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## Resisting Domination and “Cultural Imperialism” Through Direct Indigenous Participation in Historical Reenactments

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# **Resisting Domination and “Cultural Imperialism” Through Direct Indigenous Participation in Historical Reenactments**

## **Introduction**

Indigenous Tourism is a worldwide phenomenon that faces unique opportunities and challenges (Whitford & Ruhanen, 2016). Within the United States, Indigenous peoples (Native Americans) have endured different forms of discrimination through a complex settler-colonial history, and tourism’s role is not exempt. Development has willingly and unwillingly drawn Native Americans into cultural tourism activity (Markowitz, 2001), with numerous attendant issues including superficial guest-host interactions, the perpetuation of stereotypes like the “noble savage” (Laxson, 1991), omission from interpretive narratives (Pretes, 2003), and the destruction of sacred lands (Markowitz, 2001). While efforts towards more “sustainable” Indigenous tourism outcomes have included participatory forms tribally-involved tourism management (Browne & Nolan, 1989; Fletcher, Proff, & Brueckner, 2016; Piner & Paradis, 2004; Spencer, 2010), Native Americans remain a marginalized group whose cultural heritage has generally been misrepresented by dominant groups and other, more powerful, heritage stakeholders (Loewen, 2010). Despite decades of research, tourism studies have done little to address, “the socio-economic disadvantage faced by indigenous people who are still hindered by (among other things) the legacies of colonial history, ineffective and misguided government policies, and a lack of access to education, health services and employment” (Whitford and Ruhanen, 2016, p. 1083). Further, normative research examining the outcomes of Native American tourism are lacking (Whitford & Ruhanen, 2016). Case studies proliferate but as with many case studies in tourism, they rarely address more fundamental questions that can help inform just outcomes for Indigenous heritage tourism. Important questions lie unanswered, like how and why diverse ethical values arise in tourism development, and whose ethical values should/should not be taken into account (Smith, 2009). This study explores some of these issues in the context of heritage tourism, specifically, Indigenous-managed historical reenactments.

Historical reenactments are a type of heritage tourism event where an occurrence from the past is re-staged and performed by period-costumed participants for spectators. In addition to being opportunities for economic development (Wilhelm & Mottner, 2005), reenactments are also highly political events that can be used by dominant groups to present the past in a favorable manner (Goulding & Domic, 2009). While marginalized or oppressed groups can also use historical reenactments to challenge dominant heritage (Buchholtz, 2011; Turner, 1989) few studies within tourism have examined the potential of such events to facilitate cultural recognition and advance justice for such groups. This research offers a preliminary exploration of Indigenous self-representation in historical reenactments as a way to move towards socially just outcomes. Young’s (2011) five faces of oppression provide theoretical guidance to the study.

We focus specifically on the case of the reenactment of the Battle of the Little Bighorn (LBH) an annual event held by a family of the Crow Tribe on their land near the LBH Battlefield National Monument in Montana. The reenactment depicts a battle fought between the U.S. military and members of the Crow, Arikara, Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes in 1876. Popularly known as “Custer’s Last Stand”, the LBH has often been represented in popular culture in a manner that emphasizes the U.S. military perspective. By hosting and storytelling the

annual reenactment, members of the Crow Tribe are able to challenge forms of oppression and domination towards socially just outcomes

## Literature Review

Heritage tourism is a form of tourism that presents elements from the past for tourist consumption to meet the economic, socio-cultural, and political needs of the present (Graham, Ashworth, & Tunbridge, 2000). Heritage sites are performative sites of power and meaning making, which raises questions on the development and representation of cultural heritage: e.g., by how, for whom and to what end (Hollinshead, 1999; Graham, et al., 2000). Inequitable power relations privilege the perspectives of dominant groups in heritage tourism development while simultaneously disempowering diverse experiences including those of racial, ethnic, economic, and gendered minorities (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996; Loewen, 2010). In the U.S. this often includes silencing or misrepresenting Native American perspectives (Loewen, 2010). Yet heritage tourism sites have also been associated with the potential for healing and reconciliation between formerly antagonistic groups. For example, Robben Island Museum in South Africa provides stories and representations of the fall of apartheid in South Africa; a space separate from the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions set up to facilitate *restorative* justice in post-apartheid South Africa (Strange & Kempa, 2003).

