSR is a national program partially managed at the state level rather than an independent state program.

contained a short introduction, followed by images of historic markers that Christopherson located and photographed. However, Christopherson's text provided little information on how the MDT established or maintained the markers. Christopherson discussed the inception of the marker program, celebrated the "frontier flavor"¹⁵⁰ of Montana's highway markers, and claimed that the marker program helped "us know and enjoy our history."¹⁵¹ *Montana's Historical Highway Markers* elaborated on the construction, maintenance, and history of the markers as well as the history of the marker program itself. Montana Highway Department engineer Robert H. Fletcher originally published the book in 1938. The MDT has revised, updated, and re-released the book multiple times. Axline revised and expanded the most recent version, published in 2008.

According to the 2008 version of *Montana's Historical Highway Markers*, the highway marker program was Fletcher's brainchild, part of a broader campaign to draw tourists to Montana in the 1930s.¹⁵² Fletcher hoped to portray a romanticized version of Montana that drew on the myth of the Wild West. He pitched the program to the State Highway Commission on May 17, 1935, and Fletcher and the Commission unveiled the first set of markers in summer 1935.¹⁵³ According to Axline, most Montana citizens loved the markers and saw them as "interesting and informative." Fletcher's markers may have appealed to the public, but they were not always factually accurate, and they often relied on racist stereotypes and folksy Western

¹⁵⁰ Edmund Christopherson, *Montana's Historic Markers* (Missoula, MT: Earthquake Press, 1970), 4.

¹⁵¹ Christopherson, *Montana's Historic Markers*, 6.

¹⁵² Jon Axline, ed., *Montana's Historical Highway Markers* (Helena, MT: Montana Historical Society Press, 2008), vii.

¹⁵³ Axline, *Montana's Historical Highway Markers*, ix-x.

language in order to “tell a good story.”¹⁵⁴ For example, one early marker for Bad Rock Canyon, located on the U.S. 2 west of Belt, described conflict between Native peoples in the canyon. The marker read:

The Flathead River enters the valley through Bad Rock Canyon. Old timers aver that a party of war whoops surged over the divide years ago, seething with ambition to corral a choice assortment of cayuses and maybe a scalp or two from the unsuspecting tomahawks who claimed this part of the country for range and bed grounds. They came with stealth and breezed with haste and horses.

The foray put the home folks on the prod. They lined out on the trail of those vanishing redskins, both parties being totally uninformed regarding the good neighbor idea.

The departing braves anticipated some such caper so, cunning and agile as pine squirrels, they took to a projecting rib on the canyon wall and laid for the irate oncomers.

It developed into quite a disturbance. Many a warrior joined his fathers in the Sand Hills that day. Naturally lugubrious relatives thereafter referred to that ill-omened citadel as Bad Rock.¹⁵⁵

Wolfe argued in his foundational work “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native” that “settler colonialism destroys to replace.”¹⁵⁶ Within the context of Wolfe’s argument, this means that settlers destroy Indigenous resources, history, and claims to territory in order to replace them with settler resources, history, and claims to territory. The original 1938 Montana Historic Highway Marker program often represented Native men as violent and wild, Native women as sq**ws, and/or Native peoples as simply nonexistent in Montana. Rather than acknowledging the histories of Montana’s twelve tribes, the 1938 markers told a romantic story

¹⁵⁴ Axline, *Montana’s Historical Highway Markers*, xii.

¹⁵⁵ Fletcher, *Montana Highway Historical Markers*, 9.

¹⁵⁶ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8, no. 4 (December 2006): 387-409, doi: [10.1080/14623520601056240](https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240).

about the colonization of the Wild West. The original marker program enforced the “destroy to replace” process outlined by Wolfe by destroying Native histories and replacing them with settler histories. Often, “a community’s identity is closely tied to the collective memory embodied in its museums and historic sites.”¹⁵⁷ The 1938 marker program constructed a settler-colonial identity through collective memory about Montana and the Wild West.

The 1938 marker booklet listed ninety-eight markers.¹⁵⁸ By 1972, there were 118 markers.¹⁵⁹ By 1988, the number rose again to 120 markers.¹⁶⁰ As of 2022, the MDT maintains 287 geological and historical interpretive markers in Montana.¹⁶¹ Though the number of signs rose, the MDT maintenance department wasn’t always able to keep up. MDT records from the 1960s through 1980s indicate that many signs were moved as highways developed and changed. The MDT removed some signs entirely. Other signs fell apart from lack of maintenance, languished for years in repair shops, were stolen, or were vandalized. Internal memorandums reveal that the MDT held some racist assumptions about the theft of certain signs. For instance, a 1973 memorandum reported that the marker at Browning (probably the marker about the

¹⁵⁷ Jay Price, “The Small Town We Never Were: Old Cowtown Museum Faces an Urban Past,” in *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America’s Changing Communities*, eds. Amy K. Levin and Joshua G. Adair, eds., (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 91.

¹⁵⁸ Fletcher, *Montana Highway Historical Markers*.

¹⁵⁹ Clipping from Miles City Star, October 7, 1971, Montana Department of Transportation Director’s Office Files records, RS411, Box 18, Folder 27, Larry Larson Historical Markers 1969-1990, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

¹⁶⁰ Highway Signs: ‘Windows of the west’ clipping from Great Falls Tribune, 1988, Montana Department of Transportation Director’s Office Files records, RS411, Box 18, Folder 27, Larry Larson Historical Markers 1969-1990, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

¹⁶¹ Jon Axline, email to the author, February 23, 2022.

Blackfeet Nation or the Old Teton Agency) had been stolen and remarked that it “is probably in some tee-pee or hippy pad.”¹⁶²

In the 1980s and 1990s, the historical marker program in Montana underwent an extensive re-interpretation effort. Recognizing that much of the language and subject matter of the markers was racist and offensive, the MDT partnered with Glenda Clay Bradshaw and other members of the MHS to revise marker text across the state.¹⁶³ However, the MDT and MHS did not re-interpret every marker. Additionally, only a few new markers focused on Indigenous histories aside from the ten markers installed as part of the State Legislature’s Indian Historical Marker Program in the 1990s.¹⁶⁴ New markers in the 2000s primarily focused on geological features and physical landmarks rather than historic events. These new markers were part of the Montana Governor’s Math and Science Initiative, “designed to stimulate Montana’s youth to learn about the wonders of math and science.”¹⁶⁵

A few Montana tribes contributed to the Indian Historical Marker Program. However, several Montana tribes were not involved in the composition of current-day markers nor the reinterpretation of markers from the 1930s and 1940s. Given that there are now hundreds of highway markers across Montana, the lack of tribal input for these public historical sites results in the reification of settler-colonial control of historical narratives. The reinterpretation was an

¹⁶² Internal memorandum, 1973, Montana Department of Transportation Maintenance Division records, RS407, Box 6, Folder 19, Great Falls Historic Markers 1970-1976, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

¹⁶³ Axline, *Montana’s Historical Highway Markers*, xii-xiii.

¹⁶⁴ Axline, *Montana’s Historical Highway Markers*, 112.

¹⁶⁵ Axline, *Montana’s Historical Highway Markers*, xiii.

excellent first step toward incorporating Native history into Montana public history, but there is still work to be done to truly center a Native perspective in the marker program.

History of the Baker Massacre Marker

Before the marker installation, the tribe typed out a history of the event and pinned it on a hide, which they took to the site for commemoration ceremonies.¹⁶⁶ The current marker is the second attempt at permanently memorializing the Bear River Massacre. The first attempt was in the late 1990s, when the Blackfeet tribe approached the MDT with a plan to write and install a marker about the Bear River Massacre. The tribe selected a location for the marker, and the MDT “agreed to manufacture, install, and maintain it.”¹⁶⁷ In 2000, the tribe held a dedication ceremony and tribal feed at BCC, attended by university students, Blackfeet elders, the Bureau of Indian Affairs archaeologist, a Bureau of Land Management archaeologist from the US Bureau of Land, Axline, and others who were interested in the project. However, for unknown reasons, the Piikani version of the marker text was never installed.¹⁶⁸ Neither Whitford nor Murray, two Piikani leaders consulted during this thesis project, were able to provide more information on why the first version of the marker text was never completed.¹⁶⁹ Axline later wrote the second version of the marker, and the MDT installed it in 2007. Axline consulted with Blackfeet Nation tribal members, including Darryl Kipp, Jack Edmo, and John Murray as well as

¹⁶⁶ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

¹⁶⁷ Jon Axline, email to the author, February 23, 2022.

¹⁶⁸ Jon Axline, email to the author, February 23, 2022.

¹⁶⁹ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022 and Carol Murray, interview with the author, April 8, 2022.

BCC faculty, all of whom approved the marker text.¹⁷⁰ The tribe recommended changes to the sign, some of which were implemented.¹⁷¹ Though Whitford said that she appreciated the state of Montana and the effort that went into creating the marker, not everyone agreed with the marker text and the rejected changes have been “a sore spot”¹⁷² for the tribe. The text of the marker does not fully reflect the complexities of the Clarke murder, discuss the multiple victim counts presented by eyewitnesses at the massacre, or acknowledge the place of women in the massacre and in present-day commemorations. Axline completed excellent work, but the labor is not over. The Baker Massacre marker was the first European American public historical interpretation of the massacre near the site, but it should not be the last. The primary problem with the marker is not that it exists but rather that it tells an incomplete story about the massacre and continues an established tradition of privileging settler narratives.

One of the key elements that is missing from the marker is the contributions of women in remembering and commemorating the massacre. For instance, many of the survivors’ records come from women who shared their stories. In recent commemorations by the Blackfeet tribe, it is often women who lead the ceremonies and guide the programs. For example, Carol Murray extensively researched the massacre, gathered oral histories from Blackfeet elders, and led many of the gatherings and commemorations at the massacre site between the 1970s and the early 2000s.¹⁷³ After she became the BCC President in 1992, Carol led a group of family, friends, and

¹⁷⁰ Jon Axline, email to the author, February 23, 2022.

¹⁷¹ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

¹⁷² Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

¹⁷³ John McGill, “BCC Commemorates 131rd Anniversary of Bear Creek Massacre,” *Glacier Reporter*, January 29, 2004,

BCC faculty to the site each year on January 23.¹⁷⁴ According to Whitford and Croff, Murray's research played a key role in creating massacre commemorations and educational programs about the Bear River Massacre as well as establishing the importance of the massacre to the Blackfeet Nation.¹⁷⁵ In an interview with the author, commemoration organizer and the Division Chair of Liberal Studies & General Education Core at BCC Iva Croff said that "the burden of carrying things that are emotionally difficult for the family as a whole is always the responsibility of the [Piikani] woman" and that women are responsible for bringing out discussions about those difficult things.¹⁷⁶ Croff noted that while men have a significant role that cannot be discounted, women have an important duty to recount Piikani history and facilitate healing.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, Rosenzweig and Thelen wrote that many Americans consider "maintaining a sense of continuity with the past broadly defined as 'women's work' within the family" and that women often play an important role in preserving history for their families and communities.¹⁷⁸ Women's leadership in preserving the memories of the massacre pushes back on the traditional narrative of women as victims in massacres. Rather than being passive objects in massacre history, Blackfeet women are active subjects, which is not reflected in the marker.

Another significant problem with the marker is the way that it tells the story of the massacre. The marker calls the massacre "The Baker Massacre" and uses Baker's reported

http://www.cutbankpioneerpress.com/glacier_reporter/news/article_9b343d7b-b790-5437-a20e-510543dc0187.html.

¹⁷⁴ Carol Murray, interview with the author, April 8, 2022.

¹⁷⁵ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

¹⁷⁶ Iva Croff, interview with the author, April 18, 2022.

¹⁷⁷ Iva Croff, interview with the author, April 18, 2022.

¹⁷⁸ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 29-30.

number of victims rather than the numbers reported by Native witnesses. The marker also does not discuss the ways in which the Blackfeet tribe currently remembers the massacre or include quotes from Blackfeet survivors. Whitford said that the tribe gave the MDT several revisions to the marker that were rejected.¹⁷⁹ Croff added that though there is a degree of accuracy in the marker, the history “is not represented well.”¹⁸⁰ Axline acknowledged that since he wrote the current marker, the text is from the perspective of a non-Native historian. He said that he would have liked to develop a larger interpretive site with text “largely written by tribal members for their perspective rather than mine.”¹⁸¹ In analyzing the Bear River Massacre and the Baker Massacre marker, I will return to Axline’s goals for a larger interpretive site and how they might influence future public historical representations of the massacre.

Public historian and American Studies scholar Joanne Pope Melish argues that “ignorance and misunderstanding of this history fuels the ‘naturalization’ of racial disadvantage, while knowledge about it is a crucial tool in discrediting that naturalization.”¹⁸² While Melish is referring to the history of slavery and race in the pre- and post-Revolutionary Northeast, her claim can be expanded to the history of Indigenous peoples, especially Indigenous women, in the Pacific Northwest. Expanding upon Melish’s claim, I argue that re-interpretation at historical sites can serve as a fundamental point of disseminating knowledge. Melish pushes for the “reconceptualization of the [excluded or hidden] stories, and perhaps their mode of presentation

¹⁷⁹ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

¹⁸⁰ Iva Croff, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

¹⁸¹ Jon Axline, email to the author, February 23, 2022.

¹⁸² Joanne Pope Melish, "Public History and American Studies Pedagogy," *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (June 2016): 367, doi:10.1353/aq.2016.0020.

as well.”¹⁸³ Revising public historical representations of Indigenous histories can unravel naturalized histories of settler-colonial supremacy. In revising, expanding, and decolonizing the current massacre marker, public historians might look to the ways in which the Blackfeet Nation has memorialized the massacre through site visits, commemorations, and art.

