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6/4/18
Project 2
Memoir and Personal Writing

A Day in the Massacre of my Ancestors

"The massacre lasted six or eight hours, and a good many Indians escaped. I tell you Ned it was hard to see little children on their knees have their brains beat out by men professing to be civilized. One squaw was wounded and a fellow took a hatchet to finish her, she held her arms up to defend her, and he cut one arm off, and held the other with one hand and dashed the hatchet through her brain. One squaw with her two children, were on their knees begging for their lives of a dozen soldiers, within ten feet of them all, firing – when one succeeded in hitting the squaw in the thigh, when she took a knife and cut the throats of both children, and then killed herself. One old squaw hung herself in the lodge – there was not enough room for her to hang and she held up her knees and choked herself to death. Some tried to escape on the Prairie, but most of them were run down by horsemen. I saw two Indians hold one of another's hands, chased until they were exhausted, when they kneeled down, and clasped each other around the neck and were both shot together. They were all scalped, and as high as half a dozen taken from one head. They were all horribly mutilated. One woman was cut open and a child taken out of her, and scalped."

-Letter from Captain Silas Soule to Major E.W. Wynkoop in 1864, days after the Sand Creek Massacre

When you're one in a group of brown people, you are bound to receive ambiguous looks between surprise and disgust anywhere you go. For centuries, this has always been the case for Native Americans. Their land was invaded, disease spread, and millions died at the hand of white settlers. A very sad history, but if no one else tells it, the other side will continue to bury it

deeper and build a white picket fence to cover it up. On a cold, miserable day in April, a group of Native American students walked into a small restaurant in Eads, Colorado, on a healing journey that first involved lunch.

The restaurant was one of our first stops before heading to the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, which sat about 24 miles away from the small town of Eads. It was quite literally in the middle of nowhere. The main room was small and most likely sat 15 tables in all, the floor a retro tile and painted pale blue. Most of the tables and booths along the walls were occupied with regulars who were sipping their black coffee and reading yesterdays newspaper. However, every head turned as 14 natives filed in. Even the waiters stopped dead in their tracks. Every last one of them acted like they had just seen ghosts. I wondered if this was the reaction that white settlers had over 150 years ago when tensions were high with the Plains Indians.

We took the available tables in the middle of the restaurant and ordered our food as if our arrival hadn't disturbed the frequent customers. In the simplest way to describe them, they were old and white. Some had trucker hats on and denim jackets to match their handlebar mustaches. I probably would have keeled over if I spotted a cowboy hat. After we placed our orders, I noticed more and more of the guests couldn't tolerate it and bailed. Must have been too much for them to be the minority for once in the room. We were fine with that.

One of the rangers that works at the site met us there and told us a little bit about her own background. She also was native and had worked here for a number of years, fighting to protect the sacred land and educate incoming tourists of the atrocities that happened there many years ago. We all went around the tables and introduced ourselves, and I proudly gave her my name, majors, and mentioned that I was from the Taos Pueblo reservation in New Mexico. She was

familiar with the area, and we exchanged a couple of tidbits about our familial connections there. Usually I am shy to reveal that information because although I grew up on the rez for almost half of my life, not many people believed that I too was Native American. Many people preferred to invalidate my identity rather than challenge their stereotypes of what Native Americans look like.

On the way out of the restaurant, I noticed the vacant motel just next to it. There were no signs, no cars, no life. It seemed like it was abandoned at the first sight of some creepy children in a corn field. You would not see me spending the night there on a dare.

Every window was covered in dust and the outside walls were stripped of paint. Grey clouds hovered over the area, mirroring the greyed barren lands for miles out. A few of my friends started piling in the van and other cars that we took here while I stood outside of the van for a few moments more. Before I joined the rest of them, I looked back at the empty motel just in time to witness a gigantic murder of crows rising from behind the motel, cawing off into the distance as it flew over our heads.

