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Indigenous Connections at Rocky Mountain National Park

Notes from a Collaboration in Progress

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ON A FOGGY AND DRIZZLY SEPTEMBER AFTERNOON, a group of tribal members, National Park Service (NPS) staff, and university faculty and students walked carefully down a pine-filled hill in Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP) into a wide, open meadow. A park archaeologist led us through the clearing to a rocky hillside, pointing the way to two pine and aspen pole structures—one still intact, the other sliding imperceptibly down the hill. Hundreds of these sorts of structures have been found throughout the park, and they provide physical evidence for what the tribal members already knew: this place had been home for people for thousands of years before it was ever a national park.

The collection of people in the meadow came together for a two-day meeting in 2017 to discuss ways the park could better include and reach out to Native peoples—both to expand the interpretive program the park creates for its 4.5 million annual visitors and to support tribal members' connections to the Rocky Mountain region. The meeting launched a long-term collaborative project that is now known as "Indigenous Connections at Rocky Mountain National Park." The collaboration includes the NPS (specifically RMNP and the Intermountain Region cultural anthropology program), representatives from six tribal nations with connections to the region (Northern Arapaho Tribe, Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes, Northern Cheyenne Tribe, Southern Ute Indian Tribe, Ute Indian Tribe of Uintah and Ouray, and Ute Mountain Ute Tribe), and two academic centers at the University of Colorado (CU) Boulder (the Center of the American West and the Center for Native American and Indigenous Studies).[1] The

authors of this chapter are a faculty member at CU Boulder (Brooke Neely) and a PhD student at CU Boulder (Natasha Myhal). We have served as project leads and facilitators at the university since 2017, with Myhal moving on in 2021 to complete her dissertation.

In this chapter, we share the origins and development of the "Indigenous Connections" project, focusing in particular on what it means to enter into this sort of work as well as the possibilities of a collaboration between a federal agency, an academic institution, and multiple tribal nations. Drawing on scholarship about Native peoples and public history, we consider the following questions: How do we build a collaborative partnership among tribal nations, a federal agency, and an academic institution; what opportunities and challenges arise in this sort of project; and how does the history of colonization shape contemporary efforts to reckon with past injustices?[2]

We highlight the potential of collaborations between the NPS, tribal nations, and academics. The "Indigenous Connections" project has the potential to disrupt existing, entrenched narratives and practices around US national park sites generally and at RMNP in particular. It could offer a broader, more complex and accurate set of stories to the general public, and could foreground Indigenous ways of knowing and using park lands, particularly in "nature-focused" parks like RMNP, Yellowstone National Park, and Yosemite National Park. And it could provide space for tribal nations to set the terms of engagement with federal agencies and academic institutions. However, these possibilities are emergent and contingent upon several variables. NPS staff must relinquish considerable control and authority over the stories they tell and the ways they do business. Academic researchers must continually rethink what sources of knowledge they privilege and take cues from tribal partners along the way. Tribal members must work in the face of considerable wariness and distrust of the US government and academic institutions, and they must balance the interests of non-tribal entities with what they see as the pressing needs of their own communities.

Even with its limitations and challenges, we see promise in this project. The project team hopes to move beyond merely reinterpreting the official history of a national park for visitors. We also seek to support tribal nations in their efforts to connect with park lands and to educate their communities about their ties to this place. Whether we fully achieve this vision remains to be seen. Over the past fifteen years, parks across the country have increasingly collaborated with tribal nations to develop new interpretive programs and exhibits (e.g., Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, Glacier National Park, Grand Canyon National Park, Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument).[3] This edited volume reflects the growth of this sort of work, in particular in Ari Kelman's discussion of shared authority at the Sand Creek Massacre site and Gerard Baker's work expanding the stories told at Mount Rushmore and elsewhere. We hope the "Indigenous Connections" project contributes to a broader conversation about how tribal nations and national parks can best engage with one another to: 1) uphold tribal sovereignty; 2) better educate the general public about Native peoples; 3) consider new ways of understanding and interpreting the peoples (Native and non-Native) connected to national park lands; and 4) recognize alternative ways of knowing and using park lands based on Native peoples' expertise. In sharing more about the "Indigenous Connections" project, we also emphasize the value of approaching this work through the lens of *strategic collaboration* and the need for park staff and scholars to assume the role of supportive assistant in any project that seeks to meaningfully engage with tribal nations.

