Episode 1 - Silent X

Scene 1.1 Meet Chris

QUOTE:
"If you do not know history, it is as if you were born yesterday." - Howard Zinn

Why does history matter?

Howard Zinn was an American historian and social activist. He wrote the influential *A People's History of the United States* which told the history of the USA not from the famous leaders, but from the people on the ground who pushed for change including the indigenous of North America.

Inquiry Questions:
- What is Howard Zinn implying if history is not understood?
- Why would history be important in understanding our identities?

CHRIS HSIUNG:
When I took history in school, I use to think it was an exercise in memorizing one damned date after another. But I've come to see that history can sometimes tell us how life came to be, and that all of a sudden, what seems routine or a normal becomes abnormal. And other times history will tell us what hasn't changed... that we are the same as we have always been making the same mistakes, and dreaming the same dreams.

I've pretty much grown up here all my life. I studied here, worked here, played here, got married here. I'm a Chinese-Canadian. My parents immigrated from Taiwan. Their parents before that left from China. And as my dad likes to remind me all the time, I am the 23rd generation of the Hsiung family.

"…an elder is more than just an old person. It implies wisdom. Knowledge perhaps. But what does that look like? And what is the role of an elder in a society?"

- Chris Hsiung

But that's just one part of my history. The other part is the story of where I grew up. And I realized, I didn't know a lot about the place I've benefitted so much from. So I started reading about it, looking into it. There's a lot I didn't know.

So when I met a six foot tall Blackfoot Indian named Cowboy Smithx, the normal became the abnormal, and the reality was that he just didn't fit into my pre-existing prejudices.

COWBOY SMITHX:
My modern legal name is Cowboy Smithx. Yes, I'm aware of the irony.

CHRIS HSIUNG:
I watched him perform in a theatre project called Making Treaty 7. It was a play bringing together native and non-native performers.

As I got to know him, what really surprised me most was our similarities. His experience growing up seemed very a lot like my experience as a first generation Canadian... we both had to negotiate two cultures, learn or try to learn two languages, and we were both disconnected from our heritage.

But there was one big difference and that he was a foreigner in his own home. On his twitter profile, he calls himself an "elder in the making". That sparked my imagination. Intuitively I know an elder is more than just an old person. It implies wisdom. Knowledge perhaps. But what does that look like? And what is the role of an elder in a society?

Well I think I'm about to find out because Cowboy has agreed to come with me on a roadtrip to learn about our shared history in Southern Alberta especially the indigenous one...

So there you have it. A couple wannabe elders going on a roadtrip. I don't even really know Cowboy all that well, so I don't know what to expect. But I'm sure it will be a fun trip.

I'm leaving the city to meet up with Cowboy at his grandfather's ranch. This will be my first time visiting Piikani reserve. Piikani is just one of five Indian Reserves on Treaty 7 territory. There's Tsuu T'ina, Nakoda Stoney, Siksika, and Kaini. Those are the four other reserves.

An Immigrant in His Own Home

"Growing up as a son of immigrant parents is an experience shared by many first generation Canadians. On one hand, I felt caught between two cultural identities: my Chinese heritage and the modern Canadian context. However, in the struggle to understand who I was, I also learned that it is a gift to be able to navigate multiple cultures. What I've realized as a "cultural navigator" is that every culture has great qualities to be learned from and detrimental qualities to be avoided. Trying to figure out the difference is a lifelong journey!"
- **Chris Hsiung**

Inquiry Questions:
- Cowboy is described as a foreigner in his own home. What might that be like for him?
- We are all to some extent "cultural navigators" even if we don't know it. What has shaped your identity? How do you know if what you have learned has been helpful?

Scene 1.2 Meet Cowboy

CHRIS: Cowboy Smithx
COWBOY: Good to see you. I'm glad you made it.
CHRIS: Yeah, well I'm so happy to be here on your land.
COWBOY: I've heard that before. The cows are happy to see you. They've been chanting for your arrival all night and now the storm is passing. Perfect timing Chris.