Blackfeet Massacre Commemorations and Settler-Colonial Land Claims

The Piikani tribe maintains the history of the massacre in several ways, including site visits to the general location of the Bear River Massacre. Though the site has never been fully archaeologically identified, both Piikani oral histories and documents from Major Baker and his soldiers indicate that the location is somewhere around the Big Bend of the Marias River. From the late 1970s to 2012, the tribe held annual commemorations of the massacre near the site,¹⁸⁴ where they gathered to recognize massacre victims and survivors.¹⁸⁵ In 1994, Welch wrote that Piikani educators George Heavy Runner and Darryl Kipp, both massacre survivor descendants, had recently started taking field trips to the general site area, where they told “Blackfeet children the history of the event and how it affects their people today.”¹⁸⁶ During these site visits, Piikani tribal members use oral history, dances, and songs to maintain collective memory of the massacre. Usually, these commemorations also include speeches from tribal and community

¹⁸³ Melish, “Public History and American Studies Pedagogy,” 369.

¹⁸⁴ Carol Murray, interview with the author, April 8, 2022.

¹⁸⁵ Henderson, “The Piikuni and the U.S. Army’s Piegan Expedition,” 70.

¹⁸⁶ Welch with Stekler, *Killing Custer*, 38.

leaders and performances like round dances,¹⁸⁷ as well as bonfires.¹⁸⁸ Whitford noted that BCC focused on including more descendants over time and trying to get the story of the massacre out to the public.¹⁸⁹ According to Indian Country Today, the “Blackfeet Warrior Society (Veterans of all Wars), the Crazy Dog Society (*Khan-nat-so-mii-tah*), horse back [sic] riders, buses of school kids, carloads of community members, and traditional elders, dance, sing and put the spirits to rest”¹⁹⁰ at the 2020 commemoration. According to Carol Murray and Iva Croff, the Toole County Road department was particularly helpful in facilitating the commemorations by plowing roads in the winter and helping visitors get down to the site.¹⁹¹

Site visits and massacre commemorations are entwined with settler-colonial issues. One of the most significant problems is conflict over land rights and access to the Bear River Massacre site. According to the *Glacier Reporter*, the annual commemoration from 1987-2000 was held on “a high bluff on the south bank of the river which looked down into the brushy bottom.”¹⁹² Whitford stated that the man who leased the land on which part of the massacre site sits, Jim Judisch Sr., had a very good working relationship with the tribe, consistently allowed

¹⁸⁷ Nora Mabie, “‘We Are Still Here’: Blackfeet Mark Baker Massacre Anniversary,” *The Lewistown Tribune*, January 25, 2020, https://lmtribune.com/northwest/we-are-still-here-blackfeet-mark-baker-massacre-anniversary/article_6764109f-172b-5e0c-b27a-68e3321b315c.html.

¹⁸⁸ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

¹⁸⁹ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

¹⁹⁰ New Breast, “Bear River Massacre Commemoration and Healing,” <https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/bear-river-massacre-commemoration-and-healing>.

¹⁹¹ Carol Murray, interview with the author, April 8, 2022 and Iva Croff, interview with the author, April 18, 2022.

¹⁹² Mark Ratledge, “BCC Marks 26th Commemoration of Baker Massacre,” *Glacier Reporter*, March 10, 2010, http://www.cutbankpioneerpress.com/glacier_reporter/news/article_bccbcfb1-748e-5209-8856-89d332ef5f50.html.

the tribe access to the land, and assisted them with commemoration planning during the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s.¹⁹³ Loni Judisch, Jim Judisch Jr.'s daughter-in-law, said that historians visited the land and the tribe used the site for commemoration ceremonies during this time period.¹⁹⁴ However, in the mid-2000s, Judisch Sr. passed away, and his son Jim Judisch Jr. inherited the land, which was purchased from the Bureau of Land Reclamation.¹⁹⁵ In fall 2009, Judisch Jr.'s legal team approached the Blackfeet Tribal Land Department and offered to sell them an easement, which would allow Piikani tribal members to access the land as long as they followed a lengthy and limiting set of conditions.¹⁹⁶ Croff said that it was “heartbreaking”¹⁹⁷ for the tribe that Judisch Jr. would ask them to purchase an expensive easement to access their ancestral lands. Whitford said, “we were all in awe of how much they were asking.”¹⁹⁸ The sovereign tribal government considered the easement, but the tribe was unable to afford the “outlandish”¹⁹⁹ price. Whitford expressed concern over whether the tribe would be able to hold a commemoration ceremony in January 2010. Fortunately, the Piikani tribe connected with a Bureau of Land Reclamation agent. The agent helped the tribe gain access to the north side of the Marias River, which is “administered by the Bureau,”²⁰⁰ and the tribe moved commemorations to

¹⁹³ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

¹⁹⁴ Loni Judisch, email to the author, March 1, 2022.

¹⁹⁵ Loni Judisch, email to the author, March 1, 2022 and Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

¹⁹⁶ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

¹⁹⁷ Iva Croff, interview with the author, April 18, 2022.

¹⁹⁸ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

¹⁹⁹ Iva Croff, interview with the author, April 18, 2022.

²⁰⁰ Ratledge, “BCC Marks 26th Commemoration of Baker Massacre,”

http://www.cutbankpioneerpress.com/glacier_reporter/news/article_bccbcfb1-748e-5209-8856-89d332ef5f50.html.

the new site. From 2009 onward, Judisch Jr. restricted access to the south side of the massacre site.²⁰¹ However, according to Croff, “despite that particular setback [restricted land access], we have found a way to adapt and overcome.”²⁰² According to the *Glacier Reporter* and Carol Murray, Judisch Jr. was also considering selling the land altogether in 2009.²⁰³²⁰⁴ As of 2022, the Judisch family is no longer able to afford the land, and part of the massacre site is once more up for sale.²⁰⁵ There is no guarantee that the new owner will allow the Blackfeet tribe access to the south side of the massacre site. For now, it seems that annual commemorations will continue on the north side of the Marias River.

These issues of access point to the age-old reason for settler-colonialism: land. Wolfe said, “settler colonialism is an inclusive, land-centred project that coordinates a comprehensive range of agencies, from the metropolitan centre to the frontier encampment, with a view to eliminating Indigenous societies.”²⁰⁶ The uncertainty of tribal access to the massacre site reinforces the settler-colonial violence of tribal land loss. The Piikani may not only lose access to their traditional camping grounds on the Marias²⁰⁷ but also to the place where many of their ancestors died at the hands of American soldiers. Additionally, the massacre itself was used to

²⁰¹ Ratledge, “BCC Marks 26th Commemoration of Baker Massacre,” http://www.cutbankpioneerpress.com/glacier_reporter/news/article_bccbcfb1-748e-5209-8856-89d332ef5f50.html.

²⁰² Iva Croff, interview with the author, April 18, 2022.

²⁰³ John McGill, “Bear Creek Massacre to Be Remembered Jan. 23 at BCC,” *Glacier Reporter*, January 21, 2009, http://www.cutbankpioneerpress.com/glacier_reporter/news/article_84d34853-8035-567b-b9da-75d24a037d03.html.

²⁰⁴ Carol Murray, interview with the author, April 8, 2022.

²⁰⁵ Loni Judisch, email to the author, March 1, 2022.

²⁰⁶ Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” 387-409, doi: [10.1080/14623520601056240](https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240).

²⁰⁷ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

justify taking land from the Piikani for settler use. President Grant greatly reduced Piikani land possession after the Bear River Massacre, and the Blackfeet Nation was unable to resist this land theft because of the dual tragedies of the massacre and epidemic.

Typically, settler-colonial scholarship has focused on land tenure rather than access. However, issues of land access are still tied to a settler-colonial system. Another instance of land access and lack thereof is the Badger-Two Medicine, which is a sacred space for the Blackfeet Nation. The Badger-Two Medicine is located at the intersection of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex, and Glacier National Park. It is the home of the Blackfeet creation story, and the tribe traces back a presence on the land for over 13,000 years.²⁰⁸ The U.S. government leased the land from the Blackfeet in 1895 for \$1.5 million, and the tribe reserved hunting and fishing rights. In the 1980s, Secretary of the Interior James Watt began selling leases to energy companies to drill for oil and natural gas in the Badger-Two Medicine. The Blackfeet Nation partnered with conservation organizations to resist the leases. In 2017, Ryan Zinke proposed making the Badger-Two Medicine into a National Monument. In 2020, Senator John Tester introduced a bill to make the Badger-Two Medicine into a cultural heritage site.²⁰⁹ However, the Badger-Two Medicine Act died in Congress. Blackfeet leaders John Murray, Tim Davis, Terry Tatsey, Tyson Running Wolf, and Darrell Hall drafted a proposal to permanently protect the Badger-Two Medicine in June 2020: the Badger-Two Medicine

²⁰⁸ Mikaela Ruland, "Protecting Badger-Two Medicine Lands Near Glacier National Park," *Outside Magazine*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.yellowstonepark.com/park/conservation/blackfeet-badger-two-medicine/>.

²⁰⁹ Rob Chaney, "Blackfeet Continue Work to Defend Badger-Two Medicine," *Flathead Beacon*, September 21, 2021, <https://flatheadbeacon.com/2021/09/19/blackfeet-continue-work-to-defend-badger-two-medicine/>.

Protection Act.²¹⁰ Recently, calls for the land to be returned to the Blackfeet Nation and incorporated into the reservation have grown louder.²¹¹ Conflict over land access and use with the Badger-Two Medicine connects with the site of the Bear River Massacre. Both sites are historically and culturally important to the Blackfeet Nation, and both sites have had long-standing problems with settler-colonial use of the land.

In 2016, the Blackfeet Nation changed the commemoration ceremonies again.²¹² Students and faculty at BCC still present an annual seminar and commemoration ceremony each January 23rd at the college, but visits to the massacre site now take place once every four years. Carol Murray explained that the change was because the commemoration ceremonies grew too large.²¹³ The most recent site visit was in 2020, on the 150th anniversary of the massacre.²¹⁴ The next site visit will take place in 2024.

In recent years, event organizers have encouraged young Piikani tribal members, including students, to attend the commemoration ceremony. Organizers see massacre commemorations as a way to teach young people about their ancestry and give them purpose in their lives. The commemorations are not only about the past but also the future. For instance, at

²¹⁰ Tim Davis, John Murray, Terry Tatsey, Tyson Running Wolf, and Darrell Hall, “Badger-Two Medicine Needs Permanent Protection,” *Flathead Beacon*, June 27, 2020, <https://flatheadbeacon.com/2020/06/27/badger-two-medicine-needs-permanent-protection/>.

²¹¹ “Who Decides the Future of the Badger-Two Medicine?,” *Montana Public Radio*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.mtpr.org/podcast/shared-state/2022-03-07/who-decides-the-future-of-the-badger-two-medicine>.

²¹² Carol Murray, interview with the author, April 8, 2022.

²¹³ Carol Murray, interview with the author, April 8, 2022.

²¹⁴ Mabie, “Blackfeet Nation to Commemorate 150 Years since Baker Massacre,” <https://www.greatfallstribune.com/story/news/2020/01/16/montana-blackfeet-nation-tribe-baker-massacre-150th-anniversary-january-23/4457957002/>.

the most recent ceremony in 2020, Croff told her three-year-old granddaughter, “One day, you’ll be telling this story.”²¹⁵ In a 2022 interview with the author, Croff emphasized the importance of passing down Blackfeet language and history, including the Bear River Massacre, to her biological and step-grandchildren.²¹⁶ She also added that after her grandchild expressed interest in Piikani culture, she felt that she could “die a happy woman.”²¹⁷ The commemorations provide a space for the Piikani tribe to both honor massacre victims and celebrate the survivance of the tribe into the future. While the commemorations memorialize a traumatic event, they also function to assert that the tribe still exists and continues to thrive. Engaging young people with the commemoration ceremony demonstrates the longstanding importance of the massacre to the tribe and paves the way for young people to get involved with future commemorations. John Murray, the Blackfeet Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, said that preserving memories of the massacre is deeply important to the tribe. Murray said:

It is important to observe and commemorate these events, through ceremony and education, because when you look back at it historically this massacre had all the symptoms of the scorched-earth policy this country adopted wholesale...For years we tried to raise awareness among younger generations about the Marias Massacre, and we weren’t really succeeding. There were a lot of years when I visited the site alone. But the younger generation today is very engaged in the events of the past and in traditional Blackfeet culture. Our children are really embracing it.²¹⁸

Additionally, as of 2020, the massacre commemoration’s focus widened to include forgiveness and reconciliation. Theda New Breast (Blackfeet), a founding board member and

²¹⁵ Mabie, ““We Are Still Here,”” https://tribune.com/northwest/we-are-still-here-blackfeet-mark-baker-massacre-anniversary/article_6764109f-172b-5e0c-b27a-68e3321b315c.html.

²¹⁶ Iva Croff, interview with the author, April 18, 2022.

²¹⁷ Iva Croff, interview with the author, April 18, 2022.

²¹⁸ Scott, “Remembering the Marias Massacre,” <https://flatheadbeacon.com/2020/01/15/remembering-marias-massacre/>.

master trainer/facilitator for the Native Wellness Institute,²¹⁹ said that “it’s all about forgiveness and it’s all about us coming together as Americans. And we’re the first Americans, so we’re putting our hand halfway across the table to everyone.”²²⁰ According to New Breast, the 2020 ceremony also centered on Indigenous renewal. Like past ceremonies, one of the key elements of the commemoration was for young generations to learn about their histories and use them to improve their futures. The commemoration ceremonies push back against a narrative of Native women as victims, strengthen individual connections to a shared tribal history, establish the tribe’s survivance, and resist settler-colonial structures of historical destruction and replacement.