Earlier that morning, I woke up to cold air hugging my feet that were sticking out from underneath my covers. It was 6:30 a.m. on a Saturday. After checking my phone for messages from the Native Student Alliance advisor saying that we were still going to make the trip to Eads, I began my morning routine. Outside, snow silently fell, making me less excited for the day. I crossed my fingers hoping that it wasn't snowing at the massacre site, but this day was important for everyone. We all committed. Today, we would travel to where one of the saddest events in

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American history took place and pray to our ancestors for healing, and for a better future. The night before I worked on making my prayer ties, a Lakota tradition. We were given 20 small cloth squares with 5 of each color that included red, yellow, black, and white. The 21st square was our choosing of color, and whatever we wanted to pray for the most. I chose a black square. These colors made up Four Directions; this included Northern tribes, Eastern tribes, Southern tribes, and Western tribes. Each color represented some significant meaning, and our directions were to pray as we stuffed and tied eraser-sized pockets of tobacco, carefully keeping the ties in a straight line so that our prayers would not be tangled. We would take these to the site as an offering to our ancestors, something that anyone rarely did when visiting.

At the meeting point in the Nagel/Nelson Circle at DU, we gathered on the concrete roundabout and began to sage before our trip. In a circle, we each received smoke from the sage and in unison, turned and prayed to the East, the South, the West, and finally the North. Snow stopped falling around us, and the lit sage never went out. Respectively we got in different vehicles and began our journey south.

Red is for our culture, language, and our people.

Black is for endings, grief, hardship, and the negative parts of our lives. This is to remember the ancestors there and pray for the spirit world.

Yellow is for new beginnings, change, and hope.

White is for the future, moving on, and blessings for the next generation.

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During the long drive south, the van I rode in was filled with the smell of tobacco. No one was smoking, but most were making their prayer ties in silence. I wanted to finish mine at the site, so I snacked on a warm breakfast burrito instead. During breaks, I joked around with everyone in attempts to pass the time as we made our way through the white blanketed landscape almost completely void of animals excluding the occasional herd of cows.

Finally after driving the rest of the way to the massacre site, stretching my legs never felt better. The other ranger met our group in the dirt parking lot where two buildings sat making up the visitors center. Our group made our way to some tables outside in anticipation for the history we were about to hear. The ranger in charge of our visit to the site began to tell us the historical context of the massacre and details that emerged from the atrocity itself.

Prior to 1864, many factors helped shape the land and how white settlers began to interact with it and its inhabitants that included Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes on the plains. Settlers began their journey westward, and in the expansion, the population nearly doubled in the now Colorado area. As the land changed from dry and wet seasons, along with the hunting of natural wildlife, conditions became more difficult as the winter drew near in 1864. Because of the shortage of food, Cheyenne and Arapahoe Indians moved from their camps south of Sand Creek and to Fort Lyon hoping to make arrangements for food and for a truce. There had been certain skirmishes and prisoners on both sides were taken; Chief Black Kettle and White Antelope came in hopes to trade man-for-man, peacefully. As the commander of the fort originally was fine with making peaceful arrangements, others were against helping the “Indian savages,” which included John Evans, the governor of Colorado and founder of the University of Denver. Chiefs of both

tribes such as Black Kettle and White Antelope attempted to make treaties peacefully, but they were still met with hostility from soldiers and officials.

Even in the summer of 1864, newspapers would further spread word of the different encounters between the white man and Indians, often describing them as "hostile." In the late summer as tensions arose, Governor Evans issued a statement saying, "Authorizing all citizens of Colorado…go in pursuit of all hostile Indians on the plains…also, to kill and destroy, as enemies of the country, wherever they may be found, all such hostile Indians."

In November of 1864, there was a change in orders as well as in commanders (Major E.W. Wynkoop was the new commander), and shortly after the Cheyenne and Arapahoe tribes were forced away from the fort, and they moved camp to Sand Creek.

In this time, Governor John Evans had openly voiced that he was in favor of going through with a planned attack on the camp, where 700 Cheyenne and Arapahoe Indians stayed; the camp was made up of mostly women, children, and the elderly. Most of the warriors had already left south to another camp a few days prior to November 29th of that year.

