



Preserving Values

Militarization and Powwows

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Abstract

This article explores the prevalence of militarization within the important cultural and political space of the powwow. Finding popular explanations of military service (such as poverty, lack of opportunity, and desired upward social mobility) insufficient in explicating the visibility of militarization, this work illustrates how colonially suppressed values have been enacted through the creation of new symbols and forms of practice. Looking to the use of warrior staffs, the Lakota sacred numbers, and the Lakota Flag Song, the article focuses on warriorhood and illustrates how traditional cultural practices are preserved through cunning navigations and transformations of colonial landscapes, allowing for a creative expression of individual and communal sovereignty.

Keywords: Native American, powwow, warriorhood, settler colonialism, survivance

Ethnographic field note: ready, aim, fire!

'We celebrate the integrity of these heroes', the Master of Ceremonies (MC) says over the loudspeakers, 'We want to honor our veterans and to say thank you to all the families...without these colors, we couldn't honor them'.¹ The colors that the MC is talking about are veteran flags—flags draped over caskets of fallen soldiers then tightly folded into triangles and bestowed upon the surviving families. 'Please remove caps and stand'. This is conducted in a circular wooden structure, or arbors, with four openings that lead to the grassy circle. These four openings dissect the wooden stands into equal parts, three of which are stadium-seating style that consist of five basic bench-seating rows and a fourth section that is an enclosed microphone booth. In the center of the circle stands a singular tall flag, flanked by four flags on smaller six-foot poles and three wooden staffs. Throughout the wood arbor structure, affixed veteran's flags rise twenty feet into the air, while the center flag rises about ten feet higher than those. Each flag is equidistant from each other and tied onto the vertical wooden supports (of the audience seating) that hold up the aluminum rain and sun shelter. The flags, when not displayed at these celebrations are stored with the families of the fallen veterans and brought to these special gatherings, allowing their ancestor to be honored and remembered by the community. Some of the flags are bright white, making them seem fairly new, while others are much older in appearance—yellowing and wind torn. Each flag has a small name written on them in a black marker located on the vertical white strip closest to the pole side of the flag. I squint and tilt my head to make out the names.

Four uniformed men carrying assault rifles form a single line at the entrance near the MC booth and walk towards the center flagpole, passing behind it. The four men wear white gloves, maroon short-sleeved collared shirts, and black cargo pants. They wear blue baseball caps and their maroon shirt has a large yellow Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) insignia on the back. Their baseball caps give indications of branch, wars, and other indications. The fronts

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read: 'Native Pride' over the US Marines Eagle, Globe, and Anchor symbol; 'POW-MIA, You're not forgotten'; 'Veteran' over the distinctive Vietnam green, yellow, and red horizontally striped flag; and 'US Army'. The side of the hats read: Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, etc. Carrying the weapons across their torsos, they move to a spot a few steps behind the center flagpole. Marching in unison, they place their assault rifles butt-end down in a tipi-like structure, all four muzzles rest against each other. Once in place, the four form a straight line behind the tipi structure facing the center flag and the microphone booth. Turning in synchronization, they then march out in a single file line back towards the opening they entered. A larger group of veterans, half in the distinctive maroon shirt uniforms and the others in various collections of veteran t-shirts and hats, wait at the opening.

All the veterans, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, form two lines at the opening and then enter the circle, marching clockwise circumambulating the center American flag. As they make their way around the center circle, pairs peel off and move to the base of each of the flags fixed to the wood stands. Upon getting to the flags, the pairs stand at attention facing inward, saluting the center flag. 'Flag number one, Gilbert Catches the Eagle, World War II combat veteran, United States Army', comes over the loudspeakers, 'Flag number two, Franklin Spotted Dear, Vietnam Veteran, United States Marine Corps'. The MC continues to name flags until the twenty-two flags surrounding the grounds are announced. Once all pairs of veterans arrive at their respective poles, one lowers the flag with the ropes while the other waits attentively to catch the flag so as to ensure it does not touch the ground. Great effort is made to make sure each flag does not touch the ground, gently gathering each section of the flag's fabric as it's slowly lowered. Once in held in hands, the pair works to meticulously fold the flags back into a neatly folded triangle, folding first longwise in direction of the stripes one time, and then another, folding it horizontally into fourths. Standing at each end, the pair pulls and shakes the flag before the one standing at the stripe end creates a diagonal sharp crease, folding the end into a triangle. They pull, shake, crease, and fold eight times until it is fully wrapped up. Each pair faces inward, one holding the triangle closely to the chest with both hands, clenched to the heart, while the other stands at full attention.

