REMOVE, RETURN, REMEMBER: MAKING UTE LAND RELIGION IN THE AMERICAN WEST

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ABSTRACT

BRANDILYN DENISON: Remove, Return, Remember: Making Ute Land Religion in the American West
(Under the direction of Laurie Maffly-Kipp)

This dissertation narrates the development of cultural memories of nineteenth-century clashes between Ute Indians and whites in the American West. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Utes and non-Utes memorialized, in a variety of ways, the violence that led to Ute Removal from western Colorado. Within this history of violence, removal, and remembrance, Utes and non-Utes framed nineteenth-century encounters with religious beliefs and practices. Within the setting of the American West, land and its use figured prominently in these encounters and remembrances. By focusing on contact between one tribe, this dissertation grounds scholars in a localized history that mirrors a national narrative of conflict, loss, and reconciliation. The study interrogates the way in which white and American Indian societies have employed religious and non-religious identities, notions of history and progress, and the elusive specter of memory in order to claim the land. Using archival sources, newspapers, oral histories, popular literature, and field observations, it models a way for scholars to incorporate American Indian history more fully into the narrative of American religious history.

Furthermore, this study argues that modernist definitions of religion have legitimated white ownership of the land, to the exclusion of American Indian ownership of it. Through this history, the development of religious identities among Utes and non-Utes hinged on an understanding of religion that excluded aspirations for political or
economic gain. Instead, Utes and their non-Ute allies represented Ute religiosity by its lack of material or political desires. Although scholars have long noted the relationship between economics and religion, this study demonstrates the way in which academic and popular descriptions of Ute religion in the twentieth century relied on definitional boundaries that excluded economics. Through the history of contact between whites and Utes as well as twenty-first century developments in the cultural memory of nineteenth-century contact, we see the processes through which popular representations of religion became “purified” of economics.
In memory of my mom, who taught me to love school,
and for my dad, who taught me to love the land
Acknowledgments

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................... ix

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ............................................................................................. x

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................... 11

Describing and defining religion .......................................................................... 17

Religious Pluralism ................................................................................................. 24

Religion and Nature ................................................................................................. 27

Chapter Outline ....................................................................................................... 30

II. PONIES, PLOWS, AND POSSIBILITIES: LAND AND RELIGION ON THE COLORADO FRONTIER ........................................................................................................ 32

Introduction ........................................................................................................... 32

Pre-contact Great Basin ........................................................................................ 34

Spanish Contact and Captive Trade ....................................................................... 41

Contact with the United States ............................................................................... 48

White River Ute Agency .......................................................................................... 59

Nathan Meeker ....................................................................................................... 66

Meeker at the White River Ute Agency ................................................................... 75

III. MORALITY, GENDER, AND LANDOWNERSHIP, 1879-1881 .................... 85
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the Agency</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media reporting</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ute Women’s Morality</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Of Outrageous Treatment at Night”</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeker’s Character</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removal</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. MAKING UTE LAND RELIGION (1891-1941)</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After Removal</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ute Ceremonial Practices</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluding Economics from Ute Land Religion</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluding Christianity from Ute Land Religion</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peyote and Christianity</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staging Ute Land Religion</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. PAGEANTS AND POWWOWS: RECONCILIATION AND UTE LAND RELIGION</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeker Massacre Pageant</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Smoking River Powwow</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE

1. General Thornburgh killed by Ute Indian........................................94
2. Meeker Massacre Pageant..............................................................203
## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ARCIA</td>
<td>Annual Report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHS</td>
<td>Colorado Historical Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>DPL</td>
<td>Denver Public Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JWMLUU</td>
<td>J. Williard Marriott Library, University of Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTPSC</td>
<td>L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

When Clifford Duncan was a child, his parents took him on car rides from their Utah home on the Ute Uintah-Ouray Reservation. They would drive by the small town of Meeker, CO, nestled in the White River Valley in the heart of Colorado’s Rocky Mountains, and tell him: “There is where it was. This is where it happened.” His parents were referring to an 1879 confrontation between Utes and United States government officials, which resulted in numerous Ute and non-Ute deaths and initiated Ute removal from western Colorado. As descendents of the Utes who were removed, Duncan’s parents identified strongly with the small town, but they rarely stopped the car to visit. Instead, Duncan experienced this region through his family’s oral history of the violence that separated his people from their sacred homeland. As the elders’ memories faded away, younger generations sought out this dangerous, but fading, past. This hushed history instilled a longing in Duncan to return to the place “where it was, where it happened” and created an identity for him as a Ute, perpetually separated from home.1

While Clifford Duncan views the 1879 confrontation primarily through his ancestors’ removal, children who grow up in Meeker, CO learn another version of the region’s history by participating in or observing the “Meeker Massacre Pageant” every Fourth of July. Pageant scriptwriters have revised it several times in its seventy-year

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1Clifford Duncan, “Introduction to First Annual Smoking River Powwow” [speech given at the First Annual Smoking River Powwow, Meeker, CO, July 25, 2008].
history. The current version’s basic story is that in 1878, Nathan Meeker, a United States Indian Agent, came to the White River Valley to help the Utes become civilized farmers. He was a naïve, idealistic man who had little practical knowledge. The Utes, by contrast, were practical, knowledgeable people who maintained a spiritual connection to the land. In 1879, Meeker lost his life for his misguided civilizing efforts when the Utes killed him and captured his wife, Arvilla, and his daughter, Josephine. In past versions of the pageant, the performances concluded with the arrival of the Cavalry to rescue the women and send the Utes away, paving the way for “civilization” to arrive in the White River Valley.²

These reenactments diminished the specifics of Ute removal in order to emphasize the horror of the Meeker Massacre and the ultimate success of civilization, despite initial hardships. In recent years, however, amateur historians have revised the pageant script in order to downplay the triumph of civilization over “savages.” In its place, it now narrates the sadness of removal and its negative effects on the Utes. The current pageant concludes with the Utes walking off the arena stage, hanging their heads in defeated sadness, while the narrator states that with their religious connection to the land severed, the Utes would wither away.³

In 2009, Meeker and Ute nation community leaders challenged these representations of the past. Meeker residents have worked to overcome the division between these two communities by addressing the cultural memory of the nineteenth-century events. One of these projects included the Smoking River Powwow, jointly

²“Meeker’s annual massacre,” Empire, June 27, 1965.

sponsored by the Rio Blanco County Forest Service Division and the Rio Blanco County Historical Society. This Powwow was inspired by the Forest Service’s efforts to encourage more Utes to apply for jobs in the area. When Lynn Lockwood, a Forest Service employee, discovered that Utes were afraid to return to Meeker, she and her co-workers decided to bridge the communities through a powwow.

At the 2009 Smoking River Powwow, Clifford Duncan danced in the event’s Grand Entry alongside other Ute and non-Ute war veterans. His dance contradicted the pageant’s presumption that the Utes had withered away. Rather, Duncan and other Ute participants demonstrated that although removal was traumatic for the Utes, they are still thriving and their religious practices are alive. Furthermore, non-Ute Meeker residents joined in the opening dances. The stiff march of the non-Ute men and women distinguished them from the easy dance of the Ute returned warriors, but Utes and non-Utes nonetheless danced together, joined by their service in the military. Later, Euro-American Meeker residents and Native Americans bowed their heads during a Ute language prayer offered by a tribal council member. That evening, over a meal of buffalo, baked beans, and watermelon, Utes and non-Utes watched their children play together. To the United States Forest Service officials, these shared experiences serve as a figurative bookend to the United States’ government’s 1881 removal of the Utes from the area, and allowed Utes to return “home.”

This amiable meeting between Meeker residents and Ute tribal members contrasted sharply with nineteenth-century encounters. In 1879, ancestors of the Utes who danced in the Powwow fought against United States governmental agents, leading to a battle where many Utes and non-Utes lost their lives. The confrontation led to a
Congressional investigation, through which the Utes lost their reservation granted under an 1863 treaty—an area that covered most of western Colorado. In 1881, the Cavalry, backed by field artillery, forcibly removed the Utes. For the Ute and non-Ute coordinators of the Smoking River Powwow, the 2009 dance competition addressed this “difficult history” and opened the doors for possible reconciliation between the two communities. As Clifford Duncan stated in the 2008 Powwow’s opening ceremony: “Ancestors, the sound you will hear today is not of a gun—it is from a drum.”

In the twenty-first century, drumbeats might have replaced nineteenth-century gunshots, but the drums also signaled a transformation in Meeker’s cultural memory—namely the public representation of the past developed through museums, oral histories, reenactments, and monuments. Meeker’s past memory projects suggested either that removal was justified because the Utes had threatened Euro-American neighbors and prohibited civilization’s progress, or that removal had led to the Utes’ inevitable decline. The Smoking River Powwow, as well as other community ventures to remake memorial markers, complicates these earlier narratives. These revisions in cultural memory are oriented towards reflecting the multiplicity of Colorado’s historical narratives, which in turn, bridge the Meeker community and the Ute Nation. In 2009, within this previously

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4Clifford Duncan, “Introduction to First Annual Smoking River Powwow” [speech given at the First Annual Smoking River Powwow, Meeker, CO, July 25, 2008].

5I am borrowing the term “cultural memories” from Martia Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997). Strucken is building on a body of literature on cultural memory, starting with Maurice Halbwachs, On Collective Memory (University of Chicago Press, 1992) and Pierre Nora “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” Representations 26, 1989: 7–25. One concern of memory studies is the relationship between “history” and “memory,” or the tension between the academic study of historical events and public memories of those events. In Sturken’s usage of the term, she argues that cultural memory and history are “entangled rather than oppositional” (5), an application of the term that is particularly useful for this project, as it shows that the academic understanding of Ute history and cultural practices is entangled with non-academic depictions of the past.
colonized space, Ute dancers re-sanctified and re-made the area into a space of shared narratives. Through the ceremomial based, pan-Native American tradition of the powwow, non-Utes and Utes are beginning to forge relationships that aim to transcend nineteenth-century expectations and the accumulation of divisive cultural memories.

How was it that Native American religious practices came to represent an enlightened, religiously tolerant practice within the same space that their ancestors’ humanity was denied? In this articulation of religion, the Utes become the sole possessors of “authentic religious practice,” which excludes them, in part, from economic and political identities. Through this performance of “real” religion, non-Utes are led to believe that the Utes have no interest in economic resources or political gain. Rather, their relationship with the land is pure, unmediated by materialistic desires. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Utes and their non-Ute allies would have had clear motivations for presenting Ute spirituality in this fashion.

On the surface, these efforts appear to be knitting together these two communities. However, the “annual” Powwow was not held in 2010. While the Powwow Committee is searching for new leadership, it appears that the 2011 Powwow also will not be held. While some Meeker residents have cultivated friendships with Ute tribal members, these bonds are fragile and limited to individual relationships. The failure of the Powwow to facilitate long-lasting changes in the community can easily be attributed to a lack of interest or money. However, this dissertation argues that the role that a particular representation of Ute religion played in framing the Powwow committee’s expectations is a partial cause for the event’s failure.
Throughout the history of contact between Utes and Euro-Americans, “religion,” in a variety of configurations, has framed both violent and peaceful encounters. Furthermore, throughout this history, land and its proper use was tightly bound to religious (and non-religious) identities. For example, in the late nineteenth century, Euro-Americans perceived that Utes did not have a religious system, which dovetailed with Euro-American aspirations to remake the Utes from superstitious, savage hunter/gathers into civilized Christian farmers. In the first half of the twentieth century, after removal and during the reservation era, Utes and their Euro-American allies worked together to systematize Ute Land Religion out of existing ceremonial practices, anthropological observations, and Euro-American idealization of nature.

Ute Land Religion describes these collaborative processes used to construct a shared space, where non-Utes engaged with the theological ideas from Ute ceremonial practices. This space excluded political relationships or a thirst for material goods and became a place from which non-Utes could safely critique American consumerism. From this shared cultural space of Ute Land Religion, discourses of Native American religions emerged in a way that made the Forest Service leaders believe that a powwow would be the best way to achieve reconciliation between the two communities. In the twenty-first century gatherings, Native American land religion was on display through public blessings of the land, attendees, and dancers. However, because Ute Land Religion framed these projects, it was difficult for Utes to gain ground in their desire for unlimited hunting and fishing access to their ancestral grounds; resource collection has no place in articulations of Ute Land Religion.
This modern conciliatory event built on past cultural memories. For example, throughout the twentieth century, Euro-American Meeker residents learned about Native American religions through academic studies and popular literature. Through this education, the cultural memory of the “Meeker Massacre” shifted from a celebrated victory of civilization over savagery to a narrative of governmental corruption and Euro-American greed. Thus, within the development of this culturally shared space, memories of the nineteenth-century confrontations and Ute removal were reconfigured to place the blame on greedy, immoral whites who victimized spiritual, pure Utes. These cultural memories, along with the religious identities of both Utes and non-Utes, informed the motivations Smoking River Powwow organizers. However, the framing of Ute Land Religion also signaled that reconciliation would not be possible. When Utes made requests that fell outside the realm of an abstractly spiritual engagement with the land, such as unlimited hunting and fishing rights or a piece of land, the fragile bonds started to fall apart.

Describing and defining religion

In recent years, religious studies scholars have turned a critical eye towards the academic usage of the term “religion,” particularly in relationship to the study of colonized peoples. Acknowledging that the categorization of the world’s religions paralleled the economic colonial projects of European countries, scholars have demonstrated that academic taxonomies of world religions are rooted in a history of colonial violence. One oft cited example is the British colonial manufacturing of a unified
Hinduism, defined in explicitly European Christian categories, out of a collection of localized religious practices.⁶

In addition to creating religious systems, scholars have documented the ways in which colonizing officials have denied the religious character of native practices, and later, named those same practices as “religion.” For example, at certain points throughout British colonization of South Africa, British officers reported that the indigenous peoples did not have a religion. Once the indigenous population stopped resisting colonial rule, the officials starting noticing ceremonial practices and naming it religion. Through these histories, it is clear that the European academic knowledge of non-European ceremonial practices developed alongside of imperial colonial knowledge. Emerging out of a body of colonial knowledge, the academic study of religion, as well as our inherited understanding of what counts as religion, is rooted within a history of violence, power, and colonization.⁷

While colonialism is a powerful force and shaped academic projects to describe and define “religion,” the narrative of religious studies as a product of colonial expansion is only part of religious history. At the same time that indigenous peoples’ ceremonial

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⁶For the argument that Hinduism was manufactured by the British, see: David Lorenzen, “Who Invented Hinduism?” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (1999), 41: 630-659.

practices, creation narratives, and life rituals were being measured, documented, and described, the colonized people responded to these colonizing forces. Often, indigenous resistance was rooted in the stories, practices, and beliefs of their ancestors as well as the emerging Euro-American academic language used to describe and define these practices. In other words, the translation of indigenous practices into European religious practices was a collaborative project.

For instance, in the context of the 1920s, the Pueblo conformed to a European-style definition of religion, one that emerged from Protestant expectations of individual choice in spiritual matters. In order to protect their right to continue to practice ceremonial dances, the Pueblo named these dances “religion”—a semantic shift that allowed the Pueblo to argue successfully for legal protections. However, in renaming these dances, they had to extend individual religious freedom to Pueblo tribal members, a process that reshaped their understanding of the communal obligations of the dances. In short, the Pueblo argued that their ceremonial practices were “religion,” but had to reshape these traditions to fit within American legal expectations of what counts as a religion. Although colonial forces are powerful and can therefore easily define the boundaries between religious and non-religious, the example of the Pueblo dance

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8For an in-depth examination of the way academic definitions of religion have been influenced by Protestant definitions, see Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2003). For an examination of the application of Protestant definitions of religion in the courtroom, see Winifred Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton University Press, 2007).
controversy shows the way in which colonized people have been able to gain access to this power, displaying agency within these systems of power.\textsuperscript{10}

One might therefore cite examples of the way in which colonized peoples have created and gained power within colonized spaces, accepting and accessing liberal Protestant definitions of religion in order to preserve their ceremonial traditions. However, this dissertation asks the following question: how have indigenous peoples contributed to American discourses on religion? Stated another way, this dissertation asks how native peoples have shaped the definitions and descriptions of religion in a way that has formed Euro-American understandings of “authentic” religion. Native American historical studies have documented the ways in which Native Americans wielded extraordinary power in shaping America’s colonial history. Vulnerable because of their ignorance of the land, early colonial settlers often found themselves at the mercy of Native peoples. Native Americans in colonial times exercised both economic and cultural power over Europeans. Although we most often think of Native Americans as the subjects of multiple missionary efforts, it is more likely the case that Native Americans won more Euro-American converts to their lifeways than the Euro-Americans did.\textsuperscript{11}


\textsuperscript{11}There are numerous examples of these studies that have documented the ways in which Native Americans were powerful counterparts to colonial studies. Here is a sample: Daniel Usner, \textit{Indians Settlers and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783} (Chapel Hill: University of
The question still remains: did this early influence extend past the colonial period? Furthermore, how does religious knowledge fit into this history? How did academic studies and popular representations of Native American religion shape American definitions of “real” religion? Through the case study of contact between Utes and non-Utes, this dissertation argues that Native Americans continued to wield considerable influence in defining authentic religious practices within newspapers, literature, and anthropological studies. In the history of contact between Utes and non-Utes, Natives Americans drew on Euro-American expectations of “real” religion in order to gain access to spaces that would have been barred to them otherwise. By drawing on Euro-American definitions of idealized religion, Utes helped to craft Euro-American expectations of what American religion should be.

While Native Americans have shaped popular representations of American religion, these definitions have not translated into legal rights and protection for Ute practices. Thus, this study’s differentiation between literary and academic representations of Native Americans and legal definitions is significant. Throughout the twentieth-century, Native Americans have had to fight for their legal rights to practice traditional ceremonies and to protect sacred areas. While some of these court battles were successful, tribes lost significant cases, which limited their ability to continue traditional practices. Numerous studies engage the relationship between tribal religious identities and legal definitions of religion. These are important studies, however, this dissertation

contends that, in addition to definitional battles fought in court, Native American religious history has shaped perceptions of what counts as “authentic” religion in academic and non-academic conversations. Building on the theoretical foundation provided by these recent texts for the legal definitions of religion, this dissertation examines the way in which Native American religious identities are constructed by both Native Americans and non-Native Americans within the realm of cultural memories, academic discourse, newspapers, and literature.13 These non-academic definitions of religion are powerful. As chapter two demonstrates, the boundaries between legal definitions of religion and non-legal notions are porous, and popular ideas about Native American morality and religiosity had tremendous influence in shaping the outcome of Congressional commissions.

Some religious studies scholars have argued that the term religion is only a second order term, a category that is useful only within the context of academic discourse.14 While this study contends that religion is a term that is partially defined through colonial contact, religion is also a first order term, one that has real power among


13This approach is informed by literature in American religious history that focuses on the “lived religion” of everyday people, a methodological approach that is informed by the theories of Michel de Certeau, Antonio Gramsci, and Pierre Bourdieu. See David D. Hall, ed. Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice (Princeton University Press, 1997). For an example of how the lived practice of recording history influenced and shaped religious communities in the United States, see: Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Setting Down the Sacred Past (Harvard University Press, 2010).

individuals and communities alike. The assumption that academics are the only ones to theorize religion unnecessarily narrows our field of study and prevents us from seeing the way that individuals and communities shape the term in response to historical and cultural change. This dissertation examines the way in which people outside the academy enact the on-the-ground defining of religion. While I do not intend to provide a definition of this first-order meaning of the term “religion,” I describe and analyze the variety of ways that Utes and non-Utes have employed this term. Through this method, scholars can gain an understanding of the on-the-ground defining of religion and its use in the creation of group identities.

It is important to note that this text is not about what occurs during Ute ceremonial practices. Instead, it is a study of the academic and popular discourse that was fashioned by Utes and non-Utes alike. It does not aim to translate Ute religious practices into academic discourse or into other Western categories of analysis. Scholars have described and analyzed Ute religious practices, like those of many other Native American tribes, throughout the twentieth century. Some studies were approached through ethical standards recognized today, but many were not conducted according to ethical principles—in those studies, records of Ute ceremonial practices were kept without approval from the ceremony’s participants. This dissertation does rely on anthropological reports about Ute religious and ceremonial practices from the first half of the twentieth century; however, these studies are used to trace the development of academic

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For the complexity of the relationship between colonial missionary projects and Native American practices, see: Michael McNally, “The Uses of Ojibwa Hymn-Singing at White Earth: Toward a History of Practice,” in Lived Religion, David Hall, ed. (Princeton University Press, 1997), 133-159. In this essay, McNally traces how Christian hymns, translated into Ojibwa in the early nineteenth century, have been a site for solidifying an Ojibwa identity.
understanding of Native American religions rather than to interpret Ute religious practices.\(^{16}\)

**Religious Pluralism**

This project situates contact between Utes and non-Utes within a history of the development of American conceptions of religious pluralism. Like the term religion, religious pluralism is a weighty word that is used both descriptively and prescriptively. It simultaneously describes diverse religious landscapes and prescribes behavior within those landscapes. Rather than prescribing behavior, this project aims to describe the way that Utes and non-Utes have attempted to find common ground through religious difference. This project builds on the definition offered by Courtney Bender, that is, religious pluralism is “a commitment to recognize and understand others across perceived or claimed lines of religious difference.”\(^{17}\) This is a useful definition for the history of contact between Utes and non-Utes, because an implicit piece of this understanding of

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\(^{16}\)This study is in part informed by scholarship that has traced the way in which non-Native American understanding of Native American religions is based on fictional representations, starting in the colonial era. These approach is found in: Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978) and Thomas C. Parkhill, *Weaving Ourselves into the Land: Charles Godfrey Leland, “Indians,” and the Study of Native American Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). However, these texts may have overstated the lack of Native American agency in engaging popular culture representations of Native American religions, as well as the way in which Native Americans have represented their practices within courts. This study acknowledges that in the past, non-Native American academics have misrepresented Native American practices, either out of ignorance or for their own gain. However, this particular study is also informed by more recent approaches in Native American Religions that trace the variety of ways Native Americans have used religious practices in order to establish their identity in the face of colonialism. These studies include: Anthony F.C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Vintage Press, 1972); Joseph G. Jorgensen, *The Sun Dance Religion: Power for the Powerless* (University of Chicago Press, 1972); Micheline F. Pesantubbee, *Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World: The Clash of Cultures in the Colonial Southeast* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Greg Johnson, *Sacred Claims: Repatriation and Living Tradition* (University of Virgina Press, 2007); Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); and Quincy Newell, *Constructing Lives at Mission San Francisco: Native Californians and Hispanic Colonists, 1776-1821* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009).

\(^{17}\)Bender, *After Pluralism*, 2.
religious pluralism is the act of defining “religion” in order for it to become a marker of difference.

Through contact between Utes and non-Utes during the early twentieth-century, an ideology of religious pluralism emerged in order to help these allies navigate a diverse landscape. After the Utes were removed to a reservation in eastern Utah in 1881, anthropologists, fiction writers, and Utes themselves started to systematize Ute ceremonial practices into a religious system, one that was frequently compared to Christianity. Racism against Native Americans persisted, but the celebration of Native American religions and Ute religion in particular was oriented towards understanding the cultural differences and preserving those differences. While these efforts in the early twentieth century might not directly relate to later manifestations of religious pluralism, the efforts of these anthropologists and fiction writers are the cultural antecedents of later expressions of this ideology.18

In the most recent history of contact between Utes and non-Utes, religious pluralism has been one of the principles of the Smoking River Powwow. By working with the Ute Nation to create this reconciliation Powwow, the United States Forest Service attempted to establish rapport with the members of the tribe so that more Utes would feel comfortable in applying for Forest Service jobs in the region. Through engaging a religious-like practice, the powwow, the Forest Service aimed to increase Ute participation in the local management of public lands.

18For the argument that religious pluralism was not in American until the second half of the twentieth century, see William R. Hutchinson, Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal (Yale University Press, 2003).
While the increased pluralism of religions represented in the United States challenges notions of a “Christian nation,” for some Colorado residents, Native American history stands as the clearest critique of Christian claims to North American dirt, one many Meeker residents seem ready to accept. “I’ve been studying what we did to Native Americans all my life,” Tom Kildiff, the Commander of the Meeker VFW, told the Christian Science Monitor, “and I think it is a damn shame.” Kildiff’s comments reflect the willingness and openness of Meeker residents to confront a colonial past through their regret. The Smoking River Powwow and Meeker’s history provides an opportunity to document and historicize on-going efforts at reconciliation within a North American context, the use of explicitly religious practices within a public space to achieve common ground, and the engagement and transformation of national identity through cultural memories.

In his important study of American religious pluralism, William Hutchinson identified three stages of American religious pluralism: toleration, inclusion, and finally, participation. At first glance, it would appear that the history of contact between Utes and non-Utes has followed this pattern. However, participation in public life in Meeker is still defined by Euro-American expectations of property ownership and Colorado State hunting laws, which limits the Utes’ access to traditional hunting grounds. While the celebration of religious diversity and religious pluralism is at the heart of the Smoking River Powwow, the definitions of Native American religion enacted through the event limit the type of reconciliation that is possible. By tracing these localized encounters over

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a period of one hundred thirty years, this project documents the possibilities as well as limitations of a discourse of religious pluralism in reconciliation between Native Americans and non-Natives.21

Religion and Nature

Finally, this project is in conversation with an emerging field of religion and nature. Numerous studies have traced the variety of ways that people have engaged their natural environment through religious frameworks, starting with Lynn White’s 1967 essay, which essay located the pattern of ecological degradation in medieval Christian ideas of nature.22 Some later studies have evaluated Native American religious engagement with the environment as superior to European modes of engagement.23 Most recently, historians have documented the complex ways that pre-contact Native Americans tended to their environment.24 These historical studies examine the ways in which societies have constructed “nature” as an entity that is set apart from “society” or “civilization.” For example, William Cronon has demonstrated that Euro-Americans have

21This study contributed to a growing body of literature that analyzes the effectiveness of a religious pluralism ideology in order to navigate difference. For the Native American context, see: Michael D. McNally, “Native American Religious Freedom Beyond the First Amendment,” in After Pluralism, 225-251 and Tracy Leavelle, “The Perils of Pluralism,” in After Pluralism, 156-177.


23For the argument that Native American religious practices serve as an antecedent modern, new age spiritual engagement with nature, see Catherine Albanese, Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

relied on ideals of the sublime in order to construct “nature,” ideals that emphasize the profound gap between humanity and nature. Thus, as Cronon stated, we can never reach nature, because once we are there, it is no longer “nature.”

This text builds on Cronon’s approach to historicize how Americans have constructed ideas of nature and the wilderness by paying attention to the ways in which constructions of nature are built alongside ideas of religion. The American West is a particularly interesting site to examine these cultural processes, since the open expanse of land inspired late nineteenth-century social reformers to think about the possibilities of taming social problems by taming the wilderness.

While this story takes place in the American West, the underpinnings of the conflict are not limited by geographical boundaries. The co-constitutive relationship between land use and religious identity moves beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of the nineteenth-century American West to other historic and current conflicts over land, particularly to moments when identities (national, religious, racial, or ethnic) have been deeply connected to specific spaces and modes of living. This study builds on Cronon’s historical approach in documenting a multiplicity of relationships to the land, but it also examines the way in which religious identities shape a society’s engagement with the land.

American religious history scholarship has rightly focused on the role of memory and identity in shaping sacred space in urban spaces, battlefields, and other sites of national interest (such as the National Mall). This study builds on the questions posed

by scholars of these contested sites to examine the way that dirt, and then an abstract idea of “land,” became a contested site for Utes and non-Utes. Moving beyond studies that focus on abstract conceptions of “nature religion” or “ecoreligion,” this dissertation examines the everyday interactions between humans and land, the consequences of those interactions, and the relationship between land use and cultural memories.27

Non-Ute attitudes towards Ute religious practices have transformed over one hundred thirty years. These transitions correlate with shifting attitudes toward the land. For example, before contact with the United States government in the 1850s, Ute Indians had extensive contact with surrounding tribes as well as Spanish explorers. Through this contact, the Utes worked to defend and expand their territory. When the United States government arrived in their territory, the government and its agents worked to transform the Utes into Christian farmers. In this period, Utes and non-Utes thought about land in terms of its material practicality—in other words, land was about the physicality of dirt. Immediately proceeding removal, politicians (Ute and non-Ute) began to think of land in terms of ownership and morality. These questions focused around the morality of men in relationship to their behavior around white women. After removal, anthropologists, fiction writers, and other non-Ute allies, began to systematize Ute religious practices. These descriptions of Ute religious practices centered on an idealized abstraction of land, an abstraction that informs current reconciliation projects in Meeker, Colorado.


27For a model of this type of study, see: Jared Farmer, On Zion’s Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape (Harvard University Press, 2010).
Chapter Outline

This dissertation is organized in four chapters. Chapter one, “Ponies, Plows, and Possibilities,” focuses on the events leading up to the confrontation at the White River Ute Agency in 1879. Focusing on the way that Utes encountered European-style agriculture through the Spanish and then Euro-Americans, this chapter argues that land use was one kind of difference through which nineteenth-century Utes and Euro-Americans constructed religious and racial categories. For both Utes and Euro-Americans, how a society engaged with the land determined its social status; however, while the Utes believed that hunter/gatherer societies were stronger than farming ones, Euro-Americans believed that agriculture was the marker of a civilized people.

Chapter two, “Morality, Gender, and Landownership,” narrates events after the confrontation at the White River Ute Agency in 1879 to the removal of Utes in 1881. During this time, morality became a central factor in determining who rightfully owned western Colorado land. This chapter demonstrates that for nineteenth-century Utes and non-Utes, the treatment of women’s bodies was enmeshed with land ownership and ideas of what constituted a moral, civilized people. By tracing how the reading public came to understand what happened in western Colorado through newspapers and a captivity narrative, this chapter also examines the way popular literature and newspapers influenced political decisions.

28This chapter builds on theoretical work that has demonstrated that gender is shaped by social and cultural forces and is not necessarily linked to sex, or biological differences. Furthermore, this study builds on past work that demonstrates the way in which historians can document the construction of gender throughout historical times and places. See: Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (Columbia University Press, 1999). In Native American history, historians have documented the way in which gender framed colonial contact. See: Theda Perdue, Cherokee Women (University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Nancy Shoemaker, "Introduction,” Negotiators of Change: Perspectives on Native American Women (Routledge, 1995); and Micheline E. Pesantubbee, Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World: The Clash of Cultures in the Colonial Southeast, (University of New Mexico Press, 2005).
In chapter three, “Making Ute Land Religion,” we follow the Utes from Colorado into eastern Utah in order to examine the way that Ute and their non-Ute allies worked together to build an academic and non-academic understanding of Native American religions. Using anthropological reports of Ute ceremonial practices, fiction about Ute Removal, and an opera written about Ute religious practices, this chapter argues that Native American religious practices, which became represented as “land religion,” became the way Euro-Americans “played” at religious pluralism.

Chapter four, “From Ponies to Pageants and Powwows,” returns to Colorado in order to examine how Ute Land Religion has influenced the cultural memories about nineteenth century events. This chapter provides an overview of two sites of cultural memory in present-day Meeker: an annual reenactment of the Meeker Massacre and the Smoking River Powwow. While these two communities have made tremendous strides towards reconciliation, I argue that the particular definition of Native American religion that is in play in this dialogue has contributed to the project’s stagnation.

In conclusion, by tracing contact between Utes and non-Utes between 1879 and 2009, this dissertation argues that land use is one kind of difference upon which Americans have constructed racial, ethnic, and religious identities. Drawing on archival sources as well as fieldwork, this dissertation aims to document the way in which land served as a mediator for both peaceful and violent contact between Native Americans and Euro-Americans.
CHAPTER 2
PONIES, PLOWS, AND POSSIBILITIES: LAND AND RELIGION ON THE COLORADO FRONTIER

Introduction

On a warm fall day in 1881, the United States Cavalry, guns aimed and loaded, marched fourteen hundred Ute men, women, and children out of their Colorado home. The Cavalry had given them two hours to pack what they could carry—everything else was left behind. Among the possessions the Utes were forced to leave was their herd of approximately 1,500 horses, which, according to one oral account, the Cavalry then shot.¹

The horrors of “removal” belied a peaceful history of relations with the United States government; although the nineteenth century had brought numerous challenges, the Utes appeared to be successfully navigating United States expansion. During three delegation visits to Washington D.C., Ute leaders had negotiated and signed treaties that reserved twelve million acres of western Colorado for their use. Less than a decade after the last of the agreements were signed, the treaties were broken. To many Euro-American Coloradoans, “removal”—or to use an anachronistic, but more accurate phrase, ethnic

¹The oral account referred to is Clifford Duncan, “Introduction to First Annual Smoking River Powwow” [speech given at the First Annual Smoking River Powwow, Meeker, CO, July 25, 2008]. The estimate of the size of the herd is taken from Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs (ARCIA), 1879, 125.
cleansing—was the just, moral response to increased contact between the settlers and Utes.²

Given the previous history of peaceful, if coerced, negotiation, how was it that lawmakers and United States citizens in 1881 concluded that the Utes must go, as one Denver newspaper proclaimed?³ Further, why did most Euro-Americans involved in the ethnic cleansing agree that this violation of United States treaties was moral and just? Was it simply greed? Many lawmakers involved in the removal process did not stand to benefit directly from Euro-American settlement. Although potential settlers had heralded western Colorado as an untapped agricultural, pastoral, and mining promised land, initial survey reports dismissed the region as an arid desert, plagued with alkali soil and unsuitable for farming.⁴ While land lust surely infected many would-be pioneers, greed was only one factor in Ute ethnic cleansing. Examined through another set of lenses, Euro-American greed for western Colorado was rooted in land—namely, the proper use of it, and in particular, ponies, plows, and the possibility of social transformation through farming. In the days leading up to Ute ethnic cleansing, nineteenth-century Utes and

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²Others have used the term ethnic cleansing to describe Indian Removal. See Gary Clayton Anderson, The Conquest of Texas: Ethnic Cleansing In the Promised Land, 1820-1875 (University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), 7 and Jace Weaver, “Ethnic Cleansing, Homestyle,” Wicazo Sa Review 10, no. 1 (April 1, 1994): 27-39. For the use of the term in the Ute context, see Peter Decker, The Utes Must Go! (Fulcrum Publishing, 2004),12. For a definition and history of ethnic cleansing, see Andrew Bell-Fialkoff, “A Brief History of Ethnic Cleansing,” Foreign Affairs 72, no. 3 (July 1, 1993), 110. In this chapter, I will refer to the late nineteenth-century immigrants into Colorado as “Euro-Americans.” This population is distinct from the seventeenth century Spanish colonizers; however, as Colorado settlers were from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, “Euro-American” is used to designate American citizens and recent European immigrants to the Colorado territory.

³Denver Daily Times, October 14, 1879.

Euro-Americans constructed religious and racial categories through land use. For the United States government and its agents, the transformation of land use held potential for erasing those differences, but land use also reinforced religious, racial, and ethnic boundaries. For Utes, resistance to farming practices was rooted in long-standing Ute and Spanish ethnic and racial hierarchies related to land use, but for many Euro-Americans, farming fulfilled God’s destiny for America’s soil.

This chapter explores the encounter between these two approaches to land. First, the chapter provides overviews of the anthropological research on pre-contact Ute life, of Ute life after Spanish occupation, and of nineteenth-century contact with the United States government, with a focus on the White River Ute Agency. It then describes Nathan Meeker’s life before he arrived at the White River Ute Agency. The chapter concludes with a narrative of the confrontation at the Agency.

Pre-contact Great Basin

Historically, the Utes occupied the eastern portion of an area geologists, anthropologists, and archaeologists call “the Great Basin,” a region encompassing the desert region of southern California, Nevada, Utah, eastern Oregon, southern Idaho, western Colorado, and western Wyoming. The 130,000 square miles of land supported a range of resources for Utes and their ancestors’ survival. The land also inspired Ute creation narratives and ceremonial practices, particularly the annual Bear Dance. Remnants of religious and political conflicts dot the landscape, even as the human memory of them has faded. Geologically, the Great Basin is a high plateau, situated, at varying points, between 4,000 and 5,000 ft above sea level. The surrounding mountain ranges cause its distinctive aquatic feature: rivers and lakes in the region do not drain into
an ocean, but instead into the Great Salt Lake, a trace of an ancient inland sea, whose
shores expanded and receded over thousands of years. Ecologists recognize the Great
Basin as a distinctive bio-geographic region because of its aquatic features and the high
desert environment, but do not consider western Colorado to be part of the environmental
region. Anthropologists, however, include western Colorado in the Great Basin cultural
region, as the Native American groups who lived in western Colorado were kin to the
Great Basin groups.⁵

Geopolitical change alongside environmental changes marked the history of the
cultural Great Basin region. Archeological evidence suggests that the Great Basin has
supported human life for at least 13,000 years. During the Paleo-Indian period, the first
inhabitants lived in a landscape that would have been deeply unfamiliar to Utes in the
fifteenth century CE. Bonneville Flats, a modern day bed of salt where annual
experimental vehicle speed trials are held, was once a massive lake whose waters receded
and rose as the global climate fluctuated. Lake levels dictated migration and foraging
patterns. The Paleo-Indian Great Basin diet included the mammoth and other fauna that
have since disappeared. During the Archaic period, 9,000-2,000 years ago, new food
processing technologies, such as the milling stone and coiled basketry, indicated that
Great Basin peoples had increased their food storage abilities. Although the people in this

era remained foragers, the newly developed food storage techniques would have led groups to maintain a smaller territory than during the Paleo-Indian era.\(^6\)

About 2,000 years ago, farming displaced the hunter/gatherer cultures. Archaeologists attribute this shift to the arrival of the Fremont culture, agricultural immigrants to the Great Basin region from the Southwest. For nearly one thousand years, the Fremont culture dominated the Great Basin with the agricultural production of maize, beans, and squash.\(^7\) Although the immigration must have disrupted Great Basin life, the archaeological record suggests that foraging societies may have adopted the immigrants’ farming techniques. Around 1400 CE, the Fremont culture began significant decline—one so notable that anthropologists suggest a lack of continuity between the farming culture and groups that followed it. The reasons for the Fremont’s disappearance remain a mystery among Great Basin archaeologists; the “Numic Spread” theory argues that another migration displaced them. Using linguistic analysis techniques, Alfred L. Kroeber suggested that the language relationships among the Paiute, Shoshone, and the Ute pointed to a common origin, which he dated to about 1,000 years ago. He argued that the migration of the nomadic Numic-speaking people from the south displaced the agrarian-based Fremont people. Later scholars have hypothesized that the disappearance of the Fremont and the rise in Numic-speaking peoples resulted from either the climate change brought by the Little Ice Age or intermarriage between the Numic speakers and

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the Fremont.\textsuperscript{8} Despite unanswered questions, the archaeological record suggests that Great Basin history is characterized by frequent cultural changes.

Rock art might record the religious significance of the prehistoric cultural shifts in the Great Basin. Archeological evidence for religious practices from the pre-contact era is scarce; however, through rock art analysis, some scholars have attempted to make the rock art speak to ritual practices, with limited and controversial success.\textsuperscript{9} A large proportion of Paleo-Indian Great Basin rock art from this era relates to big game hunting, an activity that archaeologists have suggested represented a fusion of social, economic, and religious significances, though some scholars have suggested that these interpretations may be drawing big conclusions from what could be graffiti.\textsuperscript{10} Other scholars argue, however, that Great Basin rock art might reveal ancient upheavals and displacement from the land through ritualized vandalism. For instance, archeologists Robert L. Bettinger and Martin A. Baumhoff have compared pre-Numic rock art to Numic rock art and suggested that because the Numic group did not rely on big game, they did not use rock art as in pre-hunting ceremonies. In fact, they propose that the Numic groups defaced the rock art in order to counter the pre-Numic ceremonial hunting


\textsuperscript{10}Simms, 173. For critiques of religious interpretations of rock art, see: Angus Quinlan, “Rock Art as an Artifact of Religion and Ritual: The Archaeological Construction of Rock Art’s Past and Present Social Contexts” in \textit{Great Basin Rock Art}. 

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power. If this theory is correct, it suggests that meticulous erasure of ceremonial artifacts in order to claim land is a Great Basin tradition, one that foreshadows nineteenth-century conflicts. The cultural shifts and the evidence inscribed in rocks indicate that violence, immigration, and conflicts over resource collection define Great Basin history.

Like the disappearance of the Fremont peoples, Great Basin scholars have argued about the processes through which the Utes became a distinct tribe and came to occupy the region. Linguistically, the Utes speak a Uto-Aztecan language, one that most likely originated in Mexico. As noted earlier, most scholars suggest that the Utes were descended from the hypothetical Numic-speaking people, but others have proposed that the Utes are the progeny of intermarriages between the Fremont and Numic peoples. Despite uncertainty in origins, most scholars agree that by 1400 CE, the Utes had developed the cultural patterns that would have been recognizable to seventeenth-century Spanish colonizers.

To many Utes, however, the Great Basin has been their home forever, and their creation narratives reflect this. What follows is my paraphrase of a Ute creation narrative, recorded in 1983.