Laying the Groundwork

While some collaborations between national parks and university faculty start with a formal call for proposal, this project began with informal conversations. In 2016, interpretive and cultural resources staff from RMNP sat around a conference table with faculty from the Center of the American West (CAW) and the Center for Native American and Indigenous Studies (CNAIS) at CU Boulder (including the authors of this chapter) to discuss possible areas of collaboration and shared interests, in particular how national parks consult and work with tribal nations. The park staff explained they were struggling to engage with tribal nations that have connections to the Rocky Mountain region, including Ute, Arapaho, and Cheyenne peoples. The park was working on a new interpretive plan, and they needed to better include Native peoples in the process. While they had invited tribes to consult on the interpretive plans and they had a history of consulting and working with Ute, Arapaho, and Cheyenne tribes, they had not yet managed to hold a meeting with tribal representatives for the interpretive planning effort.

Park staff wondered if, as a starting point, the CU Boulder team could facilitate a workshop with tribal members at the park to assess and discuss possible changes to the current interpretive program at the park. The CAW convenes events and workshops around many contemporary (often contentious) issues facing residents of the western United States. The CNAIS conducts research and applied work on pressing concerns for Indigenous peoples in North America and beyond. And both university centers share a long-standing interest in the ways tribal nations work with US federal agencies. The entire university team, including the authors of this chapter, thought this would be a valuable way to get involved in the efforts to address the NPS's role in dispossessing Native peoples of their lands across the western United States.[4] The NPS staff and university faculty left this discussion with a plan to engage the cultural anthropology program at the NPS regional office, so we could be sure we were following NPS protocols for inviting tribal nations to consult on and participate in the project. The CU Boulder team committed to explore funding opportunities that could support the planning and hosting of the workshop.

The project that emerged out of these early discussions and the subsequent workshops has the following goals: (1) to encourage park visitors to see RMNP

not just as a beautiful natural setting but also as a place where Native people hold strong historical and contemporary connections; (2) to support tribal connections at the park (e.g., facilitating tribal member visits to the park and encouraging the park to consider Indigenous knowledge as they manage the park lands); and (3) to build better relationships among tribal nations, NPS, and the University of Colorado.

The broader "Indigenous Connections" team (tribal representatives, NPS staff, and university faculty and students) has sought to develop a collaborative partnership that respects the knowledge of and connections to this region that tribal nations have, and recognizes the legacy of dispossession and displacement of Native peoples that was part of the creation of the national parks. The Ute, Arapaho, and Cheyenne nations that have connections to the RMNP region reside quite far from the park boundaries, with reservations in southwestern Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Montana, and Oklahoma. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, as US settlers streamed into the Rocky Mountain region in search of gold and other resources, the Ute, Arapaho, and Cheyenne peoples fought to maintain their territories.[5] But eventually, through a series of treaties and US government coercion and force, the now six federally recognized tribal nations ended up on reservations far removed from what is now RMNP. Of course, the Ute, Arapaho, and Cheyenne (and their various bands) have distinct and specific historical experiences, which must be considered in any contemporary efforts to wrestle with the past. In all cases, however, each tribe's geographic distance from the park site and the history of their forced removal from the Rocky Mountain region inform and shape the "Indigenous Connections" project.

In this work, we are attempting to move beyond the federally mandated government-to-government consultation model for work between federal agencies and tribal nations. Although tribal consultation is an important legal framework that recognizes sovereignty, it often becomes a box to check rather than a meaningful and ongoing relationship to forge.[6] In our minds, creating a collaborative partnership helps to build more lasting relationships and prioritizes Native peoples' perspectives and interests as they relate to public lands and education at national park sites. Collaborative partnerships also provide further opportunities for tribes to assert their connections to park lands—by supporting tribal members visiting the park and/or encouraging youth to learn about their ancestral homelands. In other words, tribal representatives can and do advocate for their communities through this sort of collaboration, even as the park staff work to expand public education and awareness.