The MC booth is made of wood, with panels rising to waist-high. There are five men inside the booth, two tending to an audio switchboard, the others looking towards the center. The entire structure of wood panels is painted white, with the back interior wall noticeably cracked and peeled. Underneath the booth there is about a foot gap where the grass is overgrown and coming up the front of the booth. A large wooden sign hangs on the front of the MC booth. The three lines of text on the sign read, 'Home of [well-known Lakota warrior]', followed underneath by 'the Great Sioux Nation', and the name of the reservation. A smaller, yet newer sign, is immediately to its left reading, 'Welcome to [the community's name]', followed by 'Honoring all the Veterans'. The background of the newer sign has a Lakota medicine wheel—a circle divided into four parts, each with a specific direction and color (white, red, yellow, and black).

The two hundred or so, mainly Lakota audience members continue to stand with hats off, with a spattering of the audience saluting the center flag. Two veterans fold up the center veteran's flag. When finished, one of them yells a command and all those who were saluting stop. The drumming stops and the MC announces the singing of the Lakota Flag Song, the Lakota equivalent to the national anthem. 'The US have the Star-Spangled Banner, and the Lakota have the 'wapuchula' (or Flag Song)', comes over the loudspeaker. The drummers begin to play and sing. The Lakota Flag Song, known as *Tǎwápaha Olówan*, was created in the 1950s to honor returning Native WWII veterans. It celebrates the acts of warriorhood, bravery, and selflessness on behalf of the People (Red Cloud Indian School, 2014).

The two in the middle begin marching towards the MC booth. A few feet before they reach the booth they turn clockwise and begin circumambulating the center grounds again. As they pass each pair standing by their flagpoles, the pairs turn immediately and follow in coordinated footsteps. Those holding the flags in the procession continue to clasp the folded triangles closely to their chest with two hands. Their cadence can be described as a two-step, a mixture between a march and a dance, a step with a 1/2 step or bounce in-between. The marching procession, now consisting of staff bearers, flag bearers, and then by 30 or so flag-holding veterans, circles the empty center flagpole. At the end of the second rotation they form a line parallel front of the MC booth.

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Behind this line is the center flagpole and, behind that, the tips of guns. The four gun holders (who were part of the longer procession) step back and move in formation backwards towards their assault rifles, ceremoniously collecting their guns in synchronization. They stand at attention behind the larger line of veterans and hold their guns on their right side, butts to the ground.

'Huh', a gunner yells. The music stops. The drumming stops. The four men pick up their guns and aim them into the sky at a 45-degree angle, towards the MC booth. 'Aim', raising them up a slightly bit higher. 'Fire'. Shots ring out, echoing throughout my chest and throughout my body and then into the surrounding ridges. The surrounding ridges give the echo of a cavernous cathedral. I attempt to mask my startle, trying to recall the last time I was this close to guns being fired. 'Aim...fire', chest, echo. 'Aim...fire', chest, echo. Five times they shoot their assault rifles—at this point, I slowly look around to get a sense if anyone else is startled. These are not small rifles; they are full assault rifles—all black military-style rifles. I notice nothing from the audience that would indicate anything out of the ordinary.

The shots end. The audience remains at attention. 'Present arms', the gun-bearers cradle gun with their left arm and salute the MC booth with their right hands. There is complete silence. Two-hundred people, complete silence. 'We recognize those veterans... for their bravery and for their protection of the People', the MC states over the loudspeaker after some time. 'If we don't have any of them, who would keep our land safe and protect our way of life?' The MC tells families to come up to the booth to receive their relative's flag. Silence fills the gaps between the MC's voice.

'Taps', the military bugle song begins to play over the loudspeakers. The entire audience remains silent and all 30 veterans salute in the direction of the MC booth. The four-gun holders are behind the line, cradling their guns and saluting. The song ends. 'Huh', is voiced out and veterans finish their salutes. The gun holders stand behind the line, folding their left hands behind their back, right hands holding their guns near the muzzles, butts on the ground near their right foot. After all twenty-two of the flags are delivered to the families, the line of veterans still standing parallel to the MC booth turn to their right, creating a single file line and walk out of the center grounds near the MC booth. As they

exit, each moves to the side, forming a line to give handshakes to the veterans leaving the circle behind them. In the silence I feel all these sounds reverberating in my chest.

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The centrality of the valorization of the United States military is hard to miss—this putting up and taking down of these veteran flags took place at the beginning and end of each of the two days of the powwow. The morning flag raising session lasted two hours, the taking down slightly longer. Throughout both, Lakota audience members stood quietly at attention, focusing on the American flags. This is the same audience who, a portion of, no doubt, are themselves direct decedents of those who survived the massacre of Wounded Knee by the US military.