Long ago, the creation story states, Sinawav and Coyote roamed the earth together alone, since no one else was on the land yet. One day, Sinawav asked Coyote to cut a variety of brush into small pieces and to place them in a bag. Coyote walked all over the hills, collecting samples of all brush in the region. Once the bag once full and Coyote had returned to Sinawav, Sinawav asked Coyote to go across the land and to dump the sticks in a specific place. But Coyote’s curiosity grabbed him, and he opened the bag prematurely. Once he

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undid the knot, all kinds of people rushed out, speaking all different languages. Coyote, desperate to fix his mistake, rushed after the people. He caught a few of them and tied them back into the bag, but the majority of the people escaped. When he returned home, Sinawav knew what had happened. Sinawav instructed Coyote to make arrows to prepare for war, because all the people would be fighting him soon. The Comanches were particularly fierce warriors. However, the Indians who were last in the bag, the Utes, were the strongest fighters, despite having fewer people.13

Like the archeological evidence, the creation narrative is limited in revealing the specifics of how Utes came to the Great Basin region, but it depicts the harsh reality of life in a politically tense region. While many groups traded peacefully with each other, the diversity of peoples, limited resources, and the resulting violence between these peoples defined life in the Great Basin region.

Within these restrictions of the high, arid desert region and simmering geopolitical tensions, the Utes still maintained their lives through nomadic patterns of resource collection. Great Basin Indians created a thriving cultural system in spite of (and sometimes because of) the environment. Before Spanish colonization, Utes and surrounding Native American groups enjoyed a varied diet, eating over 150 kinds of vegetables and dozens of meats. Daily life was structured around the collection of these food sources by “mapping onto the land,” meaning that hunter/gatherer groups moved through the environment to collect resources—moving encampments to resources rather than moving resources to encampments. Groups would travel through the environment with purpose, migrating according to the season and availability of foods. Land and resource ownership was determined generationally and by resource. For instance, a

family group that traveled to a site in the spring to collect berries for several generations had a “claim” for those berries; thus, other families would not gather berries from that location. A different family group, however, could hunt rabbits in the fall at the same site, and the berry-collecting family would need permission to hunt rabbits at that location. Because ownership of the land was dependent on generational history and the seasonal resources collected, Utes parcelled the land according to time as well as space. Additionally, gender roles were tied to resource collection. Men would hunt while women would gather and practice small-scale farming (although during big harvests and hunts, everyone would work together). Thus, gender roles were linked to interactions with the land. While men and women would assist each other in their responsibilities, gathering was women’s work. With the arrival of the Spanish and then the Americans, this pattern of “mapping onto the land” was adjusted, but not abandoned, as the Utes added European and American settlements to their annual migrations.\(^\text{14}\)

Religious activities centered on these patterns of resource collection, and through religious gatherings, groups forged a tribal identity.\(^\text{15}\) For most of the year, smaller family groups would have lived and traveled together, except for during times of labor intensive resource gathering and the annual Bear Dance, also called \textit{mammaqunikap}, or the Forward-Backward Dance. This nearly weeklong ceremony marked the end of winter and the beginning of spring harvesting and hunting. Family groups converged to celebrate the end of winter and urge the bears to come out of hibernation, using rasps and resonators to

\(^{14}\text{Simms, chapter 3, 105-140 and Donald Callaway, }\text{“Ute,” Handbook of North American Indians, 340-341.}\)

\(^{15}\text{I use the term “religion” with a caveat. Utes, like most pre-contact Native Americans, would not have distinguished religious activities from economic or survival activities. Rather, these activities might be more properly described as “ceremonial.” In chapter 3, I describe the way early twentieth-century anthropologists distinguished between religious and non-religious Ute dances. In pre-contact times, these distinctions are not useful.}\)
mimic the sounds of thunder. For the Utes, the Bear was both dangerous and protective—the animal was strong enough to kill humans, but also helped them to collect meat and berries and protected them from getting sick. The ceremony occurred when a shaman dreamed a new bear song (as new songs were used every year). Through the Bear Dance, single men and women gathered to meet each other and form new marital alliances, which crossed bands but served to unite the Utes as a distinctive tribal group.16

Spanish Contact and Captive Trade

These annual patterns of resource gathering and religious meetings happened in the midst of geo-political tensions alluded to earlier—initially with surrounding Native American tribes, later, after Euro-American contact, with the Spanish, the Mexican government, and finally the United States government. Although the southwest and intermountain Native American groups experienced multiple cultural shifts, by the time of United States expansion into the Great Basin region, Utes were sandwiched between competing political powers. To the southwest, Utes competed and traded resources with their linguistic kin, the Paiute, and to the northwest, with the Shoshone. To the south, the Navajo, Pueblo, and Hopi agricultural cultures traded with the Ute hunter/gatherers. The Rocky Mountains to the east of Ute territory provided a formidable barrier to early Euro-American explorers, but was only a mild deterrent to the Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Sioux Plains Indians, as Cheyenne and Arapaho raiders frequently targeted Ute camps in search of resources. Before the arrival of the Spanish, Native American hunting groups frequently raided agricultural societies for food, supplies, and humans as part of a wider

captivity economy, where tribes enslaved or adopted captives. As in the Ute creation
myth, violence often characterized interactions among groups. Great Basin and
Southwest Native Americans aligned status and power to modes of resource collection.
The stronger hunting societies used the weaker, sedentary societies as a steady supply of
food and labor. When agricultural societies refused to trade, the hunting societies took
what they needed or desired with force. Contrary to industrialized societies’ perception of
hunting/gathering cultures as weak, pre-contact Utes would have imagined themselves as
strong, powerful people. The agricultural societies that fell victim to Ute raids would
have agreed.17

By the time the United States began to lay claim to the interior of the North
American continent, the Great Basin region had experienced several geo-political
upheavals; the most recent had been the political pressure cooker of Spanish colonization,
which restructured long-standing trade relationships among Great Basin Native
Americans and influenced Ute perception of land use. The Spanish, as the first Euro-
American explorers and colonizers of the American West, contributed to and exploited
Native American power struggles. Seeking fabled golden cities and aiming to establish
colonies to fund war chests to survive in an increasingly hostile Europe, the resources of
the land (mineral, agricultural, and human) must have seemed abundant and ripe for the
taking. Although the Spanish settled in New Mexico, the impact of Spanish colonization
traveled across long established trading networks into the Great Basin. The accidents of
geography protected the Utes from the initial Spanish colonial storm, although the ripples
of colonization made an impact on social structures, particularly through the introduction

17Simmons, The Ute Indians, 29-46. For an overview of pre-Spanish political dynamics, see chapter one of
Ned Blackhawk, Violence over the Land, and James Brooks, Captives and Cousins, chapter one.
of the horse and the intensification of the captivity economy. Both the horse and the
captivity trade modified (but did not radically change) the way Utes interacted with their
environment, transforming social hierarchies and strengthening certain assumptions about
land use and the relationship among neighbors.\(^{18}\)

Spanish colonizers exploited the existing captivity practices and constructed a
wider slave trade from this social system.\(^{19}\) Scholars have argued that the captivity
economy was related to religious practices; they have pointed to Pawnee Morning Star
rituals, where a captive girl would be sacrificed in a reenactment of a creation narrative.\(^{20}\)
In addition to fulfilling ceremonial purposes, pre-colonial captivity economies would
have most likely been part of a variety of social functions to maintain balance between
tribes, such as a means to even out war casualties, or as a means to achieve balance with
otherworldly forces. In Southwest Native American societies, women were the primary
victims of captivity raids, and more likely than male captives to be adopted into the
captor’s tribe as wives, mothers, and sisters.\(^{21}\) It may be overly presumptuous to assume
that Utes, simply by proximity to the Southwest cultures, also participated in similar

\(^{18}\)For a rich description of the religious impact of Spanish colonization on agrarian cultures, see Ramon
Gutierrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New
Mexico, 1500-1846* (Stanford University Press, 1991). For a discussion on the influence of the horse on Ute
society, see Stephan P. Van Hauk, “Waccara’s Utes: Native American Equestrian Adaptations in the

\(^{19}\)The best sources available on the Southwest captivity economies are Brooks, *Captives and Cousins*, Ned
Blackhawk, *Violence Over the Land*, and Pekka Hamalainen, *Comanche Empire* (Yale University Press,
2009). See also: Carling Malouf and A. Arline Malouf, “The Effects of Spanish Slavery on the Indians of

\(^{20}\)Mark van de Logt, “Brides of Morning Star, The Petalesharo Legend and the Skiri Pawnee Rite of
Human Sacrifice in American Popular Fiction,” in *The Challenges of Native American Studies*, edited by
Barbara Saunders and Lea Zuyderhoudt (Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2004), 207-210; Robert L. Hall,
*An Archaeology of the Soul: North American Indian Belief and Ritual* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,
1997), 86-94.

\(^{21}\)Brooks, *Captives and Cousins*, 26-34.
practices before the arrival of Europeans. However, whatever role the Utes had in the captivity economy before the Spanish, they became part of the Spanish exploitation of the slave trade in the colonial era, both as victims of it and participants in it.²²

The Spanish Native American slave trade stretched from the North American continent and provided labor for Spanish colonial enterprises in the southwest as well as the southeast. In addition to population decimation through disease, the slave trade wreaked havoc on entire communities, forcing remnants of vanished tribes to reorganize into new bands, nations, and tribes.²³ Spanish northward expansion from colonial mines in modern-day Mexico into the present-day American Southwest led to the enslavement of agriculturally-based Native Americans, such as the Navajo, Pueblo, and Hopi. Exploiting ancient rivalries among the raiding, semi-nomadic tribes and the settled, agricultural groups, the Spanish expanded the slaving network across existing trade routes. Although geographically isolated, the Utes and their linguistic cousins, the Paiutes, were frequent victims of the Spanish slave trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As a result, many Utes were forced into slave labor on Spanish haciendas. Through forced farming labor, some Utes intensified and transformed their perception of agricultural practices; agricultural labor became emblematic of servitude.

²²Brooks, Captives and Cousins, 248 and Blackhawk, Violence Over the Land, 55-87. For a brief overview of the effect of Spanish slavery on the region, see: Carling Malouf, and A. Arline Malouf: 378-391.

²³This is particularly true in the Southeast. For more information, see: Eric Browne, The Westo Indians: Slave Traders of the Early Colonial South (University of Alabama Press, 2005) and Allan Gallay, The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the South, 1670-1717 (Yale University Press, 2002).
Through the Spanish captivity economy, several generations of Utes experienced farm work as slavery.\textsuperscript{24}

Ute acquisition of the horse changed these political relationships. By the mid-nineteenth century, owing to weakened Spanish colonial rule, increased Ute horse herds, and the relative isolation of the Utes’ home in the Rocky Mountains, the Utes had successfully claimed the region as their own. Horses gave Utes the means to dominate both the land and those who worked the land.\textsuperscript{25} The horse heightened distaste for farm labor and provided the means to escape it. Instead of captives, they became captors by raiding neighboring Paiute and Shoshone tribes. The victims of the Utes’ increased regional dominance became the farm labor for the Spanish and the Mexicans after independence.\textsuperscript{26}

Once again, farmers (such as the Paiutes) were at the mercy of the hunter/gatherers (such as the Utes). Mounted nomadic groups raided defenseless agricultural settlements; the farmers could not seek retribution because the raiders disappeared into the landscape. Ponies allowed the Utes to gain power over agricultural societies. Thus, the ponies expanded the Ute Empire and allowed Utes to overcome the weakness associated with farming labor. For example, in the 1850s, a Utah Ute band successfully raided \textit{ranchos} in southern California, herding over three thousand horses.

\textsuperscript{24}For more information see: L.R. Bailey, \textit{Indian Slave Trade in the Southwest} (Los Angeles, Westernlore Press, 1966), Chapter 1; Ned Blackhawk, \textit{Violence over the Land}, 55-87; and James Brooks, \textit{Captives and Cousins}, 248.


\textsuperscript{26}Blackhawk, \textit{Violence Over the Land}, 88-118.
from Southern California into Utah territory. Through the expanded raiding culture, horses came to represent Ute warrior masculinity—the more horses a Ute owned, the more likely it was that he had participated in successful warfare. In addition to expanding the raiding culture, Ute men spent time training their horses for racing; in the nineteenth century, these horse races became a source of positive cultural exchange between Utes and Euro-Americans, to the chagrin of missionaries. For the Utes, increased access to horses increased their ability to provide for the tribe as well as to protect the tribe from becoming farm laborers.

Not all Utes participated whole-heartedly in the horse culture. By mid-nineteenth century, some Utes lived what United States Indian agents would identify as an assimilated lifestyle as farmers, most notable was the U.S. government-recognized chief of the Utes, Ouray. Although he lived over one hundred miles away from the White River Ute Agency, he served as a model for the possibility of agricultural transformation, but also as an example of a Ute who did not participate in the horse culture. However, Ouray’s 500-acre farm resembled a Spanish rancho more than the Anglo ideal of a single farmer working his own land. Ouray had grown up in or near a Spanish rancho, so it is possible that he modeled his farm after the ranchos of his youth. Like other owners of large farms, Ouray rarely, if ever, performed farm work—instead, he hired Mexican, Native American, and Euro-American laborers to plow, plant, and harvest. While his practices were similar to those followed on large Euro-American farms in the nineteenth century, Ouray’s approach to farming was probably influenced more by his tribe’s

27 For more information about Ute horse raids, see: Paul Dayton Bailey, Walkara, Hawk of the Mountain (Westernlore Press, 1954).

28 Red Buck, United States Work Projects Administration Collection, WH427, Western History Collection, The Denver Public Library.
notions of status as well as by the Spanish land grant system, in which “inferior” races were enslaved or paid nominally to perform the labor while the landowners reaped the fruits of their labor.²⁹

Throughout encounters with the Spanish, Utes’ s relationship to the land remained gendered, imbued with status, and increasingly, racialized. Although women owned horses and participated in big game hunting, they remained the primary gatherers. Men assisted the women with large gathering projects, just as women assisted with hunts; however, most labor was divided by gender, and while women’s labor was valued in Ute society, crossing gender boundaries was taboo. Thus, working with dirt fell within the domain of women and could diminish a Ute man’s warrior status. The horse enhanced the warrior role of Ute men because it granted greater access to buffalo hunting and raids on agricultural settlements. The patterns of “mapping onto the land” remained as horse herds increased the territory Utes could roam. In the eyes of Ute men, agricultural work (that was distinguished from the gathering the Ute women performed) was the domain of weaker, vulnerable peoples, such as slaves and non-equestrian peoples. The horse gave Ute men the means to escape from agricultural slavery and a means to emphasize the masculine warrior culture.³⁰

In addition to being racialized and gendered, land also could be lost. Within the tight confines of early nineteenth-century Great Basin geo-politics, Utes carefully monitored their borders against intrusions by Plains Native Americans to the east and


Comanches to the South. Archaeologists have found stone barricades in mountain passes on the border between the Rocky Mountains and the Plains. This suggests that Utes actively policed their borders, with a clear acknowledgment that their area was vulnerable to invasion. It also indicates that pre-contact Utes maintained a complex relationship to the land, one that was informed by politics, social relationships, and ceremonial practices.31

Contact with the United States

Although the Mexican-American War, fur trapping, and Mormon settlement in Utah brought United States citizens closer to Ute territory, throughout the early nineteenth century the Utes remained on the periphery of United States colonial expansion. The Rocky Mountains were a formidable barrier; wagon trails cut across the Rockies to the north and south of the Ute territory, so Ute contact with Euro-Americans would have been limited. However, in 1858, Ute isolation from Euro-American westward expansion came to an abrupt end with the discovery of gold near present-day Denver. Prospectors descended on the plains of the Rocky Mountains and Denver became a bustling city overnight.32 On the heels of the prospectors came “civilizing” forces, notably Catholic and Methodist churches.33 In 1861, William Gilpin was appointed as the territorial governor and the de facto Superintendent of Indian Affairs, assigned to the Ute Agency in Conejos, located about 220 miles south of Denver, near present-day Pueblo.

31Simmons, The Utes of Colorado, 62 and Blackhawk, Violence over the Land, 180.

32For more information about the settling of Denver, see: Gunter Barth, Instant Cities: Urbanization and the Rise of San Francisco and Denver (Oxford University Press, 1975).

33For an overview of the role of churches in settling Colorado, see: Alice Cowan Cochran, Miners, Merchants and Missionaries: The Roles of Missionaries and Pioneer Churches in the Colorado Gold Rush and Aftermath, 1858-1870 (Scarecrow Press, 1980).
The *de facto* position carried with it the national debates about Indian removal and potential for assimilation, as governors vacillated between the two “solutions” to the “Indian Problem.” As Utes were pulled into these national debates, they worked to achieve balance between their now “traditional” lifestyle, unstable political relationships with the Plains Indians, and the increasingly changing modern world.

Between 1858 and 1864, relations among Euro-American migrants, the Plains Native Americans and the Utes were tense. The arrival of nearly six thousand Euro-American settlers contributed to the already unstable relations among the Plains Indians and the Utes. These Euro-American frontiersmen and women also presented new competition for food sources as bison, antelope, and deer rapidly disappeared and became valuable commodities. Added competition forced Plains Indians to expand their hunting territory, encroaching on traditional Ute hunting grounds. Neighboring Ute camp stores, as well as Euro-American settlements became additional food sources and Native American raids, captivities, and skirmishes attracted settlers’ attention and concern. For example, on July 24, 1862, the *Rocky Mountain News* reported a skirmish between the Arapaho and Ute in Middle Park, a high basin on the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains, and on the border between Arapaho and Ute territories. According to the newspaper, Arapahos allied with the Sioux in order to raid a Ute camp, successfully capturing thirty-five horses. Although the fight did not directly engage Euro-American settlements, the article concluded with an admonishment of the fight: “If our red neighbors must fight, we insist upon their getting from under the protection of the whites to do it. The Arapahoes [sic] left their women and children here [in Denver], to go upon this foray against the Utes, and as soon as the fight was over they returned here to avoid
pursuit.” William Byers, the editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*, was concerned with this practice because he feared it would give the Utes the impression that the immigrants were allied with the Utes’ enemy.

The Native American captivity economies troubled Colorado territory officials. Concern stemmed from the national debate on Southern slavery, but also extended to the newly added Mexican territory. In the Colorado Territory, this concern played out on the individual level. The United States Cavalry along with Simeon Whitely, the first official Colorado Bureau of Indian Affairs agent, attempted to halt the captivity economies of the Cheyennes, Arapahos, and the Utes. In his 1863 Annual Report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Whitely reported that he had traveled through “Indian Country” with an Indian girl:

who had, three years before, been captured by the Cheyennes from the bands to whom I was sent [the Utes]. She had been sold to the Arapahoes, and was about to be burned at the stake when rescued by Lieutenant Harding, commandant at Camp Collins.34

The captivity practices of the Plains Indians are understudied and it is difficult to know whether this woman’s risk of immolation would have been plausible. This might have been a hyperbolic report based on popular knowledge of the seventeenth-century Great Lakes Huron and Montagnais practice of burning captives alive, or of the Pawnee Morning Star fertility ritual.35 This incident, if accurately reported by Whitely, could also point to an unknown Arapaho practice similar to the Morning Star practice, where a captive teenage girl would be sacrificed in a repetition of the rape and murder of Morning Star.

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34ARCIA 1863, 132.

Star by Evening Star.\textsuperscript{36} However, this incident does provide evidence of ongoing captivity economies among the Ute, Cheyenne, and Arapaho, as well as the beginning of U.S. official involvement in this captivity economy through attempts to halt it and restore the captives to their original families.

Reports of this incident also reveal the pressures the Utes experienced when Euro-American settlers descended on the Rocky Mountain Plains. When Whitely could not locate the girl’s tribe, he sent his translator, Uriah Curtis, a man who had earned his governmental position because of his fluency in Ute, with the girl into Ute territory. Whitely reported Curtis found the Ute encampment about twenty-five miles from the Spanish Fork agency in Utah. They had gone to Spanish Fork “to trade and visit their friends, who obtain presents at the agency.” The tribe’s reception of Curtis was warm. Whitely reports:

He [Curtis] was received with all the honors peculiar to the people. He had been acquainted with them from years before, and from them had learned their language. . . .As evidence of their friendship, one of the chiefs sent his son to thank me for the return of the captive girl.\textsuperscript{37}

However, despite the warmth towards Curtis, he noted that the tribe’s numbers had diminished. Whitely reported, via Curtis, “Chiefs who had led hundreds of warriors now do not have as many as a dozens. Disease has almost destroyed them.” The desperation at locating food and overcoming illness had led some to “express a desire to plant.” Whitely reported, “One has a small herd of cow, and Mr. Curtis [said] that if a means were devised to keep them from the influence of Mormons, but little difficulty would be experienced with them, and a large majority would adopt the habits and customs of the

\textsuperscript{36}Mark van de Logt, 207-210.

\textsuperscript{37}ARCIA 1863, 133.
Whitely’s fear of the negative influence of Mormons on Native Americans reflected a wider belief among some Americans that Mormons were attempting to enlist Native Americans in a war against the United States. However, what is significant about this report is the Utes’ drastic shift from rejecting farming to considering it; this underscores the desperation Utes must have experienced.

Although the Indian agent reported on the diminished population of the Utes due to the effects of United States expansion, to the Euro-American settlers the surrounding Native Americans inspired both fear and pride. The tension between Euro-American settlements and the Native American wilderness provided a rich source of local pride and editorial reflection. On November 15, 1860, the Mountaineer’s editor described Denver as follows:

At the base of the Rocky Mountains, in an un-surveyed, and almost unexplored wilderness seven hundred miles from the civilized world, and with no railroad or water communication, depending for her supplies upon the slow moving ‘prairie schooner,’ and surrounded by savage Indians, Denver today stands in no mean comparison with many more favored towns in the East.

Early Euro-American settler mapping of the new city was based on contradictions: imagining themselves to be in the middle of unexplored wilderness, they thought that their city still rivaled cosmopolitan cities of the Northeast. For early Denver settlers, the city was perfectly perched on the fine dividing line between civilization and wilderness. The reported fighting between the Utes and Plains Indians only contributed to the mapping of Denver as a spot of civilization within wilderness, surrounded by savage Indians.

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38 ARCIA 1863, 133.
Of course, Denver settlers were not perched upon unexplored wilderness. Prospectors and politicians founded Denver and other mining towns and camps on top of existing Native American settlements. These “new” towns bordered not wilderness, but established and fully explored hunting grounds. For the Utes, gold brought increased resource competition, new raiding sites, and United States bureaucratic scrutiny of their captivity economy. The Rocky Mountains, which had previously provided Utes with an effective barrier against Euro-American intruders, became a challenging engineering problem for Euro-Americans rather than a blockade. Entrepreneurs looked beyond riches in the dirt and saw promise in tourism. In the same year Gilpin was appointed governor, William Byers eyed a hot springs about ninety miles west of Denver as a potential tourist destination. Byers’ dream eventually became Hot Sulfur Springs, Colorado, but it also displaced Utes from a favorite campsite. In the same year, E.L. Berthoud surveyed a pass that would bear his name through Middle Park, the site where Arapaho and Utes had skirmished as the Utes defended their territory. Ute response to these intrusions was hostile, and when construction on the road began, they attempted to block it.39

In the first three years of increased U.S. settlement, Coloradoans formulated the localized manifestation of the national “Indian Question,” with an increased push for removing Denver’s surrounding Native American population. In 1862, John Evans replaced Gilpin as territorial governor and advocated for a reservation for Colorado Indians—as a means to contain the Indian savagery in an increasingly civilized world. In 1863, Hiram P. Bennet, Colorado’s Congressional delegate, also championed a reservation solution. Utes were involved in these early deliberations; in 1863, thirteen

39Simmons, The Ute Indians, 114-115.
Colorado Utes traveled to Washington D.C to meet with Abraham Lincoln. This party included the aforementioned Ouray as well as another prominent Ute leader, Shavano. Tour guides led the Utes around battleship yards and military encampments. In the midst of the Civil War, the military prowess impressed the Ute leaders. While many Ute leaders believed that war with the United States was the only means to defend their homeland, Ouray decided that the only way to protect Ute territory was to negotiate, not fight. Ouray’s excursion to D.C. generated a substantial break between Utes willing to adjust to Euro-American expectations and those that were not.40

This initial Washington trip resulted in a treaty that was not ratified by Congress, a fact that perplexed Ute leaders. The treaty preliminarily established a reservation that used the Rocky Mountains as the boundary between the Colorado Territory and the Ute reservation. It also allowed the government to build roads through the reservation, but the government was obliged to provide farming implements and livestock. Later that year, after the delegation had returned from Washington, Governor Evans arranged for a council at Conejos to negotiate a permanent treaty with the Utes. Euro-Americans attending the meeting included: Governor Evans; the New Mexico superintendent of Indian Affairs, Michael Steck; Lincoln’s secretary, John Nicolay; and Colorado Indian Agents Head and Whitely. Many Utes did not attend, but the Tabaguache Utes, led by Ouray, attended in high numbers.41 The disparity in representation created long-lasting

40Blackhawk, Violence Over the Land, 216.

41Before contact with the United States’ BIA agency system, Utes organized into small bands that would live together and collect resources as a group. The small bands would convene on an annual basis during the Bear Dance, but these bands were not a significant source of difference. Additionally, leadership was fluid and changed frequently. The BIA formalized difference based on the territory these bands spent most of their time. There were two agencies during the 1860s: the White River Ute Agency and the Los Pinos agency. The Tabeguache Utes reported to the Los Pinos Agency, where Ouray was the governmentally
rifts among Ute bands, as the unrepresented did not recognize the terms of the treaty. This treaty matched the Washington negotiations: the Utes gave up all Ute lands east of the Continental Divide, including the contested Middle Park. In exchange for the lands, the Utes (meaning the Utes located at the Los Pinos and White River Agencies) would receive $10,000 in goods and $10,000 in provisions annually for ten years. They would also receive five American stallions, 150 head of cattle, and 1000 sheep annually for five years, a blacksmith, and farm equipment.

In 1864, shortly after the Conejos treaty set aside Western Colorado for the Utes, Denver residents voiced more anxiety about the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, but at the same time acknowledged that their encounters with the Ute had been friendly. Governor Evans, acting as Indian Superintendent, characterized relations in the following way:

The Tabeguaches have manifested the strongest feelings of friendship towards the white man, although the conduct of neighboring tribes has been anything but exemplary to them; for whilst the rascally Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and Sioux Indians are daily violating their treaty stipulations with the United States by their aggressive conduct and thieving habits on the eastern side of the mountains, and the warlike Navajos on the southwest, the Ute Indians remain at home, quiet and inoffensive.

As the game diminished on the plains, the “rascally” Plains Indians looked to Euro-American settlements to supply their food. White settlers began to feel terrorized, unsure of their safety in their homes and apprehensive about their geographical isolation. Settlers recognized chief of all the Utes, although because of their traditional pattern of governance, this would not have been a title that nineteenth-century Utes would have recognized. For further discussion of Ute band divisions, see: Simmons, The Ute Indians. For a discussion of Ute patterns of governance, see: Forrest Cuch, “Cultural Perspectives on Indian Education: A comparative Analysis of the Ute and Anglo Cultures,” Equity & Excellence 23, no. 1-2 (1987): 65-76.

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42 Simmons, The Ute Indians, 117.

43 Treaty with the Tabeguache Band of Utah Indians, HR 790, 37th Congress, 3rd sess., Congressional Record [December 15, 1863].

44 ARCIA, 1864, 384.
became fearful of the possibility that Native Americans would disrupt the overland mail system, which would not only cut off the Colorado Territory from the Union, but would sever lines of communication between the Union and California. One year before the end of the Civil War, these lines of communication were integral to national security. The 1864 Annual Report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs suggested that the fear of the Plains Native Americans was so great that ranchers were abandoning their property to the Native Americans. Governor Evans, in his report, attributed the Plains Native Americans’ uprising to the dwindling food supply and Euro-American encroachment on Native American land, but still expressed astonishment that the Native Americans would fight back.45

This climate of fear set the stage for the Sand Creek Massacre, an incident that terrorized and traumatized the Cheyenne and Arapaho so deeply that many voluntarily moved to reservations in the Dakotas and Oklahoma. Colonel John Chivington, a Union soldier and Methodist minister famous for his colorful anti-slavery sermons delivered with a pistol on the pulpit, instigated this incident. In December 1864, Chivington, along with a locally based militia, rode into a camp of Plains Indians who were peacefully flying an American flag. Chivington and his men killed over one hundred Native Americans. They scalped many of their victims and displayed the mutilated bodies in the streets of Denver. The Denver settlers had made it clear to the surviving Native Americans that they were no longer welcome.46

45 ARCIA 1864, 384.

46 For an overview of the history of the Sand Creek Massacre, see: Stan Hoig, The Sand Creek Massacre (University of Oklahoma Press, 1961); Jerome Green, Finding Sand Creek: History, Archaeology and the 1864 Massacre (University of Oklahoma Press, 2004); and Lindsay Regan Calhoun, Remembering Sand
In the aftermath of the massacre, Colorado Euro-Americans widely justified the brutal act. A month after the attack, *Daily Mining Journal*, the newspaper in Blackhawk, Colorado, claimed that “On the question of killing these miserable, cruel, fiends of hell who murder and mutilate our women and children, who steal our stock, burn our houses and destroy us by cutting off our communication with the States, the people of Colorado, men, women and children, are united as one.” This was because “the Sand Creek Indians were guilty of all the above.” According to this reading of the situation, war between whites and Indians was the norm: “Since the very earliest days there never has been an Indian who was friendly to whites.” In fact, the notion of a peaceful relationship was “absurd,” because “the only friendly relations we have ever been able to maintain with them were purchased most dearly by the blood of those we love best or by gold.” Coloradoans dealt with the problem directly. “Our troops went after them as they were expected to, surprised, and gave them a most righteous and deserved chastisement—a terrible and fearful one. Perhaps it was wrong in the sight of Heaven, but we can only see with the eyes of earth. And looking with earthly, practical eyes, we see nothing to condemn but everything to approve.”

While the Plains Indians remained near Denver until about 1872, they avoided Euro-American settlements. In the aftermath of the Sand Creek Massacre, the Utes worked to adjust to new political relations and to prove wrong Colorado citizens’ expectations for white/Indian relations. With the Plains Indians substantially weakened, Utes no longer had to protect their eastern borders against raiders; their new threat was an


47 *Daily Mining Journal*, January 5, 1865.
expanding United States. However, despite the northern bands’ mistrust of Ouray’s treaty negotiations, many Utes began to adopt Euro-American practices, such as clothing and keeping livestock, while they increased their horse herds through raids and breeding. Indian Agent Oakes recommended that the government work within Ute resource collection patterns to encourage the Utes to develop their pastoral skills. He argued that by encouraging husbandry practices, governmental officials would be more successful because the Utes would not be required to end their migratory lifestyle.48

In the late 1860s, despite gestures towards peaceful relations, the lack of wild game troubled Colorado politicians. In his 1868 report, Governor Alexander Cameron Hunt noted that the “state of the Utes is poor.” He reported that they did not understand why the provisions of the 1863 treaty had not been met and the governor was at a loss as to how to explain to them that Congress did not ratify the treaty. Like Agent Oakes, the governor noted the Ute potential to assimilate through pastoral activities, though he also mentioned that they “could be good farmers, as there are small valleys in their reservation that could be irrigated.” But he cautioned that the lack of fulfillment of these desires could result in war:

Hunger closes every avenue for the reception of reason to the mind of any men educated or ignorant, and . . . this has grown to be the normal condition of these Utes as well as the portion of the Arapahos spoken of before.49

Within the reports to the BIA, agents and governors pleaded for more funds so the government could fulfill treaty promises. The end of the decade brought increased attempts to contain Ute movement and obtain a ratified treaty that recognized the terms of

48 ARCIA 1865, 363.
49 ARCIA 1868, 183.
the 1863 treaty and provided the means to establish two agencies in western Colorado, one along the White River, and another on the Los Pinos River. The treaty also established the provisions that the government would provide: mills, blacksmiths, seeds, plows, school buildings, food, teachers, and agents, among other promises, if Utes stayed on the reservation.50

White River Ute Agency

In 1869, when the Cheyennes, Aprahoes, and the Sioux had “voluntarily removed themselves from Colorado,” Utes refused to relocate permanently to their western Colorado reservation, claiming that since they did not participate in the negotiations, the treaty was nullified.51 Indian Agent Oakes worked to attract Utes who lived in the mountains by establishing an agency in western Colorado. This marked the beginning of the short history of the White River Ute Agency. Oakes described the location as:

A most excellent and desirable location for the agency on White River . . . It is below a deep canon, and at the upper end of a broad and beautiful valley, extending about twenty miles down, and averaging from one to three miles in width, of good, arable land. White River at this point contains a great abundance of water for mill and irrigating purposes, it being about the size of Platte River at this place. There is plenty of good cottonwood timber along the stream, and pine in the mountains some six miles distant. The side valleys and adjacent hills afford abundant pasturage from the stock of the agency and the Indians.52

According to Oakes, who said that he had traveled the length of the White River, this was the best location on the river, because “it is a warm valley, and stock will subsist the year round upon the pasturage.”53 Despite Oakes’s suggestion that the climate was ideal (later

50“Treaty with the Ute Indians,” March 2, 1868, U.S. Statutes at Large 619 [1868].

51ARCIA, 1869, 700 & 95.

52ARCIA, 1869, 712.
agents would note that the cold climate was unsuitable for agriculture), the White River Agency was remote. Visitors to the agency had to travel by wagon about 400 miles from Denver on a route that snow would make impassible.

Perhaps Governor McCook had this isolation in mind when he suggested that reservations were not the best means for Native American assimilation. In his Annual Report, he suggested that contact with the highest civilization America had to offer was the best way to achieve Native American civilization:

I think the settlement of these untutored tribes in the vicinity, say of Boston, where they would daily be thrown in contact with what is claimed to be the most cultivated community on this continent, would be much more likely to bring about the desired end than a complete isolation from these powerful and beneficent influences.54

In this view, civilization was about proximity: like a cold, civilization was catching.

In his final report, Agent Oakes argued that reservations were the best means of encouraging civilization, but he argued that the agent should be of a particular type, someone he called a “civil missionary.” Civil missionaries would “promote the welfare and civilize a whole race of barbarous people,” a task that “is well worthy the ambition of any Christian man.” With the goals set for transforming Native Americans, Oakes argued that “Good men will then come forward and engage as agents—men who will devote their lives to accomplish the end so much desired by all, viz: the civilizing and Christianizing of the Indians under the charge and protection of this great nation.”55 To his report, the second Ute Indian agent, Mr. Speer, wrote that he was convinced that

53ARCIA, 1869, 712.

54Ibid., 705.

55Ibid.
the wild and reckless disposition of the Indians may be directed, with less expense and trouble, into the channels of peaceful and Christian industry; that the day is fast dawning when the war-whoop will be no longer heard, and the bones of the white man will no longer whiten on the shelterless plains, nor be left to rot unburied in the deep shadow of the mountain.\footnote{ARCIA, 1870, 638.}

Christian industry along with food rations would be a cheap means to protect Euro-American settlements.

Changing Presidential administrations led to Oakes’s dismissal. Under President Grant’s Peace Policy, a Boston Unitarian Church took over the administration of the Ute agencies in 1872. The Peace Policy came in response to accusations that the Bureau of Indian Affairs had been siphoning money meant to civilize Native Americans into the pockets of corrupt agents. Christian reformers argued that moral agents, who were to be appointed by churches, would be more economical and effective, hastening the process of Christianizing and civilizing the Native Americans.\footnote{For more information about the Peace Policy see: Frederick E. Hoxie, \textit{A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920} (University of Nebraska Press, 2001); Robert H. Keller, \textit{American Protestantism and United States Indian Policy, 1869-1882} (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); and Francis Paul Prucha \textit{The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians} (University of Nebraska Press, 1984).}

After Oakes’s dismissal and the beginning of church administration of the reservation system, another round of treaty talks commenced. Under pressure from Governor Edward McCook, the United States government set out to renegotiate the size of the Ute reservation. This process started at the beginning of his term as governor. In 1870, McCook wrote a letter declaring: “I have never been able to comprehend the reasons which induced the Colorado officials and the General Government to enter into a treaty setting apart one-third of the whole area of Colorado for the exclusive use and
occupation of the Ute nation.” He claimed that, “The greater part of this country is the best agricultural, pastoral, and mining land on the continent, and when I travelled over it I could not help feeling and expressing surprise that the richest portion of the Territory of Colorado should have been alienated without any sufficient reason or any sufficient consideration.” The resources were untapped: “The Ute reservation includes mines which will pay $100 per day to the man, grasses are luxuriant and inexhaustible, and a soil richer and more fruitful than any other in the Territory.” McCook closed his letter with an appeal to the ideals of Manifest Destiny and the Bible: “I believe that God gave to us the earth, and the fullness thereof, in order that we might utilize and enjoy His gifts. I do not believe in donating to these indolent savages the best portion of my Territory.”58 This appeal was entirely rhetorical: early that year, McCook had visited the reservation and recorded his impressions: “The whole country, away from the banks of the streams, is exceedingly sterile and desolate: its only vegetable productions being sage-brush and cactus, and the only indigenous living creature the horned frog.”59

McCook’s conversion in his thinking about western Colorado could have been influenced by an earlier discovery of gold in the region. In 1860, prospectors found gold in the southern mountains of the reservation. The size of the Ute reservation combined with mineral discoveries sent Felix Brunot, the Indian Commissioner, to negotiate with the Utes for land reduction. These negotiations resulted in the 1872 Brunot Treaty, a document that demonstrates the on-going captivity economy between the Utes and other Native American tribes as well as the Utes’ use of the captivity economy in order to

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58 ARCIA 1870, 627-628.

59 Ibid., 633.
negotiate land deals with the government. Ouray agreed to meet with the government officials a year before the treaty meeting under the pretense that the government locate his son, who had been captured ten years earlier by the Sioux. When the government sought to renegotiate the boundaries of the reservation, Ouray had heard that his son, Friday, had been living with a group of Arapahos. Ouray reportedly said “the Government is strong, and can do what it wants; if the Government will do what it can for me and get my boy, I will do what I can for the Government in regard to our lands.”

With some estimates that mines on the Ute reservation could pay over $1,000 per day, it is no wonder that “Instructions had been sent by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs ‘to spare no trouble or reasonable expense in securing the young man.’”

The government was unable to deliver Friday to Ouray, despite claims that Indian agents had located him. The government also failed to convince Ouray to sell a large portion of the land. Instead, Ouray agreed to sell the San Juan mountain region, where the mines had been discovered. In a letter dated September 13, 1873, Ouray stated:

> Perhaps some of the people will not like it because we did not wish to sell some of our valley and farming-land. We think we had good reasons for not doing so. We expect to occupy it ourselves before long for farming and stock-raising. About eighty of our tribe are raising corn and wheat now, and we know not how soon we shall all have to depend on ourselves for our bread.

While Ouray pointed to a future when Utes will farm and raise stock, he also argued for a substantial barrier. Despite having many friends among the whites, “we feel it would be better for all parties for a mountain-range to be between us.” Although the treaty was successful from Ouray’s perspective, the northern bands of Utes (who lived around the

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60 ARCIA 1872, 481.

61 Ibid.

62 ARCIA, 1873, 454.
White River Ute agency) were dissatisfied. The government had recognized Ouray as the head Ute chief, a title most Utes would not have recognized, and the government paid Ouray an additional thousand dollars per year.

Between 1872 and 1878, the White River Ute agency found some stability. In six years, only two agents, both appointees of the Boston Unitarian Church, served at the agency. Farming proved difficult. Although native grass grew well, the alkaline soil prevented other crops from growing. Buildings erected in 1870 were in a constant state of disrepair: high winds blew off roofs; broke windows; and destroyed cottonwood fencing. A fire destroyed the mill and lack of fencing meant the livestock had free range of the vegetable garden. With broken plows, drought, and grasshoppers, farming became an impossible task.

Reverend Edward H. Danforth, White River Ute Agent from 1872-1878 who was appointed by the American Unitarian Association, optimistically argued for a civilized future. Some Utes, he reported, were wearing Euro-American clothing and one man had asked that his wife be “buried according to our Christian custom, and she was so interred, the employees assisting at the burial.”63 Danforth reported that education projects were going well, with twenty-one students attending the school. “The girls have already made for themselves 16 garments after the pattern of female attire in civilized life, and are anxious to learn to sew and cut garments for themselves. While working, they are learning to count and to talk with English, and are learning the alphabet.”64 Danforth reported that the leader of the White River Utes, Douglas, requested a house and a cow.

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63 ARCIA 1872, 482.
64 ARICA 1874, 583
As in the 1860s, throughout the 1870s, husbandry and hunting, not agriculture, was the main mode of subsistence for Utes.

Due to miscommunication and confusion about shipping cost responsibility, the 1877 ration shipment of flour and canned goods sat in a warehouse in Rawlins, Wyoming for over two years. The rations that the Utes did receive while Danforth was the agent were sub-par. Danforth filled his monthly reports to the Indian Commissioner with complaints on the Utes’s behalf. He reported the coffee was “not enough and not so good as the previous years,” the tobacco was not strong enough, and the sugar was “damp and heavy.”65 The quality of the goods along with the lack of flour at the agency meant that few Utes camped in the vicinity.

