

Thrivance is My Identity: Moving Beyond Survival

Dianne F. Baumann¹
University of Idaho, USA

Abstract: In this article I explore the significance of ancestral homelands to Blackfeet identity. Through the analysis of Blackfeet stories and our historical and on-going fight for land sovereignty I examine the entanglements of settler colonial formations and ideologies within Indigenous communities without reinforcing a problematic “plight of the Indian” logic. While the information presented here may contain some elements of pain, the focus centers on pushing beyond a theory of survivance to a theory of thrivance, emphasizing an understanding of our own Blackfeet ways-of-knowing and practices. A thrivance focus is important as it moves beyond a statement of survival to a statement of “we are here, we are productive, and we continue to thrive and contribute to today’s world.” In addition, thrivance accentuates the importance of ancestral homelands and traditional practices to healing and a positive sense of Indigenous identity and dignity. This emphasis on Blackfeet identity contributes to Native American studies, ethnic studies, and settler colonial studies; but most importantly it offers the hope of understanding through reintroducing a positive Indigenous identity, thus encouraging more balanced and harmonious communities.

Keywords: Native American, Blackfeet, thrivance, survivance, settler colonialism.

Blackfeet people utilize Old Man Napi stories to teach values, practices, and history. There are subtle variations of every story from family to family and clan to clan, but the moral and normative lessons remain the same. Referred to by social scientists as ‘myths’, our stories are as consistent in basic content as the ethnographies and histories so readily accepted throughout academia today. The settler colonial use of the word myth to describe our tribal stories is a serious misnomer and an insult to Indigenous ways of knowing. Adnyamathanha and Ngarrindjeri scholar Jacinta Koolmatrie (2020) pushes back against the myth trope arguing “...our stories are derived from the truth...They simply weren’t told to pass the time, these stories were created to help us live on this land” (para. 10). Koolmatrie is correct, as in the world of Indigenous scholarship and education it always comes back to relationship to land. In addition, stories influence how we see ourselves as Indigenous peoples individually and as a community; also important is the way in which they interrupt our inadvertent integration into the colonial narrative. Our stories connect the past to the present and future through analysis, interpretation, and moral lessons. A story may make a point, explain how the natural world came to be, or warn against behavioral vices (such as greed or pride) while entertaining and educating people in our historical, traditional, and contemporary ways (Baumann, 2019).

¹ Corresponding Author: An Assistant Professor of Anthropology and American Indian Studies at the University of Idaho 875 Perimeter Drive MS 1110, Moscow, ID 83843-1110, United States. E-Mail: dianneb@uidaho.edu

When searching for reference materials on ‘Blackfeet stories’ the most cited source is *Blackfeet Lodge Tales* (1892) by Euro-American anthropologist, historian, and naturalist George Bird Grinnell. This is problematic. In her book *Therapeutic Nations*, Tanana Athabascan scholar Dian Million (2013) suggests that “academia repeatedly produces gatekeepers to our entry into important social discourse because we seek to present our histories as affective, felt, intuited as well as thought” (p. 57). This is profound, as Blackfeet stories told by Blackfeet peoples are certainly more nuanced and consistent than those communicated to non-Blackfeet “gatekeeper” ethnographers. Most ethnographers have a responsibility to tell the story in an academically palatable manner, while tribal citizens are responsible to the community and continuing and preserving the moral values of the story. Today, with Indigenous stories more readily available in printed form created by the communities themselves, the power of the stories more effectively engages and educates using the entertainment and dark humor understood and appreciated by the tribal community.

‘Thrivance’ and ‘Plight of the Indian Logic’

In 1988 Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) reprinted *Custer Died for Your Sins – An Indian Manifesto* with a new self-authored preface. He wrote of “marvelous things” coming from the next generation of “Indian Tribes assuming [that] the present generation can successfully defend...against the continuing attacks of racists and corporate exploiters” (Deloria, 1988, p. xiii). In this way Deloria laid the groundwork for his enduring argument that to be Indigenous in the modern world is to be resilient against colonizing structures. In Indigenous speak, to be resilient is to survive and thrive. Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor (2008) imagined the theory of survivance as “clearly observable in narrative resistance and personal attributes...the character of survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihilism, and victimry” (p. 1). While survivance theory remains valuable and important to encourage Native peoples to think about and examine our own history and survival, it does little to accentuate the value and contribution of Native people today. Scholar Chadwick Allen (2011) suggests that to understand the merits of survivance as a “critical lens and analytic tool” it is necessary to “examine the possible limitation of the term and its typical deployments” (p. 123). His review supports my assertion that while survivance is invaluable, it is limited.