COWBOY:
For me as an indigenous person, a storyteller, a filmmaker, to have that name, "Cowboy," that's an infamy right away for most people. "What's your name?" "My name is Cowboy." I'm in. People want to know more. They're not shutting me out. And that's when I get to tell them about the history of our people. That's when I get my foot in the door and I just rush in and, and feed them what knowledge I have access to.

CHRIS (Narrator):
Like everyone, I asked Cowboy why he spelt his last name with a silent "x". He had 21 reasons for changing his family name, but his inspiration came from a famous activist.

MALCOLM X Video Clip
Interviewer: What is your real name?

Malcolm X: Malcolm, Malcolm X

Interviewer: Is that your legal name?

Malcolm X: As far as I'm concerned it's my legal name. The last name of my forefathers was taken from them when they were brought to America and made slaves. And then, the name of the slavemaster was given which we refuse, we reject that name today.

Interviewer: You mean you won't even tell me what your father's supposed last name was or gifted last name was.

Malcolm X: I never acknowledge it whatsoever.

COWBOY:
X represents yeah, the unknown name that he never had access to because of colonization of Africa and eventually slavery of black people.

Malcolm X

Cowboy watched many movies in his youth. One fateful day, he rented a VHS tape from the local video store in Fort Macleod. It was titled Malcolm X starring Denzel Washington.

Inquiry Questions:
- Why would Cowboy be moved by Malcolm X's story?
- What connections would you draw between the history of black slavery and the indigenous history in North America?

And that had a big impact on me, and I started questioning my last name, Smith. I'm like where the hell does this name come from? Like this is not a Blackfoot name. What the hell is going on?

It took me years to get it legalized cause my descriptions were a little too pedantic for the bureaucrats. And eventually after a few rejections of my name change I just wrote on the description. "Reason for name change"… "for artistic reasons". And I got it approved. So now it's legal. I have the X in Smith now.

"…a lot of young indigenous people didn't have access to their cultures because they were illegal. It was illegal to go to a sundance or have a powwow, or practice their language."

- Cowboy Smithx

CHRIS (Narrator):
This was my first rodeo. I've never even been to the Calgary Stampede. So it was strange to me, if you'll pardon the expression, seeing Indians being cowboys.

CHRIS:
My first experience with Indians is Dances with Wolves to be honest. I'm sorry to say.

COWBOY:
Well many other people. There's many more people like that. What you're speaking to is the stereotype which was birthed out of the Hollywood system which started around the John Ford era. Stage Coach, films like this that eventually led to inspire John Wayne movies and all these crazy western movies where all these indians were these savage renegades, they're going to steal all the white women.

What people don't understand is that a lot of young indigenous people didn't have access to their cultures because they were illegal. It was illegal to go to a sundance or have a powwow, or practice their language. It was illegal in a lot of cases.

So one thing that all the settlers were doing were having these rodeos and that was a social event that was acceptable to the settler culture, to the oppressive culture. What ended up happening to a lot of people on reserves is that they became cowboys and cowgirls because this is something they could do publicly in a social setting.

And the very first.. here's some trivia for you, the very first champion of the Calgary Stampede, I believe was in the bareback bronc riding, was a Blackfoot man named Tom Three Persons. So Tom Three Persons won a champion as an Indian Cowboy before any of these Johns ever showed up, speaking of John Wayne, John Ford, Roy Cooper, all these guys.

COWBOY:
You want to know about my career as a bullrider, cowboy. It was short and sweet as the skateboard kids would say. I was a calf-roper, team roper, and of course I was in these chutes as a bull rider. I don't know what I was thinking doing this. I wasn't a great champion. I would come out and get my head smashed in, not like the buffalo jump. I took on the toughest rough stock event which is bull riding. Yeah I almost got killed riding. It was a bad career choice for sure. I'm glad I got out of it.