Without flour rations, the Utes needed to rely on game in order to fulfill their nutrition needs. Rather than using bows and arrows to hunt, the Utes used the more efficient rifle. However, the Office of Indian Affairs issued a circular that prohibited the sale of ammunition to the Utes on reservation land and required a military escort for the Utes every time they left the reservation. As a result, Utes frequently sneaked off the reservation in order to travel about ninety miles to trade for ammunition, a trek that alarmed the surrounding Euro-American settlers. In 1878, in response to these hunting expeditions, residents near the reservation sent a letter to the Boston Unitarian Church to complain about their administration of the agency. They argued Danforth’s “course of administration is revolutionary and if pursued it will cause a collision between the Indians and the settlers in the Snake and Bear River Valleys,” and that the geographic isolation of the settlers would result in extraordinary casualties if a “collision” were to

65Letter from Danforth to CIA, Record Group 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Letters Received, [22 Feb 1879].
occur. Danforth’s unpopularity with the Utes and the settlers as well as his negligence in collecting the rotting supplies in Rawlings all contributed to his loss of appointment, although the end of the Peace Policy and the Boston church’s administration were primary factors.

The change in administration at the White River Ute Agency reflected a change in policy at the national level. President Hayes, elected in 1876, appointed Carl Schurz as Secretary of the Interior. Schurz was a vocal opponent of the Peace Policy and by 1882, the government had regained all administrative control of Native American agencies. However, Schurz maintained the same goal for Native Americans: assimilation into the United States. He even retained the same means—education of Native American men in agriculture and women in housekeeping. Yet, he disagreed that churches were best equipped to solve these problems and instead hired agents that were agricultural experts. In short, the governmental policy shifted from cultivating souls to cultivating soil.

Nathan Meeker

In 1878, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs selected Nathan Meeker as the representative to the White River Ute Agency because of his agricultural experience and his political connections. Meeker provided a bridge between the reformers who advocated that Native Americans must become Christians before they could be farmers and those who argued that mechanical and agricultural skills were the path to

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66 Letter from settlers of Snake and Bear River Valleys, 1879, Letters received.
68 Prucha, 194-195.
assimilation. Before his arrival at the White River Ute Agency, Meeker lived his life to advance the salvific properties of farming, informed by scientifically innovative ideas of his time. Like the ideas of the Utes, Meeker’s notions about land use were equally, if differently, gendered and racialized—men ought to own land and work it themselves. Additionally, for Meeker, farming was the primary measurement of an ethnic groups’ civilization. He also had developed an opinion about the religious origins of agriculture, as well as a notion that farming could overcome “deficiencies” of a nomadic past.

Meeker, born in Euclid, Ohio in 1817, came to believe in the power of farming by engaging with the dominant religious and philosophical thinkers of his time. As a teenager, he corresponded with Henry Ward Beecher and Ralph Waldo Emerson, seeking the advice of people that he respected about morality, marriage, and salvation. Beecher’s letters to young Meeker encouraged him to read Horace Bushnell’s works and to trust that salvation comes through time and patience. Young Meeker had little patience for gradual transformation; thus, he gravitated toward radical reform movements. He attended Oberlin College, which served as an intellectual and religious center for the abolition movement. While Meeker was dedicated to the abolishment of slavery, he was also committed to women’s suffrage, dietary reform, and temperance. While attending school, he was part of the Stone-Campbell Movement, a church restoration movement rooted in the Second Great Awakening that spread throughout frontier regions in the early half of the nineteenth century. After graduating, he continued to seek a movement

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that satisfied his intellectual curiosity. Following on the heels of the Transcendentalists, Meeker sought spiritual satisfaction in nature rather than in church institutions. In his 1841 diary, Meeker reflected on his reasons for not attending church:

I would not go thither. Let me take woodland path, mount over hills, descend into the valley where the brook frets and sleeps, I would go for up to a deserted dawn where in the springtime sheep are washed. So, the rustic fold; there is a spear of grass here and there, the autumn breezes shake the branches of the trees and make their spring lightly, the sun shines in spots, like glistening eyes upon the water; this the forest, on the hill top, are streaks of light, the border of a meadow, and hark! the quail whistle from afar, nigh me, the squirrel clatter down the bank of the hickory, or chap the nuts from a lofty limb. Far away, faintly sounds, the church bell. Solitary, I would sit, muse on the glories of Grace, on the high gifts of Fame, the immortality of the soul and the lands and things of neverending heaven. The great world has not heart; it is a statue that moves.

Despite his ruminations about a solitary soul seeking heaven in nature, Meeker attended church services occasionally. However, his opinions about his era’s religious innovation lacked the poetry of his ruminations about nature. At a Millerite meeting in 1841, Meeker heard a lecture “by a rowdy looking fellow.” Upon hearing this lecture, Meeker “got indignant... Such stupid, unfounded, dull, leadheaded, absurd, ridiculous, and perfectly nonsensical stuff.”

A few weeks later, Meeker attended another church service in New York City, “where one Matthews preaches in University Place.” Most likely a Protestant mainline church, it was also unacceptable. Meeker marched off “after standing around in the vestibule, peeping here and there, and reading that seats are owned in the Gallery, and being looked upon with commiseration by various silk [clad] women, I marched off.”

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71 For an overview of Meeker’s biography, see Peter Decker, “Father Meeker,” The Utes Must Go!, 69-90.

72 Nathan Meeker Diary, 1841, Nathan Cook Meeker Collection, MSS #426, Colorado Historical Society, Denver, Colorado.

73 Ibid.
The practice of pew rental was detestable to many of Meeker’s contemporaries who would have agreed with Meeker’s argument that “I do not believe that one single member who owns a seat in that church or was seated in it when I came away will ever go to Heaven. Down! Down! With the Aristocrat!”

In 1843, when Meeker was teaching at a rural school in New Jersey and writing his first (and only published) novel, *The Adventures of Captain Jack Armstrong*, a Methodist church held a service in his schoolroom. In his diary, Meeker recorded that the service described heaven as being without pain or trouble, but he could not “conceive of happiness without some mixture of anxiety, or misery.” For Meeker, happiness (or even salvation) could be achieved only through hard work mixed with some pain. He followed his dismissal of a happy afterlife with a strong affirmation of intellectual faith, writing “When we live and breath passively without exercising the mind it is not living … A blind admiration of the Deity without knowing why or wherefore is the part of a slave, not of an intelligent being. That fact is, nothing is known about Heaven.”

Throughout his life, Meeker would carry his youthful disdain of material wealth and blind faith. However, by 1843, Meeker’s intellectual fortunes began to improve. Miserable in his teaching position, he sought greener pastures on the lecture circuit. With optimistic fervor, Meeker set out to lecture in the style of the ancient Greek orator, Demosthenes, noting: “The great fool that I am, still thinks he may set the world on fire!” Meeker had become an advocate of Fourierism, a utopian, socialist agricultural

74Ibid.

75For a description of this novel, see Peter Decker, “Father Meeker,” in *The Utes Must Go!*, 69-90.

76Nathan Meeker Diary, 1841, Nathan Cook Meeker Collection, MSS #426, Colorado Historical Society, Denver, Colorado.
movement started by the French philosopher, Charles Fourier.\textsuperscript{77} Nathan lectured throughout the Northeast on the social benefits of women’s rights, temperance, and Fourierism—with one lecture suggesting, “Fourierism is temperance,” although this speech failed, despite his enthusiasm. “I found out that few or none understood my speech. They could not imagine what I was about.”\textsuperscript{78} The pedantic lectures were not a complete failure; Meeker’s travels attracted the attention of a Fouriest Phalanx, and he was hired as their publicist. By being accepted into this community, Meeker had found an institutional home that resonated with his philosophy. He also started experimenting with dietary reform by following the Graham diet: “I eat no more corpses, at any rate and as for bran bread, I love it dearly.”\textsuperscript{79}

Seeming to find a philosophical system consistent with his beliefs, Meeker sought to find a life companion. After rejecting one potential mate because she believed in Mesmerism, he courted and married Arvilla Delight Smith. Unlike Nathan, Arvilla’s religious beliefs remained consistent after her conversion at the age of twelve, although she wandered through several Protestant denominations; first, she was a Presbyterian, then a Congregationalist, and finally, a Methodist. Later in their married life, Nathan would mention that he was thankful for Arvilla’s spiritual stability. In his love letters (many of which he wrote in his diary to allow Arvilla to read), Nathan outlined his expectations for marriage: “I want my wife to be my companion, my equal, not my slave


\textsuperscript{78}Nathan Meeker diary, Nathan Cook Meeker Collection, MSS #426, Colorado Historical Society, Denver, Colorado.

\textsuperscript{79}Ibid.
or drudge.” However, despite this request, he acted as her schoolteacher, as he assigned her to read Plutarch’s Lives, corrected her spelling in her letters to him, and urged her to become familiar with the “principals of Natural Philosophy.”80 Despite Meeker’s demands, Arvilla returned his affections and took pride in his idiosyncrasies. Reflecting on her life, Arvilla wrote: “I have been the wife of a horticulturalist, the wife of a merchant, the wife of an editor, and the wife of an Indian agent, but I have had but one husband.”81 Along their wanderings, Arvilla and Nathan had four children: Ralph, Rozanne, Mary, and Josephine. Their religious life was rooted in the notions of hard work and the cultivation of the mind.82

Immediately after their marriage, the couple became founding members of the Trumball Phalanx, an experiment in applying the socialist, egalitarian ideas of Charles Fourier and one of many experimental communes in Ohio.83 Within the Phalanx, Meeker seemed to find solace in the community’s church services. Meeker reported that the community had found joy because “they had escaped from the wants, cares, and temptations of civilization, and instead were placed where public good is the same as individual good.” Furthermore, there was nothing that “prevent[ed] their loving their neighbors as themselves.” Through this communion, Meeker predicated that “They will


81 Arvilla Meeker, Letter, “To children from Arvilla Meeker,” March 5, 1897, Nathan C. Meeker papers, WH1680, Western History Collection, The Denver Public Library.

82 Arvilla Meeker, Diary, 1846, Nathan Cook Meeker Collection, MSS #426, Colorado Historical Society.

83 For more information about experimental communes in Ohio, see: Amy DeRogatis, Moral Geography: Maps, Missionaries, and the American Frontier (Columbia University Press, 2003).
all unite, Presbyterians, Disciples, Baptists, Methodists, and all; and if any name be
needed, under that of Unionism.”

When the venture failed (people were hungry and broke), Meeker became an
agricultural editor for the *New York Tribune*, reporting on the communal agricultural
efforts of the Shakers and the Mormons. Despite Meeker’s experiences with failed
communitarian agrarian endeavors, he continued to believe that farm labor provided more
immediate transformation than did elusive grace. In addition to tilling the soil, Meeker
argued in an unpublished manuscript titled *Spiritual Life* that marriage and domestic life
were a source of spiritual redemption and religious purity.

No apology can be made for those who disregard marriage, and there will be long
stages of painful probation extending perhaps through many millions of years or
until the individual shall be thoroughly purged from his sin, when he will
understand what this kind of purity signifies.

Consistent with Fourieristic philosophy, he continued to support women’s rights,
convinced that agrarian settlements and marriage were the quickest means to achieving
social transformation.

Meeker had to wait nearly two decades before another agrarian opportunity
sprouted. On a trip to Utah to report on Mormon irrigation, a snowstorm waylaid him in
the Colorado Territory. The Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Sioux had left the region and the
vast, seemingly empty plains evidently awakened Meeker’s dormant communitarianism.
When he traveled back to New York City, he made an appeal to Horace Greeley to start a
colony based on a mixture of socialism and capitalism (individuals would own both their

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own land and a share in community land), religious tolerance, and a strict adherence to temperance. Greeley, a long-time advocate of agricultural science and of the notion of the West as a “safety valve” for congested cities, provided support for Meeker’s plan. On December 14, 1869, the New York Tribune published a call for colonist applications for temperance men with a strong work ethic and at least $3,000 in liquid capital to form an upstanding, moral society on the plains of Colorado. They received over 3,000 letters of interest.

Meeker and Greeley selected people who would be able to sustain themselves financially, had a sense of the hardships of agricultural life, and upheld the spirit of temperance ideals. The project attracted the attention of P.T. Barnum, who brought his celebrity to the project as well as his funds, although he never officially lived in the town. In the spring of 1870, over 300 families set out to break ground on the Union Colony, establishing Greeley (located in northeast Colorado) as the colony’s hub. Townspeople quickly overturned Meeker’s idea to have only one nondenominational church where people would attend lectures exploring religious philosophies. Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational churches were established in the first few years. The philosophical lecture series continued, attracting speakers such as Horace Greeley and Susan B. Anthony, as well as lesser-known speakers who lectured on “Moslem religion,” “Eastern Spirituality,” and “Mesmerism.” Although the Colony

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86 For more information on Greeley’s advocacy of farming in the American West, see: Coy F. Cross, II, Go West Young Man! Horace Greeley's Vision for America, (University of Mexico Press, 1995).

87 “Union Colony,” Meeker Collection, Denver Public Library and Nathan Cook Meeker Collection, MSS #426, Colorado Historical Society, Denver, Colorado.

88 “Letter from P.T. Barnum to Meeker,” Meeker Collection, Denver Public Library; Meeker Collection, Colorado Historical Society.
supported religious and philosophical diversity, the townspeople policed temperance rules with vigilance. When an immigrant attempted to establish a liquor store, it mysteriously burned to the ground. Rumors suggested that Ralph, Nathan Meeker’s son, ignited the blaze.89

Despite the passion for a temperance town, many people were disillusioned by the absence of trees, the difficulty in procuring supplies, the lack of rain, and the amount of labor required to meet daily needs. Although Meeker’s irrigation system became the basis for Colorado state’s water management, it was expensive and flooded basements.90 The land was rocky and dry. Without a working irrigation system, 1,400 newly planted trees withered and vegetable gardens blew away. Almost immediately after arriving, many settlers revolted by demanding a refund. In response to these complaints, Greeley urged Meeker to press on, comparing the detractors to the Hebrews and Meeker to Moses, advising: “Let no one think of being a reformer till after he shall have read the book of Exodus carefully at least three times through.”91

Like Moses, Meeker never reached his promised land. In the early days of Union Colony, he borrowed money from Greeley to sustain his fledging newspaper. In November of 1872, Greeley died unexpectedly and his daughters pressured Meeker to repay the loan. While the Colony flourished (having overcome the early setbacks), Nathan’s debt cast a forlorn shadow on his success. Shortly after Greeley’s death, Meeker


began sending out letters of interest, applying for government posts in the agricultural department, and asking for favors from his well-connected friends.

Meeker at the White River Ute Agency

In 1876, when the governor of Colorado, Frederick Pitkin, started to receive complaints about the ineffective management of the Ute Indians by Agent Danforth, Meeker stood out as an adequate replacement. In 1878, five years after Greeley’s death, with letters of support from governmental officials, Meeker sought and obtained the White River Ute agency job. In order to assist him, he hired his twenty-one year-old daughter, Josephine, as the agency teacher and physician. Arvilla also followed Meeker to his new post, in order to maintain the house, to assist Josephine with the physician position, and to teach domestic skills to the Native American women.92 Although Meeker may have taken the job only out of a desire to earn money to repay his debt to Greeley’s estate, he did not leave behind his commitment to the transformative power of farming. In fact, his work with the Utes intensified his insistence that farming labor was the only path to redemption.

When Meeker arrived at the isolated agency in the Rocky Mountains, he found it in shambles. He noted that at an altitude of approximately 6500 ft, the chances for frost persisted into June or July, leaving only a short growing season before the first frost in August. Past agents’ attempts at farming had been limited to eight untended acres, surrounded by a collapsed fence, and Meeker reported that “there has not been enough crops raised here in 8 years to sustain a small family all year.”93 The agency had been

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without flour for one year and without annuity goods or seeds for two years. With no food to sustain the people, Meeker was unsurprised that the Utes continued to hunt and were rarely around the agency. Meeker’s solution was to move the agency to a lower elevation near the White River, extending the growing season and making it possible to build an irrigation canal. With improved agricultural conditions, Meeker believed that he could propel the Utes toward civilization and instill in them a morally sustaining work ethic.

For the new agent, the only thing standing between spiritually, physically, and materially “impoverished” people and victorious civilization was the proper mixture of soil, water, sun, and labor. Farming, not religious conversion, was the path to true righteousness. Through farm labor, the Utes could transcend deficiencies of class, race, and history to achieve civilization in just one generation. In an 1879 American Antiquities article, Meeker argued that land use and religion (specifically a religion “like that taught Moses”) were mutually sustaining: religious beliefs gave societies a strong sense of morality, naturally propelling them towards agricultural work, and this work maintained a society’s collective bodily and spiritual health. Farming signaled the beginning of civilization, and farming would advance the “savage” Utes.

According to Meeker, the absence of religion was at the heart of the Utes’ failure to assimilate into American society, but more religion was not the answer. Echoing prevailing stereotypes, Meeker cataloged the absence of things in Ute culture: “their knowledge of healing herbs is trifling, their ideas of human destiny scarcely worthy of description, and, as all nomadic people must be, they have no conveniences or habits of

93“Meeker to Teller,” May 27, 1878, Nathan C. Meeker papers, WH1680, Western History Collection, The Denver Public Library.
cleanliness, while vermin abound on their persons.” Meeker continued his list of things the Utes lacked, noting the absence of a written language, traditional history, poetry, literature, architecture, homes, or irrigation ditches. Physically, they were neither healthy nor powerful. Meeker attributed these cultural deficiencies to the lack of “religious and moral sentiments,” which led to a “race without ambition, and also, a race deficient in the inherent elements of progress.” Without a religious system equivalent to Judaism or Christianity, the Utes were bound to live in stagnant squalor—unless they adopted Meeker’s agricultural practice. In a move that was perhaps a critical response to the Peace Policy and other evangelizing missions to the Indians, Meeker argued that reform via religious education was too slow—a process that “operate[d] upon one generation after another and so [only] gradually raise[d] the standard of physical and intellectual power.” For radical reform, time-intensive religious education should be replaced with agricultural education.94

Farm work, not religious conversion, would reverse the absence of civilization in Ute history. Although Meeker held that religion (which Euro-Americans had in abundance) provided an individual with a moral background and a proclivity to “work,” while the Utes’ “superstition” clouded their judgment and led them away from activities that would advance their race, he still maintained that farming would overcome such myopia. Meeker was unremarkable by comparison to Euro-American contemporaries in his assumption that Native Americans were culturally inferior and he echoed assimilationists in his belief that Euro-Americans could guide Native Americans into civilization. Lacking religion, Utes would not develop agriculture on their own; but under

Meeker’s guidance, they could learn agriculture without first becoming Christian.

Meeker whole-heartedly believed in the transforming power of setting one’s hands to a plow. Once the Utes started working, the deficiencies of their ethnicity would melt away. In his Annual Report, he noted optimistically, “If these Indians will only half improve their opportunities they may become rich and happy.”

Even as he dismissed Ute culture as uncivilized, Meeker simultaneously compared the Utes to European aristocracy, echoing his youthful disdain for mainline Protestants. Like many nineteenth-century Americans, he did not recognize hunting or fishing as virtuous labor, instead, these activities were aristocratic pastimes. Ute resistance to work, the tendency to bet on horse races, the refusal of many parents to send their children to school, and the reliance on Meeker’s labor for agricultural products led Meeker to compare the Utes to the slothful rich. In a January 29, 1879, article in the Greeley Tribune, Meeker wrote, “The habits of this sui generis American aristocracy seem almost identical with those of the European. Neither will work, neither attach any value to learning, both have the lower classes do work for them, both find occupation and happiness in gambling and horseracing, and the women in both are of no account.”

Meeker understood Ute resistance to agricultural work to be linked to their desire to maintain status—and he resented that his role as Indian agent supported this hierarchy. However, Meeker’s comparison to the European elite worked to distance the Utes from the land. Unlike American farmers, who engaged with the dirt, the Utes, like European royalty, disdained toil and lived off the labor of the lower classes. For Meeker, the epitome of civilization was neither a Christian nation nor European monarchy; instead,

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95ARCIA 1879, 125.
civilization and racial virtue built on an individual’s willingness to plow and sow dirt. While Meeker maintained his notions of gender equality, he still was bound to Victorian notions of separate spheres of domesticity, which colored his interpretation of Ute women. A December 11, 1879 article in the *Greeley Tribune* outlined Meeker’s understanding of the proper gender role for an assimilated woman. “Susan, Johnson’s wife, is a good genius,” he wrote, “she has dignity and good sense, and she makes her husband do as she bids.” Like many of his Victorian contemporaries, Meeker believed that women civilized and controlled men, regardless of their race.

In order to curtail the Ute perception regarding work, Meeker enacted his interpretation of the governmental policy on rations. When Meeker first arrived at the agency, he had a perceptive approach to ration distribution. In a letter to Colorado Senator Henry Teller, he wrote: “I have two or three circulars from the Department of Interior to the effect that no rations are to be issued to any Indian unless he works . . . I presume there could be an outbreak if I should obey. On the whole I think the Utes have been treated badly and they know it as well as you and I.”

However, Meeker began to see that the Utes, like many other humans, would not work just for the sake of working. They needed incentives. Meeker continued to distribute basic rations to everyone, but he increased the rations of “luxury items” to those who worked. Withholding rations was “equivalent to ‘compulsory education,’ and it is the only power that can be made to operate.” Meeker suggested, “with plenty of coffee, sugar, and dried peaches I can lead them forward to civilization.”

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96Meeker, May 27, 1878, Letters Received.

97Emmitt, *The Last War Trail*, 86.
best, or governmental stinginess with rations at worst. For a population that was struggling to adjust to a new means of subsistence as well as recent memories of inconsistent deliveries of rations, the Utes may have perceived this policy as a direct threat to their well-being and an unapproved revision of the treaties. Despite his criticisms of the Utes, Meeker understood the deplorable conditions at the White River Ute Agency—rations had not been delivered, fields had not been sowed, and government neglect kept the Utes in a subsistence lifestyle. Despite Ute resistance to change, he worked to make the White River Ute Agency a shining example of the transformative powers of agriculture.

The Utes at the White River Agency responded to assimilation efforts in a variety of ways. Many continued their hunting and gathering lifestyle, simply adding the agency to their semi-nomadic resource collection routes. The Indian Agents characterized these Utes as unwilling to work, but these Utes most likely retained negative associations with farming. In 1867, a Ute man provided a religious interpretation for racial difference and land use. The Creator, he said, created white men weak, so that they had to farm. The Utes were created strong and were meant to hunt. The white man’s weakness meant that he was created to work for the Utes. By this account—and in contrast to the ideas dominant among middle-class Euro-American intellectuals—hunting, not farming, was the epitome of a people’s strength. In this Ute vision of creation, racially inferior agriculturalists provided labor to support superior hunters. Agents prior to Nathan Meeker at the White River Ute Agency had inadvertently acted out their prescribed roles in this interpretation of racial hierarchy; Utes and agents worked side-by-side to seed

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farmland, but Utes would then leave the agency to hunt. To the agents’ dismay, the Utes would return at harvest time and collect the food the agent had labored to grow. While it is impossible to know how many Utes subscribed to this understanding of racial difference and land use, this creation story does point to widely held assumptions in nineteenth-century Ute life, some of which paralleled Euro-American ideas: land use determined status, land use and racial hierarchies were inseparable, and at least for some Utes, religious beliefs shaped these categories.

However, not all Utes resisted farming, perhaps because of Ouray’s example. By the spring of 1879, Meeker had moved the agency buildings to a lower elevation and, using extra rations, he convinced twenty-five Utes to dig a mile-and-a-half long irrigation ditch.99 A handful of Utes maintained small farms while still maintaining a close connection to the horse culture. Ouray’s brother-in-law, Johnson, worked with Nathan Meeker and Euro-American laborers to build the irrigation ditch and cultivated a small section of land near the agency, at the same time tending to his own herd of horses. Occupying this intermediate cultural space, Johnson also served as mediator between Nathan and the rest of the Utes.

In early September 1879, Johnson was summoned to mediate between Meeker and his Ute housekeeper, Jane. Jane owned prime pasturing land near the new location of the agency, but reportedly, Meeker had ordered Jane’s horse pasture plowed. When the workers began, bullets whizzed past their heads. Meeker accused Jane of ordering Utes to stop the plowing, Jane insisted that she had never agreed to his plans. Johnson had stepped in to mediate, but Johnson’s relationship with Meeker was already tense. Earlier,

99“From Nathan Meeker to Ralph Meeker,” Dec 2, 1878, Nathan C. Meeker papers, WH1680, Western History Collection, DPL.
Johnson had asked Meeker to break two horses for plowing. Meeker took this as an encouraging sign; however, Meeker soon learned that Johnson merely wanted Meeker to get the horses into shape so they would be better racers. When Johnson stepped in to mediate about Jane’s pasture, according to Josephine, Johnson told Meeker “that he had plowed enough land,” and that the Utes “must have feed for their horses.” In response, Meeker said, “You have got too many horses; you had better kill them.”

In response, Johnson pushed him to the ground, injuring Meeker’s shoulder. A few weeks later, in early September, Meeker had agency employees plow the pony pasture near the agency. The agency employees reported that as soon as they began plowing, one of the Ute men shot at them. Meeker grew increasingly concerned when the Ute women and children who lived near the agency moved further away. Fearing an outbreak, he wrote a telegram to Governor Piktin, asking for assistance from the Cavalry.

On the evening of September 28, 1879, Utes were frayed by a decade of empty flour sacks, empty promises, a threatened assault on their horses, and the Cavalry camped on the border of their reservation. Communication and trust had eroded. The afternoon of September 29, the Utes were galled by reports that General Thornburgh’s Cavalry had crossed over into the Ute reservation. When word reached the Utes at the agency that the military had violated the terms of the treaty, an assault on the agency workers began. Nathan Meeker and the other nine male agency workers were killed. The women and children were taken captive and held for twenty-nine days. When the Cavalry negotiated

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100Testimony in Relation to the Ute Outbreak, 1880 (Kessinger Publishing, 2008), 9.
101Conetah, 97-100 and Lewis, 46.
their release, newspaper accounts of the “Meeker Massacre” became a rallying cry for removal.

At the center of the “Massacre” and subsequent removal were competing understandings of the proper use of dirt, mediated through religious ideas, racialization, and expectations of gender roles. Meeker attacked the center of nineteenth-century Ute culture, the horse, in an effort to spur conversion. Meeker’s suggestion to kill the horses mimics the Numic erasure of pre-Numic hunters; in order to claim the land, the previous owners needed to be ritually erased. However, this incident does not point to two coherent systems conflicting with each other. A society’s relationship to dirt is a dynamic relationship—one that is refined through contact and conflict with other societies’ valuation of dirt. The use of dirt was subjected to a variety of interpretations within both Euro-American and Ute societies. While Nathan Meeker and other reformers privileged the plowing of dirt as a means to a virtuous society, other late nineteenth-century Euro-Americans constructed lives, hygienic products, and cities to mediate their relationship with dirt. It could be contained in city parks, washed away with soaps, and conquered with careful urban planning. Meeker and his supporters wished to construct the modern American West not in terms of the expunging of dirt, but through the labor of shaping dirt into self-sufficient farms, symbols of American citizenship and hard work, fashioned according to the ideal of the Jeffersonian yeoman farmer. Using horses and oxen to plow dirt could lead Americans into a modern age of civilization, free from the wars of Europe or the sloth of the aristocracy. Native Americans, by contrast, were people who lived within nature and yet at the same time, for Nathan Meeker, emulated aristocratic attitudes towards labor. Competing ideologies of land use shaped interactions that led to a violent
end, the violation of treaties, and widespread Euro-American support for the ethnic cleansing of a people.

For the Utes, Meeker’s insistence on plowing valuable grazing pasture was perplexing. Utes displayed a variety of opinions about farming and “assimilation” to Euro-American conceptions of work: the anonymous man who suggested that the creator endowed each race with a particular role in order to support Ute supremacy; Ouray’s hacienda-like farming methods; and Johnson’s willingness to plow some land. Working the land was traditionally women’s work, and more recently in the Utes’ history, the work of slaves or lower classes. Meeker’s urging of men to till the land that served as the pony pasture threatened status in addition to cutting Utes off from an economic resource. The Utes were pushed to a point of needing to defend not only their reservation boundaries but also their livelihood.

In the events leading up to the ethnic cleansing of the Utes from western Colorado, religion is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. Vaguely Christian notions of salvation through sacrifice and hard labor framed Meeker’s notions about the possibility of transforming American culture into an agrarian society. Meeker’s admirers frequently described him as Moses, leading a group of intractable people in the desert. Yet, while Meeker valued religious systems as a means to an agrarian, utopian end, he suggested that pure labor could transform a culture more quickly than missionary work. The “lack of religion” stunted Ute “progress,” but civilization could be achieved within a generation without it.
CHAPTER 3

MORALITY, GENDER, AND LANDOWNERSHIP, 1879-1881

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the two years between the White River Ute Agency Incident and Removal, 1879-1881. It argues that for nineteenth-century Euro-Americans and Utes, morality became a central factor in determining who rightfully owned western Colorado land. Just as Thomas Jefferson’s yeoman farmer became an implicit ideal for an American subject, an idealized subjectivity of citizenship informed public and governmental assumptions about Ute land ownership; Jefferson argued that a landowner was also a moral citizen. However, this formulation was reversed in public discourse about Ute land rights; in order to own land, Utes needed to prove to the government that they were moral citizens. In determining land ownership, Euro-Americans’ perception of Ute morality took precedence over historic treaties or a commitment to the legal protection of property. Throughout Congressional hearings in 1879 and 1880, Utes themselves engaged Euro-American ideas of normative morality in order to argue for their continued right to western Colorado land. In 1880, morality framed conversations about landownership.

The events of 1880 have continued resonance in the present. In the summer of 2009, I drove from western Colorado to a diner in Fort Duchesne, Utah, which is the hub of the Uintah-Ouray Ute Indian Reservation. I navigated 175 miles on state highways to meet with Loya Arum, a Ute woman who had been instrumental in starting the Smoking River Powwow. The long trip offered time to reflect on the variety of ways that the
residents of western Colorado—both current and past—had encoded their hopes and expectations onto the landscape. Heading north on Colorado Highway 139, I drove through irrigated farmland characteristic of western Colorado; patches of green corn and golden wheat flourished despite the surrounding dry, dusty, alkaline soil. These fields reflected the optimism of late nineteenth-century Euro-American settlers; through canal systems and agricultural innovation, the pioneers managed to transform an arid, seemingly infertile desert into a productive garden. However, the hope signified by the irrigated fields obscured the difficulties of managing a small farm in the twenty-first century. The agricultural landscape did not reveal how many prayers had been uttered for rain to relieve scorched crops or for extra money to meet mortgage payments—although I was sure that there had been many of these pleas over the past century.

Outside the small town of Rangley, Colorado, I winded my way over Douglas Pass, a mountain road named for a Ute chief who was hanged for his involvement in Nathan Meeker’s death. I marveled at the way that this road stood as a testament to the grit and ingenuity of the highway’s civil engineers and I was inspired by the determination to connect state highways once impassable because of inhospitable terrain. Highway 139 traverses a comparatively minor mountain range, but its daunting switchbacks and sheer cliffs evoke trepidation even in the most experienced drivers. Douglas Pass is near the small town of Dinosaur, the Colorado gateway to the National Dinosaur Monument. Passing through, I was amused by the gigantic, decaying metal and plastic sculptures of those extinct reptiles. It seemed to me that these rusting testaments
could stand as a reminder of a long-gone city council’s desire to attract tourists. Churches dotted the landscape, including one poorly named: the Dinosaur Baptist Church.¹

Turning onto Colorado Highway 40, however, my thoughts turned away from my amusement at displays of American exceptionalism towards the Ute Native Americans forced out of Western Colorado so that Euro-American residents could construct these agricultural, paleo-archaeological, and civil engineering projects. Colorado Highway 40 connects Meeker with Fort Duchesne and I realized that I could be driving over the route that the White River Utes walked as the Cavalry marched them from their homes. Suddenly, my air-conditioned car seemed like an immense privilege. The landscape, previously inviting of carefree reflection, seemed harsh, dusty, and hot. I began looking for signs in the landscape that might point to what surely was a massive and traumatic exodus. I saw nothing until I reached Vernal, Utah, a small town on the edge of the Ute Reservation. From Vernal to Fort Duchesne, a variety of businesses used images of Indians to sell their wares—from steel construction pipes to souvenirs, grinning Indian chiefs beamed out of logos and shop windows. Rather than speaking to the removal of Colorado Native Americans into Utah, these logos promised authenticity, assuring passers-by that real Indians live here. However, the plastic promises obscured a painful history, one that is largely silent.

Loya Arum speaks about her ancestors in order to fill the silence. Sitting in the diner, Arum recounted her initial impressions of the Meeker community and shared her desire to speak about the past. A retired elementary school teacher and a “jack-of-all-

trades,” Arum is a passionate and religious mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and life-long educator. She brought her nine-year-old great-granddaughter with her to the interview because the diner served the girl’s favorite meal: fried shrimp. When the food arrived, we laughed as the girl squealed with delight at her lunch treat. Settling into our conversation, Arum chose her words carefully as we ate meals of French fries, chicken sandwiches, and soup. Arum and her family are “related to all the lands,” because her mother was from the Uintah band (the Utes located to the eastern Utah reservation in the 1850s), her maternal grandfather was an Uncompahgre Ute (Utes located around the Los Pinos Agency), and her father’s family were all White River Utes. Her family had raised her to be fearful of the town of Meeker and passed on generations of prohibitions of speaking about the death of Nathan Meeker, which she calls the “Meeker Incident,” purposefully avoiding the charged term “Massacre.” Framed by a history of fear, Arum characterized her recent trips to Meeker as a “big deal.” However, her expectations were low, because of past visits to the area. “I recall several years ago our high school kids went to Meeker to play basketball,” she said, “and they told their principal don’t ever bring us here again because the white kids called them names. [They] called them niggers and told them to go back to their reservation.”

In 2006, despite these reports of prejudice and hostility and at the request of the Rio Blanco County Historical Society, Arum took a group of children to Meeker to dance traditional pieces for Meeker residents. She was asked to speak, and in her words, “one of the gentlemen asked me to talk about my ancestors that lived around the Meeker area

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2Loya Arum, in interview with the author, Fort Duchene, UT, July 13, 2009.

and that was the wrong question to ask me. I gave him my opinion.” Much to her
continued surprise, Arum’s impromptu speech struck a chord with the Historical Society
and she became one of their key contacts. She also helped the Forest Service; without
her support, the Smoking River Powwow would have remained a pipe dream. When I
suggested that this was a leap of faith for her to speak in a place where the people had
been hostile to her fellow tribe members, she responded:

> When I’m somewhere and I don’t understand it, I know there is a purpose for it.
> And I have prayed almost all my life to know what happened to my ancestors. I
> used to pray to want to know what happened to the Anasazi. Now I know they
> were my relatives. And so when things happen I don’t think it is an accident. And
> so when I speak, I pray, ancestors will you please guide me, guide my words so
> that I say the truth, the way you want it to be told, and the way it really happened,
> and not to interject my own ego into it. And so the day I spoke there, and I wasn’t
> on the program, but I spoke anyway, that’s what I prayed for, that night they
> asked me to say a few words.

Prayer, ancestors, and speaking truth about the past direct Arum’s walk on the path
between memory and history. Drawing on her past prayers about wanting to know what
happened to the Anasazi, she continued to trust her ancestors to guide her in situations
where the truth could be spoken. Arum believed that her ancestors helped her to articulate
a version of the truth that Meeker residents had not heard: that the Utes were unjustly
taken from their homes, cruelly and without justification. “It would be like I came into

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5Arum referred to a popular idea among Utes that the Anasazi, the people credited with constructing
complex buildings in the sides of cliffs (most famously at Mesa Verde), are the ancestors of the Utes.
Archaeological evidence shows that they abandoned their homes around 1400 CE, and archaeologists
continue to debate about why the Anasazi disappeared from the historical record. For further information
about Ute claims to Anasazi ancestry, see Greg Johnson, “Narrative Remains: Articulating Indian Identities
in the Repatriation Context,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47, no. 3: 491-495. For general
information on the Anasazi, see Linda Cordell and George Gumerman, eds, *Dynamics of Southwest

6Loya Arum, interview with the author, July 13, 2009.
your home and told you to leave,” Arum told me, with tears in her eyes. She clearly mourned for her ancestors because of their experience of removal, but her grief moved beyond empathy to a profound sense of loss due to the lacuna in her family’s memory. Arum’s personal prayer requests to know about her ancestors and her desire to know “where did they go?” led her to speak with me and led her to assist the U.S. Forest Service in the Smoking River Powwow. In her words, “I think that maybe after all these years, it is time to talk about it.”

Arum pieced together her account of removal from shards of broken memories. Like many Utes, her grandparents prohibited her parents from asking questions about removal or the “Meeker Incident,” continuing the practice of the generation that feared retribution from the government. Justified in their belief that the government continued to look for the people responsible for Nathan Meeker’s death, Ute families stopped talking in order to protect their brothers, husbands, fathers, and sons. However, as the immediate threat of retribution faded, families continued to observe the silence. Forgetting had become a habit, one that Arum and many other Utes are anxious to quit. Arum’s personal connection to Meeker, Colorado through fragmented memories and religious desire demonstrates the variety of ways the residents of Western Colorado have employed religious and non-religious identities, notions of history and progress, and the elusive specter of memory in order to claim the land.

Twenty-first century memories of Ute removal are overlaid on top of nineteenth-century debates over what happened at the White River Ute Agency. Arum’s connection to western Colorado land is framed by her desire to know what happened to her

7Ibid.
ancestors—a process that is informed by both history and cultural memories. Arum’s willingness to share her thoughts about removal reflect her desire to influence the twenty-first century’s cultural memory of the events. In similar ways, nineteenth-century debates about what action the government should take in response to the Meeker Incident were also framed by the emerging cultural memory of those events.

Throughout the nineteenth-century debates about Ute ownership of western Colorado land, Euro-Americans questioned Ute morality. Morality-talk masked racism. For instance, some Euro-Americans argued that Utes should not live in Colorado because the Native Americans were immoral people. Many Euro-Americans were content to try an entire group based on the actions of a few, but others suggested that only some of the tribe should be removed, while the Utes who had demonstrated proper morality could stay. As Euro-Americans debated the morality of the Utes, the Utes themselves suggested that Nathan Meeker and the system he represented were themselves immoral.

Furthermore, through their 1879 testimony, several Ute men signaled that they had adapted to the United States government’s expectations of individual property ownership. While under different circumstances, governmental officials would have cited this as an example of assimilation, questions about morality and Ute right to the land overshadowed these arguments. Debates of land ownership through the lens of morality highlighted the ways in which only a certain kind of subject could gain access to American citizenship.8

These debates over whether Utes should retain their ownership of western Colorado land unfolded as newspapers and publishing houses released information about

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8For an example of the interplay between farmers as idealized subjects and the way that it played out in eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see: Roger G. Kennedy, Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery, and the Louisiana Purchase (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003).
the confrontation at the agency, the battle at Milk Creek, and the white women’s experience of captivity. The information published in newspapers and in a captivity narrative formed the basis for the cultural memory of “what happened” at the White River Ute Agency—a cultural memory that would persist into the twenty-first century. Newspapers across the country picked up the initial story of the confrontation and followed the story of the white women’s release from captivity. Several months after the confrontation, the women published a captivity narrative, sharing their story. At the same time these popular materials were being produced, narratives of “what happened” emerged through legislative documents as lawmakers attempted to determine the proper course of action. Shortly after the women were released, the former captives gave an official testimony to Charles Adams, the Colorado Postmaster and prior Indian Agent who had been appointed to direct the governmental investigation. Utes who were involved in the incident also testified shortly after the women were released. In the winter of 1880, Congressional hearings were held to identify the guilty parties. Through these hearings, Congress determined that the Utes had violated the terms of their treaty, and therefore, needed to be removed.

Morality around gender, such as the men’s treatment of women’s bodies as well as men’s general character, framed the Euro-American public debates about usufructuary rights to western Colorado land. The relationship among morality, gender, and landownership emerged slowly as the public learned more about the events at the White River Ute agency. In order to trace the intricacies of these relationships, this chapter identifies three “nodes” that emerged within newspapers, books, and legislative documents: Ute women’s morality; the rape of the captives; and Nathan Meeker’s
character. These three nodal points are places where the discourse of morality, gender, and landownership crystallized, and they are explored in the order in which the story unfolded in the public record. Early newspaper accounts and the captivity narrative examined the question of Ute women’s morality; later newspaper accounts and initial official reports discussed the rape of the captives; and finally, through the Congressional investigation, Utes and non-Utes questioned Nathan Meeker’s character. Before turning the particulars of these discourses, it is necessary to provide an overview of the events at the White River Ute Agency. This overview will provide context to examine the way in which morality framed debates over removal.