In 1881 non-Indigenous poet Helen Hunt Jackson (1881) alongside two missionaries published the book *A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government’s Dealings with Some of the Indian Tribes*. The book was a best seller, including the publication of three revised editions, condemning state and federal Indian policies, and calling for policy reform in the government treatment of Native Americans. Reissued in 2003 under the amended title *A Century of Dishonor: The Classic Exposé of the Plight of the Native Americans* (2003) emphasizes the colonial narrative of taking the focus from the culpability of the brutal settler agenda against the Indian peoples to a pitiful account of their survival. This ‘plight of the Indian logic’ continues to be propagated today (The Invisible Elder: The Plight of the Elder Native American, 2012; Economics of the Reservation: Origin of the Indian Plight, 1974; The Plight of Nappy-Headed Indians, 2004) in particular by non-Indigenous scholars. The continued practice of tying plight to Indian, ignores and erases accountability from everyone for creating and perpetuating settler colonialism, except the Indian. This plight of the Indian logic has to stop in order to shift the dichotomy of settler colonialism and the plight it endorses off the backs of the colonized onto the colonizer where it rightfully belongs, to open the door to a thrivance emphasis.

The concept of thrivance handily picks up where survivance leaves off: both are valuable analytical tools, yet different chapters of the ongoing story of Indigeneity. A thrivance focus is important as it moves beyond the survival statement of “we are still here” to “we remain productive, successful, and vibrant contributors in today’s world” (Baumann, 2019, p. 19) In addition, a thrivance focus accentuates the importance of healing to a positive self-identity. Just as settler-colonialism contributes to a lasting negative legacy for Indigenous peoples, the positivity of a thrivance focus resets the narrative with the constructive contributions and everyday normalcy of Indigenous excellence today, arguing against a plight of the Indian logic. While our stories and histories may contain elements of pain, a thrivance focus centers the importance of Blackfeet ways of knowing and our ancestral homelands to healing and a positive sense of identity. Our identity as Niisitapi¹ and our ongoing exercise of sovereignty to our lands and practices continues to demonstrate thrivance.

Story as a Decolonizing Methodology

In the Beginning

The following story *In the Beginning* (Apistotoke Stories: In the Beginning, n.d.) is one of our Blackfeet creation stories. It explains how life began on earth and how the Niisitapi came to be, and determined how and where they should live.

In the beginning Creator (A’pistotooki) made the Sun (Ki’sómma). Creator was lonely in this great dark hollow of space. He thought he would make some small balls of dirt to play with, and so he made the planets circle around him and the Sun. He soon chose Earth (Ksaahkomm) to be his favorite. He surrounded her with air, and Sun kept her warm so all future things would grow.

Creator made himself small so that he could play on Earth. He made a snake as his first playmate. Soon there were so many snakes they became very disrespectful. Creator then made Earth so hot that all snakes died except one female. This one female was left so that in later years there would still be snakes.

Creator noticed that Earth was bare of nice things, so he created the green grasses and flowers. And again, he thought he should create something in his image to play games with while he was on Earth. He created Moon (Ko’komiki’somma) and blew air in her nostrils and gave her life. Moon provided Creator with many children. Moon was Creator’s first wife and Earth his second wife.