This paradox is at the heart of this article's examination the Lakota cultural space of the powwow and the presence of military valorization. It illustrates how traditional practices of warriorhood are preserved through abilities to transform the realities of various colonial landscapes, allowing for a creative expression of individual and communal sovereignty—emergent forms of traditional practice, born within environs of suppression. Though there are many reasons proffered for military service, none of them seem to capture the full picture of Lakota military service. Accordingly, the following offers the concept of colonial transference, or colonially suppressed values being enacted through new symbols and forms of practice, to understand practices of survivance and sovereignty. I want to foreground, however, that I am hesitant to introduce such a term as 'transference', given its Western intellectual foundations, and, as such, I offer the concept not as a prescription, but instead as a tool for my situated understanding and organizing of observations, and making sense of those observations. If not useful for the reader, then attention should be moved to the underlying phenomena and Lakota navigations of the colonial order.² This article starts with focus on the significance of powwows and militarization, including the high rates of enlistment seen by the Lakota and Native American peoples at large. It then turns attention to colonial transference and survivance at the site of the powwow, expressed particularly through the use of warrior staffs, Lakota sacred numbers, and the Lakota Flag

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Song. It concludes with brief discussion of how these acts are cunning colonial navigations that bring back balance and harmony, while also acting as expressions of sovereignty and resilience.

The following is a result of a political ethnography premised on feminist and indigenous epistemologies and convictions. I say feminist since I take inspiration from J. Ann Tickner's (2005) four elements of a feminist methodology, which are: asking feminist questions (about power), producing useful research, practicing of reflexivity, and recognizing the emancipatory power of knowledge; and indigenous because of a deep recognition of the pernicious and on-going colonial history of research explicated by Linda T. Smith (2012). Both of these works, among others, guide how this research is constructed and carried out.³ Ethnographic fieldwork took place in the Great Plains over four years from 2014-2018 and consisted of participant observation, immersive Ordinary Language Interviews, and archival research. Readers should note that pseudonyms are used throughout to preserve anonymity, a choice I struggle with knowing the history of knowledge and identity erasure. I make this decision because of pre-interview agreements that ensured a free and candid environment. This research is born out of a focus on security, a subject where privacy is of utmost importance (see de Leon, 2020). Academic framing aside, my research methodology was ultimately based on the development of relationships developed while conducting fieldwork and the friendships of support that continue through to today (de Leon, 2018).

I write this ethnographic article as an Asian Settler whose family comes from the Aeta and Igorot regions of the Philippines. This whole exploration is a reflection of a personal journey to unravel colonial forces that have also constructed my own perceptions and lived-experiences of tradition. Simply, I write as a racialized body making sense of their own cultural colonial erasure, while simultaneously recognizing that my presence on this land reproduces similar colonial displacements of the original peoples of the land. These puzzles, forged by subtle (and not so subtle) technologies of colonialism, are at the heart of this exploration. Specifically, how can Indigenous peoples resist colonial annihilation through complicated and often paradox-producing ways to reinscribe agency and sovereignty. The colonialism unpacked here is settler colonialism, as opposed to franchise colonialism, where the former focuses on

extraction through land settlement and eradication of inhabitants (Wolfe, 1999; Kauanui and Warrior, 2018).

Powwow and the military

The powwow

The powwow, or *wacipi*, offers a present-day representation and expression of Lakota cultural practice, while also acting as a space of colonial resistance. When dancers enter the circle, they boldly affirm Native identity, past and present, taking part in an act that ‘resist[s] colonialization and assimilation’ (Axtmann, 2013, p. 124). Powwows have always been dynamic—preserving cultural values while also allowing for new practices and meanings to surface. The powwow discussed in this article is a Lakota powwow in the Great Plains. The term ‘powwow’ is a Narragansett Algonquian word that refers to a spiritual leader and medicine man, later coming to refer to a gathering of medicine men (Jennings, 1976). These communal and spiritual gatherings were a part of Lakota traditions. For example, the *Oceti Sakowin*, translating to the Seven Council Fires, or bands/tribes, of which Lakota are one, are historically nomadic and migratory peoples that would move from area to area depending on season or the hunting of buffalo. As different groups would disperse to various areas, they would use these spiritual and community gatherings to bring together entire *tiospayes*, or extended families.

During this time, colonial presence brought great violence and dispossession. For instance, the Great Sioux Reservation boundaries were first set with the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty and again in 1868. These Treaties were quickly nullified by the U.S. once gold was found in the Black Hills in 1874. White miners moved into the area within a few years and the Lakota were ordered off the land and onto their much smaller reservation. By 1889, the Great Sioux Reservation was cut by 11 million acres and the U.S. government deemed all Lakota found off reservations were enemy combatants (Marshall, 2012). This all culminated in the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre where near 200 men, women, and children were gunned down by the U.S. Seventh Cavalry.