Tribal Memorial to the Bear River Massacre

In the early 2000s, the tribe began discussing additional ways of remembering the massacre beyond the commemorations. In 2009, Whitford, chair of the Blackfeet Studies Department at BCC at the time, first brought up the idea of installing a tribal memorial or monument on the north side of the massacre site. At the 2009 commemoration ceremony, the tribe also discussed nominating the site to the National Historic Register. Whitford hoped that nominating the site would push forward the slow process of memorial creation.²²¹ In 2012, Whitford once again said that she aimed to build a tribal memorial to the massacre with feedback

²¹⁹ “Theda New Breast,” Native Wellness Institute, 2022, <https://www.nativewellness.com/theda-new-breast.html>.

²²⁰ Lindsie Hiatt, “Remembering Montana’s The Bear River Massacre,” *KPAX*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.kpax.com/news/montana-news/remembering-montanas-the-bear-river-massacre>.

²²¹ McGill, “Bear Creek Massacre to Be Remembered Jan. 23 at BCC,” http://www.cutbankpioneerpress.com/glacier_reporter/news/article_84d34853-8035-567b-b9da-75d24a037d03.html.

and input from tribal members,²²² but her goal did not come to fruition. In an update to a 2010 article, reporter Mark Ratledge wrote that Lea Whitford and Carol Murray “turned the responsibility for future memorials over [to] the the [sic] tribe” in 2012.²²³

In a 2022 interview with the author, Whitford emphasized the need for a tribal memorial. After proposing the memorial in 2009, Whitford’s efforts kept the project alive for several years. She fundraised money, solicited artists to create sample proposals for the memorial, built relationships with the Bureau of Land Reclamation to ensure land access, and worked with other tribal members to plan a dual memorial, with structures both at the site of the Bear River Massacre and at BCC.²²⁴ Whitford also suggested that BCC put up a plaque about the massacre, since the only object memorializing the massacre at BCC was a series of painted buffalo robes illustrating the commemoration ceremonies.²²⁵ In particular, Whitford wanted to include survivor descendants in the planning process and ensure that they had a voice in the memorial.²²⁶ When Whitford left the college in 2013, the project stalled. Croff also mentioned that there was a political aspect to the memorial project, since tribal council members who were invested in the project were not re-elected.²²⁷ Murray said that she believes a site memorial and a BCC campus acknowledgment about the Bear River Massacre will still be installed in the future, but the

²²² Ratledge, “BCC Marks 26th Commemoration of Baker Massacre,” http://www.cutbankpioneerpress.com/glacier_reporter/news/article_bccbcfb1-748e-5209-8856-89d332ef5f50.html.

²²³ Mark Ratledge, “2010 Bear River (Baker – Marias) Massacre Memorial,” Mark Ratledge.com, May 31, 2021, <https://markratledge.com/2010/02/2010-baker-massacre-memorial>.

²²⁴ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

²²⁵ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

²²⁶ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

²²⁷ Iva Croff, interview with the author, April 18, 2022.

timeline is currently uncertain.²²⁸ Whitford now works at Browning Public Schools, but she still believes it is important for the tribe to invest in a memorial about the Bear River Massacre. In a recent interview with the author, Whitford discussed her desire for a permanent memorial, made from a long-lasting material like marble, based on Blackfeet artists' designs and Piikani authors' text. This memorial would be situated in a publicly accessible area near the site, perhaps on the Bureau of Reclamation land where the ceremonies are now held. Whitford would also like to see a memorial at BCC's campus in the future and/or a plaque installed at the Blackfeet Heritage Center and Art Gallery as a "living legacy that we can direct our kids to."²²⁹ For Whitford, marking the site would be part of "what needs to happen for our healing as a nation."²³⁰ Most importantly, Whitford said the memorial "needs to reflect us as Piikani people."²³¹

Canadian Monument to the Bear River Massacre and Residential Schools

The Blackfeet Nation resides not only in Montana but also in the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. The Nation's ancestral homelands and current-day territory stretches across multiple countries and dissolves settler borders. The Canadian memorial to the Bear River Massacre, a Blackfeet representation of the massacre, provides an example of decolonizing public history and a potential model for a future tribal memorial in Montana.

Cardston High School (CHS) students in Cardston, Alberta learn about the Bear River massacre as part of their history curriculum each year. In 2018, a group of Blackfoot students

²²⁸ Carol Murray, interview with the author, April 8, 2022.

²²⁹ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

²³⁰ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

²³¹ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

and their teacher Kara Baldwin conceptualized a monument to honor both the victims and survivors of the Bear River Massacre and the Blackfeet children who were forced to attend residential schools. The Riverside Monument and Healing Garden in Cardston, Alberta, was unveiled on June 19, 2021.²³² The monument is an obelisk topped by a buffalo, an animal both physically and spiritually significant to the Blackfeet people. One side of the monument, which faces west, describes the Bear River Massacre and honors victims and survivors of the massacre. The other side of the monument, which faces east, honors Indigenous children who attended boarding schools, both those who died and those who survived.²³³ Baldwin and her students placed the monument by a river in Cardston in honor of the Bear River Massacre in Montana.

Baldwin and her students created the text with input from past CHS students. The monument inscription reads:

“Let this be a space to remember and honour Aapaitsitapi (The Weasel People: The Blood People). Victims of Residential Schools: Those who survived and those who died. A space in remembrance of those lost during the Baker Massacre. A space to provide education around the continuation of life, Indigenous ways of continuing relationships and a visible sign of the community’s commitment to walk in right relations with First Nation, Metia and Inuit people and with all nations. Bringing forth some of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action.”²³⁴

The other sides of the monument provide more information on residential schools and the Bear River Massacre.

²³² “Riverside Healing Garden and Monument,” Westwind School Division, June 21, 2021, <https://www.westwind.ab.ca/about-us/news/post/riverside-healing-garden-and-monument>.

²³³ Dale Woodard, “Monument Honours Victims of Baker Massacre, Residential Schools,” *The Lethbridge Herald*, June 22, 2021, <https://lethbridgeherald.com/news/lethbridge-news/2021/06/22/monument-honours-victims-of-baker-massacre-residential-schools/>.

²³⁴ “Riverside Healing Garden and Monument,” <https://www.westwind.ab.ca/about-us/news/post/riverside-healing-garden-and-monument>.

When composing the monument text, the design team consulted with the Blackfeet Nation. They also sought feedback from other Indigenous communities involved with the residential schools and the massacre. The team worked to ensure that the healing garden centered Blackfeet stories and incorporated Blackfeet cultural symbols like the buffalo on top of the statue. The healing garden is “a safe space for people to learn about the tragedies that Blackfoot people historically suffered in the area”²³⁵ and an educational site for people who don’t know about the Bear River Massacre or residential schools.²³⁶ The garden is open to all who wish to visit and is accessible to both Alberta residents and travelers.

One of the team members, Avery Many Bears, remarked on the significance of the monument and added that there are few monuments dedicated to massacres of Native American people in the area.²³⁷ Baldwin described the importance of the monument by saying, “Learning the history helps us understand our present situations, our present reality and really in remembrance of those that lost their lives during the massacre, but also those who have survived residential schools and the massacre....I think the more we’re educated, the more we understand, the more we can build connections and relationships with each other.”²³⁸

²³⁵ Charlye Caldwell, “Alberta Students Fundraise for Indigenous Healing Garden and Monument,” *Global News*, February 28, 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6606884/cardston-students-indigenous-healing-garden-monument/>.

²³⁶ Justin Goulet, “Baker Massacre Inspires Healing Garden and Monument Project in Cardston,” *Lethbridge News Now*, February 17, 2020, <https://lethbridgenewsnow.com/2020/02/17/baker-massacre-inspires-healing-garden-and-monument-project-in-cardston/>.

²³⁷ Caldwell, “Alberta Students Fundraise for Indigenous Healing Garden and Monument,” <https://globalnews.ca/news/6606884/cardston-students-indigenous-healing-garden-monument/>.

²³⁸ Goulet, “Baker Massacre Inspires Healing Garden and Monument Project in Cardston,” <https://lethbridgenewsnow.com/2020/02/17/baker-massacre-inspires-healing-garden-and-monument-project-in-cardston/>.

One of the speakers at the unveiling ceremony was Ramona Big Head, who wrote her master's thesis on the play that she composed about the Bear River Massacre, titled *Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play*. This play will be discussed more extensively later in this thesis when analyzing artistic commemorations of the massacre and their relevance to public historical representations of the massacre. Like many women involved in commemoration efforts, Big Head is a descendant of a massacre survivor. Big Head's great-grandmother, Holy Bear Woman (Natohkyiaakii), survived the massacre and moved to Canada after she got married. Big Head, who is currently the principal at Kainai High School on the Blood Reserve in Alberta and a PhD candidate in British Columbia, also presented her research to the students working on the monument at CHS. While expressing her gratitude to CHS for creating the monument, Big Head said, "... in the town of Cardston this is so important. We are so close to the border, it's acknowledgement that this happened. You're not going to find monuments like this in the state of Montana."²³⁹

A group of CHS students raised the original funding for the monument. However, according to the Westwind School Division, the current garden and monument are only the first phase of the project. As funds become available, the school will expand the garden and install additional plaques that include more information on the massacre and residential schools. The

²³⁹ Woodard, "Monument Honours Victims of Baker Massacre, Residential Schools," <https://lethbridgeherald.com/news/lethbridge-news/2021/06/22/monument-honours-victims-of-baker-massacre-residential-schools/>.

design team and school hope that the healing garden will serve as an educational and healing space for generations to come.²⁴⁰

Juxtaposed with the historical highway marker in Montana, the Riverside Monument and Healing Garden is particularly significant. Blackfeet people created the Riverside Monument to tell Blackfeet stories. Students consulted with local Native communities to develop the monument, and it is a work in progress that will grow over time. The monument and healing garden provides an accessible space for non-Native people to learn about Native history. On the other hand, the Baker Massacre marker was written by a non-Native historian. Axline consulted with the tribe, but some of the tribe's revisions to the marker text were rejected. There is no current plan to expand the marker into a larger interpretive site or change the text. There is also no current effort to create a tribal memorial to the massacre in Montana. While the marker provides an accessible space for non-Native people to learn about the massacre, it is not a living interpretive site like the Riverside Monument and Healing Garden. As addressed earlier, the Canadian monument demonstrates decolonized public history that centers Native voices and activism, and it could be a model for a future tribal memorial in Montana as well as other future public historical representations of the massacre.

²⁴⁰ "Riverside Healing Garden and Monument," <https://www.westwind.ab.ca/about-us/news/post/riverside-healing-garden-and-monument>.

Blackfeet Massacre Remembrances Through Art, Literature, Theater, and Film

Members of the Blackfeet Nation have also sought to memorialize the Bear River Massacre through artistic mediums. These art pieces could provide fruitful sources for future interpretations of the Bear River Massacre, such as an expanded interpretive marker at the site, a tribal memorial, or a museum exhibit. Art can function to recover suppressed or lost voices and draw public attention to traumatic events. Many art pieces about the massacre were influenced or created by Piikani women who participate in collective memory-making through art. These artistic forms of memory-making incorporate women's stories and give voice to the massacre victims and survivors, even those whose words are not formally recorded in an archive like the MHS or in U.S. governmental documents like testimonies to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. Like public commemoration ceremonies, art functions to maintain memories of the massacre outside of institutionalized settings like archives and museums. Art and public commemoration ceremonies also reveal Piikani knowledge about and perspectives on the massacre. Rather than centering the voices of Baker and his troops, commemorations and art honor the victims of the massacre and highlight Piikani survivance through descendant testimonies. Artistic sources and commemorations also show the role of women in preserving and interpreting memories of the massacre. Women have protected the memories of the massacre and have led commemoration ceremonies to share those memories with their community.

One of the most recognizable artistic pieces associated with the massacre dates to the 1930s, approximately sixty years after the massacre. George Bull Child painted a tanned deer

hide with a scene of the Bear River massacre.²⁴¹ Bull Child created the painting based on the memories of Piikani survivors Bear Head, Comes-with-Rattles, Heard-by-Both-Sides Woman, and Good Bear Woman (Mrs. No Chief). Bull Child is a Blackfeet man, but his work depended in part on the stories of Piikani women. The hide painting portrays the army attacking the band on the Marias River. The camp is represented by the tipis on one side of the hide, which are painted with Blackfeet designs. The figures in the center of the tipis are all dead, representing the victims of the massacre. According to a textbook from the MHS, figures on horseback with guns on the other side of the hide represent the cavalry that fired into the camp.²⁴² Overall, the art piece visually represents the horror of the massacre and drives home the message that the massacre was an unprovoked attack by the U.S. military on a peaceful camp. There are no weapons in the camp, and all the Piikani depicted on the robe are dead.

Welch's novel *Fools Crow* told a story about Piikani history that concludes with the Bear River Massacre. Like public historical sites, historical literature is a mode of storytelling outside of formal academic institutions, which can include people who are underrepresented in traditional historical narratives. In *Killing Custer*, Welch wrote about how his great-grandmother, Red Paint Woman, was a survivor of the Bear River Massacre. Though she was shot in the leg by soldiers, she managed to escape the massacre. Welch said Red Paint Woman "remembered everything that happened to her and her people"²⁴³ and "it was her stories...that informed the

²⁴¹ Henderson, "The Piikuni and the U.S. Army's Piegan Expedition," 68.

²⁴² Montana Historical Society, "Two Worlds Collide: 1850-1887," *Montana: Stories of the Land*, accessed March 7, 2022, 136, <https://svcult.mt.gov/education/textbook/chapter7/Chapter7.pdf>.