At the Agency

On September 29, 1879, shortly after noon, Ute men fired shots at Euro-American agency employees. To protect themselves, the women seized the children and hid in the milk house with Frank Dresser, an agency laborer. The milk house protected them most of the afternoon, but in the early evening, they smelled smoke. Fearing the Utes would set fire to the building, they sneaked into the juniper trees surrounding the agency. At first, they did not see the extent of the bloodshed; all nine of the agency’s men, including Nathan Meeker, were dead. Twenty miles away, in a separate but related confrontation, which today is called the Milk Creek Battle, several Cavalry soldiers, including General Thomas Tipton Thornburgh, and over thirty Utes had died. Thronburgh’s death was depicted in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper (figure 1). Ute warriors surrounded the Cavalry for nearly a week, until another Cavalry division relieved them. The 1880 Congressional investigation focused on the timing of these two confrontations, the
agency, and the Milk Creek Battle as well as the question of whether or not Thornburgh led his men onto reservation land.⁹

Out in the open, the escapees attracted the attention of the Ute men. Frank was shot, but continued to run through the bushes. Soldiers found his body in a coalmine several weeks later. Sixty-three-year-old Arvilla had broken her leg two years earlier and suffered a gunshot wound that day—the bullet grazed the skin of her thigh, “plowing a three-inch deep path.”¹⁰ Arvilla’s injuries and the two children limited the women’s

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⁹For a detailed military history of the Milk Creek Battle, see Mark E. Miller, Hollow Victory: the White River Expedition of 1879 and the Battle of Milk Creek (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1997). Miller concluded that Thornburgh did cross into Ute reservation, but the side that fired the first shot is inconclusive. Additionally, Miller concluded that the timing of the two confrontations is also unknown. The citation for the figure is: “Colorado-The Ute Outbreak and Massacre near the White River Agency,” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, November 8, 1879.

escape; they believed that they had no choice but to surrender to the Utes. Within the
newspaper accounts, personal records, and the published captivity narrative, the details of
what happened in those moments vary. In some accounts, Ute men appeared valiantly to
carry the women to safety. In other accounts, two men argued over which one “got”
Josephine. In still other narratives, Arvilla was allowed to return to her house for her
“spirit book,” (the term Utes used for her copy of Pilgrim’s Progress), medicine, and
money. She was said to have stopped to gently kiss Nathan’s body. Abandoning the
corpses of agency men, the women rode over ninety miles through mountainous terrain as
the Utes attempted to escape the United States Cavalry. Although western Colorado was
the Ute’s ancestral home, their familiarity with the rocky canyons, winding streams, and
towering mesas did not prevent the Cavalry from locating the group. Twenty-three days
after the outbreak, on October 21, 1879, Charles Adams, former Indian Agent to the Utes
and special agent of the Post Office, successfully led the Cavalry to the Ute
encampment.11

Media reporting

In the haze of their grief, Flora Price, Josephine and Arvilla Meeker allowed
Ralph Meeker, the oldest child of Arvilla and Nathan, to publish their stories in the New
York Herald Tribune. These narratives were also published locally in the Denver Tribune,
the Rocky Mountain News, and the Greeley Tribune, the newspaper that Nathan Meeker
started and later sold to Josephine, Ralph, and Edwin Carver (an original resident of the

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11 This account is drawn from: Meeker, The Ute Massacre; Testimony in Relation to the Ute Indian
Outbreak (Kessinger Publishing, 2008); newspaper reports from the month of October in The Denver
Tribune and the Rocky Mountain News; and Peter Decker, The Utes Must Go!
Union Colony). At the time of the captivity, Ralph was a successful journalist who worked as a foreign correspondent in Russia for *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* and in the United States for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Because of his work, he had contacts with newspaper publishers around the country. The sensationalism of the captivity along with Ralph’s contacts catapulted the women’s stories to the front page of the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, as well as western newspapers such as the *Denver Tribune*, the *Colorado Republican*, the *Omaha Herald*, the *Greeley Tribune*, and the *Deseret News*. *Frank’s Illustrated Newspaper* carried an article about the outbreak as well as pencil drawings of the incident.

Several months after the confrontation at the White River Ute Agency, the Denver Tribune Publishing House compiled the women’s stories into a captivity narrative. This text was drawn from the longer narrative versions of their captivity that appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *Greeley Tribune*. The captivity narrative was titled: *The Ute Massacre: Brave Miss Meeker’s Captivity, Her Own Account of it: also the Narratives of Her Mother and Mrs. Price, to which is Added further Thrilling and Intensely Interesting Details, Not Hitherto Published, of the Bravery and the Frightful Sufferings Endured by Mrs. Meeker, Mrs. Price, and Her Two Children, and by Miss Josephine Meeker*. Published in the last few months of 1879, all of these accounts were crafted for popular audiences and employed the well-honed strategies of the captivity narrative genre, complete with savage Native American men and white women bravely standing up to the “savages.” The newspaper articles as well as a series of public

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lectures by both Josephine and her sister, Rozanne, (who was not captured, but had strong opinions about the government’s Indian administration) shaped popular understanding of the Meeker Massacre and fueled the flames of removal. Rozanne also wrote several letters to local newspapers, some of which were republished by papers on the East Coast.\footnote{For an analysis of the gender norms that captivity narratives drew on, see: June Namias, \textit{White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 21-48.}

The legal documents from this period include the testimonies of Ute Native Americans, which Charles Adams collected several weeks after the women were released. These also include Arvilla, Josephine, and Flora’s statements. In the first months of 1880, a Congressional Commission investigated the causes of the confrontation, a hearing where Colorado political officials, Josephine Meeker, Colorado citizens, and several Utes testified. Once Congress decided to nullify the Utes’ rights to western Colorado, another commission traveled to the former Ute Reservation to map out potential relocation sites for the soon-to-be displaced Utes. A published diary by one of the members of this commission provides some insight into the legal processes of removal.\footnote{For Josephine’s lecture, see “Ute Usage, Miss Meeker Lectures about her Captivity among the Savages,” \textit{Daily Evening Bulletin} (San Francisco, CA), December 17, 1879. For Rozanne’s letters and lectures, see: “The letter of Miss Rose Meeker,” \textit{The Idaho Avalanche} (Silver City, ID), October 25, 1879 and “Rose Meeker has gone to lecturing on Indian question,” \textit{Milwaukee Daily Sentinel} November 19, 1879.}

\footnote{Testimony in relation to the Ute Indian Outbreak (Kessinger Publishing, 2008) and Sydney Jocknick, \textit{Early Days on the Western Slope of Colorado}, 2nd ed. (Western Reflections Publishing Co., 1998).}

Underneath both of these bodies of documents are a handful of letters that circulated within the Meeker family, revealing additional tensions and strategies in their deployment of their testimonies, public lectures, and reflection on newspaper coverage of
their experience. While not all of these sets of documents provide a comprehensive picture of the development of the cultural narrative about what happened, taken together, they illuminate the decisions the family made in narrating their understanding of why the uprising happened and how they thought the government should respond.

**Ute Women’s Morality**

Two versions of the white women’s rescue from captivity emerge from these documents and reflect the way that the public discourse on morality, gender, and landownership crystallized around Ute women’s moral character. In the first version of the captive’s release, found in newspaper reports and Meeker captivity narrative, a Ute woman, Susan, spoke on the captives’ behalf and demanded their release. In the second version, located in the Congressional testimony and commission reports, Charles Adams, a former Ute Indian Agent and Postmaster General, negotiated the women and children’s release. By examining the differences in these two narratives, the significance of morality to the history of Ute removal emerges.

The first narrative of the captive’s release is most starkly revealed in an article in the *Greeley Tribune* and the Meeker captivity narrative, when Arvilla provided insight into the Ute arguments about whether or not they should release the women. At a lengthy and stormy tribal council meeting, she reported, the “war party” advocated for the use of the captives as leverage to negotiate clemency for the Utes that had killed the agency employees. The “peace party” stood in opposition, advocating the immediate release of the captives. Resolution seemed impossible. According to Arvilla, all debate ceased when Susan, a Ute woman and sister to the prominent Chief Ouray, “burst into the lodge in a magnificent wrap and demanded that the captives be set free, war or no war.” At Susan’s
insistence, the Ute men decided to release the captives. The captivity narrative explained that Susan’s actions resulted from her “kind, noble, Christian disposition.”

In contrast, in the Congressional testimony, Charles Adams stated that on October 21st, 1879, he rode into a small camp of Utes where he “saw Miss Meeker peeping out of a tent.” After a brief conversation with her, he continued into another camp where he “found all the Indian men, probably about thirty or forty, in a tent together talking very boisterously.” They informed him he would have to wait until the “principal chief,” Douglas, arrived. When Douglas came, he invited Adams “into the lodge where all the others were talking.” Adams stated that “they talked there until about four or five o’clock in the afternoon, some in a very hostile manner, others in a peaceful manner.” He recounted for the congressional commission that he told the Utes “if these women were started on their way home I would then go to the main camp (this being only a small one) and get all the chiefs together and talk it over.” This seemingly simple statement resolved the debate and the Utes agreed to release the captives. According to Adams, “they said, ‘We don’t want to have anything more to do with the government, but we give these women to you, and if you can do anything for us afterwards, all right.’” Adams’ congressional testimony did not discuss Susan; according to this account, Adams’ presence and his reasoning alone persuaded the Ute men. Additionally, Adams stated that the captives were far away from the council meeting, calling into question the white women’s account of the council meeting.

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16Meeker, The Ute Massacre, 13 and The Greeley Tribune, Nov. 12, 1879.

17Testimony in Relation to the Ute Indian Outbreak, 2-3.
Susan is absent throughout the legal documents. In her congressional testimony, Josephine focused on the circumstances at the agency that led to the outbreak instead of the details of her release. In the commission’s collection of testimonies, Ouray is on record as saying that the testimony of women does not have weight among his people, raising the possibility that Susan’s words would not have held weight in the tribal council.\textsuperscript{18} Beyond her role in the release of the captives, Susan did not even warrant a mention in the legal records of the captivity and release of Josephine, Arvilla, and Flora.

Nonetheless, Susan’s dramatic rescue proved popular with newspaper editors across the country; Susan’s intervention in the tribal council appeared in headlines in the Denver Tribune and the Chicago Tribune, and several smaller newspapers.\textsuperscript{19} The story has inspired poetic interest in the past century, with numerous odes lauding Susan’s eloquent, liberating speech, though one poem misnamed her as Ouray’s wife, Chipeta.\textsuperscript{20} How might historians understand Susan’s omission in the legal documents despite her popularity in newspaper accounts? Or even more generally, how might historians understand the omission of a seemingly important person to historical events within “official” records? Is this simply another case of a woman of color being disregarded or of the misinterpretation of women’s roles in Ute society? How might one understand her

\textsuperscript{18}White River Ute Commission Investigation, House of Representatives, 46\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Session, Ex. Doc. No. 83, 15.


central role in the public narrative of the women’s release? What role does the captivity narrative’s description of Susan’s “Christian disposition,” or her “morality,” play in the context of the narrative?

The representation of Susan’s natural moral character started in the newspaper accounts and culminated in the captivity narrative. While the authorship of the Meeker captivity narrative is attributed to Josephine Meeker, it is more likely that the narrative was jointly compiled by Josephine and her brother, Ralph, with possible collaboration with two *Denver Tribune* journalists who published another related text about the Milk Creek Battle and details of the women’s captivity.21 The text reads as if it were a collaborative editing project. For example, the text contains three first-person accounts of the captivity, by Josephine, Arvila, and Flora Price. These accounts closely match newspaper accounts that were published shortly after the women’s release. Furthermore, the narrative is framed by a preface that calls for political action. Then, the first-person accounts begin as if they were interviews:

‘Miss Meeker,’ said the gentleman who obtained her narrative of her own and her fellow captives’ sufferings, ‘there have been all sorts of wild and differing stories going through the newspapers about the whole affair, and I am sure you would be able to give the true account.’ The handsome young woman, who by her indomitable heroism and determination saved the lives of the whole party, answered.22

Her answer follows, demonstrating her reluctance to recall her suffering. By the next page of the narrative, the question and answer style ends and the rest of Josephine Meeker’s story is told in first person. It is important to note that Josephine Meeker was an educated woman and published other accounts in newspapers; thus, she would not have


22Josephine Meeker, 4-5.
needed a ghostwriter. Still, the organization of the text suggests that it was a collaborative project.

In order to understand the captivity narrative’s depiction of Susan’s Christian disposition, it is necessary to examine the genre. Meeker’s narrative was one of the last North American captivity narratives based on a factual Native American captivity (rather than fictional accounts).²³ Thus, the text served as bookend to a popular genre with roots in the seventeenth century. As one of the earliest captivity narratives, Mary Rowlandson’s reflections on her time as a captive of Native Americans during King Philip’s war captured colonists’ imaginations; only the Bible superseded Rowlandson’s narrative in sales. The genre remained popular throughout the nineteenth century, particularly as the United States’ expansion into western Native American territory increased confrontations between Euro-Americans and Native Americans.²⁴

Scholars of captivity narratives have documented and analyzed the tropes at work in these accounts, focusing on the way in which these narratives both challenge and reinforce normative gender, racial, and ethnic constructions.²⁵ Some accounts also

²³Other captivity narratives followed, but they were either fictional accounts of Native American captivity, or fictional or real accounts of hostage situations in other political contexts. For an analysis of these captivity narratives, see: Gary Ebersole, Captured by Texts: Puritan to Post-modern Images of Indian Captivity (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 190-278.


²⁵For some of these arguments, see: June Namias, White Captives; Matthew Baigell, “Territory, Race, Religion: Images of Manifest Destiny,” Smithsonian Studies in American Art 4, no. 3/4 (1990): 2-21; Ezra F. Tawil, “Domestic Frontier Romance, or, How the Sentimental Heroine Became White,” NOVEL: A
analyze the way in which early captivity narratives describe the religious experiences of the captives. However, the latter corpus of scholarship focuses on the extensive body of literature Puritans produced, rather than the use of religious language in nineteenth-century narratives. While this scholarship offers valuable insights into the inner psychology of Puritan captives and the spiritual drama contact with Native Americans offered, it overlooks the religious language in later captivity narratives.

The periodization of the captivity narratives encourages this reading. The accepted categorization is that in the seventeenth century, religious themes defined the narratives. By the nineteenth century, the narratives cast off religious themes in order to spread political propaganda regarding the “Indian question.” The texts themselves, ranging from Mary Rowlandson’s religiously infused understanding of her captivity to Sarah Wakefield’s account of her 1862 captivity with the Sioux, seem to support this interpretation. However, this typology rests on a particular definition of religion that obscures the way religious language shaped and informed political positions in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, this periodization does not adequately account for Josephine Meeker’s use of Christian-like attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to distinguish “good” Indians from “bad” Indians.

The captive narrative’s description of Susan’s “Christian disposition” needs historical contextualization that moves beyond standard periodizations of these narratives and explores the subtle use of religious language. While many later accounts arguably are

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*For* "Indian Captivity Narrative"; Tara Fitzpatrick, “The Figure of Captivity”; Levenier, “Indian Captivity Narratives”; Namias, *White Captives*; VanDerBeets, *The Indian Captivity Narrative*; and Pearce, “The Significances of the Captivity Narrative.”
still propaganda pieces, religious language infused the narratives in a manner that significantly influenced the message. Few captives in the nineteenth century framed their experience as religious awakening, but many used religious language to understand their experience of colonial contact, a rhetorical deployment that fueled the fire of propaganda and inspired political action.

The common use of religious language in later captivity narratives reflects the religious fervor of that era. Jon Butler has argued that the nineteenth century in America was a “spiritual hothouse,” indicating an ascension of religious beliefs and practice rather than a declension after the Puritan era.\textsuperscript{27} Butler’s argument counters the common typology of captivity narratives, which follows a typical post-Puritan religious declension model, that is, that religion in North America has declined since its heyday in Puritan New England. Applying Butler’s assertion to captivity narratives, it would follow that religion became more important in the nineteenth-century narratives rather than less important. Meeker’s captivity narrative is a case in point.

While the text uses religious language to make its case, the Meeker captivity narrative is primarily a propaganda piece—the aim of the text is to argue for a restructuring of Indian affairs administration. In 1847, Indian Affairs moved from the responsibility of the War Department to a separate Bureau and the captivity narrative reflected popular opinion in advocating the reversal of this policy. The preface of the narrative states that white men will continue to be murdered and women and children will continue to be captured

until the whole Indian question is placed in the control of the War Department . . .
If the Government were to appoint General Grant or Sherman or Sheridan, as

\textsuperscript{27}Butler, Awash in the Sea of Faith, 2.
Indian Commissioner, with free power to control the whole question, we do not believe there would ever be an other [sic] Indian outbreak of any description.28

This call for the War Department to be in charge of the “Indian Question” signals that Grant’s Peace Policy had lost support. The 1872 Modoc War and the 1876 Battle of the Little Bighorn had swayed public opinion away from the reform movements of the peace policy back to war. In the minds of many Euro-Americans, war could accomplish what reforms and policies could not.29

The captivity narrative builds on the political atmosphere in Colorado. In the weeks after Nathan Meeker’s death, The Weekly Denver Post, The Rocky Mountain News and Colorado’s governor, Fredrick Pitkin, rallied Coloradoans around immediate action through removal. The Post, reporting on the confrontation at the White River Ute Agency, declared in bold, large headlines, “Utes must go!”30 Governor Pitkin’s solution to the on-going friction between the Utes and Coloradoans was to raise a militia of 20,000 men. Echoing Chivington’s Sand Creek Massacre, Pitkin was set to lead the militia in a full-scale genocide.31 The prologue to Josephine Meeker’s captivity narrative reflects the sentiments of Governor Pitkin and the many ranchers and miners who wanted the Utes gone. Economics and infrastructural developments drove this approach; the Utes’s reservation was expansive and full of resources. Land that had once been inaccessible to Euro-Americans became a tangible possibility. Railroads and mining roads had slowly carved a path through the mountains. Having nearly moved mountains

28Josephine Meeker, 4.

29For an overview of Indian Policy in the 1880s, see Frederick E. Hoxie, A Final Promise, 83-113; for details on Indian Policy in the 1870s, see Francis Paul Prucha, The Great Father, 152-180.


31Peter Decker, The Utes Must Go!, 152.
to reach the Rocky Mountains’ resources, 2,000 Ute Indians no longer seemed immovable. Meeker’s death gave the governor a rational reason to mobilize against the Utes. Only the reform policies of the Department of the Interior stood in the way of the immediate settlement of western Colorado.

Despite this clear call for political change, the text also reflected the uncertainty of a nation struggling to reconcile the principles of Manifest Destiny with Christian reform movements. On the one hand, vacuum domicilium granted “unfarmed” land to Euro-Americans, but on the other hand, Christian reformers argued that a Christian nation had a responsibility to lead undeveloped peoples toward civilization. The Meeker outbreak occurred during national debates about governmental policy towards Native Americans, with Christian reformers advocating assimilation on the one hand and Western settlers advocating removal or extermination. The representation of Susan’s Christian disposition functioned as a means to simplify the complex issue of Euro-American settlement in Native American lands. Susan’s heroic role and her ascribed religious identity stand in contrast to the prologue and Governor Pitkin’s militaristic stance. The captivity narrative concludes with an appeal to the readers, urging them to look beyond their sympathy for the captive women, and to not

like the Indians themselves visit anger and punishment indiscriminately on the latter as a people. For where among all our civilized selves can we find a woman who, under the same circumstances, would have shown such a noble, tender, Christian disposition and heart as Susan, the good squaw, the sister of Ouray.  

Perhaps this statement merely argued against Pitkin’s blanket condemnation of Utes, or appealed to reformists on the East Coast to continue their efforts at civilizing Native

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32Josephine Meeker, 46.
Americans, because Susan’s actions demonstrated either that some Indians are inherently 
good or that the civilization programs were working.

Susan’s intervention in the tribal council meeting developed as the stories of the 
women’s captivity traveled along telegraph wires to newspaper offices. At first, Susan’s 
role in the women’s release was limited to brief praises of her character by the women. 
Initial reports published in the Denver newspapers gave brief statements from Arvilla 
Meeker that Susan was a shining sun in the bleak cloud of captivity and because of her 
motherly tenderness towards the captives they were spared from the discomfort of being 
hostages. Arvilla said that Susan “did more than all others to save their lives. She was as 
kind to them as a mother.”33 Several days after these nonspecific references to Susan’s 
kindness longer articles appeared in the Denver Tribune, rippling out to the Chicago 
Tribune and the Philadelphia Inquirer. These articles expanded the role of Susan from a 
caring, motherly figure to a woman who traversed the barriers of her position in Ute 
society to demand the release of the women. Appearing on the front pages of the Chicago 
Tribune, Susan was declared a “strategic squaw,” a “faithful friend,” and a protector 
“shielding [the captives] from indignities which the Bucks offered” all things that were 
“never before heard of in Indian history.” Writers noted the rarity of the respect that the 
men gave Susan’s words of peace; more often, one author commented, “the Utes make 
slaves of their women” and force them into silence in political meetings, similar to “the 
way St. Paul did.” That article attributed the respect to Susan’s relationship to Chief 
Ouray, a Ute Indian who had attained respect from the US government for his role in

negotiating treaties, not to her natural religious inclination. Although, the emphasis on her familial relationship to Ouray might have been another indication of civility—both Susan and Ouray had family relationships that were easily translatable into normative Euro-American configurations of family.

A few days following this report, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that Susan did not intervene in the council because of her relationship to Chief Ouray but because of her past. Susan, the sister of Ouray, became the unnamed Ute woman that the 1863 White River Ute Agent, Simeon Whitely, assisted in returning to her family. As noted in chapter one, this woman had been a captive of Cheyenne Indians. The Cavalry stationed in northern Colorado rescued her from imminent immolation and Whitely reported that he helped to locate her family. However, her name remained absent from the legal record and popular records until 1879. According to an 1879 *Chicago Tribune* interview with Whitely, Susan was hunting with her family on the eastern plains of Colorado in 1863 when Cheyenne Indians attacked the group. In the chaos of defending themselves and their livestock, Susan was taken captive. Johnson, Susan’s new husband, alerted the Cavalry. The Cavalry successfully located the raiding party along the Cache de la Poudre just as the Cheyenne bound Susan bound to an unlit pyre. The soldiers transported her to Simeon Whitely, with whom she lived for several months, reportedly learning English and enjoying the luxuries of civilized life. When Whitely was able to locate her family, she returned to them. Whitely stated he had not heard of her again until he read the *Chicago Tribune*’s article. He was certain that Susan’s empathy and defense of the captives emerged from her own harrowing experience in captivity, a certainty that led

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him to write a letter to Arvilla to request more information about the details of Susan’s valiant rescue of the captives.  

The stories of Susan’s own experience with captivity perpetuated the argument that Native American men exhibited racial traits that would prevent civilization. Susan’s story attracted the attention of numerous newspapers across the country, including the New Hampshire Farmer’s Cabinet and the Macon Weekly Telegraph. Shortly after the Chicago Tribune article, Jane Swisshelm, a journalist, abolitionist, and women’s rights advocate, began a campaign to remove the Utes, but not Susan. She submitted a petition to Congress that demanded that the government purchase Susan a farm and build her a house because of her valiant efforts to rescue the white women. Although the petition did not result in any governmental action, this is one moment where the public cultural memory of “what happened” pushed on legislative bodies. Swisshelm’s campaign also reflected the generalized Euro-American fear of Native American men as perpetrators of violence against women of all races. Furthermore, the petition emphasized the relationship between morality and land ownership. For Swisshelm, Susan represented the victim of Indian violence and a moral human being. Therefore, she was worthy of land ownership and of Euro-American protection.

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35 *The Chicago Tribune*, Oct, 30, 1879; Simeon Whitely, “From Simeon Whitely to Arvilla Meeker”, November 10, 1879, Nathan Meeker Papers, DPL.


38 Senate, *Journal of the Senate*, 46th Cong., 2nd session, 1880, 81.

39 Swisshelm’s activism to provide aid to Susan mimics the actions of the suffragists described in this article: Gail H. Landsman, “The ‘Other’ as Political Symbol: Images of Indians in the Woman Suffrage Movement,” *Ethnohistory* 39, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 247-284.
What purpose did the representation of Susan’s intervention serve? Susan’s own experience with captivity did not appear in the Meeker captivity narrative. Instead of arguing that Susan intervened on behalf of the captives because of her own brush with captivity, that account argued that she acted because of her inclination towards Christian kindness. Within the captivity narrative, Susan’s religious identity plays a large role in mitigating the propaganda of the captivity literature of the era, serving as social currency in the volatile market of Indian policy.

The narrative reveals power structures that scholars have come to expect in colonial relationships: the Euro-Americans portray the Native Americans as brutal, uncivilized savages while the Euro-Americans are gentle, religious survivors. However, Josephine Meeker’s captivity narrative reveals fissures in this narrative structure. The most powerful figure is a Ute woman. Susan does not have a voice in this narrative, but the significance of her role for the captives is significant. Her influence came through her inclination towards morality and a “Christian disposition.” Religious identity was a social currency for negotiating stereotypical identities assigned within a colonial context. In other words, the captivity narrative ascribes a Christian identity to assist readers in sorting out the “good” Indians from the “bad.”

The writer of the narrative drew on a long tradition in European and American history of trying to determine the origin of the Native Americans through religious categories. English colonist Thomas Thorowgood’s 1650 volume, *Jews in America, or, Probabilities that the Americans are of that Race* was one of the first books in English to argue that the Native Americans descended from the lost tribes of Israel. In 1775, Irish-American James Adair’s *History of the American Indian* argued that the Native
Americans sprang from Jewish tribes. In 1830, Joseph Smith published the *Book of Mormon*, a text premised on lost tribes of Israel in the New World, peoples understood to be the forebears of present-day Native Americans. Early North American colonizers and nineteenth-century LDS missionaries used the constructed religious identity of Native Americans to model appropriate types of action towards indigenous populations. For example, the idea that Native Americans were descendents of the one of the lost tribe of Israel compelled the LDS Church to send missionaries in order to bring the Native Americans back into the fold.\(^4^0\)

The Meeker captivity narrative does not make similar attempts to locate the origin of Native Americans, though the description of Susan’s motive for intervening in the tribal council meeting falls within the same discursive framework. For earlier European settlers, the question of origin was one of the factors that framed the colonial response to indigenous populations. In the case of the Meeker captivity narrative, Susan’s morality framed the Euro-American response to the Ute uprising. Using a religious identity familiar to the readers, the captivity narrative links Susan and other “good” Indians to the political tropes of “Christianize and civilize.” The captivity narrative’s description of Susan, with her natural tendencies towards doing Christian things, urges readers to take action, specifically to remember the “good” Indians and presumably, work toward their preservation.

The description of Susan as having a kind, Christian disposition performs important cultural work, although it does not address Ute concerns about loss of land or

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\(^4^0\)For a further exploration of the religious representation of Native Americans, see Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon: Religious Solutions from Columbus to Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986). See also Thomas Thorowgood, *Jews in America, or, Probabilities, that those Indians are Judaical, made more probable by some additional to the former conjectures*, (London: 1660) and James Adair, *Adair’s History of the American Indians* (New York: Promontory Press, 1974).
rights or to the cultural transformation the Utes experienced as Coloradoans restricted their movements. Nor does it provide an accurate or useful description of Ute religious practices or the experiences of Ute women. The description of Susan as having a noble, tender disposition demonstrates three things. By highlighting the role of religious identity in Euro-American imaginings of Native Americans, the description of Susan’s disposition complicates racial categories by inverting the typical power structures of the captivity narrative genre. Second, just as the question of origin compelled Latter-day Saints to send missionaries to Native Americans, the religious description of Susan’s disposition sounded a call to action for readers. Finally, this use of religious identity to explain why some Utes were helpful and others were “savages” masked the moral complexities of the Meeker Massacre.

Written just on the cusp of the formalization of the reservation system, the re-imagining of Susan as a Christian advocate of white women attempted to sway public opinion towards the efforts of the assimilation movement, while still supporting the firm regulation of Indian Affairs by the War Department. The tension between turning all the affairs to the War Department and the support of the assimilation movement in the conclusion of the narrative complicates racial categories. Rather than stereotyping all Native Americans as savages, readers are encouraged to use discretion in their wrath against the Utes, to not be like the Indians and “visit anger and punishment indiscriminately.” Instead, readers are asked to think about their conceptions of a civilized person and to include a Ute woman among them. In this instance, race and barbarity are not naturally intertwined.
Second, Susan’s religious disposition provided the means for a limited call to action. “Remembering” is not a concrete rallying platform, though it could be a weak appeal for the continuation of civilizing programs. Through a complication of stereotypical notions of civilization and savagery, readers must sort through the complex issue of Native American and United States governmental relations. The framework of a kind, Christian disposition provided a bridge between the war advocates and the peace advocates; perhaps, the narrative states, there are some “bad” Indians the government should be kill, but maybe there are “good” Indians that Euro-Americans should save because of their natural inclinations toward Christianity. The mixed messages of the narrative reflect the varied attempts by western Native Americans and the United States government to find an acceptable solution to the Euro-American settlement of western lands and Native Americans’ shrinking hunting grounds. The efforts of the government to turn Native Americans into Christian farmers were popular with some Euro-American advocates. Proponents of this policy believed that education and assimilation were the only effective defense against Native American raids of western settlers. Other Coloradoans advocated more extreme policies, such as Pitkin’s extermination plan. The Meeker captivity narrative walks a fine line between these two positions.

Despite the apparent complexities in the captivity narrative regarding race and action, the narrative glosses over the complexities that led up to the Meeker Massacre. Susan’s religious disposition played a significant role in this masking, in as much as the authors used morality to negotiate and simplify the complexities of United States expansion into Native American lands. Instead of situating the Meeker Massacre within the framework of miner and rancher intrusions onto reservation lands, or seeing it as Ute
frustration with the lack of food supplies at the agency, or as the result of United States
government intrusion into the private affairs of livelihood, the Meeker captivity narrative
is framed as a justification for military regulation of Native Americans, tempered only by
a call to remember the few Indians who have a tender, noble, Christian disposition. Like
black and white hats in cowboy movies, religious identity served as a way to quickly
identify the Utes who were on the side of the Euro-Americans and those who were not.

“Of Outrageous Treatment at Night”

Employing Susan’s Christian disposition as a means to identify the “good”
Indians was further complicated by Arvilla, Josephine, and Flora Price’s reports of
having been raped by some of the Ute men. The 1880 Congressional Commission
concerned itself with the “indignities” suffered in part because the Commission wished to
punish the men responsible for the rapes. However, throughout the course of the
congressional investigation, discussion of rapes moved from individual assaults to this
question: were the Utes were moral enough to own land in Colorado? Thus, Congress’s
shift from particular criminals to the general population signaled a continued emphasis on
the role of morality in shaping property ownership. Throughout the investigation, it
became clear that the government sought to regulate how land was used and to specify
which races and ethnicities were moral enough to own property. Through the
Congressional investigation, acts of rape by Ute men, while never mentioned directly,
became an indicator of the overall morality of the Utes. Rather than criminalizing the
men responsible, the entire tribe was placed on trial. Rape became a subtext throughout
the investigation and, subsequently, a primary justification for removal of the entire tribe.
For both nineteenth-century Euro-Americans and Utes, captives’ bodies were central to political negotiations. For the Utes, the captivity economy had long served as the primary cultural mechanism through which Native American nations negotiated with each other. While Susan’s capture by the Sioux and Ouray son’s captivity demonstrate the ways in which Utes negotiated with other tribes, these two cases also demonstrate the way the United States government intervened and participated in these political negotiations. The Cavalry and Indian agents rescued Susan and restored her to her family; similarly, in Ouray’s case, the return of his son became central to the 1868 treaty negotiations. Through the captivity of Arvilla, Josephine, and Flora, women’s bodies became central to political negotiations for both Utes and Euro-Americans. For Euro-Americans, the unspoken presence of the women’s rape framed the subtext of the public debate about removal. In the initial newspaper accounts of the captivity, the women stressed that they had not been “offered indignities.” Indeed, in the Chicago Tribune account, Susan’s heroic actions including shielding the women from the men’s “indignities.” However, once the testimonies of the women were recorded, several newspapers hinted at the fact that the women had been raped. In the Congressional testimony, however, respect for the women’s privacy prevented the lawmakers from a lengthy discussion of this crime. Despite the active relegation of these acts of violence to private, unspoken concepts, rape as well as the use of women’s bodies became one of the primary frameworks for the governmental decision to terminate Ute land rights.

\[41\] To see how this dynamic shaped New Mexico borderlands political relationships, see: James F. Brooks, “‘This Evil Extends Especially... to the Feminine Sex’: Negotiating Captivity in the New Mexico Borderlands,” Feminist Studies 22, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 279-309.
In 1879, Arvilla, Josephine, and Flora worked to protect their public reputation, employing phrases in line with Victorian sensibilities. Several days after the release, the Chicago Tribune declared that Susan shielded the women from “indignities which the bucks offered.” Colorado newspapers also specifically noted that the women did not “suffer a fate worse than death.” Other newspaper articles followed the pattern of the Chicago Tribune and lauded Susan for protecting the women from the Ute men. Adams, in his Congressional Testimony, stated that Josephine initially denied being raped. When he asked her how the Indians had treated her, he said that she replied, “Well, better than she had expected.” I asked her whether they had offered her any indignity to her person. She made the off-hand remark, “O, no, Mr. Adams, nothing of that kind.”

Eventually, the full narrative of the women’s “treatment” became part of the public record through both the Congressional Testimony and the newspapers. The Cavalry had transported the women to Ouray’s home in present-day Montrose, Colorado. From there, the women were taken back to Greeley, where they returned to their Union Colony home. The government requested that Adams travel to Greeley in order to collect official statements. He first interviewed Flora, a 16-year-old who was the wife of one of the laborers killed in the attack and mother to two children. Flora, primarily concerned that the newspapers would find out about the “indignities” she suffered, expressed great trepidation when Adams asked her about her treatment while in captivity. After Adams reminded her that she was under oath and assured her that he would not leak the official

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42“A Strategic Squaw.” Chicago Daily Tribune, October 29, 1879.


44Some newspapers did report that the women had been raped. See “General Hatch denies that the entire male portion of the Ute nation outraged the Meeker women,” The Globe, (Atchison, KS) Jan 10, 1880.
record, she said, “Well, this Uncompahgre Ute and Johnson outraged me.” When Adams asked if it was by force, she said “Yes, sir, by force.”

Arvilla’s testimony confirmed Flora’s, and Arvilla stated that Douglas, one of the leaders of the White River Utes, had “outraged” her. Arvilla also noted some of the benefits of being a “subchief’s squaw.” When Adams asked her about the “outrages,” she stated: “It was made known to me that if I did not submit I would be killed or subjected to something of that kind, and after I gave up nothing was said about it. Douglas and I had connection once, and no more. I was afraid he had disease.” Arvilla had notification that she was expected to comply with Douglas’s wishes, not from Douglas, but she said “His children said I had to be Ute squaw that night, and used indecent language. Johnnie gave me to understand that I was to be Ute squaw. I said I was going to wait for Douglas; he had taken me. I expect he wanted to have everything ready for him. I was made to understand I was to submit when he came.” In this testimony, Arvilla noted that one advantage to living in Douglas’s tent was that his name offered protection against the other Indians. When they approached her, she said that she was Douglas’s squaw and they left her alone.

In her testimony, Josephine also carefully couched her experience. Pah-sone had captured her and when Adams asked her if Pah-Sone treated her well, her response was: “Well, I do not know. No better than what I expected when I was first captured, because I know the Utes and know their natures pretty well. . . . of course, we were insulted a good many times; we expected to be.” Adams asked for clarification about what she meant by “insult,” and she replied: “Of outrageous treatment at night.”

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45 White River Ute Commission Investigation, 17-18

46 White River Ute Commission Investigation, 26-7.
Although Adams could have asked follow up questions about the specifics of Josephine’s “outrageous treatment at night,” he did not. Instead, he finished his line of questioning about the rapes.

Between Nov. 12 and Nov. 28, 1879, Adams collected Ute testimonies at Ouray’s home in western Colorado. Over several weeks, Adams collected about ten testimonies of Ute men who had been at the agency during the outbreak. Unsurprisingly, none of the testimonies mentioned sexual contact between the captors and the captives. Douglas, however, justified capturing Arvilla. “She was running around loose and nobody to take care of her when I found her,” he testified, “so I took her to my house.”

Isolated from towns, the women were in a perilous survival situation. With the agency food stores depleted and the nearest white settlement over ninety miles away, captivity was a life-saving circumstance.

Throughout the history of Native American captivities of European and Euro-American people, the intimacy of life as a captive has invited reflection on the psychology around the roles that captors and captives assume. Undoubtedly, the complexities of the immediate situation perplexed the women—with their husbands and father dying or already dead and the isolation of the agency, the Ute warriors offered protection, food, and survival. Within the bounds of captivity, captors and their hostages would share intimate day-to-day activities. In such a brief episode, Josephine, Arvilla, and Flora encountered only a taste of the complex intimacy of captivity, but their bonds to their captors were deep. From the newspaper accounts and the captivity narrative, it is

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47 White River Ute Commission Investigation, 43-44.

48 White River Ute Commission Investigation, 5.
clear that all three captives connected with Susan. Additionally, Josephine participated in a healing ceremony for an infant, an honor bestowed on few non-Utes during the era. While Josephine appeared to be popular among the Utes before the captivity, her inclusion in this intimate ceremony suggests that she was treated as family. The women’s survival depended on their captors; without the assistance from the Utes, these women would have likely died attempting to reach help. Thus, the bonds would have been real; however, the bonds were complicated by the acts of violence that punctuated the relationships.

Within the legal records, the rapes of the women became a subtext within the Congressional hearings. After Adams collected the initial testimonies, a Congressional Commission requested an in-house hearing. From January to April 1880, the commission heard from Adams, Josephine, a variety of Colorado politicians and citizens, and a handful of Utes. In accordance with Victorian sensitivity about sex, Josephine did not testify about her “treatment” in Congress; Adams did. Josephine’s “private” encounter became a matter of public record, and a primary source for judgment of the outcome of property rights for the Utes. However, Josephine’s attack haunted the testimony. When asked about the character of the Utes, Josephine characterized the bands that frequently were off the reservation by noting that “They had been for years going through North and Middle Parks, scaring what women they could find, murdering stray miners, and stealing horses. They had plenty of money and plenty of horses, and, as they never did any work, they must have got them some way” (emphasis mine). Adams had already testified by

49Josephine Meeker, 17.

50Testimony in Relation to the Ute Indian Outbreak, 74.
the time Josephine started her testimony; it would have taken a cold human being to not read her experience of rape into her characterization of the Utes. Her presence in front of the Congressional Commission spoke to the absent presence of her rape. If Josephine had been vulnerable, other white women would be as well.

Subsequent testimonies reflected Josephine’s characterization by citing the generalized fear of Colorado citizens because of the proximity of such “hostile savages.” This was done primarily through the fear of what could happen to white women. William Byers, the editor of the *Rocky Mountain Tribune* and resident of Middle Park, testified that Colorow, a White River Ute who did not stay within the boundaries of the reservation, reportedly terrorized the people living near a certain mining settlement. “It was very common for him to go in there and intimidate women and children,” Byers claimed. “I have known of his going to a house, and finding a woman at home alone, take her by the hair and make the motion of scalping and warn her that if she and her people did not leave within a certain number of “sleeps” he would scalp them. I never knew of his going further than those threats, but that created, of course, a great deal of alarm.”

While Byers’ testimony focused on specific actions by one Ute, Governor Fredrick Pitkin’s testimony generalized the terror from the perceived threat of having Ute neighbors. On testifying about the relations between Euro-Americans and the Utes, he reflected: “I think the great mass of people have a sort of chill run over them when they come in contact with them [the Utes], except in places with some population. They are a dangerous looking people, their style of dress and their demeanor, and the fact that they

51 *Testimony in Relation to the Ute Indian Outbreak*, 150.
do not talk much makes the white people generally afraid of an Indian. I confess that has been always my feeling since I have known them.”

While Governor Pitkin focused his generalized fear of Indians based on stereotypes of the silent Indian, his testimony effectively legitimated unchecked racial stereotypes as a means to protect “citizens,” a population that included seemingly vulnerable women and children. The Utes’ reputed silence along with their fashion choices became a means to judge the morality of the entire race. The rape of the captured women stood in as a testimony for what could be possible, or even what would most likely happen to other Euro-American women if the Utes were allowed to stay in Colorado. The Congressional Commission was also interested in the “treatment” of the women simply because they wanted to identify the culprits in order to bring the men to justice. However, despite the Congressional Commission’s focus on identifying the individuals who were responsible for Nathan Meeker’s death and the rapes of the women, the Commission frequently slipped into probes of whether the White River Utes should be allowed to stay in Colorado, based, in part, on the fear that Ute men would continue to attack white women.