It was also at this time that Native spiritual gatherings and prayer was legally made illegal through the 1883 Religious Crimes Code. This effectively pushed

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all Native spiritual practices underground and medicine men into hiding. The protection and preservation of these practices persisted for multiple generations through to the 1978 Freedom of Religion Act that finally lifted the ban on Native spirituality. Natives found to be breaking these laws faced upward to 30-year prison sentences. The late 1800's also ushered in Indian boarding schools, separating thousands of Native youth from their families and further breaking relational and land-based practices. Both the outlawing of Native spiritual practices and boarding schools lasted nearly four generations, with the Carlisle Indian Boarding School in Pennsylvania opened in 1879 and the last boarding school closed in 1973. Native spirituality was outlawed from 1883 to 1978.

This environment of violence, erasure, and assimilation was the context in which contemporary forms of the powwow emerged, acting as a way to carry on particularly traditional practices. Powwows served as community gatherings and were eventually broadened and opened up for multi-tribe participation in the early twentieth century. Dancing takes the form of prayer, allowing for the powwow to function as a celebration, prayer, and ceremony. Often being multi-generational affairs, the powwow played a significant role in cultural preservation, continuance, self-affirmation, and resistance. Through powwows, 'power is manifest as physical, social and spiritual, and individual and communal [...] as individuals relate with one another, with visitors, with others who have passed on, and with a higher power' (Axtmann, 2001, p. 18). One Lakota elder explained what a powwow is by saying, 'It's everything all wrapped into one, it's a gathering, it's the center'. The powwow is a sacred, celebratory space where old and new traditions enter into a complex dialogue, allowing for new traditions to emerge and old traditions adapt. It is a site that is reflective of the thriving and dynamic nature of culture and tradition in the face of oppression.

Militarization and enlistment

The Lakota have been the historic enemy of the US military, possessing a long and bloody history of military engagements with the US government. Why then is the valorization of the military such a significant aspect of the powwow? Moreover, Native Americans have among the highest rate of military service

in the US (NMAI, 2020). Even taking into account the highest rates of military service, it is still striking how prominent the valorization of the military is throughout Lakota powwows. What can explain this?

Militarization can be defined as a 'step-by-step process by which a person or thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend for its well being on militaristic ideas' (Enloe, 2000, p. 3). This also includes the normalization of military symbols and ideals—toys, TV, music, video games, and fashion (Singer, 2009; Stahl, 2009; Turse, 2008). This process constructs notions of necessity and worth associated with military service and needs and goes beyond merely enlistment in military service or war-fighting to encompass the subtle normalization process of military demands and militarized suppositions. It is a process in which military service becomes valorized, remembered, and celebrated.

There are multiple contributing factors to military enlistment in the US, falling into two broad categories: demographics and family background (Lawrence and Legree, 1995; Stone et al., 1993; and Nieva et al., 1997) and individual-level factors. It is no surprise that lower income, marginalized communities have had higher rates of enlistment, given the social mobility incentive structure such as job training, access to education, travel, etc. (Phillips et al., 1992; Segal et al., 1998; Bachman et al., 2001; National Research Council, 2003; Tsinnajinnie, 2011). Within this context Black and LatinX communities have had historically disproportionate enlistment rates (Kleykamp, 2006). When parents serve in the military their children are more likely to enlist (Paris, 1984; Kilburn and Klerman, 1999; Segal and Segal, 2004), though it's also found that less parental education correlates to increases of childhood enlistment (Bleeker and Jacobs, 2004; Bois et al., 2005), as are young people coming from single parent households (Bachman et al., 2000). Overall, it has been shown that those who enlist are generally economically poor, rural, and/or from ethnic or minority groups. They are more likely to have been raised in single parent households, with parents without a college education, and/or with parents who have served in the military. Both demographic- and individual-level explanations stem from external factors—structures of underachievement, inaccessibility, or circumstances of lack. Though these factors undoubtedly impact Native rates of military service, they do not paint a complete picture.

Turning to what this article refers to as colonial transference provides another explanation.

Survivance and colonial transference

In the face of genocide Native communities have shown resilience, adaptability, and survival. To understand this further, Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor (1999) refashions the term *survivance* to capture these qualities and traits. The notion of *survivance* captures the qualities Natives have displayed in the face of genocidal US policy. It denotes agency in the face of oppression, pointing to something more than mere survival, it is a combination of survival, endurance, and resistance. By adding the suffix *-ance*—referring to the act of doing, such as reliance or assistance—to the term *survive* is to indicate a conscious act and choice of surviving. The concept is premised on a belief that life is always in ‘movement and continual transformation [...] an ongoing process of hybridity and cultural change’ (Helstern, 2008, p. 166). *Survivance* is, however, a contested term. Vizenor has defined the term in multiple and contradictory ways, both relying upon dictionary definitions while also asserting that dictionaries ‘do not provide the national reason or sense of the word’ (Purdy and Hausman, 2005, p. 98). Consequently, *survivance* has come to encompass many things, including surviving and resisting, ‘survival + endurance’ (Weaver, 2006, p. 89); ‘active presence’ and something ‘more than survival, more than endurance or mere response’ (Breinig, 2008, p. 39); an ‘active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry’ (Bernet, 1993, p. 144); an ‘action, condition, quality, and sentiments of the verb survive’ (Vizenor, 2008, p. 19); and an ‘act of being recognized’ (Carlson, 2011, p. 17). Implicit in the concept of *survivance* is the ability to change and transform as a way of preserving and staying the same. It allows for a hybridity, ‘a blending of new and old cultural materialities without invoking problematic ideas of cultural authenticity outside of legitimate “acts to persist”’ (Silliman, 2014, p. 60). Vizenor refers to *survivance* as a practice not as a theory, suggesting, ‘*Survivance* is a practice, not an ideology, dissimulation, or a theory’ (Vizenor, 2008, p. 11).