²⁴³ Welch with Stekler, *Killing Custer*, 39.

many stories I told in *Fools Crow*, an account of the Blackfeet [Pikuni] people of that era that culminates in the Massacre on the Marias."²⁴⁴ Again, women's stories and oral histories play a key role in remembrances of the massacre. Red Paint Woman's testimony about her experiences shaped Welch's book, which in turn shaped popular modern-day remembrances of the massacre.

Beyond paintings and literature, theater is another way of remembering the Bear River Massacre. As part of her master's degree in education, Ramona Big Head wrote a play titled *Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play* that she performed alongside Blackfeet students from the Kainai Board of Education school system. The play described the events leading up to the Bear River Massacre, the massacre itself, and the aftermath of the massacre on the Blackfeet Nation. Big Head specifically staged the play with children because most of the survivors of the massacre were Piikani children.²⁴⁵ Big Head's play focused on "the resiliency of the ancestors of the Blackfoot."²⁴⁶

Big Head situates herself as a descendant of Holy Bear Woman and describes her place within the long-standing Blackfeet oral tradition. Big Head wrote the play to prevent the story of the massacre from falling into obscurity and to give Blackfeet people a voice in storytelling about the massacre. For her, the play was a way to assert Native control over the massacre narrative, center the voices of her ancestors, and begin the process of healing through telling the story. When Big Head learned the story of the Bear River Massacre and began working on the

²⁴⁴ Welch with Stekler, *Killing Custer*, 39.

²⁴⁵ Ramona Big Head, "Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play" (master's thesis, University of Lethbridge, March 2009), 12, <https://opus.uleth.ca/bitstream/handle/10133/769/big%20head,%20ramona.pdf>.

²⁴⁶ Big Head, "Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play," iv.

play, she grappled with “unresolved historical trauma.”²⁴⁷ Big Head used the composition process to heal not only from intergenerational trauma but also to come to terms with her own personal trauma, since her daughter Galina committed suicide just months before Big Head began writing.²⁴⁸ The process of writing and performing the play brought Big Head to a place “[she] can only describe as peace.”²⁴⁹ In her conclusion, Big Head said, “I feel peace because I am doing my part in ensuring that our future generations have access to our history from our Blackfoot voices.”²⁵⁰

Big Head’s work dealt with a common problem regarding the lack of Native sources. She struggled to find information from Holy Bear Woman in her own voice. As a means of representing Holy Bear Woman’s story, Big Head wrote a scene where Holy Bear Woman discussed a dream with her grandmother. The dream is a vision of the coming massacre, and Holy Bear Woman and her grandmother warn Chief Heavy Runner about the event.²⁵¹ Though she did not have her great-grandmother’s actual words, Big Head represented her great-grandmother’s story through referencing prophetic dreams, which are part of Blackfeet culture.²⁵² Big Head used cultural knowledge and speculative fiction to fill in historical gaps created by traumatic violence.

²⁴⁷ Sherri Gallant, “Kainai Youth to Perform on New York Stage,” *The Lethbridge Herald*, August 22, 2008, <https://www.performingtheworld.org/past-conferences/2008-2-2/press/200-2>.

²⁴⁸ Big Head, “Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play,” 53.

²⁴⁹ Big Head, “Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play,” 59.

²⁵⁰ Big Head, “Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play,” 68.

²⁵¹ Big Head, “Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play,” 41-45.

²⁵² Big Head, “Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play,” 40.

While visiting the Bear River massacre site on January 23, 2008, Big Head prayed to her ancestors, “those who were taken into the spirit world on January 23, 1870,”²⁵³ to guide her through the playwriting process. When she completed the play, Big Head began organizing performances. Big Head and the Kainai students performed at a variety of venues, including Performing the World at New York City in 2008.²⁵⁴ Performing the World is a New York festival where attendees and performers seek to “use performance to foster growth and development.”²⁵⁵ *Strike Them Hard!* was the first submission by a First Nations group ever accepted by the festival.²⁵⁶ The cast and crew for Performing the World were all children from Kainai and Pikuni, between the ages of six and eighteen.²⁵⁷ In total, over 1,000 people saw the play.²⁵⁸ Big Head and her students also performed at the 2009 commemoration ceremony at the Bear River massacre site.²⁵⁹ *Strike Them Hard!* is an art-based form of public history as well as a creative commemoration of the massacre. In writing, producing, and performing the play, Big Head commemorated the massacre while also taking part in an effort to preserve and interpret Blackfeet history.

²⁵³ Big Head, "Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play," 48.

²⁵⁴ Big Head, "Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play," 63.

²⁵⁵ Trevor Kenney, “Rethinking the Future,” *UNews: University of Lethbridge*, October 27, 2008, <https://www.ulethbridge.ca/unews/article/rethinking-future-0>.

²⁵⁶ Kenney, “Rethinking the Future,” <https://www.ulethbridge.ca/unews/article/rethinking-future-0>.

²⁵⁷ Sherri Gallant, “Kainai Youth to Perform on New York Stage,” *Performing the World*, *The Lethbridge Herald*, August 22, 2008, <https://www.performingtheworld.org/past-conferences/2008-2-2/press/200-2>.

²⁵⁸ Big Head, "Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play," 64.

²⁵⁹ McGill, “Bear Creek Massacre to Be Remembered Jan. 23 at BCC,” http://www.cutbankpioneerpress.com/glacier_reporter/news/article_84d34853-8035-567b-b9da-75d24a037d03.html.

Art, monuments, and commemoration ceremonies put Piikani people, especially women, in a modern context. They point to the long-lasting impact of the massacre on the Blackfeet Nation and highlight the survivance of the massacre survivors. These sources are key to the process of reframing the Bear River Massacre and working toward decolonizing European American public historical representations of the massacre.

Complicating Resistance: Settler-Colonial Violence and Historical Unresolved Grief

Blackfeet women have played a key role in preserving the memory of the Bear River Massacre through art, literature, theater, commemoration efforts, and memorial development. However, the goal of this project is not to create a romanticized story of Indigenous female resistance against settler-colonial narratives. Creating a monolithic story of resistance runs the risk of homogenizing the experiences of Piikani women in Montana and implying that Piikani women who did not speak out were wrong to hide their stories. It also implies that Piikani men have not contributed to preserving Piikani histories.²⁶⁰ In Blackfeet culture, women are equal to

²⁶⁰ Blackfeet men have been an integral part of preserving the memories of the massacre, though this thesis focuses on the importance of Blackfeet women to the massacre and therefore does not extensively explore men's contributions. For instance, the film *Backbone of the World: The Blackfeet*, directed by filmmaker George Burdeau, provides a "voice" for the Badger Two Medicine area in northern Montana. The film also documents one of the ceremonies honoring the victims and survivors of the Bear River Massacre, which Burdeau calls the Baker Massacre. Darren Kipp, a descendant of the scout Joe Kipp, was one of the videographers for *Backbone of the World*. In her essay "Speaking Lives, Filming Lives: George Burdeau and Victor Masayesva," Annie Kirby-Singh describes *Backbone of the World* as a Native filmmaking project that "resist[s] colonialism by reinforcing Native 'survivance' through a vibrant and enduring storytelling tradition." [Annie Kirby-Singh, "Speaking Lives, Filming Lives: George Burdeau and Victor Masayesva," in *Native American Performance and Representation*, ed. S.E. Wilmer (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 233.] Blackfeet men such as Darrell Kipp and John Murray have also been involved in massacre commemorations. Iva Croff

men, and Whitford noted that you “can’t have ceremony without both.”²⁶¹ Most importantly, it ignores the dangers and obstacles faced by the Blackfeet Nation in preserving and maintaining their collective history and culture.

Instead, I want to acknowledge the very real threat of violence that was leveraged against Piikani people, both men and women, and how that affected how stories were told or suppressed. Many Piikani survivors avoided the massacre site and refused to go near it for nearly a century after the massacre occurred. Some survivors never told their stories publicly.²⁶² Some survivors even fled the United States. For example, Holy Bear Woman moved across the border to Canada after surviving the massacre and marrying her husband.²⁶³ Other survivors who did share their stories did not speak out for decades because they feared violent reprisal from the U.S. army or federal government.

Over a century after the massacre occurred, these fears persisted. For example, Carol Murray first asked her great-aunt Annie about the Bear River Massacre in 1978. Annie said that she would think about telling Carol the story “because if I [Annie] tell you [Carol], you will go

discussed how Darrell Kipp’s extensive research, including creating Heavy Runner’s family tree, allowed Piikani people to connect to their heritage and learn about how the massacre directly affected their ancestors.

²⁶¹ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

²⁶² Henderson, “The Piikuni and the U.S. Army’s Piegan Expedition,” 69.

²⁶³ Woodard, “Monument Honours Victims of Baker Massacre, Residential Schools,” <https://lethbridgeherald.com/news/lethbridge-news/2021/06/22/monument-honours-victims-of-baker-massacre-residential-schools/>.

down to the bulls [tribal police], and I will end up in jail.”²⁶⁴ Even though the massacre had occurred over a century ago, Annie still expressed trepidation about potential repercussions.

Similarly, in the 1980s, when Carol and John Murray and GG and Melinda Kipp interviewed Blackfeet elders Annie Calf Robe Green and Willie Running Crane, the elders “closed the doors and had the curtains drawn before they talked.”²⁶⁵ Croff, who is a descendant of both Heavy Runner and a massacre survivor named Dick Kipp, believed that Piikani survivors kept the story of the massacre quiet because of assimilation. In Croff’s words, “you forget what you are made of because you are made to forget.”²⁶⁶ Carol Murray thought that the silences around the massacre came out of the potential for violence and backlash against survivors. In reference to the Bear River Massacre, Carol said “that history was really silenced [for] almost 100 years.”²⁶⁷ Big Head wrote that Carol Murray believed that the Bear River Massacre “had successfully kept the Blackfeet quiet for a century.”²⁶⁸

Even when survivors did speak out, their claims were dismissed by officials. For example, Heavy Runner’s descendants did not write affidavits about the massacre and submit them to the Indian Office until 1913, over forty years after the massacre occurred. Senators

²⁶⁴ Mabie, “A Story of Genocide, Survival and Resilience,” <https://www.greatfallsribune.com/story/news/2020/01/16/montana-blackfeet-nation-tribe-baker-massacre-150th-anniversary/4434910002/>.

²⁶⁵ New Breast, “Bear River Massacre Commemoration and Healing,” <https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/bear-river-massacre-commemoration-and-healing>.

²⁶⁶ Mabie, “A Story of Genocide, Survival and Resilience,” <https://www.greatfallsribune.com/story/news/2020/01/16/montana-blackfeet-nation-tribe-baker-massacre-150th-anniversary/4434910002/>.

²⁶⁷ Schontzler, “Blackfeet Remember Montana's Greatest Indian Massacre,” https://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/sunday/article_daca1094-4484-11e1-918e-001871e3ce6c.html.

²⁶⁸ Big Head, “Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play,” 13.

repeatedly introduced bills to compensate the descendants for the death of Heavy Runner in 1915, 1917, 1920, and 1921. The Senate Committee on Indian Affairs agreed to consider the bill, but the committee needed Department of the Interior approval before they could consider the massacre survivors' claims. The Department of the Interior rejected the testimony and repeatedly refused to consider compensation claims from Heavy Runner's descendants.²⁶⁹ The heirs' claims for compensation were rejected because the descendants' narrative about the Bear River Massacre did not line up with written soldiers' records. Officials argued that the descendants' memories were wrong because they could not be reconciled with Euro-American accounts of the massacre and because the descendants were speaking about an event that had occurred decades ago.²⁷⁰ As of May 2022, neither the Blackfeet Nation generally nor Heavy Runner's descendants specifically have received reparations for the massacre.²⁷¹ The lack of compensation for the massacre not only shows how Piikani survivors' testimonies were ignored by settler-colonial institutions but also reveals how written records, like the soldiers' accounts of the massacre, were privileged over Blackfeet oral histories.

The silence of Piikani survivors is directly linked to Montana's violent colonization. For many Piikani people, avoiding the massacre site or silencing stories of the massacre was a response to extreme trauma. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (Hunkpapa and Oglala Lakota) and Lemyra M. DeBruyn discussed historical trauma, laid out the theory of historical unresolved grief, and analyzed its impacts on Indigenous communities in their foundational 1992 article

²⁶⁹ David W. Grua, *Surviving Wounded Knee: The Lakotas and the Politics of Memory* (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 135.

²⁷⁰ Henderson, "The Piikuni and the U.S. Army's Piegan Expedition," 67.

²⁷¹ Grua, *Surviving Wounded Knee*, 134-135, 171.

“The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief.”²⁷² Brave Heart and DeBruyn explained that Native communities suffer from generational trauma resulting from genocidal campaigns against their ancestors and “incomplete mourning of these losses.”²⁷³ This generational trauma creates historical unresolved grief, which the authors contended creates “high rates of depression, suicide, homicide, domestic violence, and child abuse”²⁷⁴ as well as alcoholism in Native communities.²⁷⁵ Brave Heart and DeBruyn recommended culturally specific community healing strategies alongside individual and family healing as a means of recovering from historical unresolved grief. Natalie Avalos, a Chicana of Apache descent, built on Brave Heart’s research and methodologies in her recent work with historical trauma. Avalos explained that historical trauma comes from both “big” events like epidemics and massacres as well as enduring structural violence against Native communities. Avalos highlighted the importance of culturally specific treatment that incorporates Native concepts and worldviews. She concluded that “some of the most effective features of treatment include ceremonial protocols to restore self-community and human-ecological relationships, as well as the general acknowledgment of colonialism’s impact on Native populations, which serves to rehumanize Native Americans and their experiences of devastating loss.”²⁷⁶ Colewell linked historical unresolved grief, intergenerational trauma, and public historical practice in his work when he

²⁷² Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra M. DeBruyn, “The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief,” *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research* 8, no. 2 (1998): 60-76.