Stereotypes

A stereotype is a widely held but oversimplified idea of a person or thing. Often these oversimplifications are used to make quick judgments without investing any time in understanding. Combined with our tendency to confirm what we already believe, stereotypes become difficult to dislodge.

Inquiry Questions:

- Why do we create stereotypes?
- How are they created? What sources of learning do we draw from to form these stereotypes?
- Why are stereotypes constraining?
- What kind of inquiry or experience would be required to overcome stereotypes?
- How does an accurate understanding of history contribute to breaking down stereotypes?

COWBOY:
Oki, so I'm here with [speaking Blackfoot]. That's the Blackfoot word, his Blackfoot name translates to Handsome Devil. This is my grandfather Floyd Smith of the Piikani tribe.

FLOYD SMITH:
Well, I'll tell you something. Some of the craziest nuts that I grew up with suddenly become holy men and are Elders now. There's so many people that have commercialized being an Elder. Suddenly they say I needed a few dollars or nobody would be believe me if I told 'em I can cure you from this sickness. So I need some money.

That's what everybody seems to be doing now when they. But there a lot of Elders around that are respected, and they don't go that route. They just be examples of the community. Well there's quite a few of them around. They don't advertise being Elders, but they do the job.

COWBOY:
One of the most important things for me is being an Elder of value and a person of value in the community, and not just somebody who's posing as a charlatan or a snake oil salesman who's pretending to heal people 'cause that's one of the things that's happened in the romanticized era of the indigenous shaman right?

COWBOY:
Don't give up so easily. There you go. There you go… there's. Who was that? Who farted?

CHRIS (Narrator):
Okay, so I'm a city slicker. Look, I come from generations of city dwellers who have adapted to the urban jungle. For the Blackfoot, the rodeo was one adaptation to a foreign culture imposing its will. The pow-wow was yet another kind of adaptation.

Scene 1.3 Powwow

Traditional vs. Modern

With the rapid pace of change, one generation will find itself in a radically different context that the generation before it. The tension between traditional and modern-day culture is common human experience. How have you handled the clash between traditional and modern practices? What traditions should be kept? What traditions should be left behind?

CHRIS (Narrator):
This was immediately recognizable as a part of First Nations culture. It was a festival, a feast, a competition, and a social gathering all in one.

CHRIS (Narrator):
Some considered contemporary pow-wow to be too commercial pulling away from tradition because dancers were paid... But for Lacy Morins-Desjarlais, competing in the pow-wow was a chance to reconnect with her culture in a healthy way.

LACY MORIN-DESJARLAIS:
During the time they banned ceremonies across Canada, they banned First Nations people from having potlucks or powwows or doing sundances or any ceremony like that.

So people were stopping practicing their traditions and singing or dancing or doing Sundance. Because they were scared, they were scared they would be put into jail or fined. To resist that there were communities, pow-wows and they paid the dancers.

CHRIS (Narrator):
For Lacy, it was about encouraging participation in First Nations culture. Indigenous dancers, elders, and people from all across the continent gather here to share their teachings, language, and stories.

LACY:
The type of elder I strive to be is exactly the type of elder my grandmother was to me. She was a matriarch for our family. She taught me a lot of the old ways of living with the land and…

Not being wasteful and working really hard every single day and appreciating the beauty that is just around you.

COWBOY:
I did not grow up around powwow. Our family did not go to powwows. We went to the rodeos right? It was always a distant thing. We'd come in have an Indian taco. We'd check things out, but we were never connected with the community right?

Interview an Elder

Listening to Lacy, Cowboy, and Floyd offer their thoughts on what an elder is, it is clear that an elder is not just an old person, but a person of value that contributes to society.

Consider an Elder in your life who has impacted you. How have they impacted you? Interview this person. How did they develop their life experience? What lessons can you take from it?