Don Fixico (2013) examines the role of Natives in modern society and suggests that Natives of North America ‘resiliently survived’. Where Indigenous peoples

around the world saw population declines, assimilation, and loss of language, in the U.S. something of note happened: 'The vanishing race of the late nineteenth century chose not to disappear' (Fixico, 2013, p. 7). Survivance challenges narratives that characterize Natives as passive or merely being an object of colonialism control; they are acts of 'renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry' (Vizenor, 2008, p. 1). Survivance points to practices of adaptation (change in order to stay the same), though this concept only provides a partial understanding of militarization at Lakota powwows.

Transference, defined by Jacques Derrida as 'transportation of a meaning from one location to another', provides additional insight to contextualizing the significance of militarization at powwows (Bernet, 1993, p. 143). Though *colonial transference* bears resemblance to the religious studies concept of syncretism, or the 'mixture of different religious origins [...] lead[ing] to the parentage of new, but impure, hybrid forms, instead of the stable reproduction of pure religious or cultural traditions' (Leopold and Jensen, 2016, p. 2), colonial transference takes into account structural colonial suppression, as well as Native navigations to mitigate the impact of those colonial forces on cultural and spiritual values over time. It points to the evolution of culturally salient values and practices as they interact with violences of coloniality.⁴ Operating within the framework of survivance, colonial transference shines light on how communities (re)negotiate cultural practices, seen here most starkly with the Lakota values of bravery and sacrifice.

Warrior values of bravery and sacrifice

The Lakota culture (and the societal roles of males, though not exclusively) is intimately connected to warriorhood. Warriorhood, and the values it represents, were curtailed and outlawed by various US Treaties and laws that banned Native possession of arms and hunting. Along with learning how to craft a bow, shoot an arrow, and to engage in combat and self-defense, warriorhood and hunting taught young Lakota men about their role in Lakota society—how to protect and provide for their family and for the People. Over time and through series of suppressive laws and regulations, one of the only available (and legal) expressions for these traditional values was through the

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avenue of US military service. Being a warrior was much more than just being a soldier or being able to fight, it was the act of becoming one who is able and willing to sacrifice for the good of the People, one who cares for the vulnerable and upholds the principles and safety of the society.⁵ Being a warrior meant a willingness to sacrifice your life for protection and betterment of the People.

Bravery and sacrifice were at the heart these values and were central in being a 'good relative', a notion that is of utmost importance in Lakota culture. 'Our people are warriors', Maryanne tells me while we're sipping on our hot drinks, 'we've always been warriors, always'. Already into her 80's, Maryanne, along with a small group of other older members of the community, have taken on efforts to ensure the continuation of traditional Lakota ceremonies. On the wall behind her is a three-foot braided string of wild turnips (*timpsula*) and to her side an Abalone seashell the size of an ash tray with the burnt remnants of sage. 'The military is a way to continue our warrior society', she explains, 'We've always been warriors, we've always been fighters'.

This reverence for warrior values is illustrated in many aspects of the powwow. I was once approached midway through a powwow by an older Lakota woman named Martha. We spoke for some time and she invited me over to her family area—a cluster of eight folding chairs, Gatorade bottles, and snacks. When I sat I noticed her granddaughter was donning ornate regalia that featured what looked like a vintage image of a Lakota man in military uniform. Martha hand-sewed her granddaughter's dancing regalia and the image was of Martha's great uncle, a Lakota code talker from World War II. We sat in the family's chairs in the front-row and she told me about her uncle, 'They are the ones who protect us, they fought for us to live'. She reaches over and holds the tail end of her granddaughter's regalia, looking at the portion emblazoned with her uncle's image. 'They fight for the right to live and for those who cannot fight for themselves'.