Creator also made First Old Man (Náápi) to be his human helper. Old Man was given special powers to help him accomplish his deeds while roaming Earth. In those early days, Humans and Star people lived on Earth together. Soon Humans became jealous of the Star people. When Humans killed a Star child, Star people moved into the sky. The Star people convinced Creator to flood Earth to kill off Humans. Creator made the

rains for many, many days and nights. Star people watched from above as waters filled Earth. Finally, Old Man and a few animals were stranded on Chief Mountain (Ninaistako). Here Old Man made the rainbow, Napi's Rope (Náápiwa otokáa'tsis) and roped the clouds to make it stop raining. Old Man asked the animals to dive down into the water and retrieve some mud. The first animal to try was the duck. He failed. Many other animals tried but failed. Last to try was the muskrat. He was gone for a long time but finally surfaced with a fistful of mud. That is why muskrats have paws like Humans today. Old Man used the mud to make the water recede. Then Old Man traveled about the plains piling up rocks to make the Backbone of the World, including Badger-Two Medicine, and gouged out beds of rivers and lakes and filled them with water. He covered the plains with grass. He made new animals and the birds. And then, from a lump of clay, he made himself a wife.

Together Old Man and Old Woman designed the Blackfeet People (Niitsitapi) and determined how and where they should live.

In his book *Red Earth, White Lies* Deloria (1995) challenges the colonizing structure of Christianity:

Flood stories are almost always linked with the concerns of fundamentalist Christians, who believe that Indian accounts of a great flood will provide additional proof of the accuracy of the Old Testament. With their cultural blinders in place, it never occurs to them that the Old Testament may very well provide evidence of the basic accuracy of the Indian story. (p. 9)

While similar to the Christian creation story *In the Beginning* does not place limit on the peoples but emphasizes our connection and responsibility to the world. This is relevant as religious indoctrination was a tool of colonization and continues to support the hegemonic constructs of patriarchy and settler-colonialism today. With this statement I contend that in pushing back against the colonizing structure of Christianity, Deloria demonstrates a move beyond resilience or survivance to a more accurate theory of thriving.

Much like our existence our stories are intimate, and not without conflict, struggle, shame, and joy. Some of these stories remain for tribal members ears only. This reminds me to appreciate the importance and sacredness of each story and to only share stories that are appropriate to a general audience, thus exercising my inherent right to my own ethnographic refusal. Cherokee novelist Thomas King (2003) warned "to be careful with the stories you tell...[for] once a story is told, it cannot be called back" (p. 10). Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) considers stories an important aspect of Indigenous research. For myself, drawing from Blackfeet literature and the continuing struggle to remain shepherds of our own land is core to understanding my own research and identity.

In the Beginning is a platform of understanding to move beyond creation stories to examining contemporary Blackfeet identity from a 'Delorian' framework as the sovereign inhabitants of our lands and territories. Blackfeet connections *to* the land, and advocacy *for* the land, demonstrates who we are as Blackfeet citizens. Our first relative is earth from which all other

relationships stem. Our tribal thrivance is demonstrated by the way in which we cultivate and protect this relationship against the historic and continued threat of colonialism.

A History of Thrivance and Resistance

Land of Identity

The Blackfeet Nation is the tenth largest Indian nation in the United States, with over seventeen-thousand enrolled tribal members and ten-thousand registered descendants.² Prior to colonization of the northern plains in the mid-19th century, the Blackfeet lived semi-nomadically in a broad area west by the Rocky Mountains, north by the Saskatchewan river, south by the Missouri river, and east by the Milk river, in what is now the state of Montana and Southern Canada (Ewers, 1958). Governmental recognition of Blackfeet lands, under the *Fort Benton Council of 1853* and the *Lame Bull Treaty of 1855* (Kipp, n.d.) established territorial boundaries covering 4/5th of the northern half of the Montana Territory.

Following the goldrush of 1862, which brought an influx of fifteen-thousand miners and settlers, Blackfeet leaders agreed to sell two-thousand square miles of the land south of the Missouri river to the government for one-million dollars. The treaty was never ratified, but under President Grant's *Executive Order of 1873* the land was seized without payment, and a group reservation was established for the Blackfeet, Blood, Gros Ventres, Piegan, and River Crow. The new *Great Northern Reservation*, defined by an act of congress in 1874, was composed entirely of the territory originally designated for the Blackfeet under the *Treaty of 1855*, minus 200 miles of the southern border which the government had seized previously without compensation. Legally, the Blackfeet ceded no land, yet thousands of settlers established government subsidized homesteads, ranches, and farms on Blackfeet territory. In mid-winter of 1887, land cession hearings led to an act of congress demanding a split of the 'Great Northern Reservation' into three individual reservations, with one being the "new" reservation of the Blackfeet Nation. All three reservations were located on previously (*Treaty of 1855*) designated Blackfeet land. The Blackfeet were not included in this *negotiation* and were compensated with \$1.25 million for seventeen-million acres they did not wish to relinquish.