From the congressional testimonies, it is clear that despite the women’s desire to keep the acts of sexual violence relegated to quiet, family histories, the rapes of the white women were central to the justification for Ute ethnic cleansing. Women’s bodies and the treatment of them became central to both Utes and Euro-Americans in the struggle over land. While Euro-American expectations for the treatment of women’s bodies in the context of land disputes differs substantially from Ute men’s treatment of women’s

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52 Testimony in Relation to the Ute Indian Outbreak, 124.
bodies, the private acts of rape formed the basis of political opinion about Ute land rights. The link between women’s bodies and land rights is a significant thread between Ute ownership of the land and Euro-American expansion into Ute land. The inability for lawmakers to identify the individual perpetrators that could be tried within the rule of law led to the legal persecution and the removal of the entire tribe.

Meeker’s Character

While the captive women’s treatment at the hands of their captors was a subtext in the Congressional hearings, the committee explicitly questioned Meeker’s morality. Viewed from a variety of standpoints, including that of the Utes and his family, Meeker’s sense of morality and his character was as much on trial as were the Utes. While most popular representations of the events portrayed the Utes as immoral savages and Meeker as a benevolent, caring father figure, a handful of witnesses testified otherwise. Utes claimed that Meeker had given them tracts of land, which Meeker then demanded that they return. Rather than being a pony pasture or a racetrack, some Utes testified that the land in question was privately held land, intended for houses—much like an empty tract of land waiting for suburban development. According to Ute testimony, the Utes were merely protecting their individually held property against Meeker’s indecision at best and thievery at worst.

The link between Meeker’s moral character and the cause of the outbreak was significant: if Nathan Meeker was simply a “bad man” and inept Indian Agent, the Utes potentially could remain on their land. If Meeker incited the Utes for good reason, then the matter could be taken care of without punishing the entire tribe. Thus, the morality of
one person became central to determining the outcome of the White River Agency confrontation.

Ute testimonies entered into the public record through Adams’ official investigation in the month following the captives’ release. Douglas, who the record named as being the chief of the White River Utes, testified first. He identified Meeker’s lack of moral character as the cause of the confrontation, explaining that the conflict between the Utes and Meeker began earlier that year. Meeker had divided pieces of land in order to work them, but also to give to individual Utes. Douglas testified, “He gave each of us a piece of land for house site.” After the Utes who had been assigned the land near the river began to dream about their future, permanent houses, Douglas said that Meeker changed his mind. “The agent said after the sites were divided up that he wanted that land for plowing. He wished the land already divided up for houses to be plowed.” Like other testimonies, Douglas said that in the context of the question of plowing tracts of land, Meeker had asked the Utes to kill their horses, “so as to save the grass.” Douglas testified that he ignored this request, but

I told him he had better quit breaking up the ground where he had already given us for houses and take some other land for breaking up. Then I told the agent that it were better that he should wait a while until I could speak to the Indians about this breaking up the land where the houses were to be built. The agent then asked me why I could not take the houses from there where they were building. I said because I could not; it was impossible.

Douglas stated that Meeker pushed his reasoning by arguing “the land was not ours . . . that the land was bought by the government with blankets and such things.”

53White River Ute Commission Investigation, 3.
mentioned the horses, but the central issue for him was that Meeker was trespassing on land that he did not own.⁵⁴

Immediately after Douglas testified, Johnson, Ouray’s brother-in-law, Susan’s husband, and “captain” of the White River Utes, added to and confirmed Douglas’s testimony. Johnson said: “‘One time I was in my house and Agent Meeker came to my house and told me to come here. The agent told me that it was better that I move from there. I answered him that I could not move because the government had given us orders to build houses, and already I had my house built. How could I move?’” Later on that day, Johnson said that agency workers came back to his land with a plow. He again spoke to Meeker. He reported that he told Meeker: “it was not right that he should order the men to plow my land.” In response, Johnson reported that Meeker said that Johnson “was always a troublesome man, and that it was likely . . . [that he] might come to the calaboose.” Johnson expressed that he did not want to go to prison, nor did he think he should have to. He concluded his testimony:

I told the agent that it would be better for another agent to come, who was a good man, and was not talking such things. I then took the agent by the shoulder and told him that it was better that he should go. Without doing anything else to him—striking him or anything else—I just took him by the shoulder. I was not mad at him. Then I went to my house. Two days after I had a talk with the agent. I moved my lodge, but not my house, to a place where I could get feed for my animals; and from there I moved to another place. That is all.⁵⁵

The testimonies of Douglas and Johnson complicate the narrative of what caused the White River Ute Agency outbreak. Rather than representing conflicting cultural

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⁵⁴White River Ute Commission Investigation, 5; Douglas’s argument that the land was held privately may indicate that Utes adopted Euro-American land owning practices. Early adoption of individually held property also happened among Native Americans in Northern California. See Khal Schnedier, “Making Indian Land in the Allotment Era: Northern California’s Indian Rancherias,” Western History Quarterly, Winter 2010, 429-450.

⁵⁵White River Ute Commission Investigation, 7-8.
conceptions of land use, this incident very well could have been simply about property rights—suggesting that the Utes were “assimilating” to Euro-American attitudes about land ownership. Douglas and Johnson presented themselves as modern men defending their individually held property against a trespasser. From this testimony, it appeared that they took the government’s desire to civilize Native Americans at face value, and like any other nineteenth-century American, they believed they had a right to protect their property against trespassers.

Johnson and Douglas identified the root cause of the outbreak as Meeker’s inability to govern well because of poor character. Unlike many of the Euro-Americans who testified, these men separated the actions of an individual from the morality of a group. Rather than accusing all Euro-Americans of being duplicitous, they suggested that Meeker had a flawed character, because he was unable to follow through on his word and refused to engage the Utes in diplomatic conversation. Meeker may have been unsuited to running their agency, but Johnson and Douglass did not reject the entire project of United States Indian administration. These testimonies reveal men willing to engage in the government’s project to turn them into individual property holders who are responsible for deciding what to do with their own land. They not only were willing to engage in this project, but according to their testimony, the only thing that prevented them from doing so was Meeker’s insistence that their land be plowed. From this perspective, Meeker’s plowing was an act of trespassing act that violated the men’s rights to private property ownership.

The Euro-American investigators quickly discredited these testimonies because the testifiers began contradicting themselves. In a series of questions about where he was
during the outbreak, Johnson denied that he, his sons, or brothers were involved; however, when he was asked about his brother’s injuries, he said that his brother was in the fight. So-wa-wick, who was named as a captain of the Nupretea Utes, testified that the problem started because “the whole question was about the land and what the agent said about our lands.” Then, he proceeded to answer every question with a “no,” including this question from Adams: “Was I ever in your tent on the Grand River?” To this question, Adams responded:

The answer to the last question was not true. I was in his tent, and in his tent we held a council which lasted from eleven o’clock at night until six o’clock in the morning. So-wa-wick was present, and agreed with the others about what was done; and today he comes here and says he does not know anything. For that reason I believe that he has not spoken the truth, and does not want to speak the truth. I believe also that none of them want to speak the truth, and it is, therefore, almost unnecessary to go any further.

At this point in the investigation, Adams asked Ouray if he could either identify the men who were responsible for Meeker’s death or, at the minimum, make the Utes testify. Ouray replied that while he was sure that some White River Utes were responsible, he could not name them nor could he compel the Utes to speak the truth. He demanded: “Show me any act of law by which a man is compelled to criminate [sic] himself.”

Once again, the Utes demonstrated understanding of United States law and the rights that American citizens were entitled to under that law: the right to property and the right to not incriminate oneself. However, the racism that barred the Utes from being protected under that law also clouded the testimony. Rather than recognizing the rights of the men

56 White River Ute Commission Investigation, 8.
57 White River Ute Commission Investigation, 9.
58 White River Ute Commission Investigation, 12.
59 White River Ute Commission Investigation, 12.
to not testify against themselves, the Euro-American members of the investigation simply disregarded all the testimony and explained the behavior through a racialized lens.

Despite the difficulties of making their side of the story heard, Ouray successfully argued that a Ute delegation should be sent to Washington, D.C. for the previously mentioned congressional investigation. While Ouray was able to argue successfully, he was unable to protect Douglas and eleven other Utes from being escorted away in order to be punished by the government. Douglas was transported to Fort Leavenworth, where he was executed along with eleven other Utes. In the meantime, in an effort to gain a fair trial for the rest of the Utes, Ouray and his wife, Chipeta, traveled to Washington along with Jack, So-wa-wick, and Henry James, all three White River Utes.

In the days leading up to the hearing, the Meeker family debated within their family circle about the public presentation of their story and how Nathan Meeker’s memory was being treated. Many of the family members believed that if anyone offered any sympathy towards the Utes, Nathan’s name would be sullied. Rozanne Meeker’s lecture tour throughout the west aimed to raise support for the Removal movement as a way to keep her father’s memory alive. Unlike her father and Josephine, she argued that United States citizens should demand an end to government support of “the savages in idleness and the Indian ring in robbery.” The Indian Ring was a conspiracy theory nursed along by several governmental reformers, including Rose’s brother, Ralph Meeker. Supposedly, a powerful group of whites siphoned off millions of government dollars intended for Indian civilization projects. These immoral, greedy people simultaneously

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grew rich on the government’s civilizing program and contributed to Indian idleness.

After learning that the Utes would be traveling to Washington D.C., Rose wrote to the *New York Times*, complaining that “these Indians would never be punished because they were not white men.” Echoing her brother’s disdain for the “special treatment” of the Utes, she suggested that Coloradoans kill the party traveling to Washington “by simply putting a rope necktie around the neck of each, which is to fit close and snug, thereby relieving these murderers and their friends at Washington all further anxiety.”

In contrast, Josephine’s lecture tours and captivity narrative described Ute life with respect and awe, while at the same time condemning the violence her family suffered. She seemed reluctant to take a stand on assigning a specific fate to the entire group. Through the lecture circuit and the book, she revealed her own ambivalence about what the government’s response should be. In a letter to Ralph, she discussed meeting with Ouray, Chipeta, and Jack, who were locked in a hotel. She said that Jack wasn’t friendly to her until she “told him she was ‘no mad.’” Then, Jack warmed to her and told her that he always liked her. She was concerned that the three travelers were afraid and worn out. She also wished that Rozane and Arvilla would calm down, and asked Ralph to talk to them.

Arvilla also made requests of Ralph: namely, to use his newspaper contacts to condemn the Utes, clearly and consistently. She was concerned that Ralph had made some statements in support of the Utes, thereby causing people to be so horrified that they “nearly lost all sympathy for us.” In another letter to Ralph, Arvilla hoped “that

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62 Letter. “Josie to Ralph,” January 11, 1880, DPL.
you will not bring shame and folly into your family by upholding these murderous fiends.”64 Throughout these appeals to Ralph and Josie to not exhibit public ambivalence about the appropriate action towards the Utes, Arvilla wanted to maintain a particular memory of Nathan Meeker. A proper memory of Nathan Meeker would portray him as a moral man, who died at the hands of an uncaring government and murderous fiends.

Josephine’s moral ambivalence halted for the testimony. Like Ralph and her sister, she targeted the members of the “Indian Ring” for contributing to the negative workings of the Ute agency. In another letter to Ralph, written a few days before her testimony, she said that she planned to have all the testimonies match each other in order to counter the “New York religious board [and Reverend] Danforth,” who she claimed were “testifying heavily against father and in favor of the Indians in order to get big government contracts.”65

Josephine characterized the comments about her father correctly: several people who knew Nathan commented that while he seemed to be a good man, he was ill-equipped to work with the Utes. Robert Fisk, the Unitarian who had been in charge of appointing Ute agents before the government took charge, testified that Meeker was about as unfit for the position as a man could possibly be to go into that country, take hold of the White River Utes and manage them; destitute of that particular tact and knowledge of the Indian character which I required in an agent; a man of too many years to being with, unhappily constituted in his mental organization for any such place. His whole agency and administration I regard as almost a failure; and his management of the Utes when they became troublesome, and his threats to bring the soldiers in (if the reports we hear are true, I don’t know anything

63 Arvilla Meeker, Letter, “Arvilla to Ralph,” December 31, 1879, DPL.

64 Arvilla Meeker, Letter, “Arvilla to Ralph,” January 5, 1880, DPL.

65 Letter. “Josie to Ralph,” January 25, 1880, DPL.
about it myself, I am merely giving you my opinion now) had very much to do with the final massacre.\textsuperscript{66}

Other testimonies suggested that Meeker might have been the cause of the outbreak. Charles Adams testified that the cause was threefold: first, Meeker “insisted upon their working and farming, and they did not want to.” Second, Adams said that “the most common complaint . . . was that he one day said something to them, and the next day he took it back and said something else. He seemed to have a want of character.”\textsuperscript{67} Finally, Meeker, perhaps because of a lack of character, brought “the soldiers there without any necessity whatever, and that through the coming of the soldiers, several of their people had been killed by the soldiers first.”\textsuperscript{68} Rather than locating blame with the Utes, Adams and Fisk joined with the Ute Testimony to suggest that Meeker himself, because of his questionable moral character, was the cause of the outbreak.

The dual representation of Meeker as benevolent father and cruel taskmaster obscures the complexity of Ute Removal. Nathan Meeker was not the obvious choice to be the White River Ute Indian Agent because of his age, lack of experience, and absence of Ute language skills. However, placing his lack of character at the center of the cause of the outbreak whitewashed the political forces involved in Removal. It ignored the ineffectiveness of rations distribution and it overlooked the tense and unstable relationship between Euro-Americans and Colorado’s Native Americans. The representation of Nathan Meeker as martyred hero, however, also omits his agency in

\textsuperscript{66} Testimony in relation to the Ute Indian Outbreak, 45-46.

\textsuperscript{67} Testimony in relation to the Ute Indian Outbreak, 10.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
escalating the conflict and suggests that the Utes had no good political reasons to go to war with the United States and its representatives.

Central to the justification for removal was the assumption that morality determined rights to the land. This morality was racialized, because Euro-Americans were presumed to have rights already, unlike the Utes. Additionally, this morality was imbued with assumptions about gender: Susan had easier access to Euro-American morality than did her male counterparts, and therefore, had more rights to the land. Contrary to Jefferson’s model of the yeoman farmer, where a landowner becomes a model citizen simply by owning a piece of the country he lived in, those on the margins of the US economic system had to prove their moral worthiness before entering into it. Susan, because of her represented Christian disposition, became a “model citizen,” worthy of retaining partial land rights in her ancestral home, but she would live out the rest of her life without her family. In defense of Ute actions, Ouray, Johnson, and Douglas used the trope of moral character to suggest that Nathan Meeker had been in the wrong. Based on the logic of their Euro-American counterparts, this tactic should have worked. However, this is not how the story unfolded.

Ultimately, the Congressional commission determined that the Utes were guilty of starting the outbreak and Nathan Meeker was vindicated. Since the Ute treaty stipulated that they could stay on their land only under the condition that they observed United States law, Congress moved towards removing all the Ute bands from western Colorado, including the groups that were not involved in the confrontation at Milk Creek and the Agency. In the midst of these negotiations, Ouray, the most powerful Ute diplomat, died. There was no clear replacement for his leadership.
Removal

On September 1, 1881, the sagebrush landscape in the Uncompahgre Valley, an area located in western Colorado, was dotted with nine United States Cavalry and nine infantry companies. Fourteen hundred Ute men, women, and children camped on the floor of the valley, in the middle of their grazing sheep, goats, and horses. The surrounding rolling hillsides, brown from the summer’s heat, were crowned with six United States issued field artillery units. In the distance, to the south, the snow-capped San Juan Mountains foretold the coming winter’s snows. To the east, the Gunnison River flowed through the Black Canyon and into the valley. Its tributaries provided welcome respite for the encamped peoples and their livestock from the late summer desert heat. The Grand Mesa, one of the world’s largest mesa formations, cast an early evening shadow on the troops and stood as a silent witness to the increasingly tense encounters below. The troops on the hillside uneasily watched the Ute families camped below. Surrounding the Utes and the Cavalry cantonment were Euro-American squatters, eager to try their hand at making the desert bloom, enchanted by the agricultural possibilities of the convergence of the Colorado and Gunnison rivers and the ancient, rich volcanic soil.

The soldiers’ orders were to remove the Utes and their sheep, goats, and horses from their nearly fifteen million-acre reservation to an existing four and a half million acre reservation in Eastern Utah. Camped near a bend in the river with access to two prominent bluffs, the soldiers had an easy view of the Ute camp in the valley below. Their position meant “not a straw in its vagaries of flight through the atmosphere or a cloud of dust hovering over the Utes's camps but underwent a scrutiny through some
officer’s field glass.” The military remained vigilant because the possibility of an uprising seemed real; the Utes had proven their military prowess in the past. The stakes were high and the Ute leaders had made it clear that they were not eager to cede their territory to the United States government.

Although the military presence served as a constant reminder for the Utes of the government’s intentions—and a reminder of the military superiority of the United States—Ute leaders vied for a continuation of diplomatic exchanges. The Utes agreed neither to their removal from their home, nor to the separation from the place where their forefathers were buried. The previous thirty years of interaction with the United States government had been a series of concessions to American demands, but had also yielded some positive results. While the nation had ceded mineral rights and a portion of mineral-rich land in the San Juan Mountains, the Utes had been more successful at defending their borders than other Colorado Native Americans. Diplomatic negotiation had served them well in the past and despite the military presence, the Utes might have thought resistance would lead to diplomacy.

However, the Cavalry did not respond to this resistance with further negotiations. In his 1913 memoir, Sydney Jocknick, one of the first Euro-American residents of Colorado’s Western Slope, recalled the scene of the Ute removal on that September day. The Cavalry had been ordered to remove Utes earlier that summer. Instead of an easy escorting job, they encountered resistance on the part of the Utes, who insisted that they had not agreed to the removal. They were also distrustful of the Cavalry’s intentions—

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69 Sydney Jocknick, 220.

70 Jocknick, 222.
General MacKenzie initially assured Ute leaders that the military was there to prevent the white squatters from jumping the gun on the settlement of the reservation. However, the impressive presence of the field artillery combined with the vast number of mounted soldiers signaled the United States government’s willingness to fight for the removal of the Utes.

Ute leaders prolonged the removal as long as they could, citing a need for at least two weeks to gather their livestock. When those two weeks passed, they requested more time to hunt for game in preparation for the journey and impending winter. The Utes were stalling—perhaps they were hoping that Chief Colorow would emerge as a leadership replacement for Ouray. While some Utes mourned the death of Ouray and wondered about the fate of their people because of his untimely death, other Ute leaders were eager to try their hand at negotiating with the government in their own way. Perhaps stalling was due to the lack of a single, strong leader mutually recognized by the Utes and the Cavalry. In addition to questions over leadership, the Utes could simply have been counting on the weather to make travel to the new reservation impossible. Maybe they thought the Cavalry would run through their supplies and eventually leave them alone.71

Whatever the reason, it was clear to the military that the Utes were not going to give up their land easily. However, pressure to have the Utes removed was mounting on all sides. The United States government wished to resolve mounting tensions between Coloradoans and the Utes. Coloradoans wanted to live out their dream of a civilized West—free from worries about raiding Indians. Jocknick reported that after over two weeks of unproductive negotiations, at least a day or two before their ultimate removal,

71Jocknick, 222.
some of the Ute warriors decided to confront the Cavalry head-on. Ute warriors followed the river, riding in a bunch, and “yelling like so many demons let loose.” However, General MacKenzie had prepared his troops—once the Utes came around a bend in the river, they were greeted with a Cavalry and infantry troop, neatly lined up, prepared to fire on any direct threat to their safety. Six field artillery units supported the men. Concluding that any fight would be unevenly matched, the Ute warriors returned to their camp.

After the incident, General MacKenzie became impatient, and perhaps concerned that another uprising would not be as easily curtailed. At 2:00 a.m., MacKenzie sent for the Indian commissioners and requested that they signed the order to remove the Utes. MacKenzie enticed the commissioners with the promise that he would begin the removal of the Utes. It is unclear when MacKenzie received the necessary signatures, but when he did, he issued the orders to remove the Utes.

In the early morning hours of September 1, MacKenzie gave the Utes two hours to pack up their camp and to ready their livestock for immediate departure. His orders were reinforced by the field artillery and the numerous troops ready to fire when ordered. When the Utes protested, MacKenzie again emphasized the two-hour deadline, “and they finally packed up and left.” Jocknick said that MacKenzie used fiery, explicit language to urge the Utes to leave the Uncompahgre Valley. An impressive mounted army and the six field artillery backed MacKenzie’s colorful language.

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72 Jocknick, 225.

73 Jocknick, 225
Ute oral history and Euro-American written history diverge at this point. Ute tradition recalls that the women were forced to pack quickly and could only take what they could carry. According to this narrative, the Cavalry was ordered to fire on the horses, leaving no horses behind for women to pack their tents and other household belongings.\(^{74}\) One can only imagine the scene—agency reports and newspaper accounts numbered the horses at least at 1,500.\(^{75}\) If the horses were massacred at the hands of the Cavalry, it would have been a gruesome, indescribable scene. Chaos and mayhem would have reigned, with women and children screaming, and men reduced to tears as their animals were shot and killed. Belongings, once carted around the reservation on horseback, would have to be gathered in the arms and the backs of the people.

In contrast, the historical record produced by Euro-Americans suggests a relatively peaceful departure. According to newspaper accounts, Utes were escorted along with all their livestock to their new home in Utah. The Army provided boats at river crossings and assisted the removal in any way they could. The details of General MacKenzie’s order to leave in two hours did not appear in the major Colorado newspapers. Instead, journalists reported that the Utes simply left and Euro-American ranchers, miners, and farmers filled in the spaces the Native Americans and their livestock left empty.\(^{76}\) One questions the accuracy behind the orderly departure of fourteen hundred people from their homeland, supervised by an array of military

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\(^{74}\) Clifford Duncan, “Introduction to First Annual Smoking River Powwow” [speech given at the First Annual Smoking River Powwow, Meeker, CO, July 25, 2008].

\(^{75}\) ARICA 1878.

personnel. Newspapers and politicians would have had a vested interest in protecting readers and voters from the grotesque consequences of the freshly blazed trails of civilization.

Conclusion

In the government’s decision to remove the Utes from western Colorado, morality governing women’s bodies was inexorably linked to land ownership. While the representation of Susan’s actions was attributed to a variety of factors, such as her previous captivity, reports of her Christian disposition motivated Jane Swisshelm to recommend that Susan be given land in Colorado, while the rest of the Utes be removed. Susan’s honorable actions, not her tribes’ treaties, warranted landownership. In contrast, Ute men testified that Meeker had violated their property ownership rights because of his lack of character. Through these testimonies, Ute men suggested that not only had they adapted to the United States’ governments’ expectations for land ownership, the Ute men acted to protect their constitutional rights. Like the Euro-Americans, Ute men also framed their argument through a discourse of morality. Finally, the intersection of gender, morality, and land ownership crystallized around the captives’ rape and the way that the rape set the tone for the subsequent Congressional hearings. The rapes, although indirectly mentioned throughout the hearings, formed an influential subtext during the proceedings.

In modern memories, Utes and Meeker residents actively forget the sexual attacks on Josephine, Arvilla, and Flora. At the 2009 Smoking River Powwow, I was in a conversation between a Meeker resident and a Ute man. The conversation included the specific Utes involved in the confrontation, the military background of some of the Utes,
and the current community projects to memorialize the battles. After jumping through a range of specific and concrete historic data, the conversation turned towards veiled, abstract talk. Without naming the rapes, both men agreed that they would not talk about it, and they agreed that it should not be part of public histories. Nineteenth-century politicians followed similar patterns—the women’s experience was their own and should not be talked about. However, the sexual violence of the women remained a present absence throughout the proceedings, making an act supposedly located within the private realm have real public consequences: the loss of twelve million acres of land for the Utes.

Reluctance to discuss the rape and the captivity economy points to the ways that the colonial model of attributing moral virtue to land rights continues to be enacted in modern memories and repeated acts of forgetting. On the one hand, American colonial aspirations exploited the captivity economy’s explicit violation of American morality. If Ute men were unable to behave properly around white women, they were not (and could never be) the right kind of property owner, who ideally, was a model moral citizen. On the other hand, twentieth-first century sensibilities attribute the characterization of Utes and other Plains Indians as warriors as implicitly racist and imbued with the power structures of nineteenth-century American land politics. Thus, acts of rape within a captivity economy are again relegated to “private” history, although these private acts carried public consequences that persist into the twenty-first century. Although people like Loya Arum are working to overcome the silence of the past, selective forgetting is still apparent in the current memories.
CHAPTER FOUR
MAKING UTE LAND RELIGION (1891-1941)

Introduction

In the fall of 2009, I made the trip from North Carolina to Colorado to participate in the second annual Smoking River Powwow. That year, the organizers moved the event from the summer to the fall in order to coordinate with the national sheepdog competition trials, whose grounds the Powwow shared. The Powwow committee adjusted the date to allow for well-groomed grass for the trials, which took place a few weekends earlier. As a result, the reconciliation event happened just one week before the 130th anniversary of the “Meeker Massacre.” Over the two days of dancing, only a few speakers mentioned this fact. However, for some attendees, the date made an impression. While I was standing in line for fry bread, I overheard a conversation between a white man and woman who had made the 100-mile trip from Grand Junction for the day’s events. In the course of their conversation, both expressed deep appreciation for the Ute spiritual connection to the land, which was a reoccurring theme of the event’s speakers. The woman then expressed dismay that the government had taken the land away from the Utes. Shaking her head, she exclaimed, “That’s what greed does to people.” The man
adamantly agreed—he said, “It’s a shame that they couldn’t learn from the Utes’ spirituality.”

This conversation represented the general spirit of religious tolerance and romanticization of Ute spirituality that was on display at the Powwow—a stark contrast to the encounters that had occurred over a century earlier. Through a shared experience of Native American religious practices, Euro-American attendees relished this expression of the United States’ homegrown religious diversity. Beyond this expression of religious tolerance, though, was an on-the-ground defining of what counts as “real” spirituality. In this casual re-working of the past, the two Powwow attendees participated in developing a cultural memory in which nineteenth-century Utes did not seek material wealth from the land, whereas the Euro-American settlers only interacted with the land for economic gain. Neither one of these otherwise introspective people connected the nineteenth-century government’s expansionist project to their current homes. As residents of western Colorado, both benefited from the acts of greed they were so quick to dismiss. This is an unremarkable conversation—many people outside of the Smoking River Powwow have participated in similar casual interpretations, attributing the United States’ nineteenth-century expansion to greed and capitalistic motivations. While it is the case that greed played a part in the United States expansionist project, Nathan Meeker and his counterparts would have understood their project through religious as well as economic terms.

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1 Author’s field notes from the Second Annual Smoking River Powwow, September 25-26, 2009.

2 Modern ideas of religion are dependent on intellectual developments in Western philosophy, starting during the Enlightenment. Enlightenment philosophers developed an idea of religion that was dependent upon the notion of separate spheres of politics, economics, and religion. See: Randall Styers, Making Magic and Timothy Fitzgerald, The Ideology of Religious Studies. In the American context, this modern idea of a
The current interpretation of Meeker’s history draws on discourses that Utes and their allies formulated in the first half of the twentieth century. This chapter argues that between 1882 and 1938, Euro-Americans and Utes worked together to define and systematize Ute Land Religion out of existing Ute and Euro-American cultural materials. Ute Land Religion, a term I employ in order to describe this process, is a shared cultural space constructed by Utes and their Euro-American allies out of existing ceremonial practices (such as the Bear Dance), emerging pan-Native American religious practices (such as the Sun Dance and peyote use), anthropological data, and Euro-American conceptions of the sublime in nature. Ute Land Religion functioned as a carefully monitored religious borderland between Euro-Americans and Utes. “Border police”—Utes and non-Utes alike—patrolled this cultural space for incursions of inauthentic religious practices—even as there was disagreement among practitioners about which practices fell outside the scope of real religion. Even as this cultural space served as a defining line between Utes and non-Utes, it was also a gathering space for Utes and non-Utes (both Native Americans and Euro-Americans) in which religious practices and ideas could be exchanged.

As a gathering space for Utes and their non-Ute allies, Ute Land Religion functioned to help Utes guard against governmental intrusions into their ceremonies. For non-Utes, an idealized vision of nature religion emerged in this space. By romanticizing

Ute religious practices, non-Utes defined authentic religion against the economic motivations of the “civilized” world. Thus, through the process of creating this space, anthropologists and fiction writers created a vision of religion that was divorced from economic considerations. How was it that economic motivations became so clearly divorced from spiritual and religious access to the land? How did the cultural memory about land develop so that twenty-first century people believe that Euro-Americans only valued land for economic purposes and Utes only value land for spiritual reasons?

These questions can be answered by tracing the way that Native American religious practices came to represent both religious diversity and religious pluralism for American citizens at the turn of the twentieth century. While some Euro-American neighbors of Native Americans merely tolerated their presence, others relished in their presence and worked to promote Native American culture through an idealized representation of Native American religion. The fifty-year period between 1890 and 1940 marked a critical turning point for Euro-American understanding and appreciation of

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3 Numerous scholars of religion have noted the intimate relationship between capitalism and religion. See: Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Stephan Kalberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). In the American context, scholars have used economic language to describe the way in which people choose religions. See: Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). However, while scholars have worked to describe the links between capitalistic systems and American religion, this chapter demonstrates the way in which on-the-ground perceptions of “authentic” Native American religion has been shaped by an explicit erasure of economics by Utes and non-Utes alike.

4 These questions have been framed by Bruno Latour’s description of modernity as being dependent on the myth of systemic purity. This is applicable to this case because it demonstrates the ways in which the separation of religion from economics is part of the project of modernity. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). These questions have also been informed by William E. Connelly’s concept of the “Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine,” in *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Duke University Press, 2008), 39-68.

5 This chapter builds on Courtney Bender’s definition of religious pluralism, that it is “a commitment to recognize and understand others across perceived or claimed lines of religious difference.” Bender, *After Pluralism*, 2.
Native American cultural traditions. As the Buffalo Bill show toured the country, children and adults alike learned about Native American practices and traditions. Native American sites in New Mexico became a popular destination for artists and tourists looking for an “authentic” primitive experience. Just as Native Americans gained popular support for their religious practices, Christian missionaries pressured the Bureau of Indian affairs to issue a circular prohibiting ceremonial dances, in an effort to continue nineteenth-century reformation movements. The fledging field of anthropology countered the missionaries’ efforts, as researchers began to document Native American practices and justify their practices as “real” religion. Ethnographers worked with haste out of fear that their notes would be the only evidence left of disappearing races, a fear justified by the continued spread of disease and starvation. By 1882, most Native Americans, including the Utes, had been relocated to reservations through programmatic ethnic cleansing. Euro-Americans, European immigrants, and railroad companies scrambled to settle the now empty land. Within eight years, Frederick Jackson Turner declared the frontier “closed.”

Scholars such as Joy Kasson, Alan Trachtenberg, and Phillip Deloria have documented the way that certain performances shaped Euro-American perceptions of Native American culture. Kasson’s text focuses on the way in which Buffalo Bill and Native Americans collaborated through “memory showmanship” to create a “passion play for the American frontier.” While Kasson focuses on the relationship among Native American performers and their Euro-American bosses and audiences, Deloria and

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Trachtenberg tease out the way that the emptiness of American identity has led Americans to fill the vacuum with an indigenous identity. Through his analysis of Euro-American literary fantasies of Native American life, Trachtenberg untangles the paradox of “nativeness” within a nation of immigrants and the way that the “dreams of Indians” helped Euro-Americans construct a shared national identity where there was none. Beginning with the “red face” revolutionaries donned at the Boston Tea Party, Phillip Deloria argues that throughout the United States’ history, Americans have “played Indian” in order to “play American.”

Calling attention to these performative acts, these works rightly signal the fragility of national and ethnic identities. As Deloria argued, Native American identities have provided a substantial foil and resource for Euro-Americans to construct a shared national identity. However, this was not a one-way street. Through the on-going processes of creating a national identity, Native Americans and Euro-Americans worked together to forge a pan-Native American identity out of the cultural resources at hand.

While the aforementioned studies analyze the way in which Native American identities developed in the early twentieth century, these studies overlook the significance of religion in shaping these ideas. Religion provided the glue to hold together diverse tribal identities and provided a centralized location for Native Americans to rally together for civil rights. In particular, Native American religious practices, notably the use of peyote in the Native American Church, Powwow dances, and the Sun Dance, served as unifying elements in crafting a trans-tribal ethnic identity. In addition to functioning as a

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means to situate a pan-Native American identity, these religious practices also provided a way for Native Americans to control their public image within mainstream American culture.\(^9\)

Amidst the urgency to settle the land and turn it into productive businesses, Euro-Americans developed a curiosity about Native American ceremonial practices. At the turn of the century, Euro-Americans paid admission charges in order to observe Native American religious practices, such as the Plains Indian Sun Dance and the Ute Bear Dance. Westerners who lived close to reservations would travel to see traditional dances performed; Euro-Americans in cities might attend performances given by Native Americans who were on tour. Their curiosity marked a significant shift in Euro-American perception of Ute religious practices. Unlike Nathan Meeker’s pronouncement that the Utes had not developed modern agricultural practices because they did not have religion, Euro-Americans in the following generation suggested that the Utes (as a representative sample of “un-touched” Native Americans) had the most pure, child-like religion of all the world’s inhabitants. It is possible that Euro-Americans labeled certain Ute cultural practices as religious simply because they no longer posed a threat to the government. Safely corralled on reservation land, they no longer occupied land that Euro-Americans wanted to use. Therefore, their dances became an interesting cultural artifact rather than a signal of war.\(^10\)


\(^10\)David Chidester makes a similar argument about the relationship between British officials and the Hottentots. While the colonizers first argued that the Hottentots had no religion, once they appeared to be
Rather than simply an object of lurid fascination, these performances served to generate cultural resources for Euro-Americans and Native Americans alike. For Euro-Americans, Native American religious practices provided material for an American identity of a religiously plural nation, that is, a nation that valued and promoted its religious diversity. To borrow a phrase from Deloria, Euro-Americans began to use Native American religious practices to “play religious pluralism.” This process was not merely Euro-American appropriation of Native American culture. Rather, as Deloria notes, Native Americans over the years have participated in these cultural processes, which in some cases, have been advantageous for native groups. For Native Americans, religious practices that had once been regionally and tribally specific became systematized into a pan-Indian identity through the interplay between the performances and accumulating ethnographic data. The interactions between Utes and Euro-Americans at the turn of the century illustrate how Native Americans and Euro-Americans worked together to forge national and ethnic identities out of religious identities.

After Removal

In order to locate these cultural processes, it is essential to understand the Utes’ historical context. After the Cavalry removed the Utes in 1882, Euro-Americans quickly populated Western Colorado. By 1890, the population of western Colorado was around 2,000 people. This increased to around 3,500 in 1900. Many of these residents immediately began plowing up the land to plant wheat, grapes, peaches, pears, apples, and cherries, realizing Nathan Meeker’s dream of turning over Colorado’s soil in order to develop an agricultural paradise. As coal became more important to the nation’s

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“tamed animals,” British officers began to notice their “religious” ceremonies. See Chidester, Savage Systems, 46.
economy, the coalmines that Nathan Meeker had discovered on the Ute reservation became significant operations. Farmers set out to conquer the arid climate through landscape-altering irrigation canal projects. Manure worked into the soil began to counteract the alkali that bubbled to the surface. Railroads built through mountain passes connected Western Colorado with the growing Plains, providing easier access for goods to be imported and produce to be exported. Catholics and Protestants built churches to accommodate the growing Euro-American population.  

At the former White River Ute Agency, settlers slowly built up a town. In 1880, soldiers stationed at the agency built a fort, and then a post office. After some debate, the Cavalry decided to honor Nathan Meeker’s death and name the post office “Meeker.” As families moved into the area, the name stuck. The military left the area in 1883 and in 1885, residents incorporated the town of Meeker.

While Colorado attracted increasingly more settlers, the Meeker family lived out the rest of their lives in their original Greeley home. Josephine continued to work for Senator Teller in Washington, D.C. However, in December of 1882, she fell seriously ill. She never recovered and died on December 20 when she was only twenty-five years old. Her body was transferred to Greeley, Colorado, where she was buried in the city’s Linn Grove cemetery. Her mother erected a substantial grave marker with the following inscription:

Born January 28, 1857, Died December 20, 1882,
Brave daughter who with me escaped foul death while captive in thy noble father slayers’ hands

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A stealthier foe has filched thy sweet young breath while lonely here I watch life's failing sands.

As she lived out her last years, Arvilla fought against the newspapers and the government—the two entities she felt had tainted her husband’s reputation. Writing to Ralph in 1882, she demanded that he not “give any facts to the newspapers. Tell them that you have nothing to say. Let us have no more of our affairs in public print. It will be a long time before I shall give anything about the massacre for publication. And I doubt if I would read a line concerning it if it were written.”\(^{12}\) In 1900, Arvilla continued to complain about the government’s paltry pension. She drafted multiple letters to public officials to voice her complaints and her feeling of injustice. Writing again about her captivity, she stated, “I was told by the chief’s daughter that unless I submitted to the chief’s bidding I would be _burnt alive_. I lay on the cold ground with only a wild catskin under my head during my captivity covered with an old dirty lousy blanket.”\(^{13}\) Despite her long suffering caused by memories of captivity, she never felt that the government sufficiently reimbursed her. Arvilla died in 1906, after living over ninety years.

Arvilla may have been surprised to know that the Utes experienced similar frustrations with the government. While Euro-American settlers were building towns in western Colorado, the Utes attempted to achieve stability in Utah. This was a difficult task, as the bands negotiated their smaller reservation. Tensions arose between the Utah bands and the newly arrived Colorado bands, in part because the Utah Utes had their own history of trouble with Euro-American settlers. As in Colorado, the first Americans in

\(^{12}\)Ralph Meeker, “To Arvilla,” May 2, 1882, Nathan Cook Meeker Collection (MSS #426), Colorado Historical Society, Denver, Colorado.

\(^{13}\)Arvilla Meeker, “Drafts of letter to Dept. of Interior,” 1900, Nathan Cook Meeker Collection (MSS #426), Colorado Historical Society, Denver, Colorado.
Utah Ute lands were fur trappers. In the 1830s, these trappers established trading posts along a trail that ran through central Utah. Forts surrounded the Utes after the conclusion of the Mexican-American War. Throughout the 1850s and 60s, Utah Utes resisted Euro-American colonization through two prolonged campaigns, the Walker War in 1853 and the Black Hawk War in the 1860s. These wars prompted LDS church leaders to request that the U.S. government relocate the Utes to a reservation in eastern Utah. The Utah Utes had been on the reservation land for two decades. They were angry about the Colorado Utes’ arrival because the White River Utes were granted an annual payment in return for their sale of the land around Meeker. This payment was nineteen dollars per person, while the Uintah Utes did not receive any income for their exchange of land in order to make room for the Colorado Utes.  

Moreover, although the White River Utes paid a monetary penalty for their involvement in the “Incident,” the Uncompahgre Utes believed they were being unfairly punished for the actions of the White Rivers. Although the Utes united along ethnic lines, tensions among the bands were high. In 1881, in an attempt to assuage the tension among the tribes, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) established a separate agency for the Colorado Utes in a new town named after Ouray.

The Colorado Utes were unhappy on the reservation and their discontent led hunters to return to the Meeker area. Although the Utes sought only to hunt, locals believed that they were attempting to take back Ute land. The Cavalry stationed in Meeker, as well as the surrounding residents, remained on alert. Eventually, the Army

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stationed a battalion on the Utah reservation. In 1886, Fort Duchanse was established midway between the two agencies located in Ouray and Uintah.\textsuperscript{16} Despite the military presence on the Ute reservation, Utes still left the reservation in order to hunt and gather in the Meeker area. In 1887, this led to a confrontation between Meeker residents and Ute hunters, in which Meeker residents shot and killed one of the Ute men as he camped.\textsuperscript{17}

The Utes’ relationship with the U.S. government remained troubled. In 1887, Congress passed the Dawes Act, a bill meant to phase out the reservation system and integrate Native Americans into mainstream society. In 1902, the Bureau of Indian Affairs put in place the mechanisms for parceling out Ute reservation land to independent land ownership. The Utes protested the allotment process through their agent and successfully won the attention of Washington. Through the testimony of a Ute leader, Tim Johnson, the Utes successfully stalled allotment for five years.\textsuperscript{18} However, their success was brief. In 1907, Utes were forced into allotment and the reservation was opened to Euro-American settlement.

Once again, the White River Utes were dissatisfied with the changing governmental policy. In response to impeding allotment, around 300 White River Utes left the reservation.\textsuperscript{19} The Vernal Express newspaper reported that the Utes were “well-armed and had ammunition in abundance,” and they were “going to one of the Northern reservations where a great gathering of all the Indians in the West had been arranged for,

\textsuperscript{16}Fred Conetah, \textit{A History of the Northern Ute People}, 130.

\textsuperscript{17}“The Recent Ute Outbreak,” \textit{St. Louis Globe-Democrat}, October 1, 1887.

\textsuperscript{18}Conetah, \textit{A History of Northern Utes}, 128.

to council over their supposed grievances.” The newspaper reported that “they express[ed] freely their determination to fight rather than return.”20 However, most historians agree that the Utes were not looking for a fight, but that they simply wanted to avoid being forced into another governmental policy. Rather than wanting to engage in combat, these Utes simply wanted to leave.