²⁷³ Brave Heart and DeBruyn, “The American Indian Holocaust,” 64.

²⁷⁴ Brave Heart and DeBruyn, “The American Indian Holocaust,” 66.

²⁷⁵ Brave Heart and DeBruyn, “The American Indian Holocaust,” 65-66.

²⁷⁶ Natalie Avalos, “What Does It Mean to Heal From Historical Trauma?,” *AMA Journal of Ethics* 23, no. 6 (June 2021), 497, doi: 10.1001/amajethics.2021.494.

referenced Cherokee anthropologist Russell Thornton. Thornton's work argued that historical traumas like massacres are "intergenerationally cumulative" and that only by "directly and systematically confronting the past, through activities like NAGPRA, can the wounds of shared traumas start to heal."²⁷⁷ In 2022, Whitford said while speaking about the Bear River Massacre that "we are still dealing with the residual effects of what happened that day."²⁷⁸

For many Piikani survivors, keeping stories about the massacre hidden was a matter of life or death. People feared prison or physical violence if they said anything about the massacre, even decades after it happened. People within the Blackfeet Nation suppressed massacre history as a response to extreme historical trauma or because they feared further settler-colonial violence. Carol Murray's work in researching the massacre, leading site visits, and developing commemoration ceremonies was vital to uncovering Blackfeet stories about the Bear River Massacre. Lea Whitford said, "Of course, we wouldn't know what we know today if it wasn't for Carol and the research she did on the massacre. Her guidance has been instrumental in everything we have done."²⁷⁹ Now, for many Piikani people, sharing the history of the massacre at commemoration ceremonies and site visits is a form of healing from intergenerational historical unresolved grief and trauma.

²⁷⁷ Colewell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 122.

²⁷⁸ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

²⁷⁹ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

NATIVE PEOPLES AND DECOLONIZATION IN PUBLIC HISTORY

Representations of Native Women at Public Historical Sites

The 1938 Historical Highway Marker Program was an example of a settler-colonial historical program that suppressed and misrepresented Native history, especially the histories of Native women. The marker program exemplified the way that settler-colonial institutions have contributed to prejudice against Native peoples. While the program has improved over time, it's important to recognize how public history can be complicit in settler-colonial structures by enforcing cultural hegemony²⁸⁰ and contributing to the management of bodies.²⁸¹

In the past and present, the presentation of Native peoples at public historical sites has often functioned to enforce normative settler-colonialism by presenting Native peoples as backwards, trapped in the past, and overall inferior to white people. Native peoples are not represented as a wide range of tribes and cultures but rather as a monolithic mass. Many public historical institutions stereotype and misrepresent Native histories, even those with good intentions. According to a working paper by cultural anthropologist Nancy Marie Mithlo (Chiricahua Apache) and cognitive scientist Aleksandra Sherman, "American Indian populations in the U.S. are frequently depicted in dated and imaginative fictions that poorly reflect the lived realities of Native communities."²⁸² Sherman and Mithlo argued that museums are sites of

²⁸⁰ Tony Bennett, *Museums, Power, Knowledge: Selected Essays* (New York City, NY: Routledge, 2017): 3.

²⁸¹ Bennett, *Museums, Power, Knowledge*, 15.

²⁸² Aleksandra Sherman and Nancy Marie Mithlo, "Seeing American Indians: Self, Other, and the Role of Visitor Mindsets in Museums" (working paper, *Research: Art Works* at the National Endowment for the Arts, 2018), 7.

contention for Native peoples and often viewed as “colonial institution[s].”²⁸³ However, the authors acknowledged that museums are spaces where non-Native visitors will encounter information about Native peoples. Their study recommended that institutions should embrace “forgiveness platforms,” where organizations recognize harm and the impact of colonization before renewing relationships with Indigenous communities. Museum professionals should also “be more transparent about their exertion of authority and take care to limit that authority,” instead sharing control with Indigenous communities.²⁸⁴

In her undergraduate thesis “Representations of Native American Women in Museums,” Heather Lauren Knapp analyzed how traditional narratives of Indigenous women present them as either “primeval and oversexed, or virtuous and hardworking”²⁸⁵ (i.e. the sq**w/princess binary). Sq**w, when used in tribal languages, was not originally offensive. However, Euro-American traders and settlers used the word to denigrate Native women in the early phases of colonization. Over time, the term was repeatedly used to represent Native women as sexually promiscuous, dirty, overworked, and inferior to white women.²⁸⁶ The princess/sq**w binary is a stereotype about Indigenous women that reduces them to either dirty, lazy, and promiscuous sq**ws in need

²⁸³ Sherman and Mithlo, “Seeing American Indians,” 10.

²⁸⁴ Sherman and Mithlo, “Seeing American Indians,” 42.

²⁸⁵ Heather Lauren Knapp, “Representations of Native American Women in Museums” (undergraduate thesis, Syracuse University, 2006), 3, https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone/648.

²⁸⁶ John M. Coward, “The Princess and the Squaw: The Construction of Native American Women in the Pictorial Press,” *American Journalism* 31, no. 1 (2014): 83, doi: [10.1080/08821127.2014.875327](https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2014.875327).

of rescuing by European American men²⁸⁷ or beautiful, pure, and hardworking princesses who willingly assisted European Americans in colonizing Indigenous lands and communities.²⁸⁸

Though these stereotypes have been at play in public historical institutions, many organizations are making efforts to revise their interpretations of and exhibits about Indigenous women. Knapp viewed museums in New York, Connecticut, Washington, D.C., and Quebec. Though Knapp claimed that “blatant stereotypes were not on display”²⁸⁹ in the museums she visited, she noted that lingering traces of the princess/sq**w binary remained in some of the exhibits she examined. For instance, women were portrayed as always working in the home, hearkening back to the idea of the sq**w-drudge and enforcing settler-colonial gender roles on Indigenous communities. Women’s bodies were often displayed as nude and exotically beautiful, referencing the image of the Indian princess.²⁹⁰ However, Knapp also noted that Native women were often portrayed as “keepers of the traditions and the reproducers of cultural knowledge” and said that “traditional information passed down through generations of women helped Native nations eventually reclaim their identities.”²⁹¹

The Public Trust, Controlling Historical Narratives, and Museum Activism

Museums are bound by a doctrine known as the public trust. Though there is no formal public trust doctrine for historical markers, many state marker programs draw on ideologies like

²⁸⁷ Coward, “The Princess and the Squaw,” 86.

²⁸⁸ Debra Merskin, “The S-Word: Discourse, Stereotypes, and the American Indian Woman,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 15, no. 4 (2010): 353.

²⁸⁹ Knapp, “Representations of Native American Women in Museums,” 74.

²⁹⁰ Knapp, “Representations of Native American Women in Museums,” 75.

²⁹¹ Knapp, “Representations of Native American Women in Museums,” 75.

the public trust when they assert themselves as protecting and preserving state history so that residents and tourists can learn from it. According to the American Alliance of Museums, the public trust doctrine means that “certain natural and cultural resources are preserved for public benefit... the public owns the collections, and they should be kept available so the public can study them, enjoy them, and learn from them.”²⁹² Museums are one of the most trusted resources in American cultural life and historical education,²⁹³ and they have a special responsibility to be accountable to the public.²⁹⁴ Americans view museums as places to connect with the past on a personal level and draw their own conclusions from primary sources.²⁹⁵ For example, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (1998) explored how American communities, including tribal nations, use the past in their everyday lives. The authors interviewed a group of Oglala Sioux people who lived on the Pine Ridge reservation. The Sioux interviewees “use[d] the past to affirm and build ties to their communities” and “blended the stories of their families, their tribe, and American Indians.”²⁹⁶ American Indian interviewees saw their family histories as entwined with a larger collective history of Native peoples in America.²⁹⁷ The Sioux respondents distrusted many historical sources but put particular faith into museums with Indigenous artifacts and historic sites like the “Wounded Knee massacre

²⁹² “Public Trust and Accountability Standards,” American Alliance of Museums, June 15, 2020, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/public-trust-and-accountability-standards/>.

²⁹³ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 91.

²⁹⁴ Paula Serafini and Chris Garrard, “Fossil Fuel Sponsorship and the Contested Museum: Agency, Accountability, and Arts Activism,” in *Museum Activism*, 75.

²⁹⁵ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 105.

²⁹⁶ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 149.

²⁹⁷ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 163.

memorial.”²⁹⁸ Accurately representing Indigenous history at sites like the massacre marker are key, since public historical sites are valuable to Indigenous communities. Like museums, historical markers function as a way for Americans to experience history outside of the classroom.

Though Rosenzweig and Thelen’s book revealed that most Americans engage with the past, different groups of Americans have a varying amount of power over historical narratives. Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot argued that “history is the fruit of power”²⁹⁹ and that historical narratives result from silences that emerge from structures of power.³⁰⁰ Chip Colewell’s 2017 book *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits* addressed the question: “Who owns the past?”³⁰¹ Colewell, a former Denver Art Museum curator and NAGPRA compliance program leader, argued that this question connects to queries about who controls America’s heritage and who “*really* has the right to decide the fate of collections.”³⁰² Colewell examined the Zuni tribe’s fight to repatriate religious artifacts known as Ahayu:da (also called War Gods) back to the tribe and reservation. While Colewell focused on how museums portray Native remains and artifacts, his exploration of who controls Indigenous history is relevant to historical marker programs. According to the principles of decolonization, it is the role of public historical professionals to share authority with local Native tribes and center Indigenous voices. However, sharing authority

²⁹⁸ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, 169-170.

²⁹⁹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), xix.

³⁰⁰ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 27, 48.

³⁰¹ Chip Colewell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America’s Culture* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 4.

³⁰² Colewell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 4.

often results in friction or outright conflict between Indigenous communities and public historical institutions.

Colewell also discusses how the drive to collect artifacts for museums “has deep roots in Western traditions of ownership, conquest, and display.”³⁰³ Public historian Denise D. Meringolo added that amassing collections for public historical institutions has functioned as a tool of colonialism.³⁰⁴ These Western traditions connect to issues of authority over artifacts and narratives. In initial conversations with the Zuni, the Denver Art Museum Director Thomas Maytham argued that returning the War God to the Zuni would be “directly contradictory to the museum’s major responsibility to preserve objects in its care.”³⁰⁵ Maytham claimed that the public trust in this instance meant keeping the War God available for public viewing. He saw the museum as the rightful keeper of Indigenous artifacts. The conflict between the Zuni tribe and the Denver Art Museum is evidence of long-standing contention between public historical institutions and Native communities. Some public historical organizations, such as the Denver Art Museum in the late 1900s, saw protection and interpretation of artifacts as their key role. From the museum’s perspective, it was their duty to preserve artifacts and present them to the public as part of the public trust doctrine. However, Indigenous communities saw themselves as the rightful owners of Native artifacts and remains and did not believe that the public should have access to them.

³⁰³ Colewell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 28.

³⁰⁴ Denise D. Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 15.

³⁰⁵ Colewell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 37.

Eventually, the Zuni won their battle for the Denver Art Museum to repatriate the War Gods to the Zuni Reservation. The museum published their note of intent to repatriate the Ahayu:da on June 14, 2001.³⁰⁶ The fight to return Native remains and artifacts to tribal communities was a key part of the American Indian Movement (AIM), a Native activist movement that pushed for American Indian rights in the 1960s and 1970s.³⁰⁷³⁰⁸ The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) emerged from this activism in 1990. NAGPRA requires public historical institutions to complete an inventory of Native American items in their collections and repatriate or transfer Native American remains or cultural artifacts back to their tribal owners if Native tribes can prove a claim to them.

While NAGPRA is a hugely important aspect of museums' relations with Native communities, conflict still rages over the act. Importantly, NAGPRA only applies to museums that receive federal funding, minus the Smithsonian. Additionally, if institutions do not link remains or artifacts to a particular tribe (a designation known as culturally affiliated), Native communities cannot claim them. A New York Times article on NAGPRA explains the complexities of proving cultural affiliation, claiming that institutions require Indigenous communities to establish affiliation "with multiple types of evidence beyond geographical information... including biological, archaeological, linguistic and historical data, creating a

³⁰⁶ John Robbins, "Notice of Intent To Repatriate Cultural Items in the Possession of the Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO," Federal Register, National Archives of the United States Government, published June 14, 2001, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2001/06/14/01-14992/notice-of-intent-to-repatriate-cultural-items-in-the-possession-of-the-denver-art-museum-denver-co>.

³⁰⁷ Colewell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits*, 76.

³⁰⁸ Women played a major role in AIM. Nick Estes wrote in *Our History is the Future* that Indigenous women were leaders in "all major AIM actions, takeovers, and campaigns" (181).

significant research hurdle at a time when experts say federal funding for such projects has fallen behind demand.”³⁰⁹ Enforcing compliance with NAGPRA can be complicated, time-consuming, and expensive for tribal communities. In July 2021, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland announced an initiative to revise and update NAGPRA regulations. According to the Department of the Interior press release, the reformed rule will:

Simplify and improve the regulatory process for repatriation of Native American human remains and cultural items. . . rectify provisions in the current regulations that inhibit and effectively prevent the respectful repatriation of most Native American human remains and cultural items; remove the burden on Native Hawaiian organizations and Indian Tribes to initiate the process and add a requirement for museums and federal agencies to complete the process; and streamline existing regulatory requirements by eliminating ambiguities, correcting inaccuracies, simplifying excessively burdensome and complicated requirements, clarifying timelines and removing offensive terminology in the existing regulations.³¹⁰

Revising and updating NAGPRA may resolve criticism of the act as ineffective and slow-moving. Colewell expressed frustration over the pace of NAGPRA compliance programs and added, “When leaders look at how much work is to be done, there is a deep sense of frustration.”³¹¹ Once more, NAGPRA reveals tension between public historical institutions and Indigenous communities regarding control over not only remains and artifacts but also over historical narratives and the responsibilities of the public trust.