An interesting thing is that there are a lot of German people who powwow and they're really good dancers. They come all the way from Berlin and Frankfurt, they come here to these powwows and they participate. And they're welcome. And they're good. I've seen some really good German powwow dancers.

And that's the beautiful thing, it's an intertribal exchange. You don't have to be indigenous. You don't have to be Blackfoot.

CHRIS:
That would be something to look forward to if in schools, we didn't just learn the line dance, you learned powwow.

COWBOY:
Line dance is okay. I always thought it sucked. It's okay. I don't want to diss line dance. But yeah, comparatively, these powwow dances are much more powerful and much more significant to this territory.

Scene 1.4 Golf

CHRIS (Narrator):
For Cowboy however, he was more at home with a different kind of Blackfoot tradition. Golf. Perhaps my stereotypes are getting in the way, but I've always thought of golf as an elite sport brought over by the Scots. Why would Blackfoot people play a sport of the colonizers?

BLACKFOOT GOLFER:
Anger Management. You get to hit a white ball without getting charged.

COWBOY:
My grandpa woke me up. I was like 12 years old. He wanted me to jump in with them. It was like Saturday morning. I wasn't intending on getting up until noon. He dragged me to a men's golf tournament and threw me in with the wolves. I went 20 straight balls. I was missing. And topping, chunking. It was terrible. Then I made one connection. One connection that flew about 200 yards and that's when I got hooked.

COWBOY:
You got a bunch of indigenous people, Blackfoot people who weren't allowed to be in a public space, restaurants, stores, bars specifically. They weren't allowed to go into bars. But on Sundays, the Mormons aren't allowed to do very much other than go to church…. or is it Saturdays… one of the weekend days. And of course Sundays is when the rest of the churches do their masses.

The Past Casts a Long Shadow

People are naturally drawn to what is immediately happening in front of us. The news often presents attention-grabbing stories on a current crisis or an unfolding situation. However, the current cannot be understood unless we understand how it came to be.

Inquiry Questions:

- Many TV shows use the tactic of revealing something about the past to cast light on the present. Can you come up with with an example that illustrates why understanding what has happened changes the understanding of the present?
- How might understanding Canada's history both good and bad contribute to our understanding of ourselves as Canadians?

So from a business standpoint, golf courses couldn't just shutdown shop. A lot of courses allowed native people to enter their course just for financial reasons. I don't think there was any kind of benevolence there.

CHRIS NARRATION:
Here were stories I associated more with slavery in the United States or segregation in South Africa than with peace-loving Canada. It would seem that the past casts a long shadow. The pow-wow, rodeo and golf were all manifestations of a deeper history, one I had to go further back to understand.

Resource List

Making Treaty 7 Cultural Society
makingtreaty7.com
The theatrical performance that brings together native and non-native actors, writers, musicians, and playwrights is a performance worth watching.

Bad Medicine
by John Reilly
Bad Medicine is an insider's look at the failure of the justice system in its dealings with Aboriginal lawbreakers. Judge John Reilly spares no one including himself, in his belief that a different and non-racist approach would serve First Nations more effectively.

Episode 2 - Westward Trek

CHRIS (Narration):
Cowboy (soften) and I were headed to a place where he grew up. It's a historical place representing a key moment between the Blackfoot and the British.

We were going back in time. Before the Blackfoot, Stoney and Sarcee were put on reserves, before the seventh treaty of eleven treaties was signed between the Crown and the First Nations. Back before the settling of Alberta.

The year is 1874. Less than hundred and fifty years ago, there were no cars, no paved roads. Calgary did not exist. This was Blackfoot territory. And even though they had little contact with the Europeans, guns, horses, and steel had already radically transformed their lives.

HBC
The Hudson Bay Company had a significant historical trading relationship with the First Nations across Canada. There was a relatively equal partnership based on economics. The company depended on indigenous hunters in the prairies to procure fur for sale. In exchange, vaccines were distributed to protect their producers while missionaries were permitted in to provide a kind of cheap social services. The story of HBC is an important one but gets little treatment in this film.