The men and women traveled to the Sioux reservation in South Dakota to seek refuge. Eventually, the Cavalry escorted the Utes to Fort Meade in South Dakota, but the Sioux were unwilling to enter into a treaty. Like many other Native American settlements in the early twentieth century, the Sioux were experiencing a food shortage and simply could not support another 300 people. The Cavalry again moved the Utes to the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation, where they helped the Utes negotiate a rental agreement. The government also found work for the Utes on the Santa Fe Railroad, but to the dismay of white allies, the Utes refused the jobs because of their sizable horse herd; the hours required would prevent the Utes from caring for their horses. Similar to events in 1879, these Utes were still unwilling either to kill or set their horses free. The continuities with their ancestors continued when one Ute was recorded as stating: “We are government people, not like the Sioux—the Sioux have to work but the government will feed us.”21 In 1908, many of the Utes wanted to return to Utah. The government provided them with funds and escorts to do so. The thousand-mile journey was accomplished in 101 days.

Ute Ceremonial Practices

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21Ibid., 328.
In the middle of this continuous social upheaval, Utes continued to practice the Bear Dance. They also started experimenting with new practices, including the Ghost Dance, the Sun Dance, and peyote ceremonies. These new practices followed newly blazed trails between reservations. Despite governmental restrictions on travel off reservations, throughout the first half of the twentieth century Native Americans traveled to neighboring reservations in order to share resources, both material and cultural. As the Ghost Dance spread from the Paiutes in Nevada to the Sioux in South Dakota, the Utes briefly practiced this dance, although by the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, they had stopped.\textsuperscript{22} After that time, they retained the Bear Dance, the Sun Dance, and peyote ceremonies as their primary ceremonial practices.

Ute practice of the Sun Dance dated to the 1890s, when they adopted the ritual of the Wind River Shoshones. The late nineteenth-century Sun Dance most likely originated from an earlier Cheyenne hunting and war ceremony, dated back to 1700. By then, the dance served as a healing ritual, one performed for the benefit of the community’s health, to allow men could attain shamanistic powers, and to heal individuals.\textsuperscript{23}

In 1914, Sam Roan Bear, a Sioux Man, visited the Ute reservation to share his newfound belief in the power of the peyote ceremony. Utes quickly adopted the practice, and eventually, nearly half of the reservation joined Roan Bear’s movement. Both men and women would ritually consume the peyote cactus, which is a hallucinogen, in order to be healed or to induce shamanistic visions. In response to the increased number of participants, the BIA agent worked to call Utah lawmakers’ attention to it. In 1917, the

\textsuperscript{22}Jorgenson, \textit{The Sun Dance Religion}, 24.

\textsuperscript{23}Ibid, 25.
Utah legislature passed a law that made peyote an illegal substance. In 1918, Native Americans established the Native American Church in Oklahoma. This institutionalization of peyote use led practitioners to travel to reservations to seek converts, following on the heels of non-Native American Christian missionaries. In the 1940s, Gray Horse, a Washoe Native American, became a Church representative to the Ute reservation. While ceremonial peyote use had increased since 1914, Gray Horses’ passion won over the Utes. With his sinful past as a “gambler, bootlegger, bartender, and pimp” before he found the “true Indian religion,” his testimony of transformation drew Utes into the peyote ceremonies.24

In 1923, the Bureau of Indian Affairs issued a circular that urged BIA agents to discourage their Native American charges from practicing dances. In response to continued efforts of Christian missionaries, the BIA prohibited the dances in hopes that Native Americans would assimilate without their ceremonies. Despite calls to halt dances, the Utes sustained their practices. The isolation of the reservation combined with the small population of both the Utes and eastern Utahans helped the dances to continue.

Despite this implicit agreement between the agents and the dancers, the Sun Dance still attracted the attention of locals, as rumors circulated that the government would prohibit the Utes from dancing. Before the 1923 prohibition against dances, the BIA agents had threatened to stop the Sun Dance. In 1914, one account stated that as whites and Utes alike gathered to watch and participate in the dance, “it became an event of suspense and tension for everyone.” The Indian Agent appeared for brief “in-and out

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visits.” Throughout the eastern Utah community, rumors spread that the Indian Agent had requested that soldiers come to the reservation to prevent the Sun Dance. The agent had been unable to convince the military of the need for soldiers, but the crowd did not know this. During the Sun Dance, “at the moment of ceremonial pause and amid the somber stillness of an impressive and spectacular medicine ritual,” three gunshots broke the silence. The shots suggested to the attendees that the army had arrived, but instead, it was discovered to be a love triangle, which had resulted in a murder suicide.25 This demonstrates the lack of interest in the Ute ceremonial practices by the military, but it highlights the way in which the dances served as a gathering point for Utes and non-Utes alike.

Excluding Economics from Ute Land Religion

In the early half of the twentieth century, Northern Ute religious practices became a site for public knowledge about Native American religion. Focusing on the Bear Dance, the Sun Dance, and peyote use, anthropologists described and theorized Native American religion through ethnographic observations of Ute practices. In scholarship written from 1891 to 1941, they reflected on the nature of Ute social practices within a setting of rapid change. Through this section, I trace the story about Ute religion and religious change that these anthropologists narrate. How did they characterize religion? How did they characterize modern capitalism in relationship to religion? What is the relationship these anthropologists perceived between religion and economics? Rather than defining “religion” or “economics,” I trace the way in which anthropologists made these distinctions. Through these documents, the contours of Ute Land Religion emerge as a

25William Hanson, “The Sun Dance Land,” n.d., MSS 299; William F. Hanson Collection; University Archives; L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.
space characterized by its absence of materialism, Euro-American consumer goods, and Christianity.

The anthropologists who wrote about Ute ceremonial practices exhibited a wide range of skill, training, and influence, but they were all bound by an interest in documenting the religious practices of the Ute Native Americans. These observers included William F. Hanson, Verner Z. Reed, Jr., Claude B. Morris, Robert Lowie, Julian Steward, Marvin K. Opler, and Omer Stewart. William F. Hanson was the earliest of the anthropologists to document Ute dances. Although he studied at Brigham Young University and Chicago Music College, he was primarily a classically trained pianist who was also familiar with Frank Boas’ theories of culture. In his M.A. thesis, he applied Boas’ theories to Ute dances and music. Verner Z. Reed, Jr. and Claude B. Morris were amateur anthropologists, whose ethnographic observations were nevertheless published in *American Anthropologist* and archived at the University of Utah.

Lowie, Steward, Opler, and Stewart all took part in the growing establishment of American anthropology in the 1920s and 30s. Lowie, an Austrian-born American anthropologist, studied with Boas and taught at Berkeley. As a Berkeley professor, he advised undergraduate Julian Steward, who became a highly influential anthropologist in the field of cultural anthropology. Steward helped to establish the anthropology department at the University of Michigan, but left in 1930 when he disagreed with his fellow anthropologist, Leslie White. However, Steward’s interest in the Great Basin Native Americans may have left a lasting impression on the department. In 1934, undergraduate Marvin Opler arrived at the University of Michigan to study the intersection of psychology and anthropology with White. Opler may have picked up an
interest in the Utes while at Michigan. Although he continued his graduate studies at Columbia, he graduated in 1938 after writing a dissertation about the acculturation of the Ute and Paiute in Colorado. Omer Stewart built on the foundation laid by these earlier scholars. Receiving his Ph.D. from Berkeley in 1938, Stewart taught at the University of Colorado and researched Ute religious ceremonies. Through these early reports, anthropologists began to define Ute Land Religion in opposition to Euro-American materialism as well as Christianity.²⁶

The earliest anthropological literature framed the Bear Dance as a religious practice. For example, Verner Reed published a brief summary of Bear Dance at the Southern Ute Reservation that he attended in 1893 in an 1896 issue of American Anthropologist. As an invited guest, Reed noted that he was the first Euro-American to participate and comment on a Bear Dance. Like many of his contemporaries, Reed romanticized the Bear Dance, waxing, “In all the picturesque West there is probably nothing more picturesque than the sacred Bear Dance of the Ute.”²⁷ In addition to describing the Bear Dance as “sacred,” Reed noted that the significance of the Bear Dance was for Utes to “worship” nature, and in particular, the bear. Reed attributed this act of worship to the belief that the Utes were descended from the bears. In addition to honoring their ancestors, Reed reported that the Utes tapped into the bear’s “magical powers.” He described how the women chose their partners for the dance and stated that some dancers participated “chiefly for social pleasure.” In Reed’s description, however,

²⁶For more information on Steward’s influence on the field, see Richard O Clemmer, L. Daniel Myers, and Mary Elizabeth Rudden, Julian Steward and the Great Basin: The Making of an Anthropologist (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999).

²⁷Verner Z. Reed, “The Ute Bear Dance,” American Anthropologist 9, no. 7 (July 1896), 237.
the social elements of the dance were subordinated to the sacred relationship of the Utes to the bear as well as its “magical” elements.

It is important to note that Reed never used the term “religion” to describe the Bear Dance. Rather, he named it “magical” and “superstitious”; however, he also described the dance as “sacred” and a form of “worship.” Unlike anthropologists such as James Frazer, Reed did not make a clear distinction between the religious practices of civilized peoples and the primitive magic of barbarism. Nevertheless, Reed described the Bear Dance as if it were set apart from everyday Ute life.

Reed also implied that the dance was a tangible representation of the purity of Ute culture, separate from the modern world. Reed wrote that the “Ute Indians have scarcely been touched by civilizing influences.” “Untouched” by the “Anglo-Saxon boundary lines of progress,” the Utes believed that “Nature is the all-providing mother,” and thus, “their ceremonies are founded on the evidences of nature as they see them.” Reed emphasized that the Bear Dance was the oldest of Ute traditions. Standing apart from the progress of civilization, the Bear Dance reflected the antithesis of the modern world. Immersed in nature, the dance protected Ute ideas of the sacred from the corrupting influences of Euro-American progress.

In 1899, William Hanson also observed the Bear Dance and, like Reed, wrote about the purity of the annual spring gathering. In contrast to Reed’s observations, Hanson explicitly characterized the practice as religious. Growing up as an adventurous child on the outskirts of the Eastern Utah reservation, Hanson sought out opportunities to interact with his Native American neighbors. In the spring of 1899, when he was twelve

28Verner Z. Reed, “The Ute Bear Dance,” American Anthropologist 9, no. 7 (July 1896), 237-238.
years old, Hanson witnessed his first Bear Dance. Unlike Reed, he was an uninvited
guest, but the experience made a lasting impression on him, leading him to spend a
lifetime writing about Ute music and aiming to educate other Euro-Americans about the
Utes. He wrote about these experiences in his MA Thesis, submitted to the Brigham
Young University music department in 1937. In the thesis, he reported that this early
experience entranced him with its other-worldliness. “People, costumes, dances, music,
language, everything seemed to be in a mythical land, enchanting, breathing, weirdness,
mystery and emotional uncertainty.”29

Perhaps it was his early awe that persuaded him to reflect on the Bear Dance’s
religiosity; he wrote that “an observer is impressed by the sincerity of the Red Man, with
the religious fervor exhibited, and with the feeling of mysticism even more deeply than
with the spectacular rituals, the loud colors of costumes, or the technique of the
dances.”30 A central facet of Ute religiosity for Hanson was that it was, in the words of
Rudolf von Otto, “wholly Other.” Although Hanson was not a self-proclaimed
phenomenologist, his description of the Bear Dance emphasized the feeling of *mysterium
tremendum*—something set apart that also inspired awe—in the root meaning of the
word, both admiration and fear. Not only did the Bear Dance appear to access a mystical
sincerity that Hanson had not experienced elsewhere, it was also completely set apart
from the world that Hanson had grown up in. The otherworldliness of the Ute ceremonies

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29 William Hanson, “The Lure of Tam-man Nacup Springtime festival of the Utes,” MSS 299; William F.
Hanson Collection; University Archives; L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library,
Brigham Young University.

30 Ibid.
must have contributed to Hanson’s memory of the first Bear Dance he saw and framed the way that he interpreted later Bear Dances he attended as an adult.

In the descriptions of Hanson and other observers of the Bear Dance, the otherworldliness of ceremony slowly disappeared as the Utes increased contact with Euro-Americans and their material goods. By the 1930s, anthropologists observing the Bear Dance argued that the dance was no longer sacred. The observers attributed this to “modernity” and contact with Euro-Americans, which the anthropologists argued had caused the dance’s significance to shift from a sacred ceremony to a social gathering. Rather than honoring the Utes’ bear ancestry, observers argued that the dance was “merely” a way to make money.

When William Hanson attended a Bear Dance in 1935, he was particularly dismayed to see how the ceremony had transformed. He noted that unlike the dances he had attended in the 1910s, the Utes arrived in cars and returned home in the evenings, “leaving the camp ground around the arena embarrassingly lonely.” Hanson emphatically wrote, “this was not the Tam-man Nacup of the olden days.” The drum was “carpenter-made,” and thus, “lacked the resonance of the drum of olden days whose beats were contagious with the romance of the springtime.” Other material elements of the dance disappointed Hanson—the “costumes had been purchased ready made; high heel shoes raised the girls from the ground and from nature; shawls, factory made in cheap designs, Irish, Spanish, and Swiss, were worn about the shoulders.” In addition to the store-bought clothes, the Utes operated hot dog stands and other concessions “in circus fashion.” Hanson lamented that “ice cream, pops, hot lunches, and whisky” replaced the “dried berries and jerked venison of the olden days.” For Hanson, the commercialism, cars, and
bought material goods signaled the rapid declension of the religious significance of the Bear Dance. He attributed this change to the influence of Euro-American consumer goods on Ute culture. “The natural religious elements,” Hanson opined, “have gone largely into myths, superstitions, fairy tales, and indifference. The ceremonials have largely wilted. Entertainment, formerly adequate, is now dull and trivial compared with the modern thrills available.” For Hanson, contact with the outside world diminished the impact of his “wholly Other” feeling of awe.

We could easily dismiss Hanson’s interpretation of the decline of the Bear Dance to his lack of formal anthropological training. However, Julian Steward also interpreted the 1930s Bear Dance through a similar lens of religious declension. In 1932, Steward wrote, “at one time, it [the Bear Dance] had definite supernatural reference to the bear and even included other minor religious elements,” however, the current dance was “almost a purely social affair.” How did Steward know that the dance had been “downgraded” from a religious ceremony to a social gathering? First, he noted that due to BIA restrictions, the Utes had “altered both its [the Bear Dance’s] purpose and nature.” This change resulted from an altered lifestyle—no longer hunter/gatherers, the Bear Dance now marked the beginning of the agricultural season. Thus, it was held later; it was in June rather than March. In response to concern among the agents at the Bureau of Indian Affairs who felt that the festivities would impinge on Ute work hours, the tribal council

31William Hanson, “The Lure of Tam-man Nacup Springtime festival of the Utes,” MSS 299; LTPSC


33Ibid, 263.
shortened the festivities to one week and combined dances so that there would be one ceremony held for the entire reservation. Steward also noted that the religious aspects were diminished because the grizzly bear was nearly extinct and the black bear was nearly gone. The lack of actual bears meant that the representation of the animal on the last day of the ceremony was “regard[ed] as unessential, [and] the dance is now considered an occasion for ‘good times,’ relations between the sexes being of paramount interest.”34 In other words, the ecological disaster that was the disappearance of the bear resulted in the exchange of religious feeling for flirtation.

Steward documented other changes in the Bear Dance, which he believed pointed to the lack of religious feeling behind the modernized ceremony. Although he noted that the menstrual lodge still figured centrally in the ceremony, children increasingly participated in the dance’s festivities. For Steward, the inclusion of children in the celebration marked the decline of the ceremonial seriousness of the dance. Rather than an adult activity, it became a children’s dance. Adding to his evidence, Steward noted that adults needed to be cajoled to dance by the dance chief, whose attempts were thwarted by an exciting hand-game taking place outside the corral.

While all these factors suggested to Steward that the religious motivations of the Bear Dance had diminished, economic changes were the most telling: white people came and the Utes charged admission fees. Furthermore, white men paid money for the privilege to dance with Ute women.35 In his unpublished manuscript dated from 1935, Claude B. Morris also noted white men who danced with Ute women were expected to

34Ibid, 265.

pay at least ten cents to his dancing partner. This practice led Morris to write that the Utes’ “Jewish eye for business” led them to make “even the most sacred dances . . . commercial.” While Steward refrained from these explicit judgments on the developing cultural practices of the Utes in the 1930s, it is clear that for Euro-American observers, the addition of Euro-American money and consumer goods devalued the Bear Dance’s religiousity.

It is easy to understand why Euro-Americans in the 1930s would have attended the Bear Dance. Although the invention of cars and the corresponding construction of highways would have shortened the month-long trip to Salt Lake City, eastern Utah remained a rural place in the 1930s. Entertainment was dependent on the local movie theater and residents’ imagination. After a long winter, the novelty of being able to dance with a Native American woman would have appealed to Euro-American men stricken with cabin fever. Aside from the seemingly innocuous curiosity and entertainment that the Bear Dance provided surrounding residents, it also served as a site for some Euro-Americans to fortify their misconceptions of Ute culture. Marvin Opler reported that at a 1936 Bear Dance, a white woman “bustled” into the Bear Dance grounds and demanded to know where she could find Buckskin Charlie, a chief that she claimed “killed all his squaws.” Opler reported that “this baseless opinion was delivered with breath-taking speed in the loudest of tourist tones.” When the anthropologist corrected her, she was taken aback and informed him “that this dance must be an Indian marriage festive. When, a moment later, one of the dance officials informed her that she was standing on the men’s side of the dance grounds, she decided in great disappointment that ‘it was all

silly.’” Opler reported that she left, but not until she pulled the hat over the eyes of one of a “dignified and patriarchal Ute.”

Curiosity and a desire for entertainment brought Euro-Americans to observe the Bear Dance in the 1930s. But what would have driven Utes to open their dance grounds to Euro-American tourists? If Hanson, Steward, and Opler were given free reign to interpret this development, they would have agreed that contact with the modern world gave Utes reason to sell their religious practices so that they could enter more fully into the Euro-American material world, through cars and other manufactured goods. This may have been the case. After living on the reservation for 40 years, the Utes had not gained the riches that Nathan Meeker and other governmental agents promised them if they would only become farmers. Euro-American interest in the Bear Dance and willingness to pay to participate in it would have been not only a tempting business venture, but also one that could have been necessary for the tribe’s survival. Additionally, the in the 1930s, the Utes were supported in the selling of their ceremonial practices by a shift in the BIA policy, under the direction of John Collier. As director, Collier reversed the 1920s policy to prevent Native Americans from practicing dances and other religious ceremonies. This was partly due to his admiration of Boas and other cultural anthropologists, but also because he saw economic opportunities for Native Americans in turning their cultural practices and artifacts into business ventures. The new BIA policy and the Utes’ need for money contributed to their shifting ceremonial practices.

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38 For more information about John Collier’s Indian policy, see: Lawrence C Kelly, *The assault on assimilation: John Collier and the origins of Indian policy reform*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983) and Prucha, *The Great Father*, chapter 37.
In addition to the economic motivations, Utes may have been motivated to open the Bear Dance to white observers to enter into the Euro-American capitalistic society on their own terms through Ute ceremonial practices rather than as acculturated farmers. Furthermore, one could easily interpret the gathering of Utes and their non-Ute neighbors as an extension of the older spirit of the Bear Dance. Before contact with Euro-Americans, the Bear Dance served as a transition point from winter camps to the beginning of spring migrations to traditional gathering and hunting spots. It marked the shift from large group gatherings to smaller groups of gathering, but it also was a time where Ute bands came together, a gathering of people who shared resources and the land. Inviting surrounding Euro-Americans to participate in the Bear Dance may have been a reinterpretation of the Bear Dance’s purpose—to increase goodwill among neighbors who shared the land’s resources and to provide a means for Utes to represent themselves in the face of racism.

Whatever the motivation for Utes to open the Bear Dance to non-Ute observers, the Bear Dance served as an early cultural meeting space, one based on Ute ceremonial practices. Ironically, as this space developed into more of a site of exchange between non-Utes and Utes, Euro-American observers began to suggest that it was less and less of an authentic religious practice. For Hanson in particular, the authenticity of the Bear Dance had been diminished by the presence of cars, purchased clothing, and convenience food. “True” religiosity was that feeling of being immersed in an utterly different world—not simply going to a social gathering at a circus.
Furthermore, economic activity, such as buying and selling hotdogs and ice cream, seemed to be too commonplace for Hanson. In contrast, to the Utes, hotdogs and ice cream would have been exotic. For Utes, the hotdogs and ice cream may have fulfilled a ceremonial purpose because of its specialness. As a ceremonial dance, special food was to be served—hotdogs and ice cream may have fit the bill. Rather than diminishing in cultural significance, the Bear Dance of the 1930s may have simply found an adequate translation into Euro-American culture through material goods. However, another possibility might explain the hotdogs. In addition to the concerns of anthropologists, Ute elders were also concerned about the possibility of the Bear Dance disappearing. In a letter to Hanson, Roy Smith, a Ute elder, wrote that although the Bear Dance did have religious significance, “today this dance does not mean much to our younger Indians in time to come it will be forgotten.” For Smith, the primary concern was not that Euro-American consumerism had intruded on the sacred space of the Bear Dance, but that the youth did not value it. The food, purchased clothing, and the cars may simply have been a way to engage a younger generation in a traditional practice that was at risk of becoming outdated.

Underlying the presumption that the Bear Dance had been devalued in its religious currency is the idea that religion and money are unrelated enterprises. For the first observers of the Bear Dance, it was a site of “pure” religious expression because the ceremony was isolated from what the writers called “modernity” and American consumerism. When Utes started to use American material goods, such as cars, food, and

39William Hanson, “The Lure of Tam-man Nacup Springtime festival of the Utes,” MSS 299; William F. Hanson Collection; University Archives; L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.
store bought clothes, anthropologists decided that the ceremony was no longer “religious.” The Bear Dance, for observers, transformed from pure religion into an emblem of the dangers of American culture and consumerism for Native American practices. In other words, the transformed Bear Dance had become a site of Euro-American grief and longing for a time when “real” Native Americans engaged in “real” religious practices.

Anthropologists may have concluded that the Bear Dance was “less religious” because of the increased prominence of the Sun Dance. Euro-American attendance at the Sun Dance waxed and waned throughout the early twentieth century, but compared to the Bear Dance, the Sun Dance was less commercial. While the Bear Dance celebrated relationships (both through honoring their Bear ancestor and relationships among men and women), the Sun Dance aimed to heal individuals and to grant shamanistic visions to participants. This distinction struck Hanson: “The Sun Dance is predominately religious while the Bear Dance is social with certain religious elements that are pertinent to Springtime included.”40 From the perspective of Euro-American culture at the time, calling the Bear Dance “religious” would be akin to calling a barn dance religious. The Bear Dance’s emphasis on sexual relationships combined with the later carnival-like atmosphere could not compare to the Sun Dance’s emphasis on personal growth and healing by leaving society—a relationship between nature and human culture that would have seemed recognizable to Euro-Americans.

Excluding Christianity from Ute Land Religion

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40William F. Hanson, “The Lure of Tam-man Nacup Springtime festival of the Utes.” MSS 299; William F. Hanson Collection; University Archives; L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.
Just as materialism and consumer goods indicated a lack of authenticity, some Euro-Americans defined Ute Land Religion against Christianity. For Native Americans, Christianity acted both as a foil and as a means of translation for Ute ceremonial practices into terms understood by the mainstream culture. The next section examines the way in which anthropologists, fiction writers, and Native Americans engaged Christianity in order to define the otherwise porous borders of Ute Land Religion. Throughout these comparisons to Christianity, Utes and non-Ute allies defined Ute Land Religion as individualistic and based in an unmediated experience with nature. First, we will return to the late nineteenth century in order to examine the way in which two fiction writers, Thomas Haskell and Merrill Tileston, defined Ute Land Religion against Christianity. These fictional accounts were complemented with Native Americans who employed Christianity in order to define their practices. The section concludes by returning to the anthropologists discussed above and examines a debate in the 1930s and 40s between Omer Stewart and Marvin Opler regarding the influence of Christianity on Ute peyote use.

Building Ute Land Religion through Fiction

In the years following the 1879 battles and the subsequent Ute Removal, numerous authors dramatized these encounters. While almost all of these accounts engage Ute spirituality, the two discussed below, Thomas Haskell’s *The Indian Question* and Merrill Tileston’s *Chiquita*, are particularly representative of the relationship between Ute spirituality and Christianity. Early fiction accounts, such as Haskell’s, portrayed the Utes as a superstitious, nature-loving, non-religious people in need of a Christian education. Other fiction accounts, such as Tileston’s, portrayed the Utes as
possessing a unique religious knowledge based on their love of nature and their culture’s respect for the individual.

Thomas Haskell (1826-1906) was a minister, educator, and an author. Educated at Miami University, Oberlin College, and Union Theological Seminary before the Civil War, he was ordained as a Congregational and Presbyterian minister. In 1873, he moved to Colorado for his daughter’s health. When she passed away a year later, Haskell was inspired to establish a college in her memory. He proposed the college to the Congregational Association of Colorado and the institution became the first college in the Rocky Mountain region, Colorado College in Colorado Springs. Although he resigned from the college board just a year after it was established, Haskell remained active in political life, serving as the Colorado Senate’s librarian for one term and the Senate chaplain for another term. Until his death in 1906, Haskell wrote poems and non-fiction pieces.

During his time in Colorado, Haskell became friends with the Meeker family. He was deeply moved by Nathan’s death and the women’s captivity and in order to express his sorrow, he drafted an epic poem, *The Indian Question: Young Konkaput, The King of Utes, A Legend of Twin Lakes and Occasional Poems.* He started working on the poem in 1879, but it was not published until 1889. Although the poem was born out of grief for Meeker’s death, he marketed the book to tourists visiting the Rocky Mountain region, selling it on railroads and bookstands in Colorado. In his introduction, Haskell noted that in addition to being a text for entertainment, he also aimed to educate people on the “Indian Question.” This text is significant because it is an example of the way in which memories of the confrontation at the White River Ute Agency intersected with religious
identities in order to create a Colorado regional identity based on the area’s natural beauty.

Haskell’s Christian commitments frame his poem; the introduction states that he saw “Bible reading as the essential basis of safety to our Republic.” The text narrates the story of Konkaput, a fictional character patterned after one of Haskell’s former Native American students. In the introduction, Haskell explained that in developing the character of Konkaput, “I have endeavored to create the best Biblical Christian hero that I could from an aboriginal barbarian, and to give him all the personal excellences which converted and pious savages have so far evinced.” The idea that Christianity could “rescue” Native Americans from their savagery persists throughout the poem’s narrative of the Meeker Massacre and Ute Removal.

However, Haskell was not too quick to dismiss the virtues of Ute culture. In the poem’s introduction he stated that the Utes were better than most tribes because they more susceptible to Christian civilization. Haskell noted that they had the same intelligence as Euro-Americans and that they had two political parties, so they had a primitive conception of American democracy. Haskell derived this opinion from Major Whitely’s article in the Chicago Tribune. In this article, discussed in chapter two, Whitely reported on Susan’s 1863 captivity and her rescue, as well as her pleasant disposition. Haskell included a reprint of the news article in the introduction, using it as evidence for the possibility that American missionaries could assimilate the Utes through conversion to Christianity.


42Ibid.
Although for Haskell, Christianity is the answer to the “Indian Question,” the text contains nuances that are worth examining in relationship to Ute Land Religion. These nuances include: 1) the way in which Christians can overcome denominational differences to greater ends; 2) the spirituality of the Ute women; and 3) the centrality of the land throughout the narrative as the location for this “religious history” of the events leading up to the Meeker Massacre.

Haskell’s solution to the problem of religious diversity emerges early in the poem, although this representation of diversity is based on Christian diversity. The narrative begins with Konkaput’s auspicious birth under a comet. After a happy childhood when he learns how to be an excellent hunter, Konkaput decides to travel with several of his Ute friends and three fur trappers so that he can make his fortune. The fur trappers are Christians—Catholic, Anglican, and Presbyterian—and Haskell emphasizes that despite their differences, they are able to work together, “as brothers of one blood bought race, and so come to one common cross!” 43 In contrast to the fur trappers, the Ute men do not have a religious practice. This becomes evident in the poem when one of the Utes tragically dies and Konkaput feels great sorrow, but is unable to express it. In response to Konkaput’s emotions, the fur trappers teach him how to pray. Although the trappers had conflicting traditions, when confronted with Konkaput’s need they were able to communicate a unified message. Praying carries Konkaput through several tribulations and leads him to become a preacher. Haskell’s message is clear: through the unity of Christian denominations, Native American conversions are not only possible, but also

43Haskell, 40.
probable. Thus, overcoming the differences raised by Christian diversity is essential to solving the problem of ethnic diversity.

Through this text and his understanding of Susan’s role in the release of the Meeker women, Haskell described a Ute religiosity that dwelled with the women and was markedly similar to Protestant practices. Shawsheen, the character that Haskell created to dramatize the Meekers’ representation of Susan, was Konkaput’s love. While on a hunting expedition, Shawsheen visited the Garden of the Gods, a picturesque rock formation outside of present-day Colorado Springs. While there, Shawsheen had a religious experience that taught her how to pray. “When she heard the voice of thunder/Peal on peal, speak to the mountains/and the mountains to each other;/Saw the lightening shoot its arrows/At the towering rocks and cedars;/Then she hushed her heart in silence,/Listening to the voice of nature,/Listening to the Lord, its author--/Listening unto God Almighty!”

Because of this experience, Shawsheen releases the captives from the Meeker Massacre, demonstrating that she was “with the love of God enamored.” Shawsheen’s religiosity parallels Haskell’s own Protestantism because she learns to pray while alone, isolated from her tribal traditions and institutionalized expressions of Christianity. Furthermore, her ability to listen to the “voice of nature” allowed her to stand up to her tribal leaders to save the captive women. Through Shawsheen, Haskell perpetuated the idea that Ute women were particularly receptive to the moral lessons of Christianity. He expanded on this idea by suggesting that the women were more able to connect with nature, which allowed them to hear and respond to its author.

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44Haskell, 45.
45Haskell, 47.
Haskell developed the idea that Colorado’s natural beauty allows Christian residents to have a deep connection with God. Throughout the text, Haskell referred to specific Colorado places, such as the mountaintops of Harvard, Yale, and Lincoln. These places inspired Haskell to draw connections between these places and a divine creator. For instance, Haskell described Estes Park, a popular twenty-first century-tourist destination, as “peaceful as a pious soul, When lighted by some heavenly spark that doth from dazzling fixed stars roll, Is beautiful beyond compare, with winter heights and wooded haunts, and intervals intensely fair, and rocks and rivers plumed with plants.” In addition to providing a Christian interpretation for the natural beauty, by locating his poem within these spaces, he provided a mythologized history for Colorado landmarks.

Konkaput grows up within these spaces, learning to love his natural setting through his “pagan” beliefs; however, he learns to fully appreciate nature only after he has been ordained as a Christian minister. He travels to the East Coast to attend a seminary and returns to Colorado to convert his tribe. When he arrives in Colorado, he falls to his knees and utters an emotional prayer after seeing the Mountain of the Holy Cross. Located in present-day Eagle County, this landmark is named for the two deep ridges on its side that form a cross. When the crevices are filled with snow, the cross becomes a prominent feature of the landscape. The prayer begins with Konkaput lauding Jesus for his sacrifice on the cross. It concludes with: “When He ascended out of sight,/He set this symbol there,/So clean and white in the clear light,/And haloed in His

46These are significant mountain peaks in Colorado’s Collegiate Peaks, located in central Colorado. All the peaks mentioned are over 14,000 ft. in elevation.

47Haskell, 18.
air;/Upon the topmost waves of time,/He set this signet high,/On mountain summits most sublime,/And in the lofty sky,/O most serene and blessed sight,/And simple as sublime! I look on these, and with delight/Repeat my reverent rhyme,/And hallow thee with all my heart/To guide where’er I go;/And when from earth I soon depart/Make me white as thy snow.’”

Whereas in his childhood, Konkaput looked upon nature and saw the excitement of the hunt, as a mature Christian, he saw evidence of God’s love. While the last stanza might simply be a metaphor for spiritual purity, a reader is left to wonder if Haskell meant to evoke ideas of racial purity as well.

Throughout this poem, Haskell walks a fine line between Ute paganism and Haskell’s interpretation of a Christian appreciation for natural beauty. While Ute traditions taught them how to live and love within nature, Shawsheen and Konkaput did not learn to love their surroundings fully until they learned to pray. The message of the text is that by overcoming denominational differences, Christians could tap into the Utes’ inclination towards religiosity. The result would be purity and a deeper appreciation of Colorado’s natural beauty, but it would be achieved through Christianity, not Ute ceremonial traditions.

In contrast to Haskell, Merrill Tileston dramatized the Meeker Massacre in order to explore his critique of American Christian practices by comparing them to Ute spirituality. Tileston’s *Chiquita: An American Novel, The Romance of a Ute Chief’s Daughter* was published in 1902. This novel contributed to the cultural memories of the Meeker Massacre, Ute Removal, as well as to the production of Euro-American
representations of Ute Land Religion. The main character, Jack Sheppard, was a New England descendent of an old English family.

In the first chapter, Tileston juxtaposed the oppressive, traditional religious practices of the Northeast with the pragmatic practices of the West. As a boy, Jack loathed Saturday nights in his New England home, because it was the beginning of the Sabbath. On Saturday afternoon, women would bake cakes and “other dainties” and ready the house for the Lord’s Day. Men shaved, bathed, and finished their chores by sundown. Although the Bible was read every night in the family parlor, on Saturday night “services were held earlier and longer than on other days of the week.” Adding to his misery, Jack’s Uncle John “prayed long and earnestly for the divine grave, which sustains the righteous through the snares and temptations of the wicked world.”49 In contrast to the family parlor, which was decorated with a “chintz-covered lounge, rag carpet, Dutch clock, and chairs upholstered in haircloth,” Jack found more comfort in the rolling hills of New England, where he found “that pleasure and freedom which afterward was intensified by his associations with the forest-born red man.”50 Through this introduction to his hero, Tileston set up a dichotomy that would have been familiar to early twentieth century readers—the East Coast is steeped in religious tradition, whereas the West promises innovation and freedom of thought. Like other adventurers before him, Jack found freedom from the haircloth chairs of the East Coast in the moccasins of Native Americans.


50 Tileston, 17.
Jack and his father moved away from their family’s religious home base to the West. Despite his dislike of his extended family’s religious practices, Jack attempted to live by the Christian code by not fighting the bullies in his school. Jack became a frequent and favorite target of these bullies because he would not fight back. When Jack’s father told him that he could fight in self-defense, Jack’s reputation in school improved. Jack also learned an important lesson about the limited efficacy of his family’s religious orthodoxy—a lesson that continued to frame his relationship with his family as he brought his western life to the East Coast.

Jack and his father returned to Boston, where Jack fell in love with his childhood friend, Hazel. Rather than staying with her in the comforts of New England material wealth, Jack sought a great fortune in the West. He left his family to travel deeper into the Colorado wilderness, into what the author called “the firing line of civilization.”

While camping near the White River Ute Agency, he met Yamanatz, “a friendly and peaceable savage” and his beautiful daughter Chiquita, “a girl of seventeen, richly attired in beaded skirt, leggings and moccasins.” Jack quickly adjusted to the rhythm of life outside of Boston by forgetting to keep track of Sundays. This marked the way that he continued to break with his traditional religious upbringing. However, despite his friendly relationship with Yamanatz and Chiquita, “he did not then know that the Utes’ camp was made up of some of the worst characters from the White River Agency, or that the band was there against the wishes of Indian Agent Meeker.”

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51 Tileston, 41
52 Tileston, 47.
53 Tileston, 48
Against this background of war and ethnic tension, Jack and Chiquita developed a deep friendship. Jack taught Chiquita English and she revealed her desire to become a nurse so that she could help her fellow Utes. One evening, Chiquita and her father came to Jack’s camp with $5,000 in gold. Yamanatz promised to take Jack to the gold mine in exchange for Jack’s help with Chiquita’s education. Jack, alerted to the trouble brewing among the White River Utes and wanting to arrange for Chiquita to travel to the east coast, traveled across the mountain passes during a snowstorm. Transitioning back to civilized life, Jack said goodbye to “a life absolutely free from conventionalities, police interference, and taxes.” He ruminated:

No wonder . . . that the red man prefers the avenues of the forest, the virgin plains of grass, the rugged canons running with sparkling water, the smoke of his tepee fire and a starry dome for his homestead, to the cobblestones, the plowed ground, the artificial goose ponds, the greasy-surfaced rivers, the steam-heated, foul-smelling hothoused monuments of man’s industry and civilization.54

Despite his sorrow at leaving Colorado, Jack returned to his parents’ house with a hero’s welcome. When he told his parents about his plan to bring Chiquita to Boston to educate her, his parents warned him against trusting her. However, he convinced them by condemning the effects of manifest destiny on Native Americans.55 After an argument with his parents about whether or not the country was better populated with civilized white men or barbaric red men, his parents made arrangements for Chiquita to come to Boston to live with Hazel, Jack’s love.

The following spring, Jack returned to Chiquita. However, the White River Utes had rebelled against their agent. Tileston embellished his narrative of the conflict, but he

54Tileston, 100-101.
55Tileston, 136-137.
emphasized the role horses played in Meeker’s death and the women’s captivity. Throughout the conflict, Chiquita and her father kept their distance. However, the Cavalry removed Jack’s friend along with the rest of the tribe.

Tileston used Ute Removal in order to forward Chiquita’s medical education and to emphasize the distance between the religious sensibilities of the East Coast and the American West. In the middle of Removal, Yamanatz took Jack to the gold mine. Jack struck gold and obtained a government title to the land. This allowed Chiquita to start her college education in the Northeast. She worked through college, taking summer breaks to travel to Indian Territory. In her travels, “Chiquita watched the marvelous growth of that great stretch of country between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains with sinking heart.” In her conversations with Jack, she confided her worst fears: “the Great Manitous of the Utes has been conquered by the Great Spirit of the white man.”

Throughout the text, Tileston portrayed a persistent tension between “society,” as represented by the Northeast and educational systems and “nature,” represented through traditional Ute lifestyle and through the rural wilderness of the West. For example, although Chiquita wanted to travel to the Northeast to obtain an education to help her fellow tribes people, she felt constrained by the rhythms of East Coast life. She traveled with Jack and Hazel to Estes Park, and her “restive spirit broke through the bonds of captivity as soon as the first campfire was lighted. Like a golden winged chrysalis she burst her civilization fetters and became again the forest-born Indian maiden, Chiquita. No longer did she feel the restraint which society demanded.”

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56 Tileston, 190.
57 Tileston, 248-9.
Tileston highlighted the tension between “civilization” and “savagery” through religious differences. In her graduation speech, Chiquita commented on the religious beliefs of her people and the effects of the march of civilization across North America. Chiquita orated,

Alas! For my people! The Great Spirit of the white man is probably the same as the Great Manitou of the red man, the Buddha of the Hindoo and the Mahomet of the Arab. All worship a divine being, all nations and tribes of the earth acknowledge a power, mysterious, ever present but unseen, who rules the world, the elements and the actions of his followers.\(^5\)

Despite the similarities among the God of these races, Chiquita noted that, “The white races are intellectual, far outranking the black man of Africa, the yellow man of eastern Asia and the red man of America.” This intellect pointed towards the ultimate “blotting out of all religion except the Christian belief in the Messiah, who in the form of man was crucified to do away with the offerings, sacrifices and consecrated rites established by the Hebrews and observed by them without dissension until the commencement of the Christian era.” This fact alone stood as a reason for Chiquita to state that “the heathen world must succumb before the strides of education, science and civilization.”\(^5\)

Despite living her adult life as a Christian, on her deathbed, Chiquita renounced Christianity for Ute traditions. “It will not be long ere till all my people are as the buffalo, and the white man alone in the land that once was a paradise, but the mockery of civilization turned it into a stench hole of iniquity and market place of educated vampires, against which the child of the forest of the same God had no--.” Unable to finish her last thought, Chiquita died, as did traditional, authentic religion, as Tileston imagined it.\(^6\)

\(^5\)Tileston, 259-260.

\(^6\)Ibid.
Like Haskell, Tileston represented Ute religion as a system defined against Christian civilization, but he presented this opposition with more sympathy. Just as Jack longed to escape the rigid religious traditions of his East Coast family, Chiquita also wanted to hold onto the traditions of her Ute family despite her initial conversion to Christianity. In Tileston’s imagination, Ute Land Religion is free, nature-based, and driven by the individual. Whereas East Coast religion was driven by ritual and strict rules, the religion that Chiquita practiced as well as the freedom that Jack found in Colorado was propelled by an unfettered relationship with nature.

Unlike Haskell’s narrative, which portrayed the lack of religious belief among the Utes, Tileston compared Ute religiosity to an idealized American religion, one that emphasized the individual and freedom of thought. Through the freedom that Jack found in Colorado’s natural setting, he found a truer expression of his own religiosity. Tileston implied that Americans could find this idealized religion not in the industrialized north, but in the undeveloped West. Furthermore, through Chiquita’s work in comparative religion, Tileston presented the idea that the Ute Creator God was the same as the Christian God. Through nature, however, humans could better access this God without the noisy trappings of industrialized civilization.