The attack took place as soon as the sun rose. Colonel Chivington, Captain Silas Soule, and a couple of other officials waited a mile from the camp with 675 Colorado volunteer soldiers, at the top of the hill in which we arrived and made a pit stop. Our group stood on the western side of the riverbed, possibly where battalions waited for orders as the attack commenced on the tribes. With the use of firearms and howitzer cannons, the soldiers descended upon the camp, and chaos broke loose. About 250 Cheyenne and Arapahoe women and children were brutally murdered while the survivors took shelter in the banks of the river, south, and north where there

were more Cheyenne tribes stayed. In the afternoon and the day after the massacre many soldiers mutilated the innocent corpses spread in the plains of Sand Creek.

Throughout the story, my friends and I solemnly stood close to one another, braving the icy winds as penguins do. Some cried, but through my own tears it was difficult to see them. I hadn't realized I was crying until my friend next to me reminded me to wipe my tears away. Nothing could stop me.

We were lead up a trail to the top of one of the hills overlooking the now empty riverbed where the massacre happened. The land was barren except for the occasional sage bush, yellowed from the winter weather. Cottonwood trees lined the riverbank where Sand Creek used to run. The rangers mentioned that the river flows once every 10 years since the massacre. Like skeletons, their grey, dead branches were intertwined with one another. They were the only trees in the area, in one big group, a community if you will. As the cold wind blew, I looked over and tried to imagine how the massacre took place. In fact, this is probably the kind of weather they faced on that fateful day. Where our ancestors ran, where they tried to hide. What it might have been like for Soule and his men to stand there and not take part in the slaughtering of hundreds of innocent people. It was overwhelming to feel that pain, and the tears never stopped. Our spiritual advisor that came with us to the sight mentioned that some people are susceptible to feeling the pain and suffering that took place that day. It was beyond generational trauma. It was our ancestors and the wanagi spirits that were there channeling their energy through me.

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Since the mass graveyard was spread over a large area and no one was properly buried as the survivors were not allowed to come back for their dead. There was a small pavilion and a tombstone in remembrance for all of the fallen natives. I sat alone on a nearby log and finished my prayer ties hoping that the freezing wind would not tangle my string. Frequently, I had to wipe away my tears before they froze on my face. In groups we were saged and walked to the post where we would attach our prayer ties as our offering to the land and the ancestors who passed. After tying mine, I stood in a few moments in silence. How could people be such monsters? How could they get away with such atrocities? How could the soldiers look a child in the eye and gladly pull the trigger?

No one is really civilized, are they?

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This is for my ancestors and the wanagi (the spirits), for those who gave their lives for us, so that we remember to stay close to our roots and be humble. So that we can keep fighting for our culture, our people, and the generations to come. Thank you.

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Upon leaving the site, we surprisingly were in better spirits than after hearing the history surrounding the massacre. A few of us made jokes, and others stayed silent. We were all freezing and looking forward to making the trip home. We did one final sage and asked our ancestors to keep us safe on our travel back to Denver, said our goodbyes, and headed on the dirt road we took to get to the site. As we made our way back to Eads, we experienced things that are still difficult to explain.

As per the rules of riding shotgun in any vehicle, if you sit there you are not only the DJ, but also the navigator and spotter of wildlife. Miraculously, as soon as we left the 8-mile dirt road, we all spotted a group of four or five deer along the side of the road, watching us as we drove by. We all were in awe, as this was the only type of wildlife we saw other than cows, crows, and horses on the way south. Then as we passed the restaurant we ate at earlier, I spotted two hawks flying above us. The whole van was now jazzed up about seeing them as well as the deer. We were on a roll at this point. After stopping at the last gas station for necessary snacks before leaving Eads, we spotted many rabbits, prairie chickens, and four more hawks in various Cottonwood trees, watching us pass by. Closer to Denver we ran into another group of four or five deer, and finally our spiritual advisor spoke up about the coincidences. He joked that our ancestors were watching over us as we went home to Denver. I laughed remembering what my grandmother once told me as a child.

“There are lots of things ancestors can do. They’re always with us, and always in ways you may not think.”