The Early Road to Building a Collaboration

The more organic and informal framework that initially shaped the "Indigenous Connections" project has meant that to some degree, we have had to figure out the process as we go. For example, we don't have a formal task agreement with the NPS, a common model for NPS-university engagement. After the initial exploratory meeting in 2016, with the help of the cultural anthropologist from the NPS Intermountain regional office, the park staff initiated a formal consultation process to launch the "Indigenous Connections" project. They sent formal letters to ten tribal nations, specifically to the Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (THPOs), or other designated cultural offices, and the chairperson or president. The park followed up with phone calls and emails to tribal representatives and initiated additional conversations about the project. From these efforts, six tribes expressed a desire to consult. They included the Northern Arapaho Tribe, the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes, the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, the Ute Indian Tribe of Uintah and Ouray, and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe. These tribes had all consulted with the park in the past and their connections to the region are well-known and documented.[7] NPS staff held initial meetings (some in-person and some via phone) with tribal representatives to explain the project, to let them know about the plan to hold a workshop to discuss the project further, and to gather input and suggestions from the tribes as early in the process as possible. Once NPS staff carried out the formal consultation phase, we entered the "collaboration" phase of the project, during which the CU Boulder team could play a more active role in planning and facilitating the workshops and some of the subsequent project activities. The university team then engaged more directly with the points of contact for each tribe, including THPOs, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) coordinators, and/or cultural office directors. The team invited them to the workshops and requested their thoughts on what they saw as the most important considerations as the park made changes to its interpretive program. Some tribal representatives expressed skepticism that the park (and the university) would make any meaningful improvements given their spotty track record, but all six tribes sent representatives to the workshops to engage in a discussion about possible next steps.

The workshops, first in September 2017 and then in January 2018, offered an opportunity for NPS staff to share the current exhibits and programs at the park, and for the tribal representatives to share their views on the changes they would like to see at the park. Some key takeaways from the discussions included: 1) the need for tribes to tell their own stories and histories, with NPS staff only sharing information each tribe has vetted; 2) a strong desire to support tribes' efforts to connect with the landscape and educate their youth; 3) the importance of showing non-Native visitors (with color photos and vibrant programs) that Native peoples continue to connect with this landscape and are alive and well despite all the sepia-toned photos that make them seem relegated to the past; and 4) the need for NPS to recognize Native peoples' ways of utilizing and connecting with the landscape, which may differ from the frameworks NPS uses to manage the lands. The workshop discussions also established a shared set of goals for the interpretive program at the park, including new permanent

exhibits, videos with tribal members, summer visitor programs presented by tribal members, tribal youth visits to the park, and new website content. We also committed to regular communication and collaboration on the next steps for the project.

The first step toward these goals involved gathering existing research on tribal histories in the park region and documenting the information in a way that would be useful for park staff, namely through a content summary document on each tribe that would go in new interpretive ranger packets and be available to all park staff. The workshop discussions highlighted the value of creating a set of content documents that park rangers could draw upon to develop new exhibits and programs. Participants discussed how much prior research had already been done with Ute and Arapaho representatives at the park, but that because of staff turnover and unclear institutional processes for using the information, the existing research was not being fully utilized by the current park staff.[8] Tribal representatives expressed concerns about reinventing the wheel at the park, causing new NPS staff members to ask the same sorts of questions over and over again, and they shared that they hoped the work their tribes had already done with RMNP could be better integrated at the park. Each spring, new seasonal rangers are hired at RMNP and are tasked with creating their own ranger talks and other programs. The Lead of Interpretation at the park saw these ranger trainings as a prime moment for expanding the programs' interpretive scope—for example, by using the content documents as a route to synthesizing information about Native peoples and better integrating it into the park's regular practices and processes for training staff and developing new programs.

With this plan taking shape, the university team and park staff secured additional funding to travel to tribal offices, provide stipends to tribal partners, and hire a graduate student to work on the project. Through regular emails and phone conversations, and then with trips to visit the Northern Arapaho, Cheyenne and Arapaho, Southern Ute, and Ute Mountain Ute offices, the CU Boulder team and RMNP staff engaged in conversations with each THPO (or equivalent tribal representatives). We discussed how best to co-create the content documents and ensure we included the information each tribe saw as most important and omitted any information the tribes did not wish to share with the public. Some tribal partners wished for the university team to draft outlines and other documents for them to review, comment on, and revise. The Northern Arapaho THPO decided to write their own documents to ensure they shared the information on their own terms. The CU Boulder team checked in regularly with this THPO office to offer support when they asked for it—for example, by locating and sharing archival and secondary research materials from the university library. From 2018–21, we worked on these documents, trading drafts with tribal partners and revising the content through ongoing conversations.

The road to creating the documents took considerable time and persistence, especially during a global pandemic that shut down the park and tribal offices. But by the spring of 2022, documents for four of the tribes were in the final stages of formal review and approval by tribal governments.