Everything comes back to land. "Land is life," argues Patrick Wolfe (2006), "or, at least, land is necessary for life" (p. 387). This theory is supported by the differentiation between settler and Indigenous approaches to land. Settler government promises, including treaty responsibilities (such as education and/or healthcare), have been used in attempt to eliminate the Native body, promote white/settler superiority, and position land possession as uncharacteristic and unreachable for Native peoples. Superintendent of the infamous 'Carlisle Indian Industrial School' Richard Henry Pratt reiterated an 1892 statement from former Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas Jefferson Morgan (1892):

A wild Indian requires a thousand acres to roam over, while an intelligent man will find a comfortable support for his family on a very small tract ... Barbarism is costly, wasteful and extravagant. Intelligence promotes thrift and increases prosperity. (pp. 1-14)

² On August 30, 1962, the Blackfeet tribal council amended the constitution from lineal descent to a blood quantum-based enrollment policy. Anyone born after that date must prove one-quarter or more "blood quantum" to enroll as a full voting citizen. Those who prove lineage but are under the one-quarter blood quantum are registered as descendants. This abrupt change has culminated in immediate families having split status and tribal rights.

This expression of essentialist philosophy, in which an emissary of the United States pontificates his agenda of land use as universal and non-binary is characteristic of the settler-colonial move to eliminate the Native (Wolfe, 2006) through erasure of Native agency. In contrast to Pratt, Vine Deloria, Jr. (1973) differentiated between Western and Indigenous understandings of land:

When the domestic ideology is divided according to American Indian and Western European immigrant, however, the fundamental difference is one of great philosophical importance. American Indians hold their lands – places – as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind. (p. 61)

Mishuana Goeman (2008) of the Tonawanda Band of Seneca supports Deloria's argument by relating land to such terms as sovereignty, belonging, rights and responsibility, indicating that Indigenous epistemologies are intimately linked to land bases. I suggest that in addition to both Deloria and Goeman's elucidation as to the importance of a land base, the Blackfeet Nation's historical and ongoing battle to protect and access our homelands is proof of our spirit of thrivance.

The Backbone of the World

The Blackfeet relationship with the land centers within the mountains on the east side of Glacier National Park, which we refer to as the 'Backbone of the World' (Craig et al., 2012). Pieces of the 'Backbone' were sold, not for profit in the entrepreneurial sense, but out of a frantic attempt to avoid starvation on reservation lands. Following the *Lame Bull Treaty of 1855*, the combination of disease, military skirmishes, decimated buffalo herds, and crooked Indian agents, one-quarter of the Blackfeet people died. Now referred to as the 'starvation winter of 1883-84' over six-hundred Blackfeet men, women, and children starved to death, leaving behind a meager band of approximately one-thousand-eight-hundred people. Out of desperation and with little choice, the people sold (many Blackfeet believe it was leased, not sold) pieces of their remaining land to the government, culminating in the 1895 sale of the eastern half of the reservation in exchange for life-sustaining supplies. While desperate to survive, the Blackfeet were careful to ensure that their land rights to what is now 'Glacier National Park' remained intact, as the land was considered sacred and sovereign and should not be subjected to allotment. This agreement, as noted in *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties* (Kappler, 1904) demands the following:

...the right to go upon any portion of the lands hereby conveyed so long as the same shall remain public lands of the U.S., and to cut and remove therefrom wood and timber for agency and school purposes, and for their personal uses... And provided further, that upon said lands and to fish in the streams thereof so long as the same shall remain public lands of the U.S. under and in accordance with the provisions of the game and fish laws of the State of Montana. (p. 606)

This language was vital to the agreement for the Blackfeet people as the *Backbone of the World* was and is considered a fundamental symbol of Blackfeet identity (Craig et al., 2012). The Backbone is the home of Old Man Napi whom formed the mountains of Montana and the Niisitapi

themselves. As our stories teach, it is here that he taught the people how to hunt, gather plants, and collect the ‘Beaver Medicine Bundle’³ from Ninaistakis (Chief Mountain).