Historical reenactments are a type of heritage tourism event that re-create historical incidents, including battles, for spectators. These events are important socio-political and economic resources that are used to communicate ideological values to the public (Goulding & Domic, 2009; Farmer, 2005). However, while historical reenactments can be used to convey or reinforce a dominant group's ideology, they can also be used to challenge it in a way that recognizes traditionally marginalized groups (Buchholtz, 2011). The ability of historical reenactments to contest dominant representations of heritage makes them a potential resource towards gaining justice for marginalized populations. However, this topic has received little attention from tourism researchers.

The work of Young (2011) offers a useful lens to begin to explore the justice-related outcomes of historical reenactments. Young (2011) understands injustice through two conditions: (1) domination, which refers to institutional-constraints on self-development, and (2) oppression, which refers to institutional constraints on self-determination and participation. She presents "five faces of oppression": exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence: (1) *exploitation* involves profiting off of groups without providing them with proper compensation or representation, (2) *marginalization* occurs when groups are relegated to a lower social status through material deprivation and disenfranchisement, (3) *powerlessness* refers to a lack of authority or status that is perpetuated towards a group, (4) *cultural imperialism* refers to the establishment of a dominant culture that reflects that of powerful social groups, (5) and *violence* refers to attacks on persons and their property, or the threat of such (Camargo, 2011; Young, 2011).

## Methodology

This study uses qualitative case study methodology (Yin, 2009) and data gathered as part of an ongoing study at LBH. During annual site visits by the lead author (2015-2019) data was collected from: (1) 30 interviews with key stakeholders, including event organizers, reenactors,

tourists, and local residents; (2) observations of the Real Bird Reenactment, and (3) secondary textual data, including books on LBH and online material (e.g., public reports and reviews). Purposive sampling was used to gather data based on its ability to address the purpose of the research (Hesse-Biber, 2017). The data was analyzed through iterative inductive and deductive processes guided by Young (2011).

The Battle of the Little Bighorn, fought in 1876, saw members of the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes defeat an American military force led by General Custer and allied scouts from the Crow and Arikara tribes. Today, the LBH Battlefield is a National Monument in southeastern Montana managed by the U.S. National Park Service (NPS). The National Monument attracts approximately 300,000 tourists annually (National Park Service, 2017), and is surrounded by the tribal landholdings of the Crow Reservation, private farmland, and battlefield preservation trust land (Greene, 2008).

Since the Battle occurred it has been celebrated as an important cultural event by its diverse participant groups, who each remember the event in different ways. However, for over 100 years, many dominant forms of heritage representation such as popular books, movies, artwork and even the Battlefield itself, presented the event as a heroic “last stand” by Custer and the military (Greene, 2008). Despite the LBH being a major victory for the Native American tribes, the site – first known as the Custer Battlefield National Cemetery – primarily focused only on military heritage through monuments and interpretive narratives (Greene, 2008). This dominant military narrative led to decades of contestation by Native Americans, who sought greater representation at the site and voice in planning. This culminated with the eventual revision of the site in the 1990s to include different cultural perspectives. Amid the busy heritage landscape of the LBH, including private tour companies, museums, and other special events, the re-construction of heritage at LBH demonstrates that marginalized groups can assert their voices towards achieving heritage representation and cultural recognition, leading towards more just outcomes with respect to access to resources, recognition and direct participation in revising the commemorative story (Wahl, 2019).