³⁰⁹ Zachary Small, “Push to Return 116,000 Native American Remains Is Long-Awaited,” *The New York Times*, August 6, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/06/arts/design/native-american-remains-museums-nagpra.html>.

³¹⁰ Department of the Interior, “Interior Department Announces Tribal and Native Hawaiian Consultations to Discuss Updates to Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act,” press release, July 15, 2021, <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/interior-department-announces-tribal-and-native-hawaiian-consultations-discuss-updates>.

³¹¹ Small, “Push to Return 116,000 Native American Remains Is Long-Awaited,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/06/arts/design/native-american-remains-museums-nagpra.html>.

Decolonization and Public History

The Baker Massacre marker is an example of an incomplete decolonizing process. The marker program reinterpretation efforts and the Indian Historical Marker program in the 1990s indicate a willingness to decolonize public history in Montana. However, while the Baker Massacre marker interprets Native history, it does not tell the story of the Bear River Massacre from a Piikani perspective or fully adhere to decolonial principles. Understanding decolonization as a larger movement in American Western public historical sites and applying its goals can strengthen revision and re-interpretation in the Montana marker program.

As previously explained, decolonization is the process of reframing historical narratives and interpretation by privileging Indigenous voices and sharing authority with Indigenous communities.³¹² Through decolonization, public historical institutions self-reflexively examine their role in colonization and work consciously against reinforcing colonial narratives. Instead, organizations seek to collaborate with Native communities in exhibits and programming, interpret the effects of colonization on Native peoples, share authority with Native peoples, and/or provide a cultural center for current-day Native populations.

One of the most important texts regarding public historical decolonization is Lonetree's 2012 book *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*. *Decolonizing Museums* explored recent decolonization efforts at several institutions, including the National Museum of the American Indian and the Mille Lacs Indian Museum, and how other public historical organizations might begin the process of decolonization in their own

³¹² Shoemaker, "What Does It Mean to Decolonize a Museum?," <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/>.

institutions. Lonetree called for museums to depict both the survivance of Native communities and the impact of colonization on Native communities rather than exclusively highlighting survivance or portraying Native peoples as victims by focusing only on the impact of colonization. She emphasized the value of a balanced presentation that centers Indigenous voices.

Lonetree claimed that by the 2010s, many museum professionals considered a collaborative model of public history that included Native voices in museum exhibits “best practice.”³¹³ However, she also argued that simply including Native voices in public historical narratives is not enough to claim that a museum is truly decolonized. Instead, museums must challenge stereotypical representations of Native peoples, honor Native worldviews and knowledge, tell the hard truths of colonialism and provide space for reflection and healing.³¹⁴ Importantly, Lonetree also pointed out that the process of decolonization in public historical organization is not an easy one. Instead, she said that “moving to the place of respecting and privileging Native voices in museum work inevitably involves painful experiences...”³¹⁵ and that the process takes time and effort to succeed. Lonetree also spoke to the value of decolonizing public history. In her words, when museums engage in the work of decolonization, they can become “a means for repairing colonization’s harm.”³¹⁶ Overall, Lonetree called for museums and other public historical organizations to center Indigenous perspectives, work collaboratively

³¹³ Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 16.

³¹⁴ Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 25.

³¹⁵ Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 170.

³¹⁶ Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 171.

with Native peoples, tell the hard truths of both colonization and survivance, and use their sites as spaces of community healing and empowerment.³¹⁷

Part of the New Museology in the 1980s and 1990s was the rise of museum activism, in which decolonization played an important role. In *Museum Activism*, Janes and Sandell, examined decolonization as a form of social activism at public historical sites. Janes and Sandell defined museum activism as “museum practice, shaped out of ethically-informed values, that is intended to bring about political, social and environmental change.”³¹⁸ In their chapter “Detoxing and Decolonising Museums,” Sara Wajid and Rachael Minott discussed decolonization efforts at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in England. Wajid and Minott worked to democratize decision-making, allow POC communities to set the tone of exhibits, and acknowledge the role of museums as colonizers.³¹⁹ Other authors advocated for museums to encourage participatory practices of community engagement and discussion/debate,³²⁰ to center themselves on the problems of everyday life to serve their audiences,³²¹ and to practice and incorporate self-examination techniques to rethink the way narratives are told.³²²

Like Colewell’s book, Robert C. Post’s 2013 book *Who Owns America’s Past?* questioned the politics at work in display and interpretation work in public historical sites. Post

³¹⁷ Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 168-175.

³¹⁸ Janes and Sandell, “Posterity Has Arrived,” 1.

³¹⁹ Sara Wajid and Rachael Minott, “Detoxing and Decolonising Museums,” in *Museum Activism*, 30.

³²⁰ Sharon Heal, “Museums in the Age of Intolerance,” in *Museum Activism*, 210.

³²¹ Marcelo Lageas Murta, “Whose Memories for Which Future?: *Favela* Museums and the Struggle for Social Justice in Brazil,” in *Museum Activism*, 232.

³²² Laura-Edythe S. Coleman and Porchia Moore, “From the Ground Up: Grassroots Social Justice Activism in American Museums,” in *Museum Activism*, 97.

claimed that by the end of the twentieth century, museums had shifted away from “collections-driven” exhibits to “story-driven” exhibits where “artifacts served to sustain narratives.”³²³ By the twentieth century, museums sought to tell a story using their exhibits, often one that supported traditional narratives of American history. Post discussed the exhibit controversies of the Smithsonian, particularly the presentation of the Enola Gay, and how they were part of a broader conflict over the nature of history as either static or fluid.³²⁴ Post also briefly analyzed the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), which opened in 2004 and sought to “add the voices of native people themselves.”³²⁵

The National Museum of the American Indian

While it is a prime example of decolonization on a national scale, the NMAI has received mixed reviews from Native scholars. For example, Amanda Cobb (Chickasaw), Founding Director of the Native Nations Center at the University of Oklahoma, argued that “as colonizing forces in the Americas, museums cannot be underestimated.”³²⁶ Cobb’s article about the NMAI, “The National Museum of the American Indian: Sharing the Gift,” expanded on this concept of museum as colonizer by explaining that museums impose identities on Native peoples, often freezing them in time and contributing to the myth of the “vanished Indian.” Since the repatriation movement of the 1980s and 1990s, the emergence of the new museology, which

³²³ Robert C. Post, *Who Owns America’s Past?: The Smithsonian and the Problem of History* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), xv.

³²⁴ Post, *Who Owns America’s Past?*, 267.

³²⁵ Post, *Who Owns America’s Past?*, 274

³²⁶ Amanda J. Cobb, “The National Museum of the American Indian: Sharing the Gift,” *The American Indian Quarterly* 29, no. 3 & 4 (Summer/Fall 2005): 363, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aiq.2005.0083>.

aims to share authority with Indigenous peoples, has contributed to decolonization efforts.³²⁷ Cobb claimed that the NMAI is important because “colonization is *not* the entire story.”³²⁸ Instead, the museum placed Indigenous people into a modern context, highlighted the multiplicity of Native nations, and allowed space for Native peoples to assist in developing programming and exhibits. From Cobb’s perspective, the NMAI recognizes the survivance and modernity of Native peoples and functions to decolonize museum spaces through countering the myth of the “vanishing/vanished Indian.”

On the other hand, Lonetree argued that the NMAI is not fully decolonized. Lonetree’s article “Missed Opportunities: Reflections on the NMAI” examined the shortcomings of the NMAI. While Lonetree claimed that “the museum does many things right”³²⁹ (especially by privileging Native voices and including survivance in exhibits), she also addressed the failures of the museum. For Lonetree, one of those key aspects is the museum’s lack of attention to the violent process of colonization. Additionally, Lonetree said that several sections of the NMAI were curated by staff rather than Native communities.³³⁰ Finally, she claimed that the museum does not clearly and coherently convey ideas to the public.³³¹ Instead, Lonetree said that the museum’s lack of labels and abstract themes render some sections unintelligible to all but

³²⁷ Cobb, “The National Museum of the American Indian: Sharing the Gift,” 363-364.

³²⁸ Cobb, “The National Museum of the American Indian: Sharing the Gift,” 366.

³²⁹ Amy Lonetree, “Missed Opportunities: Reflections on the NMAI,” *The American Indian Quarterly* 30, no. 3 & 4 (Summer-Autumn 2006): 636, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4139033>.

³³⁰ Lonetree, “Missed Opportunities,” 638.

³³¹ Lonetree, “Missed Opportunities,” 639.

postcolonial scholars well-versed in museum theory. She argued that the museum is not accessible to laypeople and does not adequately teach Indigenous history.³³²

However, Lonetree asserted that the NMAI is only one part of an evolving relationship between tribal nations and museums wherein the two collaborate on museum interpretations and exhibitions.³³³ Indigenous peoples are now involved in making museums more inclusive and relevant to Native communities.³³⁴ From Lonetree's perspective, public historical organizations have an opportunity to collaborate with Native communities to tell truly decolonized histories, even if the NMAI missed some of those opportunities.

The successes and failures of the NMAI are important to consider when addressing decolonization at public historical institutions. While the NMAI represented a shift away from portraying myths of the "vanishing/vanished Indian" and toward highlighting the modernity and survivance of Indigenous communities, it failed to represent the history of colonization or develop cohesive and accessible exhibits. With a broader understanding of settler-colonialism and decolonization at public historical sites, let's return to state marker programs.

³³² Lonetree, "Missed Opportunities," 640-642.

³³³ Lonetree, "Missed Opportunities," 635.

³³⁴ Lonetree, "Missed Opportunities," 632.

SETTLER-COLONIALISM AND DECOLONIZATION IN STATE MARKER PROGRAMS

Settler-Colonial Stereotypes of Native Women in the Montana Marker Program

The same princess/sq**w binary and silencing of Indigenous female stories was present in the original versions of the Montana Historical Highway markers, and traces of those stereotypes remain today. In the Baker Massacre marker, Indigenous women are minimized to a single line on the historical marker even though many massacre survivors were women and both survivors and their descendants played a large role in creating collective memory about the massacre. The same goes for many of the markers in Montana, many of which either ignore or very briefly mention Indigenous women. Many earlier markers also called Indigenous women “sq**ws.” For instance, Sacagawea is referred to as a “Shoshone sq**w” or “little sq**w” on the 1938 Bozeman Pass, Shields River Valley, and Camp Fortunate Markers.³³⁵ Sacagawea is one of only two Indigenous women who are named in the 1938 markers (the other is Eklaka).

Though Sacagawea is called a sq**w on these markers, she is also a traditional example of the “Indian princess” trope. The markers frame her as a virtuous, hardworking woman and define her through her contributions to the Lewis and Clark expeditions. Some historical highway markers contained slurs and racist stereotypes about Indigenous peoples until the re-interpretation effort in the 1990s. The re-interpretation work, along with the effort to include some Indigenous histories in the Indian Historical Marker program, points toward an effort to properly represent Indigenous peoples in the marker program. The 2008 versions of the Bozeman

³³⁵ Fletcher, *Montana Highway Historical Markers*, 19, 53, 58.

Pass and Shields River Valley marker removed the term sq**w and replaced it with “woman.”³³⁶

The Camp Fortunate marker is not listed in the most recent book about the marker program.

Presumably, the marker has been removed or damaged.

However, the markers do not tell Sacagawea’s history outside of Lewis and Clark beyond a brief acknowledgement of her kidnapping by the Minnetaree tribe, and even that event is placed in the context of the expedition. According to the Three Forks of the Missouri marker, “her memories of this country were invaluable to the explorers.”³³⁷ Instead, the marker narratives focus on European-American settlers and Montana’s colonization. Most other markers, including the Baker Massacre marker, frame Indigenous women in relation to the settlers with whom they interacted. One partial exception to the rule is Eklaka, the only other marker that names an Indigenous woman. The marker says that the town of Eklaka was named “after an Indian girl, born on the Powder River, who was the daughter of Eagle Man, an Oglala Sioux. She was a niece of the War Chief, Red Cloud, and was also related to Sitting Bull. She became the wife of David H. Russell, the first white man to settle permanently in this locality.”³³⁸ While the marker acknowledges Eklaka’s life before marrying Russell, the main focus of the marker is on the story of the unnamed “old buffalo hunter” who began the town before Russell or Eklaka resided there.

What Comes Next?

Amy Lonetree’s 2021 article “Decolonizing Museums, Memorials, and Monuments” celebrated the removal of settler-colonial monuments and memorials while also questioning what comes

³³⁶ Axline, *Montana’s Historical Highway Markers*, 128-129 and 132.

³³⁷ Axline, *Montana’s Historical Highway Markers*, 125.

³³⁸ Axline, *Montana’s Historical Highway Markers*, 195.

next.³³⁹ Lonetree advocated for giving land on which memorials and monuments sit back to Indigenous communities and giving these communities “primacy in determining the memorials and educational programs that are developed at these sites as it is critical to change the narrative.”³⁴⁰ The Montana Historical Highway marker program has made real progress in removing slurs and racist stereotypes from markers dealing with Indigenous histories.