The loss of buffalo in the late 19th century increased Blackfoot reliance on the mountains with its wealth of elk and deer. In 1910 the land specified as public land per the 1895 agreement was designated by the federal government as a National Park, thus removing public status. For several years park officials ignored the Blackfoot peoples continued use of park resources, even including pictures of them in park advertisements. Eventually the park management, in an effort to retain [the parks] its original wilderness condition began programs of predator reduction to increase nonpredatory wildlife. Predator reduction manifested as policing of poachers, including peoples of the Blackfoot Nation in direct violation of the 1895 agreement.

In 1912 Blackfoot lands were opened for allotment despite the promises of 1895 and without the tribes’ consent, resulting in nearly one-half of the remaining reservation (eight-hundred-thousand acres) opening to settlers. At the same time, hunting and fishing disputes escalated between park officials and the Blackfoot peoples; coming to a head when the Secretary of the Interior, Franklin K. Lane issued an edict to the Indian agent that the Blackfoot lost their rights to land use upon its designation as a national park. The Blackfoot people refused to recognize the edict and continued to gather plants and herbs for food and medicinal purposes, hunted game (beaver, deer, elk, and moose), continuing to use the resources of their traditional land for food and ceremonial purposes as they understood to be their treaty rights. In 1924 the Blackfoot Nation petitioned Senator Walsh of Montana to introduce legislation guaranteeing Blackfoot rights to continued park use as specified in the 1895 *Agreement*. Petition author Peter Oscar Little Chief (Spence, 1996) used the government’s own word games stating:

...[according to the Blackfeet, the tribe had] sold the United States Government nothing but rocks only. We still control timber, grass, water, and all big game or small game or all the animals living in this mountains. The [agreement of 1895] reads that as long as the mountains stand we got right to hunt and fishing. And provided further that the said Indians hereby reserve and retain the right to hunt upon the said lands... (p. 40)

The petition was ignored by the senator, but Little Chief presented it again in 1926. Receiving no response, Little Chief repeated for the third time in 1928. Upon this third submission the petition was forwarded to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. The commissioner responded with: “[the] Blackfeet have the same rights to hunt in Glacier National Park as non-Indians – which is to say, no right at all” (Spence, 1996, p. 41). This statement is noteworthy as it fails to consider the inherent treaty rights and privileges denied the Blackfoot people by equating them with non-Indians. In 1932 a US District Court agreed with the park service and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs stating “the Blackfeet had failed to establish the extent to which they used the reserved privileges from 1895 to 1910 [thus forfeiting all rights to use]” (Ashby, 1985, p. 50). I argue that the Blackfoot peoples not only established the extent of which they continued to maintain use of the territory, but that there was no point in which they did not maintain use. It always goes back to

³ “The largest, oldest, most complex bundle of its type in North America, containing over, 600 songs and dances representing each animal person being in our [Blackfeet] territory. This was also a drumless bundle, in ceremony, rattles were tapped on the rawhide side of animal skins. The beaver (k)sist’uki, was one of the three original animals in Creation, and is considered the most sacred because of his role in the orchestration and allocation of water.” – Jack McNeel (April 6, 2017 – Indian Country Today)

the land, and the Blackfeet stories of creation centering around the *Backbone of the World* demonstrate for time immemorial that the Niitsitapi and Ninaistako are one.

In 1932 four Blackfeet men were arrested for hunting inside the park boundaries. The men, unable to find attorneys to represent them, pled guilty and were fined one-hundred-fifty dollars. Park Superintendent Scoyen (1933) stated [that] “these arrests and convictions can only be interpreted as meaning that we have authority to keep Indians from hunting in the park” (p. 6). The Blackfeet appealed to the District Court of Appeals, which reached a decision in 1935 siding with the Park Service. Tensions between the Park Service and the Blackfeet Nation continued into 1973, when following 40 years of uneasy truce (in which the Blackfeet were without legal recourse) tribal member Woodrow ‘Woody’ Kipp is cited by a ranger for entering the park and refusing to pay the entrance fee. Kipp’s case went before the federal district court, with the judge affirming that Blackfeet tribal members *did not* have to pay an entrance fee. However, the judge also reaffirmed the earlier decision that Blackfeet still had no legal right to hunt within the boundaries of Glacier National Park. Later that same year Darrell Momberg, another tribal member and descendent of one of the four men arrested for hunting in the park in 1932, was cited for cutting timber in the park (Rodriquez, 2009). The same judge that sided with Kipp earlier in the year found Momberg guilty based on testimony that the timber was being cut for commercial, not personal use. The Blackfeet people seemed destined to take one step forward and two steps backward in the battle for recognition as rightful recipients of the glacier bounty. But still we persisted.