To the South of the 49th parallel, the Americans had already annexed the southern part of their territory as part of the Lame Bull Treaty and were threatening to move further north.

Meanwhile the Cree and other Plains Nations were encroaching on Blackfoot land... seeking dwindling numbers of buffalo.

"As would happen time and time again in the early exploration of Canada, they would need a guide to find their way. Jerry Potts, part Blackfoot and part Scottish, would take the NWMP into the heart of Blackfoot Territory."

To the East, the Dominion of Canada was consolidating its territories having purchased Rupert's Land from the Hudson Bay Company… this was the largest real estate transaction ever made in Canada's history. Now it was called the North West Territories.

Making matters worse, the fur and bison economy was dying rapidly, while American whiskey traders did well selling to the plains tribes many of who were dying from starvation, disease and alcohol-induced violence.

In the meantime, the transcontinental railway, was being built to unite the country. Wherever the tracks went, life surrounding it transformed. But to link the nation from coast to coast, they had to build through Blackfoot Territory where Permission had not yet been secured.

And so the North West Mounted Police were sent Westward to secure the territory and pave the way for Canada. With promises of glory, wages and 160 acres of land, they gathered to leave from Fort Dufferin.

Leading the men was James Farqueson MacLeod, born on the Isle of Skye in Scotland, assistant commissioner of the North-West Mounted Police. He was a competent leader, one that the men came to trust.

The journalist Henri Julien travelled with them documenting their westward trek. Three Hundred NWMP began a gruelling 94 day trip across an unfamiliar terrain under a blistering sun, harassed by mosquitos and ants, and threatened by a lack of food and water. Horses died by the dozens. And a flawed map would lead them to the wrong fort.

Frontier Travels
Today, a Canadian can travel from coast to coast in the time it takes to watch a few movies. Imagine what would have been required to trek across Canada on horseback? What skills and qualities would it have taken to survive the trip?

However they were sustained by their beliefs and their frontier abilities, they also got help along the way as they made their way across the prairies.

As would happen time and time again in the early exploration of Canada, they would need a guide to find their way. Jerry Potts, part Blackfoot / part Scottish, would take the NWMP into the heart of Blackfoot Territory.

MacLeod asked the Blackfoot permission to winter in the area. The Blackfoot War Chiefs granted him one winter. It was marked in the wintercount as "when the police came".

Their camp was called Fort MacLeod. The first outpost of the Dominion of Canada on Blackfoot territory. And they have been here ever since.

COWBOY:
Yeah, so this is Main Street, the most exciting part of Fort Macleod I guess. It’s actually way more busy here than I thought. And this is obviously my hometown, me and Joni Mitchell. We were born in the same box, the same shack, on the back part there the other side of town.

CHRIS (Narration)
Fort MacLeod is a place frozen in time... the town proudly remembers the North West Mounted Police who were to become the great Canadian icon of the Mounties.

We were meeting with Kris Demeanor, poet, musician, and writer is playing the role of Colonel James MacLeod in the Making Treaty 7 theatre production. He was spending time in Fort MacLeod researching his character and the process of colonization that transformed the region.

KRIS D.
The place is still called Fort Macleod. It’s still based on the Northwest Mounted Police fort. It is in lots of ways a testimony of the early days of the empire in this part of the world. We like to, I think, from the, from the settler's side, promote that as, as virtuous and good. We came to this area and in some ways improved it, you know, made it cleaner and more comfortable, and more organized, and all those things.

And so in some ways, yeah, a museum like that is sort of for, for better or worse a celebration of that aspect of the history. And you don't get a sense that it was a struggle or that there was a deception or that there was the taking of land. You don't, you don't, they don't really talk about that, which is fascinating. Yeah.