These documents share historical and contemporary information on each tribe, including an overview of the dispossession and removal period and the continuous efforts by the tribes to maintain their cultural traditions and care for their people. The documents also include information on the seasonal migrations and uses of the landscapes in and around RMNP as well as answers to the top six visitor questions interpretive rangers field every year, which include: where are the Native people who lived on this land living today; why did they leave; and do they still live in tipis? These content documents are already helping to shape the development of new exhibits at the various park visitor centers around RMNP. They are also feeding into other interpretive projects, including creating ArcGIS StoryMaps for each tribe. This web-based educational tool allows tribes to more easily co-create content and will provide visitors with an engaging platform for learning more about Native peoples at the park. As of early 2023, the project team is exploring next steps for "Indigenous Connections," with a desire to maintain these relationships for years to come. More specifically, we are exploring cultural and art programs run by tribal members, podcasts featuring Native voices, web-based content that builds upon the exhibits, social media engagement, and job pipelines for Native park staff. In the future, the project team also hopes to broaden the reach of "Indigenous Connections" to other park units and tribal nations.

While the "Indigenous Connections" project carries great promise and has accomplished modest yet meaningful goals so far, the path to building this collaborative project has not always been smooth—we have had plenty of hiccups and mistakes along the way. The tribal representatives have offered their precious time and resources and have had to assert their nations' interests to outside organizations—a US federal land agency and a public university—that they have little reason to trust given their collective histories. The NPS staff has had to navigate their own institutional protocols and budget constraints while trying to make changes they saw as valuable and aligned with the educational mission of their organization. The university team has had to figure out its role and how best to engage with both a federal agency with sometimes confusing bureaucratic processes and busy tribal nations with good reason to be wary of universities and federal agencies.

The interview with Max Bear, THPO for the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes and "Indigenous Connections" partner, earlier in this volume highlights the value of reflecting on and learning through these sorts of collaborations. During the years of relationship building in the "Indigenous Connections" project, we have come to believe successful collaborative partnerships include several key

tenets, which come from our experience and a few key resources we have regularly consulted on how best to work with Native communities:[9]

Listen: We strive to really listen to our tribal partners and put them at the forefront of the project. This includes communicating regularly throughout the year and as project needs arise.

Follow through: We do our best to incorporate tribal partners' ideas and suggestions into the activities of the project, to move from discussions to tangible actions.

Follow tribal and federal government policies and protocols: We have followed the protocols both of tribal nations and the National Park Service for research and government-to-government consultation and other initiatives.

Create collaborative goals: We have worked to create project goals and figure out the process collaboratively with all the project partners.

Build in reciprocity: Our project aims must be mutually beneficial and recognize that the goals of various partners may be different. Traveling to visit tribal offices is a good first gesture of reciprocity, but it is only the beginning.

Be flexible: The project team must adapt to the different and changing needs and interests of the partners. Flexibility should be built into the process.

Take time and be patient: We have devoted considerable time to this collaboration. It has involved coordinating multiple partners, holding many meetings and phone calls, and sending countless emails.

Communicate clearly: We strive to maintain open and ongoing lines of communication and encourage honest dialogue.

Be inclusive: We have worked to welcome all tribal nations with an interest and connection to the park region.

Be historically and socially aware: We try to recognize the ways historical and social factors shape the working relationships. This includes considering contemporary tribal policies and issues that matter most to their communities today.

While these tenets may seem simple or obvious, we have found they can be trickier to apply consistently in practice. They also echo a similar list in Gish Hill's chapter in this volume. The "Indigenous Connections" team aspires to all these collaborative goals, but we often stumble and experience the work as an ongoing learning process. Indeed, thinking critically about the elements of a collaborative partnership has helped us reimagine how NPS sites, tribal nations, and universities can work together to better include Indigenous peoples in national parks, and ideally uphold tribal sovereignty and support cultural connections to the landscapes in the process.