In 1992, Blackfeet tribal member Ed DeRosier opened *Sun Tours* (a Blackfeet Tribal Chartered Business) proclaiming Sun Tours as “[a] vision of success and sharing knowledge...[and to] educate and inspire all to a higher respect, appreciation, and understanding of the Blackfeet world.”⁴ DeRosier’s tours emphasized Glacier National Park’s historical reputation as a region of sustenance and ongoing spiritual importance for the Blackfeet Nation. By accentuating the Blackfeet peoples historical and contemporary connection to park land DeRosier cunningly used *Sun Tours* to push back against previous court rulings.

The early conflict between the Blackfeet and park officials are characteristic of each entity. Park officials, under the umbrella of the ‘Department of Interior’ (DOI) pushed the assimilation or elimination of their ‘Indian problem’, which aligned perfectly with the governments Indian school purpose of self-sufficiency through civilization (Adams, 1995). The Blackfeet Nation demonstrated and continues to demonstrate sovereignty by remaining consistent in their quest to utilize traditional activities and in continuing to hunt and gather the bounty of the park, as the original and sovereign inhabitants of the land. Federal use and ownership of ceded and un-ceded Indian lands like Glacier National Park exemplify the political history of the United States’ dispossession and animosity toward its Indigenous peoples. The Blackfeet peoples struggle with the parks service is political and sovereign, as the very act of continuing the struggle represents the sustained thrivance of a nation unwilling to disengage in practices that confirm their cultural identity.

⁴ “Ed [DeRosier] approached the Glacier National Park to explore the inclusion of the Native History and Cultural aspects of the Blackfeet Ancestral Home Land. At that time, the Park’s existing interpretation of Blackfeet Tribal Cultural History was vacant/minimal. As a life-time resident of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, Ed envisioned Blackfeet Guides possessing extensive knowledge and all -encompassing history and experience of the landscape of Glacier National Park’s inhabited areas: park history, animal species, common plants and roots used for nutrition and medicine; and the spiritual and philosophical perspectives/stories of the Blackfeet people.” – <http://glaciersuntours.com>

Badger-Two Medicine

In the early 1990's, *Badger-Two Medicine* in the *Lewis and Clark National Forest* (a section of the land ceded in 1895) was under consideration for development by several oil companies. The 130,000-acre Badger-Two Medicine is significant for its on-going spiritual, hunting and gathering use by the Blackfeet Nation. The Badger is also the headwaters of two drainages that supply water to the reservation and beyond the northern plains. The forest service quietly sold several dozen leases to oil companies in 1982, but it wasn't until Chevron© began trucking in drilling equipment in 1993 that anyone on the reservation became aware of the impending threat to Blackfeet sacred ground. Tribal member Floyd Heavy Runner, distrustful of the federal court system, contacted the media, the United Nations, and the oil companies declaring, "What you're doing is putting us on the road to extinction. We are here to notify you that we have no alternatives. We are not going to stand back" (Peacock, 2011; para. 9). Heavy Runner campaigned against the proposed drilling to anyone willing to listen, explaining the sacred nature of the tribes' relationship to Badger-Two Medicine. He was soon joined by other Blackfeet, including Woody Kipp (now a Blackfeet Community College professor) who opined (Peacock, 2011):

[T]hose places are sacred places, and there's usually a story that goes with it. So, our stories, legends, and mythology go with the landscape. And trying to convey that to mainstream people is just...just almost impossible, because the concepts are not there. Our language says something different about the landscape than English. English is a great language for commerce, for recreation, for sex, whatever. But it is not a sacred language, as our language is. (para. 12)