However, part of the Bear River Massacre site is still owned by a non-Native family, and the rest of the site is owned by the US Bureau of Land Reclamation, not the Blackfeet Nation. In historian David W. Grua’s words, the site “remains outside of tribal control, which has constrained the descendants from holding regular commemorations and performing mourning rituals.”³⁴¹ Axline consulted with the tribe while creating the marker, but it is still uncertain whether a tribal memorial or larger interpretive site will ever be created. There are yearly commemorations and educational programs at BCC and quadrennial massacre site visits. However, as far as this author has uncovered, other public historical institutions do not participate in these programs or partner with the college in its educational efforts. Women are often left out of the massacre narrative as told by settler organizations. In the marker, Native women are reduced to victims. Although the Baker Massacre marker never used the term *sq**w* for Piiakni women, it implies that women were unable to make any impact on the massacre occurring, does not explain that some women survived the massacre, and does not detail how women have been involved in massacre commemorations and remembrances after the fact. The

³³⁹ Amy Lonetree, “Decolonizing Museums, Memorials, and Monuments,” *The Public Historian* 43, no. 4 (November 2021): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2021.43.4.21>.

³⁴⁰ Lonetree, “Decolonizing Museums, Memorials, and Monuments,” 26.

³⁴¹ Grua, *Surviving Wounded Knee*, 94.

marker also does not explain how the massacre is connected to settler-colonial exploitation of Native women and how that exploitation is part of genocidal campaigns against Native peoples in the American West. Instead, it simply says that “the soldiers fired into the lodges where women, children, and the elderly slept.” So, what comes next for public historical interpretations of the Bear River Massacre?

As public historical marker programs attempt to decolonize, it is key for them to form strong partnerships with local Native communities to accurately and respectfully represent Native histories. Examples from Washington and Idaho historical marker programs can provide a model for revising the Montana Historical Highway Markers program. While public history is not a complete answer to an exploitative settler-colonial legacy, it can function as a stepping stone to deepen understanding of the impact of settler-colonialism in the American West.

Decolonization in Washington and Idaho Historic Marker Programs

Recent decolonization efforts at public historical sites include new efforts to share authority with tribes and increase transparency about and public access to historical projects. For instance, in October 2020, the Washington State Historical Society began a statewide audit of monuments, markers, and plaques attributed to the Society. The Society also investigated the Department of Transportation “highway heritage markers,”³⁴² which are similar to the Montana highway markers. The Society sent out a call to the public asking Washington citizens to send

³⁴² Julianna Verboot, “Washington State Historical Society wants your help to evaluate markers and monuments,” media release, published October 7, 2020, https://www.washingtonhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Media-Release_Monuments-and-Markers-Inventory_public-participation.pdf.

the Society “a link to the GIS coordinates [for the monument/marker] in Google maps, along with photographs of the item and its surroundings.”³⁴³ The Society created a Google My Maps interactive map on their website that includes photographs of the monuments and a transcription of their inscriptions. The interactive map is accessible to the public.

The monument and marker audit was part of a broader inclusion initiative that the Society began in late 2020. The Inclusion Statement of Commitment outlines steps that the Society plans to take to create a “more inclusive organization,”³⁴⁴ including increasing diversity in hiring, training all staff in diversity and equity practices, auditing language in exhibit galleries and collections databases, and increasing accessibility to collections and prioritizing diverse collecting practices. The statement outlined the process for the marker audit, saying the Society would “research and develop a comprehensive list of historical markers and monuments placed by the Society across time and review these markers for structural integrity, historical accuracy, and language/interpretive sensitivity. [The Society] will bring sound scholarship, diverse perspectives, and community conversation forward to determine whether, as tangible objects of our work, these markers continue to uphold our mission and values.”³⁴⁵

³⁴³ Kelly Stroh, “The Washington State Historical Society Needs Your Help,” *South Sound Magazine*, August 26, 2021, https://www.southsoundmag.com/arts-entertainment/the-washington-state-historical-society-needs-your-help/article_46e116bb-d7dc-598d-b98a-1ad4839fc9e1.html.

³⁴⁴ Jennifer Kilmer, “Statement of Commitment,” *Belonging: Diversity, equity and inclusion*, Washington State Historical Society, published October 2, 2020, <https://www.washingtonhistory.org/about/belonging-diversity-equity-and-inclusion/>.

³⁴⁵ Kilmer, “Statement of Commitment,” <https://www.washingtonhistory.org/about/belonging-diversity-equity-and-inclusion/>.

By September 2021, Washington State Historical Society had completed the marker and monument audit, assembled a list of items, and was convening a committee to evaluate the items for physical integrity, historical accuracy, and compliance with the Society's mission and values. As of 2022, future steps for the project included consultation with tribes and local outreach organizations.³⁴⁶ While the process is not yet complete, the Society acted to include the public and remain transparent throughout reevaluation of markers, monuments, and plaques.

For a broader example of decolonizing re-interpretation, let's turn to the Idaho historical marker program. The Idaho marker program is managed by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). The SHPO researched, wrote, and installed most of the state's 290 markers without tribal input from the 1950s to 1980s.³⁴⁷ In 2021, the SHPO began a collaborative effort with the Shoshone-Bannock and the Nez Perce tribes to rewrite historical markers. The project received \$700,000 in funding and will "follow input from the state archaeologist and state historian, as well as the tribes."³⁴⁸ SHPO deputy Tricia Canaday hopes that the re-interpretation effort will "rebalance Idaho's roadside history with an Indigenous perspective and thereby create a more culturally sensitive and historically accurate picture of the past."³⁴⁹ So far, Native

³⁴⁶ "Monuments and Markers Project," Across Washington, Washington State Historical Society, published September 9, 2021, <https://www.washingtonhistory.org/across-washington/monuments-project/>.

³⁴⁷ Jennifer Nalewicki, "Inside Idaho's Campaign to Include Indigenous History in Its Highway Markers," *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 10, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/inside-idahos-campaign-to-include-indigenous-history-in-its-highway-markers-180979198/>.

³⁴⁸ Evans, "Decolonizing Idaho's Road Signs," <https://www.hcn.org/issues/53.11/indigenous-affairs-people-places-decolonizing-idahos-road-signs>.

³⁴⁹ Nalewicki, "Inside Idaho's Campaign to Include Indigenous History in Its Highway Markers," <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/inside-idahos-campaign-to-include-indigenous-history-in-its-highway-markers-180979198/>.

scholars and the SHPO have rewritten 27 markers to better reflect Native history in Idaho. High Country News reporter Tony Tekaroniake Evans wrote that Canaday and her team acknowledge that “the process is only just beginning and could take years.”³⁵⁰

Idaho has its own Bear River Massacre, where over 200 soldiers killed 400 to 500 Shoshone men, women, and children during a surprise attack on a Shoshone camp on January 29, 1863. Like the Montana Bear River Massacre, the Idaho Bear River Massacre took place on a cold winter morning, and soldiers attacked when many of the Shoshone people were sleeping and unprepared for battle. The marker site itself is an example of conflict in commemoration, with multiple markers that interpret the massacre in wildly different ways. In 1932, the Daughters of Utah Pioneers installed a memorial to the massacre. However, the plaque, which was paid for by the Utah Pioneer Trails Association, told the massacre story from a settler-colonial perspective.³⁵¹ The second marker, installed in 1953 by the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, commemorated the area’s “Pioneer Women.”³⁵² The first two markers call the massacre “The Battle of Bear River” and claim that women and children were combatants during the massacre. The 1932 and 1953 markers also underreport the number of Shoshone deaths, claiming that soldiers killed 250-300 rather than the 400-500 people who actually died. A later marker from

³⁵⁰ Evans, “Decolonizing Idaho's Road Signs,” <https://www.hcn.org/issues/53.11/indigenous-affairs-people-places-decolonizing-idahos-road-signs>.

³⁵¹ Misty Inglet, “Bear River Massacre Memorial Gets New Plaque Focused on Shoshone History,” *KPVI*, February 5, 2021, https://www.kpvi.com/news/local_news/bear-river-massacre-memorial-gets-new-plaque-focused-on-shoshone-history/article_6fc9248a-675f-11eb-98e8-f302f8c6898d.html.

³⁵² John Barnes, “The Struggle to Control the Past: Commemoration, Memory, and the Bear River Massacre of 1863,” *The Public Historian* 30, no. 1 (February 2008), 83.

the Idaho Historical Society, erected by the Idaho Department of Transportation, acknowledges that the event was a massacre and provides a more accurate death toll.

In 2021, the International DUP paid for a new plaque that interpreted the massacre in greater detail. Darren Parry, a descendant of massacre survivor Chief Sagwitch and the Former Chairman of the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation, approved of the new plaque.³⁵³ The 2021 marker from the Daughters of Utah Pioneers describes the massacre, acknowledges its significance to the Shoshone people, and discusses how some of the massacre survivors joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and “established a thriving farming community known as Washakie.”³⁵⁴ These survivors created a new, successful community despite the trauma of the massacre. Recognition of the massacre survivors’ survivance was missing from the earlier markers. These multiple markers memorialize both the massacre and the competing narratives that emerged from it.

Interpretation at the site will soon grow beyond the markers installed by settler organizations. Parry is currently fundraising to build an interpretive center at the site called the Boa Ogoi Cultural & Interpretive Center, which will “educate and enlighten visitors about the history of the Northwestern Shoshone Band.”³⁵⁵ Parry’s efforts to memorialize the massacre were deeply influenced by his grandmother, Mae Timbimboo, who was the Shoshone Nation’s

³⁵³ Inglet, “Bear River Massacre Memorial Gets New Plaque Focused on Shoshone History,” https://www.kpvi.com/news/local_news/bear-river-massacre-memorial-gets-new-plaque-focused-on-shoshone-history/article_6fc9248a-675f-11eb-98e8-f302f8c6898d.html.

³⁵⁴ Inglet, “Bear River Massacre Memorial Gets New Plaque Focused on Shoshone History,” https://www.kpvi.com/news/local_news/bear-river-massacre-memorial-gets-new-plaque-focused-on-shoshone-history/article_6fc9248a-675f-11eb-98e8-f302f8c6898d.html.

³⁵⁵ “Boa Ogoi,” Boa Ogoi, Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation, updated 2022, <https://boaogoi.org/>.

tribal historian and keeper of oral stories. Timbimboo served as a representative on the White House Council for Indian Tribal Affairs to develop federal programs and tribal resources. She also played a key role in developing Utah's NAGPRA state guidelines.³⁵⁶ One of Timbimboo's most important projects was her fight to change the name of the event from "Battle of Bear River" to "Bear River Massacre."³⁵⁷ In 1990, Timbimboo petitioned the federal government for an interpretive sign from the National Park Service that would interpret the event as a massacre and provide a Shoshone perspective.³⁵⁸ The NPS complied and installed a new marker with additional information, including Shoshone perspectives.

Parry, who now serves as the Shoshone tribal historian, views the Boa Ogoi Cultural & Interpretive Center as a continuation of Timbimboo's legacy. The new interpretive center will function as both an educational space and a healing location. Beyond educating visitors about the Shoshone and preserving Shoshone culture, the center will also restore natural resources in the area.³⁵⁹ Parry asserts that "still, the Bear River Massacre³⁶⁰ does not define us today. It has made

³⁵⁶ Darren Parry, "Mae Timbimboo Parry, Historian and Matriarch of the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone," Better Days Curriculum, Utah Women's History, June 11, 2021, <https://www.utahwomenshistory.org/bios/mae-timbimboo-parry/>.

³⁵⁷ Maren Peterson, "Mae Timbimboo Parry: Stories of Utah Women," Utah State Archives and Records Service, Utah Division of Archives and Records Service, December 8, 2020, <https://archivesnews.utah.gov/2020/12/08/mae-timbimboo-parry-stories-of-utah-women/>.

³⁵⁸ Daysha Eaton, "Forgotten Shoshone Massacre Story Will Soon Be Told on Grand Scale," *KUER*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.kuer.org/indian-country/2019-01-31/forgotten-shoshone-massacre-story-will-soon-be-told-on-grand-scale>.

³⁵⁹ "Boa Ogoi," <https://boaogoi.org/>.

³⁶⁰ Here, Parry is referring to the Idaho Bear River Massacre, not the Montana Bear River Massacre.

us stronger. We have used those stories and tragedies to inspire and motivate us to be better people and a better nation.”³⁶¹

Decolonizing Montana’s Highways

Decolonization in the Montana Historic Highway marker program takes the form of working with tribal representatives and aiming to center Indigenous voices. According to Axline, the MDT works closely with the Tribal Historic Preservation Offices and “tribal consultation is a critical part of MDT’s cultural resource program.”³⁶² The Salish Cultural Committee, operated by the Salish tribe in Montana, has a “proactive interpretive marker program.”³⁶³ The tribe works closely with Axline to develop markers about Salish history. For instance, the Salish-Pend d’Orielle Culture Committee wrote the marker titled “The Salish and Pend d’Oreille People and the Jocko Valley.” The marker tells CKST history from the perspective of the tribe and includes words in the Salish language. The marker reads:

For thousands of years, western Montana, including the Jocko Valley, has been home to the *Qlispé* (Kalispel or Pend d’Orielle) and *Séliš* (Salish or “Flathead” people). In their traditional creation stories, tribal elders tell how Coyote traveled across this “island,” North America, preparing it for the human beings who were yet to come. He left signs of his deeds upon the land, some of which can still be seen today. Here in the Jocko, Coyote killed a gigantic monster who swallowed all living things.

Long before the arrival of non-Indians, Salish-language place names covered this area, including *Sntacnálqw* (Edge between Forest and Prairie - Schley area) and *Ntqálqw* (Place of Wide Trees - Arlee area). The more recent name “Jocko” came from Jacco (Jacques) Raphael Finley, a fur trapper with the North West Fur

³⁶¹ Parry, “Mae Timbimboo Parry,” <https://www.utahwomenshistory.org/bios/mae-timbimboo-parry/>.