Yet the National Monument is not the only site that represents the LBH. In the early 1990s the Real Bird family of the Crow Tribe began hosting a reenactment of LBH on their farmland. Located on the Crow Reservation, the site includes some of the land where the Battle took place. The Real Bird Reenactment tells a family history of the American West that has been passed down for generations. The performance includes pre-contact Native American history, aspects of Crow culture, and other major socio-political events between the U.S. government and different tribes culminating with the LBH. As a family-run event operating on a limited budget with no rehearsals, each performance varies slightly in content. The one event common to every performance is young “warriors” from the Crow tribe (representing the historically antagonistic Sioux and Cheyenne tribes) defeat Custer and his soldiers (volunteer cavalry reenactors from around the world) at the climax of the event. Reenactments of LBH are not a new phenomenon. Annual reenactments were held on the Crow Reservation from 1964 until the mid-1970s (Buchholtz, 2011), and in the 1990s the community of Hardin, Montana (20 miles from the Battlefield) hosted a reenactment before folding due to financial constraints in the early 2000s (Buchholtz, 2011). The Real Bird reenactment continues to be held annually in June, though due to COVID-19 it is cancelled for 2020.

## **Results**

Drawing on Iris Marion's Young's (2011) five faces of oppression, the Real Bird Reenactment is a Native American-led heritage tourism event that counters domination and oppression.

### ***Exploitation***

For over 100 years the NPS interpreted the LBH at the Battlefield National Monument with little involvement from different tribal stakeholders. While the Battlefield National Monument site is surrounded by the landholdings of the Crow Reservation, for decades the Crow did not directly benefit financially from their representation, and were not invited to tell their own story. While today the NPS manages the LBH Battlefield with increased tribal input, employs Crow staff, and is partnered with a Crow-operated tour company, economic exploitation persists. Large-scale or new economic development opportunities at the Battlefield site itself are limited due to its designation as a National Monument, and while the Crow are able to operate businesses outside of the Battlefield boundaries, the necessary resources to start such businesses are lacking. From 2007-2011 the Crow Reservation had an unemployment rate of nearly 30% (Crow Nation, 2013).

The reenactment overturns economic exploitation by providing the marginalized residents of the Crow reservation with an event that draws over 3,000 spectators a weekend. Seating at the reenactment is limited and tickets, available at the gate only, are priced at \$20 for an adult. This results in a high demand from tourists, some of which have travelled from across the U.S. or internationally to view the reenactment. These tourists often stay in the area to see other LBH-related attractions, and spend money in the Crow Reservation. The reenactment also raises funds through souvenir and concession sales, including locally made Crow items. The funds raised at the reenactment go directly to the Real Bird family and is then provided to Crow participants (many of them young boys who provide their own horses). Vouchers for school supplies are also distributed to young Crow participants. With limited local opportunities within the dominant system of representation and economic development, the Crow have created their own heritage tourism product to tell their own story, in their own way, on their own lands.

### ***Marginalization***

The reenactment is also used to challenge the marginalization of the Crow Tribe in American society. Until recent decades the Crow had been excluded from telling their own story at LBH. The reenactment provides the Real Bird's with another means to enter the "business" of heritage development, and to construct and present their own narrative of the past as part of the same dominant system of meaning making that has traditionally excluded them. One way this occurs is through educating and empowering younger generations. While tourism can threaten the use of traditional languages (Markowitz, 2011), the reenactment celebrates the Crow language and culture, and encourages its practice amongst participants, including many young "warriors" from the reservation.

The performance of the reenactment also bluntly communicates historical and modern social, political and economic issues to the public. These issues range from the local to national level. For example, during observations of reenactments, narration has outlined individual incidents and grievances that the Real Bird's have experienced with the Bureau of Indian Affairs over several generations. Inter-tribal issues are also commonly expressed. Regardless of the

specific message, the reenactment offers the family, and members of the Crow tribe, an outlet to express their feelings regarding their marginalization in society: educating tourists not just about what occurred in a battle with the government in 1876, but also about the ongoing socio-political battles of the present.