Colonialism

"In some ways, colonialism is a search for creature comforts. You had millions of Europeans living on a small chunk of land who had survived the plague. Now they discovered metals, spices, and resources from around the world that could give them not only comfort, but wealth, affluence, and experience."

"But there's a fundamental error to the empire's way of thinking. It's the notion of superiority that comes from your religion or from your culture. It's the notion that if you go into a place where people don't look like you or live according to your technological standards, you can consider whatever you do there as being an improvement."

"As a result, you go in and bring order to the place. You pacify the wilderness and the people there. Fundamentally, it's a war against the natural world which is a kind of neo-colonialism."

- Kris Demeanor

Inquiry Questions
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CHRIS (Narration)
Despite what was to come, the NWMP succeeded in bringing the American whiskey traders under control and brought rule of law to the area largely under MacLeod's leadership.

But the Blackfoot were concerned about the American army, the encroachment of the Metis and white people on their territory. Treaties were being signed with other tribes. It was Chief Crowfoot, a Blackfoot warrior and a skilled diplomat who would speak on behalf of the chiefs... petitioning for a meeting with the British.

For the British, the Blackfoot territory was the last barrier to connecting the railway. A treaty would needed to secure passage and land.

In September of 1877 at Blackfoot Crossing, the Dominion would meet with the five nations which included the three bands of the Nakoda Stoney, Tsuu T'ina, and the Blackfoot Confederacy which consisted of the Pikani, Kaini and Siksika. Lieutenant Colonel James MacLeod and Commissioner David Laird represented the Crown. There were many leaders from the five nations, but the government officials favoured working with Crowfoot.

The treaty document is in typical legal jargon. From what I can make out of it, in exchange for surrendering land to the Crown and obeying the laws, the Indians would receive land reserves, hunting rights, yearly payment in perpetuity, farm implements and education.

The pipe was smoked, ceremonies were performed, medals and gifts were given to seal the treaty. Speeches were given by Elders and Commissioners alike. Eventually the chiefs marked an X or touched their pen on the treaty trusting Crowfoot's judgment and trusting MacLeod would live up to his promises as he had before.

CHRIS:
Well here's what do you think? This is Macleod and Crowfoot.

COWBOY:
Well, I don't think they did justice to Crowfoot. Crowfoot was much more handsome than that.

CROWFOOT:
We want peace. What you tell us about this strong government and good law and treat the Indian the same as the white man makes us glad to hear.

MACLEOD:
Some of you might be afraid that we have come to take your land. That is not our objective. We simply want to insure that all who live here can do so in peace.

COWBOY:
The history needs to be romanticized if it's to be packaged, if it's going to be sold and marketed. The real history probably isn't a very pleasant one. There was a lot of tension leading up to the signing of Treaty 7.

KRIS:
They're probably both jockeying. They're both trying to figure each other out, trying to figure out how they're going to get the best for their side and their people. And of course there's this veneer of friendliness. What I'm curious about is how true was that?

"History is more about how we want to be seen today rather than how it really was. It is like our memory. We burnish the triumphant moments and hide the ugly ones."

- Chris Hsiung

COWBOY:
I believe there was a lot of mistrust, but the gestures that Crowfoot made to the NWMP and Macleod were natural gestures that he would make to his brother or his father in law. That was the custom.

CHRIS (Narration):
Maybe some of the glory of that meeting has been lost in translation, but the message is clear. It was an honourable peace treaty made between two equal nations. I have a feeling, however, the Blackfoot do not share this rosy perspective. Jane, our tour guide at the museum, offered up her thoughts on the treaty.

JANE:
It was kind of one of the fairest treaty at the time and the way it was laid out was agreed upon by both sides. It was just really badly enforced by the Canadian government and I think that's why it went so sour.

COWBOY: This looks like the perfect scene for the Walking Dead people to fight off all the zombies. Do you know, you should know this, if there were zombies at the time?