The concept closest to soldiering in Lakota is *akicita*. The meaning of *akicita* (or *ogichidaa* in Anishinaabe/Ojibwe) differs, however, from the English word *soldier* in significant ways. 'When I speak of the *akicita* of the white people I mean the soldiers', explains Thomas Tyon (1992, p. 28), an older Lakota man described in 1897, 'But *akicita* never means a soldier of the Lakotas, except

when a Lakota is in the army of the white people as a soldier'. *Akicita* can be used in multiple ways and has various meanings. As a verb, it can be seen as hunting for something or searching for the 'right way to do something' (Tyon, 1992, p. 28). As a noun, it most commonly refers to camp officers designated by tribal leadership to act as 'policeman' and keepers of peace. It can also refer to those who are charged with protecting and organizing the camp as it moves from various locations, protecting the People during these vulnerable camp transitions (Tyon, 1992). Formed into various *akicita* societies, the *akicita* protect the People and help maintain order and proper social functioning.

Lakota rites of passage depended upon warriorhood traditions. '[Military service] is similar to going away to learn how to be a warrior', Andrew tells me, 'There is no place else to test your skills'. Andrew, a youthful Lakota man in his mid-50's with a gruff voice and imposing demeanor that belie his slight stature, tells me: 'There are other ways you can be a warrior, but the quickest way is to go to the military, and that is what I did—US Marine Corps'. He tells me about his family ties to Lakota warriors of the past, as well as the significance of warriorhood and rites of passage. 'When the boys get of age, they usually go to the military'. Military service, and the attendant values of warriorhood, provided a pathway for Lakota young men to learn and enact cultural values through evolving outlets. 'I never pushed my children into joining any type of military service', Andrew tells me, then starts naming two, three, then four of his kids and nephews who served in the military. 'I don't push them into it, it was always their choice, my parents never pushed me into it either'. Natalie, Andrew's wife, asserts as she walks by, 'We don't push our kids, but they know their dad is a Marine ... and they still want to be what their dad was'. This was central to a Lakota way of life, particularly for men coming-of-age. 'In order to continue being warriors, you went to war', explains Maryanne, 'we couldn't go to war with each other anymore'. At the end of the Indian Wars (which largely ended with the Massacre of Wounded Knee) guns ownership and hunting became outlawed. Any Lakota who ventured off reservation were to be treated as an enemy of the state by the US military. Warrior practices were banned, leaving no 'legal' outlets for the continuation of these important cultural practices. The Lakota people, however, chose not to lose their traditional ways, adapting to their new colonial realities.

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Cultural values passed on through warrior traditions faced a period of eradication and suppression. The Lakota choose to adapt rather than to lose important traditions, causing cultural practices to embody new forms—forms deemed ‘acceptable’ to the dominant US culture. Military service was one primary means of continuing the cultural practices of warriorhood. Turning to examples of survivance and colonial transference at the powwow—including use of warrior staffs and US veteran flags, Lakota sacred numbers and duration of military service, and Lakota Flag Song—we see how traditions were preserved through practices taking on new, yet familiar, forms.

Warrior staffs

US military veteran flags encircle the circular dancing area, attached to flag poles that rise well above the circular arbor. Each flag represents a family member of the audience who has served in the US military, with some passing away while serving abroad. These were the flags bestowed upon families and used to cover caskets during funerals.

Veteran flags play such a central role to powwow celebrations that local Lakota newspapers have described them as ‘Raising of the Flag Celebrations’. The practice of encircling the powwow with flags derives its origins from before Euro-American contact (Schmittou and Logan, 2002). The Lakota did not historically use flags. Instead, they surrounded gathering grounds with warrior staffs. Flags were first introduced to Native people by Europeans and Euro-Americans. US flags began to be used in powwows after World War I, when the first Native veterans were returning home with American service experience. Natives were not granted US citizenship until 1924, making WWI Native military service voluntary.

The Lakota used staffs to represent various societies in the *tiospaye*, or extended family or community. This was particularly the case, though not exclusively, with warrior *akicita* societies. Individual warriors carried staffs and upon their passing were used in celebrations and ceremony as a way to honor their sacrifices and bravery. These were the staffs used historically to surround the celebration grounds. With warriorhood traditions outlawed and US military service an acceptable alternative, traditional practices were altered—Lakota warrior staffs were replaced by US military veteran’s flags. Another way

colonial transference can be seen is through durations of military service.

Sacred numbers

Durations of US military service, most commonly four years but also to seven, coincide with traditional Lakota warriorhood practices. Young Lakota men, when coming of age, needed to learn values of bravery, sacrifice, and self-sufficiency to become a warrior. These values were important for the coming-of-age of young men and central to being a good relative. At the age of thirteen, traditionally, boys would be sent off to the far boundaries of the Lakota territory, particularly to the North to help protect the *tiospaye* against marauding rival tribes. These young men would learn the ways from older warriors, while also serving to reinforce areas where the Lakota were most vulnerable. They would learn fighting techniques, tactics of stealth and cunning, hunting and tracking, and how to practice discretion and discernment—when to kill or when to count coup. They learned about their cultural and social roles and expectations, as well as how to continue carrying out the Lakota way of life.