Possibilities

We believe the "Indigenous Connections" project is filled with possibilities. It offers an opportunity to educate the general public and encourage them to see RMNP not just as a beautiful "wilderness" area, but also as a place with deep and long-standing human presence and connections. Settler-colonial narratives remain firmly entrenched in RMNP's interpretive program (similar to most other national park sites). Any visitor who sits down to watch the orientation film at the Beaver Meadows Visitor Center will only briefly hear about Native peoples. The film moves quickly from a general discussion of the people who called the park lands home before Euro-American settlement to the history of the creation of the park in the early twentieth century. The stories in this film and throughout the park are largely about white Americans' arrival to the region and the value of preserving the natural landscape. The interpretive exhibits and programs largely ignore the violence and trauma of the dispossession era for Native peoples. The Fall River and Kawuneeche visitor centers, two key stops for visitors entering from the west and east sides of the park, largely ignore Native peoples. In the Alpine Visitor Center at the top of Trail Ridge Road, the park does include a wall of exhibit panels that describes the Ute peoples who inhabited the region, but this exhibit wall is one of four in a room otherwise devoted to flora and fauna within the park. Overall, the prevalent messages at the park reflect larger discourses in the United States that relegate Native peoples to the past, tie them in essentializing ways to nature, and erase their histories and contemporary experiences. As of early 2023, RMNP installed new freestanding exhibits in all the visitor centers at the park based on the content created through "Indigenous Connections," and the park is developing a new permanent exhibit with tribal representatives at the Kawuneeche Visitor Center.

During the "Indigenous Connections" project, tribal partners have expressed the pain and frustration of visiting sites like RMNP and not seeing their people represented there in a meaningful and accurate way. They have also conveyed frustration that representatives from their tribes have worked with the park for years without them seeing meaningful changes. At the same time, many of the project's tribal partners see value in educating the general public, and they have explicitly communicated that they see national park sites as particularly important spaces for educating non-Natives because of the high numbers of annual visitors. They have said they think more people learn about Native people through national parks (and museums) than they do through schools. Tribal partners also view this interpretation- and education-focused project as a vehicle to advocate for their nation's needs, especially by supporting their peoples' connections to the park region and asserting their rights to access and use these lands. This approach on the part of tribal members echoes the thoughts of Cheyenne and Arapaho people in Gish Hill's chapter earlier in this volume, where they explain that they see value for their communities in re-envisioning national park sites.

In RMNP, park staff have been quite open to recognizing the limits of their current interpretive program, and they are actively engaged in thinking about how the park can better share information with visitors about the Native peoples who have long been connected to this region. This process of recognition involves a collective reckoning with the past and its contemporary effects. Ideally, the work of "Indigenous Connections" will help disrupt the entrenched narratives that paint RMNP as a pristine natural setting and a place born primarily out of the imagination of white conservationists.

By working with tribal partners, park staff are striving to broaden and complicate the stories the park tells visitors, especially the emphasis they place on the natural landscape, preservation, beauty, and recreation. Ideally, an expanded interpretive framework recognizes the role of the US national parks in Native dispossession and offers a more truthful account of Native peoples' experiences, both in terms of historical trauma and erasure, but also in terms of resilience, sovereignty, and ongoing connections to this land. Through these efforts, park staff are trying to improve and enrich the park's relationship with Native peoples.

We also strive to follow the lead of tribal partners when they set their terms of engagement with federal agencies and academic institutions. In the process of co-creating the content documents, tribal partners challenged the project team to reconsider the information we share and the wording we use to better reflect the value we place in Native peoples' knowledge and oral traditions. For example, in a discussion of the length of Ute peoples' presence in the Rocky Mountain region, a Ute partner suggested we change the phrase "Ute believe" to "Ute know." This semantic shift better recognizes and legitimates Ute knowledge of their history. Similarly, the THPO from the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes reviewed a draft of their content summary and noticed we were relying too heavily on academic texts. He recommended that we work to directly incorporate more Cheyenne and Arapaho voices, both historical and contemporary. This co-creation process better allows for tribal partners to steer the work and foreground their knowledge.

The co-creation process has also allowed for tribal partners to have their voices heard regarding the logistics of the project itself. Early in the process, the park staff and university team heard that tribal representatives travel often and far for meetings with a host of non-tribal institutions, and that they would like the park staff and CU team to share the travel load. In an effort to better accommodate tribal partners and recognize their critical role in this project, we worked to budget time and money for these trips, and park staff and CU faculty and students have visited Ute, Arapaho, and Cheyenne partners at their offices in southwestern Colorado, Wyoming, and Oklahoma. These trips have been valuable for forging working relationships and for a more substantive and meaningful exchange of ideas. This is a somewhat simple example of relinquishing some control over the process and establishing reciprocity, but it can be a way to illustrate commitment and respect.

The "Indigenous Connections" project has the potential to foreground Indigenous connections to the lands that are now part of RMNP, and to recognize and support their ways of knowing and using the land. The project is working to revise and improve the current park narratives about Indigenous peoples and the park's history more generally, and it is trying to encourage and support Indigenous peoples as they return to the park and reconnect with their ancestral lands. However, all of this requires that we navigate limitations and dilemmas along the way.