Ironically, Jack’s Colorado life was defined by his capitalistic goals to seek his fortune in gold mines. Tileston acknowledged this tension. Throughout the text, the main characters move freely between the religious and economic systems of Euro-Americans and Native Americans, but at the same time, both note the incompatibility between the two systems. Unlike the intellect that is stimulated by Christianity, according to

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60Tileston, 305.
Tileston’s depiction, Ute Land Religion does not support technological innovation or capitalistic endeavors. Since there is not a natural relationship between Ute Land Religion and Euro-American progress, Ute religious practices, according to Tileston, are doomed to extinction. However, Tileston implied that through learning about Ute religion, modern people could progress their religious practices away from the stagnant expressions of Christianity into religious beliefs located in nature and unfettered by convention.

Defining Paganism against Christianity

While Euro-American fiction writers were using their ideas of Ute religiosity in order to construct Ute Land Religion, Native Americans embarked on similar projects to define their religiosity in opposition to Christianity. Zitkala-Sa (1876-1938), a Sioux woman who lived and worked with the Utes in the 1910s, wrote about Native American religion in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1902, the same year that Tileston’s novel was published. Zitkala-Sa, also known as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, was educated at Earlham College in Indiana, where she was an excellent student and won a statewide speech contest. She became a teacher at the Federal Indian school in Carlisle, PA, but left after disagreements with the institution. This decision dismayed her teachers, who thought that she abandoned the “racial progress” she had made in order to be an advocate for the “Indian way of life.” A talented musician, she studied violin at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. She married another Sioux, Raymond Telephause Bonnin, who was appointed as an Indian Bureau employee at the Uintah Ouray Reservation.
The essay that Zitkala-Sa, published in a 1902 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly* was titled “Why I am a Pagan,” and it was one of the first published assertions that Native American religious practices were opposed to Christianity, appearing before Black Elk’s 1932 narrative of the Ghost Dance. While William Apess’ *Son of the Forest* (1829) cloaked his tribal religious practices with Christian language, Zitkala-Sa articulated clearly the irreconcilable differences between “paganism” and Christianity.  

The essay narrates a day spent along the banks of the Missouri, recounts the author’s reflections on the relationship between her natural surroundings and her village, and concludes with an encounter she had with a Christian cousin who wonders why she did not attend church. Speaking of the wild prairie flowers that grew along the riverbank, she wrote, “And they, the lovely little folk, soothe my soul with their perfumed breath. Their quaint round faces of varied hue convince the heart which leaps with glad surprise that they, too, are living symbols of omnipotent thought.”

While this notion could easily be included in William Paley’s teleological argument for the existence of God, Zitkala-Sa expanded her notions of nature to reflect on the ways in which Sioux supernatural history is encoded on the landscape. She described a rock along the riverbank as “Stone-Boy,” an ideal warrior who “baffle[d] the siege of the pests of all the land till he triumphed over their united attack.” Zitkala-Sa used Stone-Boy to demonstrate the way in which the native American social fabric was intertwined with nature: “Interwoven with the thread of this Indian legend of the rock, I fain would trace a subtle knowledge of the native folk which enabled them to recognize a

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kinship to any and all parts of this vast universe.” Through this connection, she wrote, “I feel in keen sympathy with my fellow creatures, for I seem to see clearly again that all are akin.”

Her belief that all creatures are bound together informed the way that she interacted with her Christian cousin, who “mouth[ed] most strangely the jangling phrases of a bigoted creed.” She reported that she listened with respect to his condemnation of her for not attending church while she fed him lunch. She concluded her essay:

Still I would not forget that the pale-faced missionary and the hoodooed aborigine are both God's creatures, though small indeed their own conceptions of Infinite Love. A wee child toddling in a wonder world, I prefer to their dogma my excursions into the natural gardens where the voice of the Great Spirit is heard in the twittering of birds, the rippling of mighty waters, and the sweet breathing of flowers. If this is Paganism, then at present, at least, I am a Pagan.

Zitkala-Sa’s theology relied on the opposition to her cousin’s Christianity, but it also demanded that she treat her cousin with the respect that all living things deserve. In this piece, Zitkala-Sa opposed the two theological systems, noting that one is grounded in dogma, while the other is grounded in ideas of interdependence. Zitkala-Sa’s theological statement of paganism rests on a sort of via negativa—she understands paganism while she is sitting on a riverbank, yet her theology sharpens when she is in conversation with her Christian cousin. Whatever Native American paganism is, it is decidedly not Christianity.

Peyote and Christianity

In the 1910s, a decade after Zitkala-Sa published her theological statement about her religious practices, she arrived at the eastern Utah Ute reservation as the wife of an

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64 Ibid.
agent. Peyote ceremonies had just been introduced on the reservation and she began a campaign against them. She believed that peyote undermined everything for which she had worked. Throughout her life, she worked to serve her fellow Native Americans, to promote among Euro-Americans an understanding of traditional Native American lifestyles, and to use Native American culture as a place to criticize what she saw as the perils of progress. Peyote would prevent true progress. She wrote that “peyote victims of all ages from the adult to the babe in arms are themselves the sad verification of this analysis.” In addition to damaging lives, she argued that peyote was not an authentic religious practice; rather, the railroad and “unscrupulous men” introduced the drug to the Native Americans. Peyote practitioners frequently compared their ceremonies to Christianity, a comparison that Zitkala-Sa rejected. She wrote that these comparisons were imported as a “cloak to hide under, and to evade the laws of morals and decency.” As further evidence for the sham of peyote religion, Zitkala-Sa also argued that true religion is the product of rational mind, thus, “no one in the state of drunkenness, by whatsoever cause, can be in his rational mind; and he cannot practice religion.”65

Zitkala-Sa’s campaign against peyote foreshadowed anthropological debates that occurred twenty years after she lived on the Ute reservation—the question of the relationship of Ute peyote ceremonies to Christianity. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, anthropologists Omer Stewart and Marvin Opler documented the development of peyote use among Native Americans. In a series of journal articles, they publicly disagreed on the origin and character of Ute peyotism. Opler argued that peyote was a re-working of

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ancient Apache ceremonial practices that the Ute had adapted, while Stewart insisted that peyote use was an indicator of assimilation into Christian-like practices.

The features that Stewart cited as being distinctively Christian were the mention of Jesus in songs, prayers addressed to Jesus, God, Mary, and Peyote, as well as blessings invoked for the Indian Commissioner and the Utah Senator. Furthermore, Stewart wrote: “The Ute meetings impress me as similar in spirit and feeling to many Protestant Christian church services. Although the Bible and crucifix are lacking, the confessions, testimonies, prayers, and speeches of the Indians closely resemble manifestations of the religion in which I was reared.” In addition to these Christian figures and ideas, Stewart reported that his informants told him that their religion “was Indian Christianity, and that they had attempted to combine with the Protestant mission on the reservation.” Instead of accepting this comparison, Stewart reported that the missionary merely increased his attack on peyote use. Despite the missionary’s rejection this comparison, the “peyotists . . . maintain[ed] their conviction that their religion is fundamentally Christian and look to the time when an understanding pastor will recognize that fact and unite with them.”

In contrast to Stewart’s argument that peyote use was firmly rooted in assimilation, Opler argued that some Ute peyote practices were revivalist movements that aimed to reintroduce ancient Ute practices into the modern era. Opler based his conclusion on fieldwork he conducted on the Southern Ute reservation, at the towns Towaoc and Ignacio. Opler noticed that the peyote practices in each of these communities


were noticeably different. He argued that in Towaoc, Christian elements of peyote use were absent, but in Ignacio were present. Additionally, Ignacio shamans warned Utes against peyote use, suggesting that it was a corrupting force and not part of the “Indian way.” Opler attributed these differences to the degree of assimilation each community had experienced. While Ignacio residents maintained a close relationship with the surrounding white community and had adapted farming as a livelihood, many Utes living at Towaoc had maintained a semi-nomadic lifestyle and had not sought out encounters with Euro-Americans. Opler suggested that because of these cultural differences, Ignacio peyote practitioners had incorporated Christian elements into their ceremony as a signal of assimilation. In contrast, in Towaoc, peyote was “cultural regeneration” and it “serves the function of closing the door on a modern American environment.” Opler extended his argument, stating, “there, with the main stress placed on native sentiments rather than on Christianity, the Towaoc Ute is free to elaborate on an aboriginal mode of curing and an aboriginal view of life.”

Stewart addressed Opler’s distinction between these two communities by noting that Utes at Ignacio were reluctant to practice peyote ceremonies because the community leaders had prohibited them. A few years after Opler conducted his survey, Ignacio tribal leaders approved peyote use. In response, more Utes started to practice it. Additionally, Stewart argued that rather than being an expression of a deeper, more authentic type of Ute practice, peyote use came from outside tribal influence. As evidence, Stewart pointed to the repeated pilgrimages to Utah and Oklahoma Utes made to learn about the ritual and

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to keep the “theology correct.” Based on his fieldwork, Stewart concluded that the Utes “never talked of peyotism as a rebirth and reworking of ancient ceremonies.”  

70 Although Stewart and Opler disagreed about the presence of Christian elements in Ute peyote practice, they both agreed that Christian elements were not part of authentic Ute religious practices.

While Stewart and Opler debated about “Christian elements” in Ute peyotism, Utes worked to translate their religious practices into Christianity. Mildred Dillman, a BIA agent who worked with the Northern Utes during the 1920s and 30s, reported on a conversation with a Ute about the Sun Dance as a Christianity practice. She reported that her Ute informant had stated that the large center pole of the Sun Dance area represented God, the twelve poles were the twelve apostles, and the ten singers were the Ten Commandments. The “surrounding foliage—the twigs, the leaves, the branches, etc—represent all the people under the sun. During the dance when the dancers run up to the center pole, they offer up their prayers to God.”  

71 Dillman used this report to support her opinion that the government should allow the Utes to dance. Her reasoning was that if the dance is just another expression of Christianity, it is beneficial to the tribe.

Ute comparisons of their ceremonial practices persisted throughout the twentieth century. A 1967 interview with Henry Harris, a Ute man who was born in 1896, located the origin of the Sun Dance in Jericho:

It's like this, you see, when Aaron and Moses led their children out of Egypt they came up to . . . they came up through there and Moses and them. And so many days and nights on the water and on the land and they come to the Red Sea and


71 Mildred Miles Dillman, “The Sun Dance,” n.d., MSS 6164, Mildred M. Dillman Collection, University Archives; L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.
they cross the Red Sea which the Lord opened for them to cross. They went through. So, they come to this land of Jericho, that's where the Indian Sun Dance starts where the . . . the lodge they build, they have many lodges of worship but the Sun Dance is the main one . . . so when the walls were made of Jericho, you see, the Indians circled the lodge three times and sound their flutes and answer from the east just as through they did when the children came in around Jericho where they circled the wall three times and then the walls caved from the east. The center pole which is the center pole forked . . . resembles the cross as far as the brush work makes the cross where Christ was crucified. And these little feathers they wear, the Indians wear on their fingers meaning the nails which was put into Christ's hands when he stand when they . . . see, they, that's why that's beam and the center pole passes the fork, see, it has 12 long poles on which mean the 12 apostles, the followers of Jesus.72

Although most origin narratives of the Sun Dance suggest that Native Americans learned it from the buffalo, this narrative reinterprets events from the Hebrew Bible as well as symbols from Christianity.73

These interpretations of the Sun Dance might serve as an example of Native American assimilation to mainstream American society. However, it is possible that these explanations were part of a larger cultural project to translate Ute practices into language that would have been intelligible to Euro-Americans. The cultural translations may have been a product of an earlier era, when BIA officials and Christian missionaries attempted to thwart Native American ceremonial practices. Utes would have been motivated to do everything they could to protect their ceremonies—both new and old.

A 1982 interview with Clifford Duncan, a Ute man, confirms this idea. In 1982, the Utah State Oral Historical Society interviewed Clifford Duncan about his experiences growing up in as the son of a Ute medicine man. In the course of the interviews, Duncan stated that Utes had purposefully used comparisons to Christianity in order to explain and


protect their ceremonies. The interviewer asked about the relationship of the Sun Dance to Christian symbols, and he stated that people had made those comparisons “to protect that [the Sun Dance]—to preserve that or keep it. . . . The change was an artificial thing - it was not for real -they had to add those things on.”74 For Duncan at least, Harris’s origin story of the Sun Dance in Jericho would have been a calculated move to preserve Ute ceremonial practices.

The necessity to translate Native American ceremonial practices into Christian practices was a critical component of preserving cultural identity. Much like W.E.B deBois’s “double-consciousness,” Native Americans in the early twentieth century lived within two worlds—one firmly rooted in tribal practices, language, and identity, and a second world where they were expected to conform to mainstream, Euro-American cultural practices. The two worlds were constantly in tension. Duncan’s upbringing was decidedly within these two worlds. A descendent of a shamanistic family, Ute spiritual practices framed Duncan’s worldview. However, both his parents were baptized as Episcopalians. Duncan reported that despite living as baptized Christians and using the church facilities, his parents “weren't really what you call Christians.” Instead, Duncan said that the church was attractive to his mother because “she utilized some of the facilities likes they had, you know, like the washing machines.” The washing machines were open to all the church members, and since Duncan came from a large family, the church and its appliances served a utilitarian purpose for his family.75

74Clifford Duncan, interviewed by Sandra Fuller, August 30, 1982, “The Ute Indian Interviews.” Transcript, JMLUU, Accn 0853.

75Ibid.
The Duncans, as well as other Utes, used Christianity to serve a purpose—either to wash clothes for a large family or to preserve Native American religious practices. Rather than being a cynical application of religion, the Duncans’ acknowledgment of Christianity’s utility revealed the way in which they were actively involved in the manufacturing of the cultural space that Ute Land Religion afforded. The Duncans selected Euro-American cultural materials to build boundaries between their ceremonial practices and the shared space afforded by comparisons of Ute religious practices to Christianity. By acknowledging the cultural (and utilitarian power) that Christianity offered the family, the Duncans joined other Utes and non-Ute allies to draw borders around this shared space. These cross-religious comparisons contributed to the on-going systemization and defining of Ute Land Religion.

Native Americans had a profound need to present their ceremonial practices as “real” religion. For example, in a 1903 BIA report from the Nez Perce Agency, John Seger, an Indian agent, reported that the religious expression of the annual Sun Dance had declined. He wrote: “This Sun Dance was once a religious ceremony, and was useful in keeping their tribal organization and the genealogy of the people. They have discarded it as a religion and forgotten the ceremony . . . The last three sun dances the Cheyenne and Arapaho indulged in were simply fakes. They were pretending to be something they were not.”\textsuperscript{76} In order for Native American religious practices to continue, it was imperative that the practitioners successfully translate the dances into terms that the Euro-American Indian agents could understand. While the Nez Perce Reservation was several

\textsuperscript{76}Quoted in Jacqueline Shea Murphy, \textit{The people Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 58.
hundred miles away from the Ouray-Uintah Reservation, Seger’s condemnation of the Cheyenne and Arapaho’s supposed lack of religious feeling in the dances was part of the wider culture. If these ceremonies were deemed inauthentic, Native Americans risked losing them.

Staging Ute Land Religion

Outside of anthropological reports, the representation of Ute Land Religion culminated in the musical collaboration of Zitkala-Sa and William Hanson, in an opera titled *The Sun Dance*. The work combined anthropological descriptions of Ute practices, Native American attempts to translate these practices for Euro-Americans, and an understanding of Native American religion as being related to Christianity. Zitkala-Sa, the Sioux woman who worked with the Utes, and William Hanson, the BYU professor and ethnomusicologist, wrote the opera together in the 1910s. First performed in Vernal, Utah, in 1913, the opera was performed twenty times in a variety of venues, including Salt Lake City, Provo, and New York City, in 1938.

Zitkala-Sa provided several traditional Sioux songs for the piece, which Hanson transcribed and for which he wrote lyrics. Having studied Ute songs for a decade, he also incorporated many of their songs and rhythms into the opera. Although the names of the characters changed with each version, the basic plot stayed the same. Tavamouiscie, the hero and a personification of the sun, was to bring an Indian maiden, Tam-man, the personification of spring, to the Utes. But Cutchi, or winter, kidnapped Tam-man. In the end, Cutchi could not hold onto Tam-man, because the sun was too powerful. The Utes boosted the sun’s power through a rousing performance of the Sun Dance. In the first performances of the opera, Ute performers sang and danced. Historian Jane Hafen
suggested that since the Utes were practicing the Sun Dance at the time of the opera’s premier it is “easy to draw the conclusion that knowing the topic, they performed their own ritualistic songs and dances.” However, it is difficult to know conclusively, since these pieces were not scored into the opera.

Hanson described his motivation for writing the opera as twofold: to preserve the Native American songs and to educate non-Native Americans. Hanson saw these two endeavors as interrelated. As a young man, he had witnessed governmental efforts to prevent the Utes from holding both the Sun Dance and the Bear Dance. Without support from Euro-Americans and the United States government, Hanson feared that the dances would end. The opera was a place to both record songs and to increase Euro-American appreciation for Native American culture. He wrote that the “unrecorded aboriginal songs, the rituals, and the habits were doomed to oblivion in the natural processes which were rapidly allowing the policies of the white man to have complete power and domination.” Thus, because of the rapidly disappearing Native culture, Hanson believed that “he had been born at the right time: He must not procrastinate.” Next, because of the “vastness of the nature of the culture,” he believed that the “most efficient mode of transcribing and interpreting the culture was in opera form.”

Hanson reacted in part to the belief that the Bear Dance was detrimental to the Utes because young girls often married after the dance—a phenomenon that Hanson wrote about as the “sex lure.” The fear, as reported by Hanson, was that the girls chose marriage over returning to the Indian school, which would lead to the downfall of the

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78 William Hanson, “The Sun Dance,” n.d., MSS 299; William F. Hanson Collection; University Archives; L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.
entire population. Hanson may have framed this desire to regulate Native American sexual practices based on his membership with the Latter-day Saints. Although he was just a child when the church banned polygamy, he would have been aware of the limits of religious freedom granted in the United States. Regardless of his relationship to Mormon religious freedom, he argued that “the Indian should be free to conduct his social life and also his courtship.” He further asserted that “marriage is sincere and regular according to native custom and is not an immoral episode; that the right of the Red Man should be respected until legal modern marriage ceremonials can be brought about within the tribe.”

While Hanson recognized that the “sex lure” was present at the Bear Dance, he also noted many other “lures” could harm the Utes and that this particular “lure” was “reduced to a sane minimum.” Through the Sun Dance Opera, Hanson sought to change public opinion about the danger of these dances and instead, to cultivate appreciation and understanding of the practices.

The opera met limited success. The biggest stage on which the opera was performed was the 1938 performance by the New York City Light Opera Guild as their annual American Opera. Hanson reported that one hundred Indians attended the opera in full regalia, and 3,100 seats were sold out for both nights. Additionally, eight Indians performed in the cast, alongside white dancers and singers who appeared in red-face. In a letter home, Hanson reported: “The first night audience was enthusiastic. Applause stopped the performance several times.” For at least one reviewer, Hanson’s orchestration and collaboration with Bonnin succeeded. An article published in the June

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79Ibid.

80William Hanson, “The Lure of the Wigwam,” MSS 229, LTPSC
9, 1928 edition of *Musical America* reported on a Utah performance of the Sun Dance opera, noting that “the clarinet, the flute, the oboe, and the bassoon drift through the harmonies as wind in the treetops. No one can listen to the best of the rhythm without feeling the presence of the great open spaces and sensing the somber spirit of the nomadic Indian.”

For this reviewer, the nature of the music captured a romantic spirit of the open frontier and the life of Native Americans unfettered by civilization. It is ironic that this reviewer was able to experience the open spaces of frontier life within an opera house, as the very production of an opera, complete with sets, complicated costumes, and the combination of instruments relied on a world separated from the wilderness. The opera performance was authenticated by Zitkala-Sa’s collaboration with Hanson as well as the involvement by Ute and Sioux dancers. Bound by the walls of an opera house and confined to a stage that Euro-Americans could comfortably observe and then leave, this display of Native American religion could potentially remain safe to Euro-American observers.

Rather than demanding that Euro-Americans respond to the governmental restriction and injustice being done to the Utes, the religious practices that were at risk of fading into the past became a means of commercial entertainment. However, through the presentation of the religious practices, a cultural space emerged that solidified public perception of Ute Land Religion. An image of Ute religious practices that was dependent on the purity of the land and the freedom from intrusion of the modern world developed within that shared space.
The opera also represented something to the Native Americans who participated in the performance, either through dancing or through watching. Zitkala-Sa died the night of the premier of the opera on which she collaborated. In the playbill for the New York performance, she did not receive credit for her work, although Hanson signed over his copyright and subsequent proceeds to her.\textsuperscript{81} For Zitkala-Sa, the opera was part of her lifetime project to bring Native American affairs into the public arena. Hanson reported that Zitkala-Sa had given him the following advice:

Never forget, Mr. Hanson, and let this influence all of your writings about the American aboriginal people, that all Indian tribesman are predominately nature-made. They are inherently religious and they possess a child-like (Christ-like) faith. We are not ashamed of the redman culture. Our supercontrolled lives are constantly being helped or deterred by mystic beings, good or evil spirits, who also occupy the wonderland about us. Spirits of this wonder world sometimes our deceased relatives, or heroes of past mortal lives, come to us in visions of in controlled events. Old friends eagerly await the arrival of deceased humans at the Happy Hunting Grounds. Our forefathers live there.\textsuperscript{82}

Through the collaboration of Zitkala-Sa, Ute performers, anthropologists, and William Hanson, an understanding emerged of Ute religion as rooted in an unmediated experience with nature. For some Euro-Americans, Ute Land Religion became a place to reflect on the downfalls of a consumer-based society. For William Hanson, his academic and cultural projects centered on arguing for the authenticity of Ute religious practices by stating that the Utes had achieved more religiosity than Euro-American Christians. “Personally,” Hanson wrote, “the writer cannot see so much idolatry . . . Many of the so-called barbaric dreams and chants seem to embody more sincerity, hope, imagination, originality, MORALITY, and even character development than some of our so-called

\textsuperscript{81} Gertrude and Raymond Bonnin Papers, MSS 1704; LTPSC.

\textsuperscript{82} “Sun Dance Land,” William Hanson, MSS 299, LTPSC.
intellectual and Christian formulas.” Hanson used his understanding of “civilization” to explain Native American religion. “Civilization either doubts or explains the supernatural. It is cold-blooded. It shuns emotionalism, superstition and sentimentalism.” Furthermore, the way that “civilization” understands the natural world frames its interaction with it. “[Civilization] knows the reason for the sighting of the breeze; it sees the physical power in the rippling brook; it measures the money value of the forests, the irrigation possibilities of the lakes, and the economical value of animals. Everything in nature is weighed in terms of resources.” In contrast, Hanson wrote, “The Indian has been largely molded by his environment. He seldom created or altered his surroundings.” Hanson interpreted efforts by Euro-Americans to Christianize the Utes as a project of a “conqueror to revolutionize what nature had taken ages to mould.” Hanson believed that in response to these efforts, the Utes retreated “both in body and soul, from Caucasian society” and instead “centered his social and religious interested as a tribe on the Bear Dance and the Sun Dance.”

The motivating factor for Hanson’s Sun Dance opera, the novels, the anthropologist work, and Zitkala-Sa’s advocacy work was to preserve an invented memory of Native American religious practices. For the Euro-American allies, this project was motivated by the collective observation that Native American religion was in steep decline in response to contact with the civilized world. For Zitkala-Sa, the opera provided her with the chance to educate Euro-Americans about her experience of Native American religion, as being born from and immersed in the natural world.

83William Hanson, “The Lure of the Wigwam,” MSS 299; LTPSC.

84William Hanson, “The Lure of Tam-man Nacup Springtime festival of the Utes” MSS 299; LTPSC.
Utes and non-Utes benefitted from the production of the culturally shared space of Ute Land Religion. Through this process, Ute Land Religion became a place from which Utes and their allies could criticize what they saw as mainstream American culture’s preoccupation with consumerism. Residing outside the influence of excessive materialism, Ute Land Religion figured as a place to reflect on Euro-American thirst for technological and material progress. In this space, Euro-Americans found solace from capitalism but they also feared that the boundaries between Ute Land Religion and capitalism were too porous to keep it pure. Thus, ironically, nostalgia for a time when Euro-Americans did not observe Ute ceremonial practices underlay the project to name and describe Ute religion. Additionally, Euro-Americans could use Native American religious practices as a means to celebrate America’s religious diversity, and subsequently, America’s commitment to pluralism. For Euro-Americans, Ute Land Religion became a place to celebrate what they found to be the best of America while at the same time criticizing the worst of it.

Euro-Americans were not the only group to benefit from this newly defined space. Utes benefited from the production of Ute Land Religion as well, as it provided them with cultural space within the dominant culture to control their public identity and to educate non-Utes about themselves. Through creation of these tenuous boundaries, Utes developed non-Ute allies by heightening the belief that the Ute maintained a purer religion, untainted by the corrupting effects of capitalism. Thus, a complex dance was enacted; Utes danced around incorporating the material artifacts of Euro-American society while non-Ute allies grieved for the declension of what they identified as real religion.
In the process of analyzing the civilizing project of the American West, Euro-American allies began to develop an idea of authentic religion as being separable from those “civilized” activities, such as a market-based economy. As a result, twentieth century observers forgot the religious motivations of United States westward expansion—since “authentic” religion has no economic motivation and the social/economic activities that had long been part of Ute religious life were identified as the corrupting forces of white greed. Through the process of defining and systematizing, the producers of the cultural memories of the United States nineteenth-century expansionist project responded by reading both the Ute Land Religion and the corresponding critique of American consumerism back into the past.

While Hanson was researching Native American religious practices for his opera, he was invited to attend a Sun Dance by Old Sioux, who Hanson reported was a cousin of Sitting Bull’s. In return for his generosity, Hanson invited Old Sioux to attend the opera in New York. In his MA thesis, Hanson wrote “When we took Old Sioux into our opera to have him dance certain of the Indian dance with the chorus, he thought he had met a new Indian People. Faces of the singers, make-believe Indians, were painted and of course their costumes were Indian.” Hanson believed this to be an indication of the success of the production. However, Old Sioux may have been commenting on the way Euro-Americans had appropriated Native American religious practices in order to “play” at religious diversity by “playing Indian.”

85William Hanson, “The Lure of the Wigwam,” MSS 299; LTPSC.
CHAPTER 5
PAGEANTS AND POWWOWS: RECONCILIATION AND UTE LAND RELIGION

Introduction

In the summer of 2009, the sleepy town of Meeker buzzed with projects to update the town’s cultural memories.¹ Over three hundred Meeker residents were coming together to produce and watch the annual reenactment of the Meeker Massacre and the Smoking River Powwow Committee, riding on the national attention from the 2008 Powwow, was preparing for the coming fall’s Powwow. Through these activities, the Chamber of Commerce, the Rio Blanco Historical Society, and the Rio Blanco County Forest Service Division were building bridges between the Meeker community and the Ute Nation. These two cultural memory activities, the pageant and the powwow, demonstrate how one modern community attempted to overcome a violent past through collaborative memory projects, in part, by updating older cultural memory projects and by creating new projects. At the heart of these collaborations was a twenty-first century version of earlier articulations of Ute Land Religion.

Through the Meeker Massacre Pageant and the Smoking River Powwow, Coloradoans worked to construct a regional identity that was intertwined with the

¹The questions of this chapter are framed by literature in memory studies, many of which focus on projects to remake cultural memory sites. Barbie Zelizer noted that “collective memory thrives on remaking the residue of past decades into material with contemporary resonance” (217). Barbie Zelizer, “Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies,” Critical Studies in Mass Communication, June 1995: 214-239. Similarly, Iwona Irwin-Zarecka argued that memory studies is about asking “how the past is made to matter” (7). Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994).
developing cultural memories of the Meeker Massacre and subsequent Ute Removal. An understanding of religion rooted in individualism and tolerance buttressed these cultural memories. Subsequently, the regional identity that developed out of these cultural memories was based on an idealized understanding of religious freedom and Euro-American tolerance towards and validation of Native American religions. Through this cultural memory, Coloradoans used governmental expansion into the American West and the subsequent removal of Native Americans as a foil for their own regional identity of a religiously tolerant people, an identity that served as the basis for the terms of reconciliation.

For Ute and non-Ute community members, reconciliation required a reworking of Meeker’s cultural memory sites—the older versions of the memory sites did not emphasize the region’s acceptance and valorization of Native peoples. However, for some Utes, these projects did not meet their expectations for reconciliation. In other words, by evaluating the project by the committee’s own terms, the Smoking River Powwow committee’s goal of reconciliation did not succeed. The short-term failure of the reconciliation projects could be attributed to a variety of factors, including a change in leadership and a lack of funds. While few projects can succeed without clear direction or money, this chapter contends that the committee’s expectations for reconciliation as well as their means to achieve it set up the project for failure. This chapter argues that the failed reconciliation project can be partially attributed to the way that Ute Land Religion informed the committee’s goals. Building on previous articulations of Ute Land Religion, the committee drew on past assumptions that Utes maintained a purely spiritual relationship with the land. Thus, the committee worked to make sure that Utes had access
to spiritual sites, but when the Utes began to request hunting access and free land, the committee lacked the resources to facilitate a compromise.

Meeker Massacre Pageant

On July 2, 2009, I picked up Merilee Claverie, a family friend, and drove to Meeker to watch the seventy-first annual Meeker Massacre Pageant. We pulled into a dirt parking lot already filled with pickups. We were apprehensive about the rain clouds that flanked the arena—our hour and a half drive had been through torrential rain. Clutching umbrellas, three coats, and a towel, we paid our ten-dollar admission fee. The ticket attendant handed us bracelets and a program, which named tonight’s pageant as the “Twilight of the Ute Empire” and included a list of acknowledgments of the many businesses and individuals that contributed to this performance and of the fifteen scenes in that night’s performance. A pencil-drawn image of a Native American graced the front of the program.2

On our way into the stadium, we passed a young woman who had slid out of a F250 Ford pickup. She was dressed in a red satin dress with a lacy slip, a feathered headband, and heavy makeup. She grinned at us, as if she was sharing a private joke. Marilee and I wondered why there were “floozies” in the narrative. We decided there must be a saloon scene, but we questioned how that would fit—there were no saloons on the Ute reservation in the late nineteenth century. I jokingly suggested that she could have been Josephine Meeker, gone wild. Walking towards the stadium, we saw a collection of “Indians,” people dressed in sienna buckskin clothing, dark wigs with braids

and headbands, and red makeup on their faces and exposed arms. It was a strange scene—a circle of people dressed in “red-face” was surrounded by firefighters dressed in fire-repellent suits, ready to act in case of disaster.

The Pageant was held in Meeker’s Fairgrounds, a modestly sized arena about the size of a football stadium, where the Range Call Rodeo would be held that weekend. The Pageant and the Rodeo had been held on the same weekend for the past seventy years. The Rodeo, an annual event since 1885 billed as one of the oldest continuous rodeos in Colorado, attracts amateur and semi-professional rodeo stars eager to test their skills. Surrounded by corrugated metal buildings, the fairgrounds were flanked with covered bleachers for about 300 spectators. The basement level contained a concession stand where event attendees could purchase giant pickles, nachos, hotdogs, hamburgers, and soda. The wooden doors into the bathroom had swung open for many years, but the paint on the doors was fresh.

Throughout the performance, it became clear that the pageant emphasized the significance of Ute Land Religion to Meeker’s regional history. Like earlier articulations of Ute Land Religion, the Pageant depicted the Utes as particularly spiritual people because of their connection to the land. Like the earlier representations of Ute religiosity, the pageant stressed the importance of the spiritual usage of the land over political or economic uses of it. The narrative suggested that these religious beliefs defined all Utes. For example, the script declared that the Utes were unified in their protest against Nathan Meeker’s farming endeavors. The script asserted that the Utes were drawn together by their shared belief that plowing scarred the landscape, desecrating sacred space. Historically, as chapters one and two have
demonstrated, nineteenth-century Utes disagreed about farming—some supported the transition, while others rejected it. However, this simplified representation of nineteenth-century Utes pitted against the United States government’s assimilation programs highlights purported character of Meeker residents: rugged mountain men who maintained an amiable relationship with the Utes.

In order to transport pageant attendees to the nineteenth century, the arena was staged to recall the “Wild West.” Stage right held three teepees decorated with colorful geometric designs (figure 2). Potted sage bushes dotted the center of the dirt arena. In front of the teepees were two pyramid-shaped piles of wood, ready to be ignited. A canvas sheet painted with green and brown trees, brush, and cacti hung along the arena wall, in the place where there might otherwise have been advertisements. On a flatbed trailer, in the area between the arena and the stadium, a four-piece country-western band played. The musicians included a drummer, guitarist, bass guitar, and a banjo. They played traditional country-western music, with song selections that were a mixture of “secular” and religious songs, such as: “I’ll Fly Away;” “Will the Circle be Unbroken;” “If I told you you had a beautiful body, would you hold it against me;” “Cotton-eyed Joe;” and “Rocky Top.”
God, home, lust, and the pride in hard work in the great outdoors were prevailing themes in the lyrics—themes that were reflected in crowd of about 300 people. As the threat of rain subsided, the stadium filled. Teenagers and young people roamed the grounds, young mothers and fathers tended to their young children, and patriotic and evangelical t-shirts and ball-caps graced bodies and heads. When we first arrived, about one hundred people sat in the stadium, many of whom were dancing to the music. As the music started to wind down and the time for the pageant arrived, people grew more enthusiastic. One man, dressed in overalls, an engineer’s cap, and a bandana visited the rowdy group seated in front and informed them, “I may not need to die tonight, there might be too many people.”

Meeker residents have been “dying” during this reenactment since 1938. The *Meeker Herald* reported that the first performance, which was held on the Fourth of July and was titled “March of Empire Pageant,” attracted over 3,500 attendees.³ The

³ “March of Empire Pageant,” July 6, 1938, *The Meeker Herald*. 203
American Legion Auxiliary inaugurated the pageant as a way to supplement the already long-standing tradition of the Range Call Rodeo. The original performance opened with the arrival of the Spanish in Colorado and then the narrative turned to Meeker’s history. On stage, Meeker and his family arrived in the arena in a wagon train. “In the flood lights,” the newspaper reported, “the whole scene was so typical of the old West that it brought a great hand from the stands.” This scene was augmented by “old time singing, music, and dancing to the old tunes.” The third and fourth scenes of this original production portrayed the confrontation between Meeker and the Utes. The last scene depicted the gunfight between Major Thornburg and Ute warriors and the *Herald* stated that “the scene is in the arena in faint light and the shots and flashes from the guns add much to the scene.”

In 1939, the same local newspaper reported that the women of Meeker’s chapter of the American Legion Auxiliary produced an improved version of the pageant, titled “Echoes of the Past.” As the *Herald* noted, “there is a world of material from which the organization can draw their script and each year the pageant can be a little different so that it will continue to be entertaining and historical to those attending.” Like the first performance, this one started with the reported expedition of the Spanish in the area. Then, the pageant skipped ahead towards Meeker’s arrival at the Ute agency, which was followed by Meeker’s contested plowing. In this performance, Meeker plowed up a racetrack rather than a horse pasture. Then, the pageant depicted the battle of Thornburg, the Meeker Massacre, and the burning of the agency. This performance included

4 Ibid.

Chipeta’s ride—a fictionalized account that emphasized Chipeta’s role in freeing the captives.\(^6\) The same version was staged again in 1940.\(^7\)

Meeker did not sponsor the pageant again until after World War II when the Chamber of Commerce revived it in 1954. A local resident wrote the script, but Elliot Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s son and frequent visitor to the White River Valley, revised the script and narrated it for the following two years. In 1958, Meeker’s local theater group, Curtain Call, produced the pageant. John Wix, an Aspen resident and frequent visitor to Meeker, wrote that script, which he titled “Destiny of Betrayal.”\(^8\) Despite changes in the script and producers, three elements remained the same: the burning of the Indian Agency buildings; live gunshots; and fireworks to represent the Milk Creek battle. Generally, the narrative covered “the life of the primitive Ute Indians, the coming of the pioneer trappers and explorers and the unsuccessful efforts of Indian Agent Nathan Meeker to convert the red skins to the white’s way of life.”\(^9\)

Until 1988, Utes did not participate in the Meeker Massacre Pageant. That year, through collaboration with the Rio Blanco County Historical Society, the performance included twenty-two Ute Native Americans from the Southern Ute reservation, located in southern Colorado. The Ute visitors stayed with Meeker families, in what the Denver Post called a cultural exchange. This visit was in collaboration with a Rio Blanco Historical Society project to raise funds to construct a “Peace Barn” on the original White

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\(^6\) “Echoes of the Past” Pageant is huge success,” Meeker Herald, July 6, 1939.

\(^7\) “Meeker Massacre Pageant Scrapbook,” Meeker Public Library, n.d.

\(^8\) “Meeker Massacre Pageant Scrapbook,” Meeker Public Library, n.d.

\(^9\) “Meeker’s annual massacre,” Empire, June 27, 1965.
River Ute Agency site. The funds were never raised, but the Utes visiting from the Southern Ute Reservation expressed appreciation for the project. “I think it would bring a closer unity and closer understanding, to share a part of our heritage with them,” said Everett Burch, the education program coordinator for the Southern Ute tribe. “What was done was done. We want everything back in harmony again.” Another visitor, Lillie Frost said, “This is like a homecoming. I’m very glad to be here. This is where generations of my grandfathers are buried.” Adding to this idea of a homecoming, one Ute visitor, Sanjean Ketchum said, “It’s a feeling like you’ve been here before.”

Native Americans have not participated in the performance since the 1988 collaboration, although both Clifford Duncan and Loya Arum have watched recent performances. Duncan agreed with the 1988 visitors—he believed that the pageant was an effective way to teach Euro-Americans about Ute culture. Arum disagreed, unlike Duncan, she stated that the reenactment of the events disturbed the spirits of the people who had died during the confrontation. Knowing that, her reaction to the pageant was that “it hurts!”

In response to the Rio Blanco County Historical Society’s efforts to update the region’s historical narrative, the 2009 performance was the culmination of multiple years of painstaking revision to better reflect both sides of Ute and Euro-American history. From the sound and light box, perched above the stadium, this year’s narrator, Steve Wix (a local real estate agent and the son of a past narrator) proclaimed that the pageant would

12 Clifford Duncan, interview by author, Fort Duchene, UT, July 21, 2009.
be starting any minute. He welcomed people to the seventy-first presentation of the pageant and noted that while the script, directors, and people had changed over the years of production, the one thing that remained the same was that the entire community pulled together to produce the presentation. The crowd remained talkative throughout this announcement, and I was unsure that the crowd heard the announcer’s reflection on the longevity of the show or his interpretation of its significance.

Like many other community productions, this performance was not a well-oiled machine. The narrator’s voice strained under the burden of speaking for nearly an hour and a half; there were long pauses in the narration as actors struggled to run across the arena to set the next scene. We waited for five to six minutes after the announcer suggested that the pageant would begin and the actual beginning of the performance. Eventually, though, the announcer requested that the audience stand in order to honor the United States flag. The arena was dark, but a spot light from the light and sound box shone on a young female rider, who held the flag and rode to the center of the arena, on a horse decked out with red and blue ankle tape. A wordless recording of the “Star Spangled Banner” was piped through the PA system. Folks took off their hats, placed their hands over their hearts, and about halfway through, some started softly singing the anthem. At the conclusion of the song, the crowd burst into applause and cheers.

The beginning of the pageant established Meeker’s natural beauty as a significant theme of the pageant. After the National Anthem, about fifty actors dressed as Native Americans crouched down and ran across the darkened arena. Subtle string music played in the background; a handful of fireworks went off on the hill. Once the actors were in place, a recording of “America the Beautiful” played as the narrator began the script.
introduction situated the listeners within what the narrator called “America’s last wilderness,” where people today enjoy abundance of fish and game. In a nod to historical tourism, the script encouraged the audience to explore the area’s abundant flora and fauna. Then, the script made its first, and last, mention of an environmental ethic: “The red man knew that if he took care of the land, the land would certainly take care of him, now the white man is learning this lesson painfully and slowly.”

The surrounding landscape and its history oriented the narrative. The narrator described Meeker’s original buildings that still stand and encouraged the audience to visit these places, “to walk on boards shaken by soldiers’ boots.” From these spaces, the narrator noted that the town of Meeker grew slowly. He then situated the arena in relationship to the two places where battles were fought—using mileage and highways to orient the crowd in relationship to the historic locations where these events happened.

By locating the audience within a wider space, the narrative oriented them to a new way of thinking about the surrounding area. For people unfamiliar with the story, the introduction situated them within a specific space and established a spatial relationship among the dirt, rocks, trees, and the audience. We were not viewing a documentary from the comfort of our home; we were in the place that held the memories of the past. The pageant’s prompted participants to unlock and decode these memories from the places, with an invitation to “trace back through the bloody trace of time,” because “these are the mountains, this is the ground, the blood that stained this earth has disappeared, but listen carefully, for tonight, the ghost that haunt these hills, these men will speak.”