When young boys were sent away, they were sent away for four years. Upon their return, they would be full-grown men, formidable warriors, and able to take care of the People and be a good relative. They would then be able to marry, protect their family, and provide for the larger *tiospaye*. 'That was normal', says Neil, a Lakota artist and fluid Lakota speaker, 'See, you're gone at thirteen, so when you come home you got the right to choose your wife and protect your family from there forward'. Neil is in his 50s and, as we speak in his living room, to my left is a wall of photographs of family members in military uniforms—from soldiers with their arms around each other to more formal headshots. A picture of a young Neil in his Army uniform is surrounded by other photographs of family members, some dating back to the early 1900s. 'All the Lakotas went to the full max, just to show them that we did it ... If you're in the National Guard, you were just a weekend warrior, that's what we'd call you'. He shares with me his family history of US military service—a great grandfather in World War I, an uncle who was a Lakota code talker in World War II, and his two nieces who currently serve in the Navy. His late wife's family was similar, a great grandfather who served in World War I and

grandfather in World War II.

'It hit our culture right on the head', Neil says, 'because it's four years or seven years'. 'Those are our numbers and are based around our beliefs'. Many Lakota choose military service as a full-time commitment for four or seven years.⁶ This aligned to the Lakota sacred numbers while also mirroring traditional practices of warriorhood. The sacred number four represents the four directions, four seasons, four types of balance (spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional), and four winds. There are Seven Council Fires (or the seven bands of Lakota), seven sacred parts of the body, seven sacred directions (north, east, south, west, up, down, and internal), and seven stars that comprise the Big Dipper—the Big Dipper plays a central role in the Lakota origin story, the Lakota coming from an arrow from the Big Dipper and landing in the Black Hills.

The tradition of sending young men for four years to vulnerable areas of the territory was an important coming-of-age practice that allowed for young males to learn the warrior way, how to be a good relative, and their role in society. They gained the skills needed to protect and to carry out traditional Lakota ways of living and culture. The sending off of young men (for four or seven years) to learn from other Lakota warriors was interrupted and suppressed. US military service became an alternative and, again, we see traditional ways of life being altered and transferred to new, 'colonially-approved' practices. Colonial transference can also be seen through the Lakota Flag Song.

Lakota Flag Song

Before the four men in the circle pick up their assault rifles an echo rounds off the surrounding ridges, the Lakota Flag Song had been sung, not the US National Anthem. This is noticeable given the visibility of the twenty-two US flags flying on poles affixed to the surrounding arbor.

The singing of the Flag Song occurs at the beginning and end of each powwow session—two sessions a day for two days, though many powwows last a series of days. The Flag Song can be read in multiple ways that serve distinct purposes: On one hand, it can be read in a way that satisfies colonial demands, placating and gesturing to the pragmatic navigation of colonial realities and,

on the other hand, as continuation and reinforcement of Lakota traditional ways of life, a determined expression of sovereignty and agency.

The Lakota Flag Song lyrics read: *Ṭḥuŋkášilayapi, ṭḥawápaha kiŋhán /oíhanke šni hé nážiŋ kte ló /lyóḥlateya oyáte kiŋhán /wičhíčhaŋiŋ kta čha, /léčhamuŋ weló.*

This commonly translates to: The flag of the United States / will stand, indestructibly. / Because of the Flag, / the People shall live, / and flourish. Quite simply, a pledge of allegiance. When translated into Lakota, the Flag Song takes on different meanings.

Take, for instance, the first line *Ṭḥuŋkášilayapi, ṭḥawápaha kiŋhán*, or ‘The flag of the United States’. *Ṭḥawápaha*, is commonly translated as ‘flag’. Though traditionally, as previously mentioned, the Lakota did not use flags. *Ṭḥawápaha* (the first part of the line), therefore, can also translate to staff. Secondly, *Ṭḥuŋkášila* (the second part of the line), translates to ‘grandfather’. Grandfather for the Lakota translates to the Creator or Great Spirit, whereas grandmother refers to the earth. Moreover, the first white Americans, upon encountering Native peoples, encouraged the use of grandfather to refer to the US president and, more symbolically, the US government. What this means is that the first line of the Flag Song can either mean ‘The flag of the United States’ or ‘The staff of the Creator’—two significantly important translations, both serving very distinct ends.

The Flag Song was created just after World War II during a time when practicing Native spirituality and prayer had been outlawed since 1883, or roughly sixty-years (Red Cloud Indian School 2014). These bans were well underway for multiple generations by the time the Flag Song surfaced. Violations carried a penalty of up to 30 years imprisonment (Zielske 2010). The Lakota Flag Song became a way to carrying on a core Lakota value—prayer to the Creator—while still being understood as demonstrating allegiance to the US government.