Challenges

During a conference call with a Ute tribal partner, as we discussed next steps for the "Indigenous Connections" project, she shared that she gets "heartburn" doing this sort of work. She explained that working with federal agencies and academics can be tiring and painful—because she has to continually explain and assert her peoples' sovereignty and their knowledge and connection to the landscapes across the Rocky Mountain region. She said she may forge ahead on these projects, but they are not easy for her. Indeed, several challenges complicate this sort of collaborative project. The legacy of colonial violence and injustice shapes even micro-interactions of the project team. A large, collaborative network of project partners and a variety of bureaucracies make the work slow and unpredictable at times. And expanding and improving interpretive content at a national park site may raise the awareness of the general public, but it does not necessarily improve the lives of Native peoples in fundamental ways.

On a visit to a Ute Tribal Historic Preservation Office in 2018, the director shared his concerns about the university and NPS participants' motives. He explained that it can be frustrating how outsiders come in with a lot of requests for tribes and do not necessarily listen and follow tribal members' guidance, nor do they properly compensate or provide benefits for tribal nations in the process. Indeed, distrust is present in any collaboration between tribal nations, the US federal government, and an academic institution. With a long history of broken treaties, violence, and trauma, tribal members have every reason to be wary of partnering with the NPS and a team of university faculty. The US federal government—through the treaty-making period, forced removal and assimilation, and the damaging practices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs—has a terrible track record in its policies regarding tribal nations. And academics have an equally troubling track record conducting research "on" Indigenous peoples; much of early anthropology research was more extractive and exploitative, with most of it benefitting settlers rather than Indigenous peoples.

Given this baggage, it is remarkable to create any sort of collaborative relationship. With "Indigenous Connections," we have tried to recognize this historical legacy as we negotiate our collaboration, taking extra time to listen to and recognize Native peoples' ongoing frustration and pain and trying wherever

possible to shift the project to account for tribal partners' interests and preferences. We also see value in exploring the discomfort of these histories. It can be tempting to seek a simple remedy for the uneasiness that comes when the weight of history bears down on us. However, it can be more fruitful to avoid the impulse to fix or control, and instead engage fully in the difficult conversations and reflections that come along the way.

The logistics of relationship building and collaborative work with multiple partners can become tricky. Working with the NPS, like any federal agency, comes with a host of challenges, including navigating the nebulous nature of their planning and budget cycles and the frequency with which park staff move around to other positions/parks. It is challenging and takes considerable time to make concrete changes to an underfunded federal bureaucracy. The park staff we work with are committed to the project, but they are increasingly stretched thin as federal funding gets tighter and the activities of the parks continue to grow. NPS staff across the United States must abide by a host of federal policies and practices that do not necessarily align with the priorities and preferences of tribal nations.

For example, we heard from NPS staff early on in the process that our project was strictly about education and interpretation, not about natural or cultural resource management and definitely not about treaty rights. However, over and over again, we have sat down with tribal partners to discuss the information they would like the park to share with visitors, and the conversation has often shifted to a discussion of plant gathering or hunting rights or even the theft of Native lands by the US government. Tribal partners have repeatedly reminded us how interconnected the education piece is with their desires (and rights) to access and use their ancestral lands. At the same time, while park staff have worked hard to listen and follow the suggestions of tribal partners, they have had a tough time implementing this interconnectedness, in part because the federal bureaucracy they inhabit so firmly separates public education, cultural resources, and natural resources. We are optimistic that long-term relationships and engagement with tribal nations will help move the needle a bit more within the NPS. But for now, this is a challenge without an easy remedy.

Working with multiple tribal nations (in this case, three Ute tribes and three Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes) means adapting to varying expectations and desires. We have had to recognize and work around the limited bandwidth that Tribal Historic Preservation Offices and other cultural offices have for this project, since they are asked to consult on many federal, state, and local projects. On a more practical note, to foreground Native peoples' expertise, we have modified the work process and approach based on the preferences of each tribal partner. For example, one tribal partner wished to write most of the content for our project, while others wished to have conversations through which the CU team drafted the documents and shared them for regular review. In another instance, we started by creating separate content summaries for each tribe, but over time, the three Ute tribes suggested we combine their summaries and collaborate with them simultaneously. We have modified the direction of the project through ongoing conversations with all partners.