In addition to locating attendees within the surrounding landscape, the pageant drew on concepts of Ute Land Religion, particularly the idea that Utes had explicitly
spiritual ties to the surrounding landscape. After the narrator situated and located the arena and its people in the places and the significance of the events, a man dressed in buckskin clothing, with an elaborate headdress, took center stage. The rest of the arena remained dark, and a single spotlight shined on him as he pantomimed the text the narrator read. “When we first had this land, we were strong, now, we are melting like snow on a hillside, while you are growing like spring grass.” The man in buckskin exaggerated his hand gestures, pointing to the audience to show that we were the ones who flourished, while his people did not. This moment in the script presumed that the audience was entirely non-Ute, but I was unable to confirm this. The pantomimed monologue concluded with this statement: “I know I have been wronged. The words of the Great Father never reach me, and mine never reach Him . . . I will talk to you no more. I will go now and I will fight you. I will fight you for my hunting grounds.” The narrator’s voice became emphatic, as did the gestures of the actor. With the last statement, the chief raised his fist and pounded the air. Then, the lights dramatically darkened. This opening scene emphasized that Utes used the land to communicate with “the Great Father,” and that Euro-Americans had disrupted that communication by removing the Utes from the very place the audience was sitting. However, the script did not detail how the Utes used the land to communicate with the Great Spirit.

The pageant presented the idea the Utes became a formidable people only after the Spanish brought the horse to the Great Basin region. After the narrator described the pageant as being a tale of the downfall of the “noble and proud Ute,” the story described what the Utes did before the arrival of the Spanish. The stage lighting then shone on the fifty people that had run out at the beginning of the pageant. The actors sat in circles
around the teepees and gathered around the fires; the children played with sticks. In the background, about six horses with riders gathered, although these riders were not part of the narrative yet. The narrator described the Indians as being poor, miserable, and root diggers. The actors wandered around, hanging their heads as if they were miserable.

The Spanish horse erased the Utes’ misery. According to the script, the pony filled the Ute men with pride, touched them with nobility, turned the Indian warrior into “half-man, half-god,” and “made possible the Indian’s finest hour.” This glory came with a price, since the narrator declared that the horse also “brought his darkest day.” The narrator noted that the Utes became involved in the captivity economy and raided the Paiute and Cheyenne for captives. At this point in the performance, the mounted riders rode very fast around the camp, shouting “war cries,” whoops made with open mouths with a hand over the mouth. The crowd snickered and one child applauded.

The pageant stressed the importance of horses through a depiction of a wedding ceremony. On stage, performers acted out a scene in which a Ute man obtained a bride through the exchange of horses. Through the scene of setting up “Ute culture,” the narrative aimed to demonstrate the centrality of horses as well as to gesture to women’s place in society. The actor who received both horses as part of his wife’s dowry appeared to be more enthusiastic about the horses than his new bride. Through the depiction of bridal exchange, the implication was that horses were more important than women.14

Following the bridal exchange, the actors acted out the “famed Ute pony races,” racing horses around the arena two at a time, with plenty of war whoops. The pounding

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14 This depiction is an exaggeration of Ute gender relations. Evidence demonstrates that nineteenth-century Ute women had more autonomy than this scene suggests. For more information about Ute women’s roles in their society, see: Katherine M.B. Osburn, Southern Ute Women: Autonomy and Assimilation on the Reservation, 1887-1934 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).
of the horses’ hoofs on the dirt arena drew cheers and applause from the crowd. From the horse, the pageant script argued that the Utes built an idyllic empire, one that was full of joy for the participants. The narrator called the Ute the “laughing people,” who lived in a region where “lush grass tickled his pony’s belly.” A recording of Prelude to an Afternoon with a Fawn piped through the PA system enhanced the idyllic scene. The pageant’s message was clear: the Utes enjoyed the bounty of the land and were at peace in nature.

   European explorers threatened the Utes’ bucolic life. The pageant emphasized the difference between Ute Land Religion and Christianity through the travels of Escalante and Domínguez, the Franciscan missionaries who traveled into Colorado and who reportedly were the first Europeans that the Utes met. The arena spotlight shone stage right on two men dressed in hooded brown robes, led by a family of “Utes.” In the background, chant music played. The monk actors met the groups of Indians who had continued to play and sit on the ground around the fire. The monks held up a cross and attempted to convert the Utes. The Utes spurned the conversion efforts because, as the narrator noted, the “Utes worshipped nature and everything in nature was good, and the greatest sin was the desecration of the land, which was the plow.” At this point in the script, the narrative established the primary idea of Ute Land Religion: the Utes happily enjoyed the bounty of the land without needing to scar it with plows.

   After the horserace, the pageant then turned to a popular, but puzzling scene: the mountain men. I had a feeling that we would find out why there was a young woman dressed as a can-can dancer in the parking lot, but I was unsure of the significance of these historical characters to Meeker’s regional history. This act of the pageant included
stories about Kit Carson, Pegleg Smith, and Alfred Packer, Colorado’s infamous cannibal; however, historically, none of these men figured in the region’s past. The narrative focused on several legends surrounding Smith and Packer, all of which emphasized the ruggedness of the mountain men. One was titled “How Pegleg Smith got his name.” Smith was a fur trapper with Ceran St. Vrain, a French fur trapper, working around Bent’s Fort, when he was shot in the leg.15 Actors dramatized this on stage with gunshots and Pegleg fell to the ground. He shouted the only speaking part in the pageant. When people were attending to his leg, his line was: “Cut it off,” which was followed by Packer shouting “grub,” much to the audience’s amusement. The relation of this tale to the Ute story was nominal; in this scene, the narrator stated that Utes cared for Smith temporarily after his amputation. A saloon scene followed, in which the young woman I had seen earlier danced to Jacques Offenbach’s “Can-Can.” Fur trappers and cowboys whooped and shot off their guns. In the middle of the dance, Pegleg got into a fight and the narrator informed the audience that Pegleg would take off his leg and whack detractors in the head.

These stories had nothing to do with the Utes; however, at the end of the scene, it became clear that these scenes had everything to do with Meeker’s regional identity. In the conclusion of the mountain men scenes, the narrator said the following:

Mountain Men—crude, vulgar, kind, lusty, vicious, proud, and sometimes gentle. Men, like all men, but painted in more vivid colors, etched in fierce hues and splashed against the shining mountains. Gradually civilization would seep into these craggy hills and the breed would die out. But men a century later would find a thousand ways to test their courage and manhood, for the blood of the mountain men still pulses in many veins.

15 Established in 1833, Bent’s Fort was a trading post located in southern Colorado. For more information see: David Lavender, *Bent’s Fort*, (University of Nebraska Press, 1954).
With a perception of roughness, straightforwardness, independence, respect for the land and Native Americans, this act suggested the clearest sense of communal identity, one that was populated with brave people, who were more comfortable in the wilderness than in “civilization.”

After this overview of the events leading up to the confrontation at the White River Ute Agency, the pageant narrated the lives of Ouray and Nathan Meeker. According to the pageant, Ouray’s power came from his friendship with Kit Carson, who urged the Ute leader to negotiate with the United States government.\(^{16}\) To make his point, Carson took Ouray to Pike’s Peak, where Ouray saw the “madness of the white man.” On stage, Ouray and Carson overlooked gold seekers, represented by ten men scrambling around the ground as a fiddle played over the PA system. There were gunshots between the men. This encounter, according to the script, led Ouray to urge the current chief of the Utes, Neveva, to make treaties with the United States government. Again, the stage darkened and the narrator read the script, without added dramatization from the actors. “The land,” Nevava said, “belongs to the Utes. There is no need to sign papers.” In response, Ouray said that the whites would come to take their land; Nevava said that the Utes would fight. Ouray walked away and convinced the younger council members to replace “the ridiculous old Nevava.” Ouray was crowned “chief of all Utes” because of his desire to use treaties rather than war.

Meeker’s bumbling nature amplified Ouray’s exemplary character. The narrator introduced Meeker by declaring that in him, “there was a rare and contradictory mixture. Half liberal-half conservative, great idealistic plans kept rising in his mind to conflict

\(^{16}\) This representation of Ouray is drawn from Marshall Sprague’s narration of Ouray’s past. See: Marshall Sprague, *Massacre: The Tragedy at White River* (University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 75.
with a rather unfathomable rigidity.” On stage, a wiry man dressed in a seersucker suit jumped out of a wagon, as did a young girl. The man dressed in the overalls that I had seen at the beginning of the pageant helped out of the wagon an older woman dressed in petticoats. The narrator informed the audience that the Ute Agency was 61-year-old Nathan Meeker’s last chance. On stage, Josephine Meeker became friends with other young Utes, Arvilla attempted to teach Ute women how to sow seeds, and Meeker unsuccessfully attempted to direct Utes to farm.

In the arena, Meeker labored to irrigate the agency land and struggled to compel the Indians to work. On stage right, young actors, dressed as Native Americans, held several ponies. The narrator described Meeker’s thoughts: as the leaves changed into their fall colors, Meeker was convinced that the ponies were his “real enemies.” He resolved, the narrator said, to plow up Jane’s pony pasture. On stage, the audience saw Meeker point to one of his helpers and urge him to plow around the ponies.

Running alongside the plow, a young Native American pleaded with the farmer to stop. Shots rang out. The plowing stopped, but the narrator said that Meeker’s resolve to transform the Utes into farmers remained strong. Meeker went into his house—a cut away building, which showed his study. Johnson knocked on the door, and pantomimed yelling. In response, the narrator said that Meeker told Johnson: “You have too many ponies. You had better kill some of them.” The audience gasped at this suggestion, and I suspect that many sided with Johnson when he shoved Meeker onto the ground.

After Johnson pushed Meeker, the action sped up. Actors dressed in military uniform marched onto the stage, the stage lights went black, and the fire department launched an impressive fireworks display. Once the fireworks stopped, the narrator
described the aftermath, all the men at the agency, dead, and the women captured. He quickly described the release of the captives, but then transitioned to narrating the removal. With the stage still dark, he said: “Ouray knew the white man. One factor, whether or not the women had been sexually molested, would tip the scales and seal the fate of the Utes. He prayed they had not.” Then, the narrator said that under pressure “to assist in ridding Colorado of all Indians, Arvilla admitted that the women had, true to tribal custom, been forced to submit to their captors.” Because of this, the narrator said, “Banishment was now certain.”

The lights came back onto the arena and shone on the Utes, who had gathered in a line, holding leather sacks and the bridles of ponies. As they marched out, hanging their heads, the narrator proclaimed:

The Utes had lost everything. The shining mountains, the deer, the mountain streams and mirrored lakes, the quiet forests and the mighty elk. They had lost warm summer days, and sharp cool nights, and they had lost their beloved leader. It had been truly said: the land is the body, the people, the spirit. When the land and the people are cut apart, this is death.

With such a grim conclusion to what had been a rowdy gathering, people were unsure if they should clap. Then, the lights came on and all the actors gathered on stage, and people started to applaud. Parents woke up their sleeping children, we gathered our possessions, and slowly, we trickled out of the arena, newly oriented in the space in which we drove, farmed, and lived.

The pageant’s ending scene extended the significance of Ute Land Religion to removal. The final scene could have accentuated the difficult transition from hunter/gatherers to pastoralists or farmers, or the political fights that the Utes fought over the twentieth century. Instead, the pageant concluded with the proclamation that
removal severed the Utes’ spirit (the land) from their collective body. Although the pageant addressed some of the complexities of the history of contact between Utes and Euro-Americans, the conclusion compartmentalized Ute removal to the past; removal had happened and the Utes were gone, leaving only the residual sacredness in the region’s earth.

The pageant capitalized on the residual sacredness of Meeker’s land. At the beginning of the pageant, the narrator located the audience spatially as well as historically. The script emphasized that Ute history enfolded audience members; we were not far from the fields where “grass tickled the bellies” of Ute ponies. Furthermore, we were in the very space that had nourished the spirits of many generations of Utes. This suggestion allowed audience members to think about the ways in which the land might nourish their own spirits. In addition to increasing the audience’s appreciation for the beauty surrounding them, the script urged them to develop a long-term relationship with the area. In other words, appealing to the sacredness of the region served to boost tourism, one of the primary goals of the Range Call Rodeo weekend. Ute Land Religion continues to be a tourist attraction in the twenty-first century.

Furthermore, the representation of Ute Land Religion made the pageant more “Ute friendly.” Past versions of the pageant emphasized the triumphant march of civilization in order to overcome savagery. This is no longer the pageant’s narrative; instead, the current script directed the audience to have feelings of loss and ambivalence about the region’s history. Focusing on the Utes’ spiritual connection to

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17 Dr. David Steinman, interview by author, Meeker, CO, July 8, 2009
the land, the pageant allowed the attendees to mourn the loss of a happy, spiritual people and to question the actions of a greedy government. However, through this portrayal of the Utes, the script directed the audience to mourn for a particular type of Indian: an Indian that maintained a spiritual connection to the land. Instead of portraying the range of hardships and triumphs that Utes had experienced throughout the twentieth-century, the pageant presented a narrowly defined Ute identity. This representation denied that modern Utes would be able to thrive or even maintain a connection to their traditional spirituality.

In addition to Ute Land Religion, the pageant emphasized the mountain men. These characters complemented the description of Utes’ spiritual connection to the region, because they modeled appropriate behavior towards Native Americans—namely, that the mountain men were similar to Native Americans in their shared love of the land. By including the stories of these mountain men, the pageant diverted attention away from the town of Meeker’s history. Many of the stories occurred somewhere in Colorado, but not always in Meeker. However, these stories had an explicit purpose. By juxtaposing the contact between mountain men and Utes to the contact between governmental agents and Utes, the pageant created a Meeker regional identity based in the rugged and tolerant philosophy of the mountain men, one that was summed up by Dr. Steinman as: “live and let live.”

As the cultural ancestors of current Euro-American Meeker residents, the representation of the mountain men presented a subtle critique of the nineteenth-

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18 Dr. Dave Steinman, interview by the author, July 8, 2009.

century federal government. \footnote{Limerick has analyzed the way in which Westerners have used the federal government as a scapegoat for their problems. See: Patricia Nelson Limerick, \textit{The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West} (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 44.} Audience members were left to wonder what western Colorado could have been if the mountain men had dominated the interactions with Utes. Without the federal government sending its bumbling agents to “fix” things, audience members can imagine that peace between the two groups could have been achieved. Furthermore, the White River Valley could have continued to serve as a spiritually nourishing respite for Utes into the twenty-first century.

The Smoking River Powwow

The Smoking River Powwows maps onto the memory landscape created by the long standing Meeker Massacre Pageant. The Powwow committee intended to provide a space for visitors and residents to explore multiple narratives of the region’s history. However, the Powwow had an additional, explicitly stated goal: to help the communities overcome a difficult past and to increase Ute presence in the region. \footnote{Smoking River Powwow website, http://smokingriver.org/about_us.shtml, [accessed April 10, 2010].} The process of starting the Powwow reveals the way in which Meeker’s regional identity as a town of religiously tolerant people combined with the governing ideas of Ute Land Religion in order to frame the terms of reconciliation. While this combination facilitated some conciliatory conversations, ultimately, it also contributed to the project’s failure.

The Powwow started when the Rio Blanco County’s U.S. Forest Service Division hired a new director in 2006. Within the first year, the new director asked his assistant, Lynn Lockwood, why the division had no Ute employees. She was baffled by the question and when she asked for clarification, the director stated that in past Forest Service Divisions he had worked for, the departments explicitly hired members from
tribes that had historic roots in the region. Lockwood resolved to find out. She attempted to contact the Northern Ute Tribal office, but her messages were never returned. One weekend, when she was in Grand Junction for a parade, she overheard a fellow attendee identify himself as a Ute. She introduced herself to him and asked him why none of his fellow tribe members visited the Meeker area. He responded by saying, “We’re afraid.” He clarified by stating that his people were afraid of the Meeker people—he believed that Meeker residents would run the Utes out of town if they tried to return.22

At this point, Lockwood, along with her assistant, Liz Turner, resolved to continue to contact the tribal office. Their phone calls and emails to the Northern Ute Tribe continued to be unanswered, so she organized a car trip to the reservation. Their intent was to see if they could find someone in the tribal office who would collaborate with them on a Powwow to be held in Meeker. The trip was successful in that they made contact with Loya Arum and Clifford Duncan, two people who became instrumental in the later years of the Powwow. However, the tribe did not agree to the Powwow immediately. Instead, they agreed to an organized visit. In 2007, a small group of Utes, including Arum and Duncan, traveled to Meeker to talk to the Rio Blanco Historical Society and the U.S. Forest Service. At this talk, Arum spoke what she believed to be the truth: her ancestors were deeply wronged by the U.S. government. To her surprise, the Historical Society loved what Turner called her “passion.”23

The 2007 meeting snowballed into the first Powwow, held in 2008. The organization of the Powwow came with frustration from both sides. Arum explained her

22 Lynn Lockwood, interview with the author, Meeker, CO, July 16, 2009.

reasoning for getting involved with the U.S. Forest Service: “I felt sorry for those people. They didn’t know anything about it [powwows] . . . and I saw them struggling with it, and so I thought, teaching people and my own children to help others. So I got my nephew, his brother, and my brother.” At times, she was frustrated: “It’s hard. It’s like talking to people that know nothing. And you’re trying to explain all this and your going, it’s a little irritating.”24 Turner echoed Arum’s frustration. She stated that it took a lot of patience on her part in order to work towards the collaboration that she had envisioned.25

Despite these frustrations, the 2008 Powwow gained national attention, and numerous Native Americans from a variety of tribes came to dance and compete for prizes. As Arum stated, “we participate in all Powwows.”26 The Smoking River Powwow was structured like most other modern Powwows. As an inter-tribal event, Native Americans from the region convene to participate and compete in a variety of dances. At this Powwow, popular dances include the fancy dance and the jingle dance. In these dances, individuals performed for judges and were evaluated on their regalia, dance movements, and overall style. Throughout the two days of dancing, the competition was interspersed with Ute elders praying in Ute and English and speeches by these elders explaining to the crowd what returning to Meeker meant to them. Many of these speeches framed their experiences of Meeker as being a people displaced from sacred, ancestral lands.27

26 Arum, interview with the author.
27 Smoking River Powwow, Author’s field notes, July 25, 2008.
During its two years of operation, the Powwow attracted numerous observers as well, from Meeker residents to German tourists. In 2009, around 500 people, Utes and non-Utes, attended the dance, which featured a $25,000 purse and a buffalo feast, which was donated by the Southern Ute Tribe. However, by 2010, the Powwow committee had lost key leadership and was looking for a new sponsor. It was not held that year, and the 2011 Powwow will not be held either.

The Powwow organizers worked to reshape the region’s cultural memory by engaging the idea that Meeker residents are religiously tolerant people. Building on the Pageant’s valorization of mountain men, the Powwow enacted the religious tolerance of these characters. The Powwow was not sponsored by a church organization, but many participants understood the quest for reconciliation as part of their moral and spiritual life. For example, Dr. David Steinman, a retired physician and the Rio Blanco Historical Society representative to the Smoking River Powwow Committee, found profound meaning in this reconciliation process. “I’m finding it to be a meaningful, spiritual experience,” he noted, “as well as a cultural and historical effort . . . this is a secular effort, but it has some deep spiritual realities to it.”

Furthermore, for Dr. Steinman, who is a member of the Methodist Church and whose father was a minister, the process of reconciliation between Meeker residents and

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29 Dr. David Steinman, interview by author, Meeker, CO, July 8, 2009
the Ute nation is grounded in religious universalism.\textsuperscript{30} “What is the issue is not to judge the Native American, but to seek revelation,” Dr. Steinman affirmed. “And what is revealed to the Native Americans might be useful to be appreciated by the dominant culture. And if they [the Utes] can express their revelation in positive terms, they are blessing us.” He concluded this thought by stating: “It can widen the circle of fellow believers, ultimately.”\textsuperscript{31} For Dr. Steinman, the Smoking River Powwow provided a space from which both Utes and Euro-Americans could come to a deeper spirituality through a deeper appreciation of Native American spiritual practices.

Loya Arum, who we met in chapter two, also framed her quest for reconciliation with the past as a spiritual one, as she sought the truth about her ancestors through prayer. Although many Native Americans would not characterize powwows as religious, Arum and Clifford Duncan’s explanations of Powwow activities, such as dancing, drumming, and the prayers, were laden with religious language.\textsuperscript{32} These reconciliation projects happened within public spaces and were sponsored by non-religious entities, but religious ideas— informed by both Christianity and Ute Land Religion— structured the organizers’ and participants’ expectations.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{30} Religious universalism is the idea that all religions point to the same, greater truth. For an analysis of American religious universalism, see: Robert Wuthnow, \textit{After Heaven}, 75.

\textsuperscript{31} Dr. David Steinman, interview by author, Meeker, CO, July 8, 2009.

\textsuperscript{32} Clifford Duncan, interview by author, Fort Duchene, UT, July 21, 2009; Loya Arum, interview by the author, Fort Duchene, UT, July 10, 2009.

\textsuperscript{33} This reading of the Smoking River Powwow is informed by literature on “lived religion.” Scholars have long noted the significance of the practice of religious movements outside the formalized boundaries of institutions. See: David C. Hall, \textit{Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice} and Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri, editors, \textit{Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965} (John Hopkins University Press, 2006.) These studies generally focus on the ways in which laypeople interact with institutionalized religion, a parallel that is admittedly weak in describing the relationship between the Ute Sun Dance and the Powwow. However, the underlying
Through proving to the Utes that Meeker residents respected their religious practices and cultural traditions, the Powwow committee extended an olive branch to the Tribe. In contrast to the Pageant, though, the Powwow also challenged the narrative of the “Vanished Indian.” Through the Powwow, Meeker residents were able to have conversations—ranging from serious topics about the violent past that binds them together to light-hearted small talk about their children’s shared interests—with modern Ute Native Americans. Through these brief encounters, the origin story of Meeker is extended past the moment of Removal. Unlike the narrative described in the pageant, the landscape no longer was the sole keeper of Ute memories. Instead, Meeker’s residents and modern Utes became producers of memories as the regional history expanded to include Ute experiences in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Additionally, the Powwow provided a site for Euro-Americans to identify the Utes as authentically religious people, within the very landscape where Nathan Meeker had denied their religious ideas and practices.

The Smoking River Powwow was a public act of redemption, which relied on religious ideas in order to facilitate reconciliation. The Utes were no strangers to formalized apologies with religious ideas. For instance, in 2009, the Unitarian Universalist Church issued an apology to the tribe on behalf of a Boston Unitarian Church that was responsible for placing agents on the White River Ute Agency in the 1870s. In a meeting that included Clifford Duncan, Unitarian Universalist President projects, such as mapping the practice of religious people, can help to interpret the Powwow as a sacred practice.

34 By public, I mean that this act of redemption occurred within an un-restricted space. Anyone willing to pay the admission fee to the Powwow was welcome to attend.
William G. Sinkford declared, “We participated, however ineptly, in a process that stole your land and forced a foreign way of life on you. We ask for your forgiveness, and we promise to stand with you as you chart your way forward.”35 As a recognized religious institution with a historical relationship to the Ute nation, this formal apology fits within a range of other Christian reconciliation projects. However, the Smoking River Powwow was sponsored by the U.S. Forest Service and took place within Native American ceremonial space in order to better meet the goals of the Forest Service to grant access to public lands. Rather than being a straightforward apology from a religious organization, the Smoking River Powwow reveals the porous boundaries among religion, memory, and the public.36

Land and access to it is at the heart of this entangled relationship. Lynn Lockwood, the 2009 coordinator of the Powwow and U.S. Forest Service employee, stressed the importance of the Smoking River Powwow. She said that if people felt unwelcome, the Forest Service was not fulfilling its duties as a caretaker of public lands.37 Since public lands make up nearly ninety percent of the Rio Blanco County, this is a significant goal.38 Ironically, this public land was at one time the Utes’ land—they would not have needed to feel welcome in order to enjoy it. Furthermore, throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century, the government actively sought to prevent the Utes from enjoying this land. This was partly because the Utes at that time would have not


37 In this instance of “public,” I mean land held in common.

constituted “the public.” Citizenship changed this, but so did an increased recognition of the Ute spiritual connection to the land. Thus, through this notion, the Forest Service recognized and honored the Utes’ connection to Meeker’s public lands. In order to accomplish their goal of making the public lands more accessible, Meeker’s non-Ute allies looked to a religious event—the powwow.

For some attendees and observers, powwows’ commercialism and prizes suggest that the possibility of material gain supplants religious motivations. As a Native American practice, the Powwow does not have the same recognized religiosity of the Sun Dance and the Native American Church. Yet, the Utes I interviewed for this project explain that every dance is a prayer, even if it is done for competition.\(^3^9\) The non-Ute attendees respectfully participated in these displays of Ute religious practices. Furthermore, attendees reported natural occurrences—such as a rainbow suddenly appearing and deer visiting the site while the event was in full swing—as unexplainable, and therefore, supernatural.\(^4^0\) For some Euro-Americans, these natural occurrences were signs that the land responded to the return of the Utes.\(^4^1\)

How was it that Native American religious practices came to represent an enlightened, religiously tolerant practice within the same space that their ancestors’ humanity was denied? In this articulation of religion, the Utes become the sole possessors of “authentic religious practice,” which excludes them, in part, from economic and political identities. Through Ute Land Religion, non-Utes are led to believe that the Utes

\(^3^9\) Clifford Duncan, interview with author, Fort Duchene, Utah, July 21, 2009; Loya Arum, interview with author, Fort Duchene, Utah, July 10, 2009.

\(^4^0\) Liz Turner, interview with the author, Meeker, CO, July 8, 2009.

\(^4^1\) Lynn Lockwood, interview with the author, Meeker, CO, July 16, 2009.
have no interest in economic resources or political gain. Rather, their relationship with the land is pure, unmediated by materialistic desires. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Utes and their non-Ute allies would have had clear motivations for presenting Ute spirituality in this fashion.

Given the definitional boundaries of the Smoking River Powwow, what are the limits of redemptive acts, within a society that has benefitted from and continues to benefit from a colonial history? It is to be expected that there will be limits to redemption when past violence irrevocably transformed the landscape and people’s interaction with it. Probing deeper into the expectations of Powwow organizers and Ute attendees, one finds that their collective sense of redemption is unclear. For many Utes, “coming back” to Meeker would mean access to public lands through hunting unfettered by hunting licenses.42 This request has historical precedence, as other nations have successfully won similar rights through the courts. Other Utes suggested that the town of Meeker should give them property in the area as a continued gesture of goodwill. In contrast, the Euro-American Meeker residents I interviewed insisted that simply having the Utes in the community was enough. Several people explicitly stated that it would not be acceptable to give Utes unrestricted access to hunting and fishing, nor would it be justified to donate land to them. Instead, most residents liked the idea of having a greater presence of Utes in the community, but through hunting tourism and Utes buying land.43 Although the Smoking River Powwow was a public act of redemption within a Native American ceremonial space, the consequences of redemption reestablished the Utes’ subordinate

42 Loya Arum, interview with the author, Fort Duchene, July 10, 2009.
43 Steve Wix, interview with the author, Meeker, CO, July 8, 2009.
relationship to the United States government. The Utes are free to participate in the Meeker community, but only within the terms already established by the law.

However, these limitations do not deny the extraordinary power within small redemptive acts. At the 2009 Smoking River Powwow, reconciliation took center stage when the descendents of a Ute Indian who had a prominent role in the 1879 confrontation sat in the middle of the dance circle. Meeker residents lined up to greet them with hugs and handshakes. For organizers, this was the highlight of the day: not only had the “Utes come back,” but also, the community literally embraced them. However, these are only small steps towards knitting together two communities separated by a century of colonialism’s continued effects.

These transformative acts of redemption contribute to the on-going work of constructing Meeker’s regional identity as well as the construction of the Ute’s tribal identity. For over a century, Utes have honored their ancestors’ requests to not talk about the 1879 agency killings, or to publicly discuss the specifics of removal. However, through the spaces like the Smoking River Powwow, elders have begun to share their childhood memories of their grandparent’s stories as well as their simultaneous fear of Meeker and their desire to be there. Through these public acts of redemption, the Utes are portraying themselves as a diasporic community, displaced from ancestral land and severed from the religious acts that would link them to their ancestors.

Conversely, Meeker residents have maintained a distanced interest in Native American history through the Meeker Massacre Pageant as a means for developing their

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identity as an authentic American West town, but they have not publicly addressed the ways that Euro-American residents have benefitted from a violent, colonial history. The Smoking River Powwow allowed Meeker residents to step slightly out of their so-called “comfort zone,” but they were free to return to their homes without thinking about how they have personally benefitted from past violent acts. The articulation of Ute Land Religion through the Smoking River Powwow allowed for a small space of public redemption to occur. However, Ute Land Religion also created a barrier within the space in which Euro-Americans and Utes congregated, allowing the reconciliation to occur separate from everyday life, in which Euro-Americans and Utes alike live out the continued effects of colonial violence and displacement.

This act of redemption does not signal newfound unity. In 2010, the Smoking River Powwow committee disbanded. While they are currently looking for new leadership, it seems as though the Powwow’s reconciliation efforts have stagnated. When I asked a Ute woman what she thought about this development, she simply shrugged her shoulders. She said that she wasn’t surprised. Indeed, Euro-Americans have a long history of backing out of promises with Native Americans. Despite the small steps Meeker residents and Utes have made to create a unified regional identity through the powwow, the specter of colonialism continues to wedge people apart, creating and maintaining the fractured spaces of the American West. Although religious practices can serve to construct some bridges between distant communities, those bridges also reveal deeper cracks in the shared soil.

Conclusion
In their cultural memories, Coloradoans displaced negative interactions with Native Americans onto outsiders (such as Nathan Meeker and other governmental officials) and instead, claimed the presumably more tolerant mountain men as their cultural and intellectual ancestors. Through the valorization of the mountain men, individualized, independent religion emerged as the most authentic expression of religion, as well as an integral aspect of Colorado regional identity.

This religious expression paralleled the Ute Land Religion that developed in the first half of the twentieth century. While anthropologists, Native Americans, and artists worked to fashion Ute Land Religion out of existing cultural practices and Euro-American concepts of nature, Coloradoans constructed a regional identity out of their recent history. Rather than dwelling on the negative consequences of Euro-American immigration into Colorado, these memories emphasized the way in which Native Americans left their imprint on the landscape, authenticating that the area was the “real” Wild West. Through these cultural memories, Coloradoans condemned governmental involvement in Native American religious beliefs. Through this narrative, Meeker residents participated in a critique of the government based on the idea of individual religious freedom. Thus, through emerging cultural memories and public histories, religious tolerance and pluralism played a prominent role in creating Colorado’s regional identity.

In 2010, a large group of collaborators established the Ute Ethnobotany Learning Garden in Grand Junction, the largest metropolitan area near Meeker. Representatives from the Ute Nation danced at a “mini-Powwow” in order to celebrate the opening of the two-acre garden. A joint project of the U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land
Management, the U.S. Forest Service, Mesa State College, Mesa County, Colorado State University Extension and the Ute Indian Tribe, this garden teaches visitors about the history of Ute removal, teepee etiquette, Ute culture, and the medicinal uses of native species. This collaborative project allows Grand Junction school children to learn about Ute cultural practices, as well as their regional history.

These efforts in Colorado parallel on-going projects in Utah to shape public knowledge about Native American history. The Utah State Director of Indian Affairs, Forrest Cuch, a member of the Ute Nation, has worked with the Utah State Board of Education in order to develop curriculum for fourth, seventh, and eleventh graders. In the “We Shall Remain Project” students learn about Utah’s Native American cultural traditions and conclude with the complexities of Native American sovereignty. Alongside these state-level projects, the Northern Ute Tribe continues to work to preserve their language through annual language conferences with surrounding nations. In the 2010-2011 academic year, Loya Arum taught a Ute language immersion course for ten fourth-graders.

These projects to reshape Colorado and Utah’s cultural memory exist alongside other cultural memories that draw on older stereotypes. In 2009, Lisa McDivitt, a news reporter for one of Grand Junction’s TV stations, reported on “The Curse.” According to McDivitt, after calling Grand Junction home for more than thirty days, she was now subject to this curse—that she would always come back to Grand Junction if she did not collect dirt from Grand Junction’s soil to take with her when she moved away.45

McDivitt’s report struck a nerve—several comments from her blog post confirm this legend. On Sept. 3, 2010, an anonymous poster commented: “ITS SOO TRUE [sic]. I was supposed to move to Denver, and a week before I did, I totaled my car leaving me no way to get there.” Michele from Nevada, posting on November 10, 2010, commented, “I was born and raised in Grand Junction and left 5 years ago with my dirt, which will always be with me, because I do not want to return. I do believe in the “curse” and have seen many leave and come back.”46 Like other legends, the specifics of overcoming the curse differ. For some, any dirt from the region will do. For others, dirt needs to be collected from four cardinal points of the valley and mixed with water from the Colorado River. Others specify a particular place where the water needs to be collected. However, most accounts agree that if a person does not want to return to Grand Junction, they must take a jar of dirt with them.

The believers in the curse agree on its origins. When the Utes were forced to leave western Colorado, Chief Ouray placed a curse on any non-Utes who called the region home for more than thirty days. They would be forced to return to the area. On the surface, the legend makes sense. One could imagine that Ouray would be motivated to curse non-Ute residents regarding land that was meant for his people. Furthermore, legend serves to educate western Colorado residents about the history of their home by reminding them that they are living on Native American land. The ritual of collecting the dirt also allows people who will be leaving to explore some of the beautiful places in the region: the Grand Mesa, a large flat-top mountain that has numerous lakes and hiking trails; the Bookcliffs, a chain of sandstone-formed mountains; the Colorado National

46 Ibid.
Monument; an unusual sandstone formation; and a visit to the Colorado River. In the process of collecting the dirt, they might be reminded of the region’s benefits, which might lead some to question their desire to leave the town forever.

The curse, which exists alongside these other collaborative projects to reshape western Colorado’s identity and cultural memory, signals the difficulties in achieving reconciliation between these two communities. The curse continues to frame non-Ute perceptions of Ute religion by suggesting that Ute religious acts are based in revenge and have magical power. The curse perpetuates the cultural memory of Ute Removal and dictates how non-Ute western Colorado residents engage with the land’s dirt. By carrying the burden of the region’s dirt as they move away from the area, the legend suggests that they are disrupting the accumulation of guilt. Cleansed by dirt, Grand Junctions’ jar carriers end the curse.

Rather than facilitating reconciliation, however, Ouray’s Curse perpetuates the divide between Utes and non-Utes, while at the same time engaging in the false intimacy of the connection that is facilitated by the region’s earth. Instead of achieving a connection with today’s Utes, the curse mimics the ritual erasure of hunters in Great Basin cave paintings. By taking western Colorado dirt with them, former residents of western Colorado are simultaneously declaring their ownership of the land and erasing Ute religious claims to it.

In western Colorado and Utah, there are incremental steps towards healing the wounds of the past. For Utes, the central concern is preserving their language and teaching their children about Ute lifeways. While this appears to be a localized concern, some believe that in order to continue to transmit cultural practices to the next generation,
non-Utes need to be educated as well. The preservation of Ute culture rests on diminishing racism against Native Americans, which leads the Ute nation to collaborate with governmental agencies on educational projects. However, these projects are overlaid on a popular history that locates Ute religion as a site of curses against Euro-Americans, and thus, the progress towards reconciliation remains stilted. Furthermore, terms of reconciliation remain undetermined. Does it mean that the Utes completely absolve non-Utes of the actions of the past? Does it mean that Utes purchase real estate in western Colorado? Or does the State of Colorado allow Utes to hunt and fish on public lands without permits? Reconciliation remains an elusive goal.

In conclusion, the curse combined with the collaborative memory projects demonstrates the ways in which both Utes and non-Utes have used religious identities and shifting cultural memories in order to claim the land. This was a on-going process when Nathan Meeker arrived to transform nineteenth-century Utes into farmers and it continues today as former Grand Junction residents carry around their jars of dirt to overcome Ouray’s curse. Religion in the American West remains, like dirt, simultaneously everywhere and nowhere.
CHAPTER SIX:

CONCLUSION

Through archival sources, newspaper accounts, popular fiction, and fieldwork, this dissertation has shown the way in which Americans, both Ute and non-Ute, have used land as a site for building religious, ethnic, and regional identities. In the years leading up to the confrontation between the White River Utes and Nathan Meeker, Utes determined a tribe’s or race’s status based on how they engaged the land. Tribes that mastered the land by riding horses across it lorded over tribes that tilled and plowed the earth. Furthermore, agricultural tribes provided food for the equestrian-based societies. When the United States government arrived in the intermountain region, Utes had long held beliefs about the weakness associated with agricultural societies. Their creator had given them the ability to rule over the land—the Utes did not need to toil in it.

Nathan Meeker, informed by the most prominent social thinkers of his day, also believed that how a society engaged the land determined its status. However, unlike the Utes, Meeker believed that agriculture held the most hope for social progress. Religion, Meeker believed, provided the social structure for societies to “evolve” into agriculture. However, unlike his missionary contemporaries, he believed that it would take too long for Utes to be able to reach this level of progression. Farming would be the quickest way to salvation. For all his shortcomings, Meeker was an astute observer of life around the agency. He targeted the Utes’ devotion for their horses as being his primary obstacle for transforming the tribe into an agricultural society. While this may have been correct, his attack on the horses was also the end of his life.
As the battle at Milk Creek and the fight at the agency were hashed over in newspapers, a captivity narrative, and in Congressional hearings, the question of morality framed the debates about landownership. Although Susan’s involvement in the release of the captives is debatable, her reputation as a moral, Christian woman prompted one activist to petition to Congress that they offer her land in western Colorado, even if her tribe was removed. Furthermore, as the rape of the captives emerged in the Congressional hearings and in the newspapers, legislatures began to consider the implications of these acts for the Ute tribe. In addition to attempting to locate the perpetrators of the violence, the commission questioned Ute land rights. If they were not moral enough in their relationships with white women and children, they would not be able to own land. Finally, the Utes presented evidence that Meeker had violated their private property rights, leading both the Utes and their allies to question Meeker’s moral character. Morality lay at the heart of questions over who had legitimate claims to the land of western Colorado.

Euro-Americans removed the Utes. Their absence left a large vacuum that Euro-Americans quickly filled with towns, orchards, and wheat fields. In Utah, while the Colorado Utes adjusted to the close quarters they shared, Utes and their non-Ute allies worked together to systematize Ute Land Religion, or the public representation of their ceremonial practices. By translating these practices into Christianity (either as a foil or as a point of comparison), Utes worked to preserve their practices from governmental prohibitions. Additionally, an idealized vision of nature religion emerged out of Ute ceremonial practices. Through Hanson and Zitkala-Sa’s collaborative opera, Ute Land Religion emerged as a shared space through which Utes and non-Utes met to exchange
ideas. Traditionally, as chapter one demonstrated, Utes would not have separated out their reliance on the land, political boundaries, or economic exchanges from their ceremonial practices. However, through Ute Land Religion, the idea that Utes maintained only a spiritual relationship with the land emerged.

Throughout the twentieth century, as Coloradoans produced their regional history, Ute Land Religion was woven into the cultural memories of the Meeker Massacre and Ute Removal. In the twenty-first century, as members of the Rio Blanco Historical Society and the local Forest Service updated cultural memory sites, Ute Land Religion continued to frame the contact between Utes and non-Utes. Although Sullivan worked to update the memorial markers to reflect the Ute side of the story in addition to the U.S. military’s side, other community members worked to engage Utes through their spiritual practices—the powwow. During the first two years of the Smoking River Powwow, non-Ute Meeker residents pointed to natural occurrences as proof that the land itself welcomed the Utes back.

Ute Land Religion, defined against economics and politics, limited the possibilities of reconciliation. While some Utes stated that reconciliation would mean land or having unlimited access to the hunting and fishing in Rio Blanco County, non-Utes did not agree with these terms. Framed by the idea that Utes had a purely spiritual engagement with the land, Euro-Americans did not prioritize hunting rights and landownership. Instead, Meeker residents believed that reconciliation happened through cross-cultural interpretations of history and individual relationships. Conflicting ideas about what reconciliation would mean, as well as conflicting needs meant that the project stagnated.
Through the cultural processes of contact that emerged over the past century between Utes and non-Utes, religious identities were constructed in order to generate a culture that celebrated America’s home-grown religious diversity. From this shared space, a localized definition of authentic American religion emerged. This definition rested on the assumption that religious expressions can only be felt apart from the civilized, modern world. Thus, the Utes transformed themselves from superstitious savages into enlightened keepers of true religious knowledge. Through the cultural processes that systematized Ute Land Religion, economic and political usage of the land fell firmly outside the boundaries of true spirituality. Anthropologists, Utes, non-Utes, and historians all contributed to the construction of this space, benefitting from its location outside mainstream America. Through these processes, Utes, despite their few numbers, helped to shape twenty-first American expectations of “authentic” religion.
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