The Lakota Flag Song is a central aspect to powwows, as well as many other Lakota ceremonies and events. As an expression of sovereignty, agency, and resilience, it stands as an example of colonial transference where genocidal

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realities faced by Native peoples led to new expressions of traditional cultural values and practices. These acts preserved and protected traditional ways of life. The Lakota Flag Song acts 'colonially-approved' stand-in for the US National Anthem in a manner that placated dominant racist ideologies, while at the same time carrying on a major aspect of Lakota life: prayer.

Concluding thoughts

I sit at that the circle, listening to the drummers and watching the regalia-clad dancers moving back and forth as they circle the center flags and wooden staffs. Men in their 60s dance next to teenagers and little boys. Grandmothers sit at the edge of the circle in folding chairs braiding girl's hair. Others are in conversation, sharing food and preparing items for the dancers.

I reflect on the power and significance of the circle, the hoop. For the Lakota the hoop is a sacred symbol representing unity, balance, and harmony. The natural cycles of life—of birth and death, of decay and renewal—all happen in a circle, a hoop. In a circle 'there are no corners, there is no dark place, there is no back row, there is no third or second row, it's all front row', Ian, a well-known Lakota spiritual and cultural leader and one of the few traditional hoop dancers, tells me. '[Traditional dances and the hoop are] all about restoring well-being, restoring physical well-being, restoring emotional and mental and of course spiritual well-being—not just individually but collectively, It's about restoring collective well-being' (de Leon, 2020). The echoing of gun shots reverberate in my chest and I can only think of the gunfire and emotions those young Wounded Knee survivors felt as they were running from the US military. The US government tried to eradicate Lakota ways of life, attempting to break the hoop. The powwow, with its honoring of warrior traditions, celebration of survivance and colonial transference, and foregrounding of bravery and sacrifice, is a sacred space where intergenerational, cultural knowledge can be transmitted and important practices protected. The powwow reconnects the hoop, it allows for cultural renewal and spiritual springtime.

Colonialism produces complex puzzles. How could it be that valorizations of US military are so present during the powwow, when Native peoples, and the Lakota specifically, have been so adversely affected by the US military? This

article explored this puzzle and finds that common explanations of military service and valorization of that service—poverty, lack of education and job opportunities, poor academic performance or college preparation, and desired upward social mobility—do not paint an entire picture. Instead, this article reveals new ways of interpreting the centrality of militarization at powwows as an expression of sovereignty, agency, and resilience—as traditional ways of warriorhood were banned, the Lakota found new expressions to honor and pass on these values. New expressions manifested through adaptations such as the use of US veteran flags, the duration of military service, and the creation of Lakota Flag Song. These examples of colonial transference foreground the practical navigations of colonial oppression. The powwow acts as a way for the Lakota to maintain and reclaim traditions, while also providing a sense of identity, purpose, and sovereignty. Engagements of militarism act as renegotiated expressions of important, yet suppressed, warrior-based cultural practices.

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Ethics statement

This research obtained Tribal Council approval (Tribal Memorandum, 'Justin DeLeon's request regarding security and colonization', 17 June 2014), as well as Institutional Review Board clearance: University of Delaware Institutional Review Board (Approval No. 575100-1, 4 March 2014).

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Notes

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² For indigenous critiques of Western philosophy see the works of Vine Deloria, Jr. (1969) and Deloria et al. (2012). John Little (2020) looks at a similar phenomenon to colonial transference, also with Lakota military veterans, using the term 'redeployment'.

³ I take inspiration from Jo-Ann Archibald (2008) on indigenous storywork, Margaret Kovach (2009), Shawn Wilson (2008), Sweeney Windchief and Timothy San Pedro (2019) on indigenous methodologies, and Audra Simpson (2014) on ethnography. In regards to terminology, I capitalize *Indigenous* when referring to peoples (a noun) and lowercase when referring to a pre-Columbus past (an adjective).

⁴ Transference here is from the work of Jacques Lacan (1964) who suggests a dialectic involving both to agentic parties. This is in contrast to Freud's (1900, SE V 562) use of the term as a subconscious phenomenon where emotions are transferred from one relationship (generally from childhood) to another (in adulthood). Suppression is used intentionally, as suppression is at the conscious level, while repression at the subconscious level.

⁵ Sitting Bull describes, 'For us, warriors are not what you think of as warriors. The warrior is not someone who fights, because no one has the right to take another's life. The warrior, for us, is one who sacrifices himself for the good of others. His task is to take care of the elderly, the defenseless, those who cannot provide for themselves and above all, the children, the future of humanity' (LaDuke and Cruz, 2013, p. 3). Though widely circulated (even amongst the Lakota themselves), this quote cannot be verified (see Chadwick, 2012).

⁶ For accuracy, first-term enlistments require four-year active duty and two-year inactive duty commitments. Depending on enrollment timing, this process can reasonably extend into seven years.