³⁶² Jon Axline, email to the author, February 23, 2022.

³⁶³ Jon Axline, email to the author, February 23, 2022.

Company (1806-1809) who intermarried with local Indian people and has many descendants here.

In the Hellgate Treaty (1855), U.S. officials tried to force the Salish, Pend d’Orielle, and Kootenai people onto a single reservation. The Salish resisted removal from their ancestral Bitterroot Valley. When troops finally forced them north in 1891, the Salish came only as far as they had to, stopping at the Flathead or Jocko Reservation’s southern edge. To this day, many Salish people live in the area, which now faces a new kind of “swallowing monsters,” as suburban sprawl presses north from Missoula.³⁶⁴

In partnership with the MDT, the CKST has also erected several signs using Salish and Kootenai place names “along U.S. Highway 93 within the Flathead Reservation.”³⁶⁵ These place name signs are separate from roadside markers but perform the same decolonizing labor. Debra Merskin, a media studies professor at the University of Oregon, argued that Euro-American settlers removing Indigenous place names and renaming a place in their language is a form of colonization.³⁶⁶ However, installing signs in Native languages that restore Native place names to the landscape could push back against settler-colonial naming campaigns. In a book about the Salish people and their history, the Salish-Pend d’Oreille Cultural Committee and Elders Cultural Advisory committee wrote, “...embedded in these placenames, in the stories of places, in the ways these places were used by tribal people from time immemorial, are further clues to the tribal way of life and the tribal relationship with the land.”³⁶⁷ Whitford mentioned that the Toole County Road Department has expressed interest in working with the Blackfeet tribe to

³⁶⁴ Axline, *Montana’s Historical Highway Markers*, 13-14.

³⁶⁵ Axline, *Montana’s Historical Highway Markers*, 14.

³⁶⁶ Merskin, “The S-Word,” 350.

³⁶⁷ Salish-Pend d’Oreille Cultural Committee and Elders Cultural Advisory, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, *The Salish People and the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 35.

install markers using Blackfeet place names near Shelby, Montana.³⁶⁸ Installing these place name markers could continue to decolonize Montana's highways beyond the Flathead Reservation.

Axline's usual policy is to allow Montana tribes to write the markers, and he edits the marker text to ensure they fit on the marker itself.³⁶⁹ However, Axline says that other tribes in Montana are "hit or miss" when it comes to involvement in writing marker text.³⁷⁰ He explained that "some tribes, like the CSKT [Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes], are into doing interpretive markers as are the Blackfeet and sometimes the Crow. Other tribes, like the Northern Cheyenne, don't see any real value in it. The Fort Belknap and Fort Peck folks are sometimes – depending on what the subject matter is."³⁷¹ As previously mentioned, the Blackfeet Nation did not write the Baker Massacre marker for unknown reasons, though the tribe did begin the marker creation process in the 1990s. Instead, using information from the Tribal Historic Preservation Office, Axline wrote the historical marker and installed it in 2007. Overall, the efforts of both Axline and the larger MDT organization indicate a willingness and dedication to tribal input from the CSKT and Blackfeet on Montana historical markers.

Of course, other factors influence the success of public historical interpretations of the massacre. The size and location of the marker is an issue for Bear River Massacre interpretation in Montana. The marker, like many historical markers, has a strict word count that limits text. The site itself is also remote, and Axline expressed concerns that creating a larger interpretive

³⁶⁸ Lea Whitford, interview with the author, April 7, 2022.

³⁶⁹ Jon Axline, email to the author, February 23, 2022.

³⁷⁰ Jon Axline, email to the author, February 23, 2022.

³⁷¹ Jon Axline, email to the author, March 9, 2022.

installation at the massacre site would invite vandalism.³⁷² However, the Bear River Massacre site in Idaho is also relatively isolated. The nearest town is Preston, Idaho, which had a population of 5,591 as of the 2020 census.³⁷³ Preston only has approximately 2,000 more people than Shelby, Montana, the nearest town to the site of the Bear River Massacre.³⁷⁴ While the site is remote, it is not entirely isolated. Additionally, even though other markers have been vandalized in Montana, those markers remain in place, including the marker for the Blackfeet Nation and the current Baker Massacre marker itself. Axline acknowledged the limitations of the sign program and brought up the politics of the marker text. He said that “the wording the tribe had pinned to a bison hide at the dedication many years ago said something to the effect that ‘the soldiers shot the women and children as they ran away.’ I would not have been able to put that wording on a sign. We would have received complaints and the sign would have been vandalized. I agree that that happened, but putting things like that on a sign is never a good idea.”³⁷⁵

Ideologies of decolonization and activism add to our understanding of how to revise and reinterpret historical markers in Montana, especially at locations like massacre sites. In the future, decolonization might focus on expanding the site by incorporating information about the Bear River Massacre from the Blackfeet perspective. Of particular interest is Bridget Conley’s examination of memorial museums and how memorial sites might engage in activism. Conley

³⁷² Jon Axline, email to the author, February 23, 2022.

³⁷³ Explore Census Data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/all?q=preston,%20idaho>.

³⁷⁴ Explore Census Data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/all?q=shelby%2C+montana>.

³⁷⁵ Jon Axline, email to the author, March 9, 2022.

studied how the Red Terror Martyrs Memorial Museum (RTMMM) in Ethiopia engages in activist practice through presenting exhibits that discuss the abuse of state power as well as the political community organizing that responded to state violence.³⁷⁶ Conley also addressed how all museum docents are “family members of victims or survivors of torture and prison.”³⁷⁷

Survivor-docents provide information about traumatic events from the perspective of those who were involved in them rather than from the “neutral” perspective of museum staff. RTMMM practices could influence the Montana marker program. For instance, the museum’s focus on highlighting both violence and resistance could influence marker text revisions and prompt new focus on both colonization and survivance by adding information on how the Piikani people have commemorated the massacre into the current day. Similarly, the museum’s presentation of survivor testimonies could be a model for the Bear River Massacre site, which could incorporate quotes from survivor testimonies submitted to the Indian Office.

Additional decolonizing efforts could draw on the example of the Idaho Bear River Massacre site. For instance, the proposed Boa Ogoi Cultural & Interpretive Center, which will be located near the Idaho Bear River Massacre site, will educate visitors about the Shoshone, preserve Shoshone culture, and engage in decolonizing projects like land restoration. The Montana Bear River Massacre site might aim for some of the same goals, with some changes that recognize the limitations of the space and the organizations involved. Perhaps in the future, a larger interpretive site could be installed that would include some of Axline’s goals, including

³⁷⁶ Bridget Conley, “Memorial Museums at the Intersection of Politics, Exhibition, and Trauma: A Study of the Red Terror Martyrs Memorial Museum,” in *Museum Activism*, 363.

³⁷⁷ Conley, “Memorial Museums at the Intersection of Politics, Exhibition, and Trauma,” 364.

“Blackfeet reminiscences about the massacre, perhaps some photos...”³⁷⁸ and “a map, and more information than I had room for on the current marker...largely written by tribal members for their perspective rather than mine.”³⁷⁹

A larger site interpretation of the Bear River Massacre could revise and expand on the historical highway marker. It could give context about the smallpox epidemic and land loss that hurt the tribe in the late 1800s at the same time as the Bear River Massacre. The site might also explain how the brutal massacre functioned not only as an act of physical violence against the tribe but also as an act of psychological terror. As previously explained, many Blackfeet survivors were so afraid of violence or prison that they were hesitant to discuss the massacre even a century later. The site might also further explore how the massacre continues to affect the Blackfeet Nation. Furthermore, the site could highlight the tribe’s survivance and the important role played by women in preserving memories of the massacre and commemorating the massacre in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It could draw on the reparative memory work done by Blackfeet art pieces such as *Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play* and *Fools Crow*. This type of interpretive site could acknowledge the settler-colonial origins of the historical marker program and how the current-day marker program has acted upon its decolonizing goals. This interpretive site could educate non-Native people about the event and its significance not only to the Piikani people but to the Montana area as a whole.

In addition, as Lea Whitford hopes, dual memorials could be erected at the Bear River Massacre Site and at BCC that would incorporate Piikani artists’ plans and Piikani oral histories.

³⁷⁸ Jon Axline, email to the author, March 9, 2022.

³⁷⁹ Jon Axline, email to the author, February 23, 2022.

These memorials, designed and authored by tribal members, could serve to educate young Piikani people, recognize the impact of the massacre on tribal culture and history, and continue the healing process. By using Blackfeet designs, language, and memories, the memorials could return narrative power to the Blackfeet Nation. Alongside massacre commemorations, memorials could meet some of the first steps of healing historical unresolved grief: acknowledging and disclosing emotional burdens created by traumatic events.³⁸⁰

Both a larger interpretive site and tribal memorials could also recognize the importance of Piikani women in massacre survival and in the preservation of memories about the massacre. The site and memorials could explore settler-colonial assaults on Piikani women and the connections between silencing Native women and silencing Native history. From the 1870 survivors' stories to the 2009 play and 2020 massacre commemorations, Piikani women have been integral to remembering the massacre, whether they publicly resisted settler-colonial narratives or privately passed on their stories. Recognizing and respecting obstacles to preserving tribal history would be an important aspect of future interpretations of the Bear River Massacre.

While it may or may not be the responsibility of the MDT to install a larger interpretive site, the Bear River Massacre deserves further interpretation at the Marias River in Montana. Like the Idaho Bear River Massacre, the Montana Bear River Massacre deeply affected and continues to affect tribal communities. Like the Riverside Monument and Healing Garden in Alberta, a larger interpretive installation could serve as a space both for education and for healing. A larger interpretive site based on tribal history that would have the space to incorporate

³⁸⁰ Avalos, "What Does It Mean to Heal From Historical Trauma?," 496.

items like maps would fit with Lonetree's decolonizing goals, including recognition of colonial harm, centering Native perspectives and collaborating with Native peoples, and facilitating healing. It could also align with Jacobs' goals of reconciliation by examining a shared settler and Native past and possibly working toward redressing colonial harm. Settler-colonialism can be (and is) disrupted by resistance by Native peoples and non-Native allies. Wolfe said that settler colonialism is "a structure rather than an event,"³⁸¹ an ongoing process that shapes the American nation and other Indigenous nations located on the American continent. Likewise, decolonization is not a single event but a reparative structural process. While historical institutions have been complicit in structures of settler-colonial violence through a centuries-long process of actively and passively misrepresenting Indigenous peoples, they can also play a part in undoing colonial narratives and structures.

³⁸¹ Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," 387-409, DOI: [10.1080/14623520601056240](https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240).

CONCLUSION

While they have played a harmful role in settler-colonial structures, public historical sites can now function as important spaces for healing historical trauma. Historical markers are physically limited and therefore cannot contain as much detail or nuance as a full-fledged museum exhibit. However, historical markers benefit from a longevity that museum exhibits often do not have, since they are often intended to be permanent. As Lonetree theorized, decolonized public historical sites can function as spaces of healing for Native communities and education for non-Native people. Centering Indigenous histories at public sites resists settler-colonialism by disrupting normalized narratives of settler supremacy. However, decolonization is a complex and layered process that takes time and effort. Recognizing the impact of colonization on Native communities, including language, culture, and land loss, is an important first step in decolonization and healing historical unresolved grief. For public historical sites, this may take the form of adopting the “forgiveness platform” set out by Mithlo and Sherman, which acknowledges settler-colonial harm before building relationships with Native communities. The next steps include challenging stereotypes of Native peoples, interpreting both colonialism and survivance, and providing space for reflection and healing.³⁸²

The Bear River Massacre and the Baker Massacre marker are a strong case study for examining how public historical representations of Native peoples, especially Native women, have contributed to colonization. It reveals how public historical institutions are complicit in

³⁸² Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 25.

settler-colonial goals of destroying Native histories and replacing them with settler histories. Public historical institutions often ignore the significance of Blackfeet women with the Bear River Massacre and the links between violence against women and settler-colonial campaigns to exterminate Native peoples and cultures. To this author's knowledge and to the knowledge of Axline,³⁸³ the Baker Massacre marker is the only European American public historical representation of the massacre. The Montana marker, while a strong first step toward interpreting the Bear River Massacre, does not center the Piikani perspective of the massacre or incorporate significant facts from Piikani oral histories such as the rape of Owl Child's wife or numbers reported by Native witnesses or survivors. It also does not discuss how settler-colonial violence functioned to suppress the Piikani history of the massacre or how the Blackfeet Nation currently commemorates the massacre. In short, the decolonization process is not complete at the Bear River Massacre site or marker.

As addressed in this thesis, there are physical and political obstacles to marker expansion, including word count limitations, potential marker vandalism, and complaints from the public. However, if the marker was expanded into a larger interpretive site, it might include more information such as photographs or drawings, maps, survivor testimonies, and art created by Blackfeet tribal members. It might also recognize how the tribe has commemorated the massacre and the importance of women to the commemoration process. Installing separate dual tribal memorials could function to meet the Blackfeet tribe's needs of cultural education and healing.

³⁸³ Jon Axline, email to the author, March 9, 2022.

The Bear River Massacre remains an important part of tribal and public history, if one that is rarely recognized. Blackfeet representations of the massacre assert that importance. Big Head wrote in *Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play* that “we, the descendents [sic] of the survivors, are proof that they never gave up. I am here because a young 12 year old girl kept putting one foot in front of the other on that cold winter in January 1870.”³⁸⁴ Settler-colonial structures of destruction and replacement have obscured both the story of the Bear River Massacre and its impact. However, decolonizing European American public historical representations of the massacre could prove vital to restoring its significance to Montana.

³⁸⁴ Big Head, "Strike Them Hard!: The Baker Massacre Play," 40.

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