Tribal partners have been engaged in a variety of ways during this project, illustrating strategic engagement in action. Some tribal partners have expressed more concerns than others, about the project generally or the specifics of the process. Some have expressed concerns that the park and the university team are the ones benefitting most from this project, and they have wondered how the project will also serve the interests of their tribe. Other tribal partners have expressed concern about how park staff will share the information they provide them, and how the visitors will learn about and understand what they read and hear. Park rangers have considerable autonomy in creating programs, and visitors may interpret the information in a range of ways. So, some tribal partners are wary of how their knowledge and information will be circulated and used. Keeping these lines of dialogue open is one avenue for Indigenous people to assert their sovereignty and authority over their communities and histories. Also, because we are working with multiple tribal nations, we encounter discussions about which tribes or specific historical bands have the best claim to the park region. At the same time, some tribal partners focus more on the positive potential of engaging with the national parks and of educating the general public, and they see this project as a valuable venue for asserting the needs of their nations. Through all these discussions with tribal partners, we work to listen and take all their concerns seriously. We also strive to maintain the same level of commitment to the rockier relationships as we do with the smoother ones.

The challenges we have encountered in the "Indigenous Connections" project may look different from various vantage points. In other words, the various stakeholders for this project may see and interpret the challenges differently. What might look like a challenge of time and productivity for the park staff or the university team (e.g., what are the deliverables and when will they be delivered?) may be a challenge of cultural and community protection for tribal members (e.g., how do we defend our people and culture from the encroachment of outsiders?). The project team has had to recognize that the interests of tribal partners may not be the same as the interests of the non-tribal partners. When the various project partners engage strategically, however, they nonetheless find common ground and room for collaboration.

Paths Forward

This project highlights the potential for US "nature" parks to consider (and possibly address) their role in erasing Native peoples from the landscape, both in terms of physical displacement and in terms of the narratives the park disseminates to visitors. And collaborative partnerships among tribal nations, national parks, and academic institutions have the potential to foreground Native peoples' interests

and educate the wider public in beneficial ways. But we are tempered in our assessment of whether a project like ours has the capacity to enact meaningful change in the lives of Native peoples in the United States.

Indigenous social movements have worked for decades to assert tribal sovereignty, to reclaim their lands, and to care for their people. Much of these efforts revolve around regaining control over their communities and homelands. The recent protests at Standing Rock and the #LandBack movement are part of long-standing efforts to empower and support Native peoples. Such recent protests and initiatives have roots in the mid-twentieth century American Indian Movement occupations and other direct actions, but also in Native resistance efforts since the start of Euro-American colonization.[10] Drawing upon global decolonial thought and activism, Indigenous peoples have long advocated for upholding sovereignty and dismantling the control colonial nation-states have over Indigenous peoples.[11] Recently, the NDN Collective, an organization leading the Land Back efforts, described their goals on their website: "Together, we decolonize and transform systems while providing tools and strategies for Indigenous self-determination and movement-building."[12]

With these ideas and efforts in mind, we find it valuable to consider how the "Indigenous Connections" project fits into this broader picture and potentially supports larger Indigenous social movements. We do not think this project serves to decolonize national parks. We work within the framework of a federal institution, and even though we collaborate with open-minded and well-intentioned federal employees and academics, we can never fully rid ourselves of the NPS's institutional power and legacy. While we believe the "Indigenous Connections" project could help to broaden and boost education and awareness-raising efforts, we also wonder if projects like this could be used by the US federal government to justify not honoring treaty rights or other requests from tribal nations. It may be a way for the NPS to nod to Native peoples' sovereignty, while ignoring Indigenous social movements and other calls for the United States to return public lands to Native peoples.[13]

Ultimately, we understand the "Indigenous Connections" project more as a process of reckoning and strategic collaboration (similar to other cases highlighted in this volume), one through which tribal nations can work to assert their sovereignty as well as their deep and lasting connections with their lands. We see promise in making even small and incremental changes to public spaces in the United States. Better representing Indigenous peoples in the national parks has immense value in terms of redefining our collective understanding of the United States as a nation with multiple and complicated historical narratives. In the long run, NPS interpretation and education may help to change non-Natives' appreciation and knowledge of Indigenous peoples and *slowly* help to dismantle colonial legacies in the United States. Representation is just one step toward addressing the damage done. But we see potential power in educating the general public, disrupting prevalent narratives of Native peoples, and supporting tribal nations as they work to connect with their lands and care for their communities.