### ***Powerlessness***

The Real Bird Reenactment counters the legacy of Native American exclusion at LBH by providing voice and authority to members of the Crow Tribe to interpret their own heritage. The distinct Crow perspective of the reenactment counters much of the knowledge presented by other heritage sites including the NPS-managed Battlefield, nearby museums, and private tours. The Real Bird's oral history is championed as the "true" version of the LBH that contrasts the "lies" told elsewhere (Buchholtz, 2011). The live audio narration that accompanies the reenactment is used to challenge dominant narratives of how Custer died, the length of the fighting, and the role of the Crow tribe as military scouts. There is also power in each individual performance, as the narration may vary according to the subjectivities of its speaker, who often adds his own thoughts on different topics. While this representation of the Battle does clash with the expectations of some tourists, especially those familiar with dominant western-driven narratives of LBH, for many it provides a new and enlightening perspective on the culture of the Crow tribe and their view of shared events in "American" history. The reenactment is not affiliated with the NPS, has no sponsors or partnerships, and is largely free from external influences, which maintains the authority and power of the Real Birds to interpret their heritage.

### ***Cultural Imperialism***

Cultural imperialism is addressed through the celebration of Crow culture. The Crow have largely been written out of narratives of popular history, and to tourists the LBH is popularly known as a fight between the U.S. military and the Sioux, or as Custer vs. Sitting Bull/Crazy Horse – with less recognition for the Crow or their role as military scouts. The event establishes the Crow as "insiders" within the U.S. by emphasizing their military contributions including their historic role as scouts, saluting veterans in attendance, and highlighting the high proportion of Crow currently serving in the U.S. military. The event also emphasizes that the site of the LBH is the homeland of the Crow, and that in the classic American tradition, that they were fighting to protect their homes from other tribes. Stereotypical representations of Native Americans are also challenged as Crow culture is explored through the event: the Crow language is spoken, the Crow anthem sung, and traditional displays of Crow horsemanship and material culture are renewed amongst younger generations. These narratives challenge the way that tourists view the LBH and the culture of the Crow.

### ***Violence***

Finally, the LBH highlights acts of violence that have been exercised in the colonization of different Native American tribes, and emphasizes that the Crow Tribe lives under the threat of violence. The reenactment details broken treaties, malfeasance, and acts of brutality committed against Native Americans by the federal government: emphasizing that women and children were killed in military attacks at Sand Creek, CO and the Washita, OK. There are also efforts to detail more modern acts of violence, such as those reportedly perpetuated against Crow livestock by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. One member of the Real Bird family felt that younger Crow are unfamiliar with the prejudices that older generations have faced, for example when businesses posted signs in their windows that said "No Indians Allowed". However, the reenactment allows

him to teach younger generations about what it has been like. Through its performance, the Reenactment educates both tourists and younger members of the Crow Tribe about these incidents from the perspective of the victims.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

Like other forms of heritage tourism development, historical reenactments play a role in communicating key messages about the past and present to the public. The Real Bird Reenactment represents an Indigenous-led movement towards justice as recognition of difference, and a space to resist marginalization and control the expression their cultural heritage through telling their story their way. For indigenous groups, events like the Real Bird Reenactment are vital towards the facilitation of justice-oriented outcomes such as recognition, representation, agency and autonomy that counter systemic issues of oppression and domination, including exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (see also Jamal, 2019). Similar to the way that some Caucasians in the American south are able to contest the modern politics and meanings of the American Civil War by staging reenactments that interpret their subjective views (Farmer, 2005), so too are the Real Bird's able to challenge dominant sociopolitical views through their event. In presenting their own version of heritage, they are able to communicate what the LBH means both historically, and in relation to contemporary issues, in what amounts to "a multilayered story of the subjugation and disenfranchisement of Indians by whites, Indian resistance and resilience, and political jockeying within the tribal sphere" (Buchholtz, 2011, p. 436). These findings support Laxson (1991), who argues also that Native American cultural experiences should challenge rather than reinforce dominant beliefs and worldviews, in this instance by challenging existing structures of oppression and domination. However, further research is needed to explore this vital aspect and corroborate the importance of cultural-heritage events such as these for facilitating justice.

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