The Blackfeet community, led by Heavy Runner and Kipp joined forces with white environmentalists to stop the drilling. The *Glacier-Two Medicine Alliance*⁵ was formed, and the fight began in earnest; lawsuits were filed, and neighboring communities were drafted to join. Their tactics worked. In 1993 the Secretary of Interior called a temporary halt pending completion of a cultural survey. In 1997 the Forest Service issued a 10-year moratorium banning any new leases in the Lewis and Clark Forest. During the moratorium, the forest service worked with the Glacier Two-Medicine Alliance, resulting in two-thirds of the region, including Badger Two-Medicine being federally classified as a 'Traditional Cultural District', throwing all leases into perpetual limbo. As of 2016 all drilling leases have expired, and no new leases may be issued. For now, our land is safe from oil drilling.

Conclusion

Today, the reservation of the Blackfeet Nation is much like other poor communities throughout North America. Sociologist Barbara Chasin (2004) compares reservations and inner-city ghettos as sharing a number of characteristics including low employment, high poverty, and

⁵ "The Glacier-Two Medicine Alliance (GTMA) is a local grassroots organization, based in East Glacier Park, MT, and surrounded by the glorious Badger-Two Medicine area, Glacier National Park, and the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. We organized as a community of Blackfeet and non-Natives to protect the cultural and ecological integrity of the Badger-Two Medicine in 1984. We will continue to fight for this landscape, until we realize the implementation of a permanent protection plan." – <https://www.glaciertwomedicine.org>

inadequate social services, supporting Vine Deloria's (1988) statement [that] "the truth is that practically the only thing the white men ever gave the Indian was disease and poverty... To imply that Indians were given land is to completely reverse the facts of history" (p. 35). This is fueled by the settler colonial fallacy that the only Indian land remaining in the United States are reservations. Reservation land was not given to the Blackfeet (nor other tribal nations), nor was much of the land taken by settlers or set aside for the government given away by us. Mishuana Goeman (2015) supports and expands on this, pointing out that all land in the Americas is Indian land. The Blackfeet people displayed an early and innate understanding of these principles by fighting for the past 120 years to retain their land relationship to Glacier National Park and Badger Two-Medicine as the bodily and spiritual sustenance and identity of our entire community.

All things considered it would be easy to believe the Blackfeet Nation is an incongruous community, yet each time it is necessary we stand together in resilience and fight for our sovereign rights to the land we have inhabited for time immemorial. Our ability to come together as an empowered community and demand our rights as the sovereign inhabitants of our lands and territories carries the Blackfeet Nation forward. To thrive in the world and ensure the survival of our grandchildren, the Blackfeet Nation must continue to protect the lands and the stories that identify us as Niitsitapi, thus exercising sovereignty and demonstrating thrivance through the preservation of our Blackfeet identity.

Our creation stories document our history, practices, legends, and rituals with a rich panoramic view. Passed on from generation to generation they not only relate our history, but also serve the purpose of teaching, guiding, and establishing our place as Niitsitapi today. White Earth Anishinaabe scholar Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark (2013) wrote that "stories shape how we see and interact with the world" and "Indigenous stories outline relationships – the relationships we have to one another, and the relationship we have to self" (p. 259). I share our Creation story to make observations about Blackfeet people's pre-colonization and contemporary. I try to do this without muddying the point of the stories. Our stories lay the groundwork of demonstratable thrivance by revealing Blackfeet ways of knowing that continue to flourish in the contemporary world and to upset the idea that colonialism is our history. Our creation stories demonstrate through narrative why, where, and how Blackfeet are expected to live and behave. The significance of our stories is the development of a compassionate and generous nature, leading to a fundamental understanding of the human-human, human-animal, and human-earth relationships that comprise our identity. Identity is more important to relationship than possession, and that identity thrives through and on connection to our homelands.

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Notes on Contributor

Dianne Baumann is an assistant professor of Anthropology and American Indian studies at the University of Idaho. Born and raised in the state of Washington, her closest familial ties and connections are in Montana, particularly on the reservation of the Blackfeet Nation, of which she is a registered descendent. Her research investigates how ongoing settler colonialism impacts the lives, relationships and masculine identities of American Indian men, and what values and practices invite push-back against current settler colonial power dynamics.

ORCID

Dianne Baumann, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4347-5164>