Notes

1. Given the in-progress nature of this project and collaboration, we have opted to omit the names of participants in this chapter.
2. See, for example, Mary Lawlor, *Public Native America: Tribal Self-Representation in Casinos, Museums, and Powwows* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Laura Peers, *Playing Ourselves: Interpreting Native Histories at Historic Reconstructions* (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2007); Loriene Roy, Anjali Bhasin, and Sarah K. Arriaga, eds., *Tribal Libraries, Archives, and Museums: Preserving Our Language, Memory, and Lifeways* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011); Jennifer A. Shannon, *Our Lives: Collaboration, Native Voice, and the Making of the National Museum of the American Indian* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2014).
3. See, for example: Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); https://www.nps.gov/glac/learn/historyculture/tribes.htm; https://www.nps.gov/grca/learn/historyculture/associated-tribes.htm; "New Visitor Center at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument," National Park Service press release (October 10, 2020). https://www.nps.gov/libi/learn/news/new-visitors-center.htm.
4. See, for example: Robert H. Keller and Michael F. Turek, *American Indians and National Parks* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998); Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Philip Burnham, *Indian Country, God's Country: Native Americans and the National Parks* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2000); Peter Nabokov and Lawrence Loendorf, *Restoring a Presence: American Indians and Yellowstone National Park* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004).
5. For more on the Euro-American settlement and Native resistance in the nineteenth century in the Rocky Mountain region and beyond, see for example: Ned Blackhawk, *Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998); Thomas Andrews, *Coyote Valley: Deep History in the High Rockies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); David Treuer, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2019).
6. For more information on the history of federally mandated tribal consultation, see the introduction and the historical overview in this volume. See also: "Tribal Consultation: Best Practices In Historic Preservation," National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (May 2005). http://npshistory.com/publications/preservation/tribal-consultation.pdf; Jacilee Wray et al., "Creating Policy for the National Park Service: Addressing Native Americans

and Other Traditionally Associated Peoples," *The George Wright Forum*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2009). http://www.georgewright.org/263wray.pdf.

7. See John Brett, *Ethnographic Assessment and Documentation of Rocky Mountain National Park* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace, 2013).
8. See, for example: Brett; Sally McBeth, *Native American Oral History and Cultural Interpretation in Rocky Mountain National Park* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace, 2013); Thomas Andrews, *Coyote Valley: Deep History in the High Rockies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). Considerable archeological research has also been conducted at the park; we do not cite most of this work in order to help keep the sites better protected.
9. See, for example: Guidelines for Collaboration (website), facilitated by Landis Smith, Cynthia Chavez Lamar, and Brian Vallo, Indian Arts Research Center (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research, 2019), https://guidelinesforcollaboration.info; Chantalle Hanschu, *State-Tribal Consultation Guide: An Introduction for Colorado State Agencies to Conducting Formal Consultations with Federally Recognized American Indian Tribes*, Colorado Commission of Indian Affairs (2014), https://ccia.colorado.gov/sites/ccia/files/documents/CO%20State-Tribal%20Consultation%20Guide_0_0.pdf; Linda Tuhiawi Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books, 2013 [1999]).
10. For more information on the Land Back movement, see also: Nikki A. Pieratos, Sarah S. Manning, and Nick Tilsen, "Land Back: A Meta Narrative to Help Indigenous People Show up as Movement Leaders," *Leadership* 17(1) (2021): 47–61; Kim TallBear, "Beyond Indigenous Performance to Life and Land Back," *Unsettle* (January 26, 2022). https://kimtallbear.substack.com/p/beyond-indigenous-performance-to?s=r (accessed May 4, 2022); www.landback.org; http://therednation.org. And for more information on Native activism and social movements, see: Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New York: The New Press, 1996).
11. See, for example, Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*; Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 1(1) (2012): 1–40.
12. See: https://ndncollective.org/.
13. See, for example: David Treuer, "Return the National Parks to the Tribes," *The Atlantic* (May 2021) (available online April 12, 2021). https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/05/return-the-national-parks-to-the-tribes/618395 (accessed April 27, 2022); Jim Robbins, "How Returning Lands to Native Tribes Is Helping Protect Nature," *Yale Environmental 360* (June 3, 2021). https://e360.yale.edu/features/how-returning-lands-to-native-tribes-is-helping-protect-nature (accessed April 27, 2022).