JANE:
I don't know. They didn't have these… these walls we built just for tourist reasons. So I think if there were zombies, they would have had the walls at the original fort site and the watch towers, but they didn't.

CHRIS:
So they actually put these fences in…

JANE:
So the fences and watchtowers are kind of the biggest difference from the original fort site.

KRIS:
Really, so they're there to make it look more like a military fort.

JANE:
The original fort site wasn't like a military protect themselves from everything. Those things you see in movies are more in the States. First of all, we didn't have enough money coming across to start a war with anyone.

CHRIS (Narration)
It would seem, History is more about how we want to be seen today rather than how it really was. It is like our memory. We burnish the triumphant moments and hide the ugly ones.

It's clear to me the history told here is incomplete and doesn't explain what happened to the five nations of southern Alberta. So we have to dive deeper into the history of the land and the people who lived here before we can begin to understand the present.

Why we tell history…

History is written not just by the victors, but also rewritten and retold by everyone. As a result, history is often used as a way to reaffirm or remember ourselves in the best possible light even if it isn't true. However, a glorified history prevents us from learning from the past.

Inquiry Questions
- What personal or historical examples do you have about how we "rewrite" history to suit our needs?
- Why do we prefer history that affirms our identity?
- What is the risk of having an inaccurate or narrow view of history?

Resource List

1996 Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal

Episode 3 - Sacred Ground

Scene 3.1 The Grasslands

CHRIS (Narrator)
An Elder once asked, "if this is your land, then where are your stories?"

Early 18th century maps show the British had few stories about Southern Alberta. They considered this area a wild and desolate land unfit for human habitat. With winter stretching at times for 8 months out of the year, who, they thought, could possibly have live here? Growing up in the darkness of winter I would think the same thing.

If this is your land…

In a meeting between an indigenous community in British Columbia and government officials claiming the land for the government, a Giksan Elder asked, “If this is your land, then where are your stories?” It raises an important question of what it means to “own” land. Is conquest through military force or treaty sufficient? What about the experience of indigenous people living off the land? What happens when we don’t understand the land?

Today, it’s scorching hot. For the first time I am trying to pay attention to the prairie landscape rather than just driving through it.

We were meeting up with Wes Olsen, a world renown Bison Ecologist involved in almost all of the bison restoration projects in North America. He has offered to take us into the grasslands national park.

WES OLSEN:
The first time I came to the Grasslands I was unprepared psychologically for the vastness of this landscape. It's huge. You can stand up on some of these buttes and see for 1,000 square kilometres of native prairie with not another soul on it.

And on first glance it looks empty, and it looks like there's grass but there's nobody home. It takes time to walk out here on the prairie, look at your feet, look at the surroundings. Be here morning and dusk to see just how complex and how diverse this landscape is, with the wildlife that lives on it.

It starts with the grasses and the insects that live in the grass and the dung that’s on the ground. And it moves all the way up the food web into the major predators, the hawks and owls, coyotes and badgers. Incredibly complex landscape.

It's big, it's unforgiving. If you don't have water, it can be harsh. Um, but it's got a special beauty that's rare in this country.

WES:
So right on this little butte, we have everything that provides us evidence that people and bison —the bison trail, the tepee rings—all lived and, and shared this landscape for well over 5,000 years. Tepee rings like this have been carbon dated, ah, and it's been shown that these are older than Stonehenge or The Great Pyramids of Giza. We know that we're standing in a place that somebody slept in perhaps 5,000 years ago. To me that's a remarkable thing. And in that little tipi, people lived, they made babies. Those babies grew up or they died. An entire life cycle of human evolution in that 3 metre wide tipi ring and I have the opportunity to sit in there and

soak up some of that ancient ambience. Tremendous experience and one that you have to be very respectful of.

CHRIS (Narration):
My untrained eyes see only rocks on the ground, but for Wes, he sees the ancestors living, playing, and working in a harsh land.

CHRIS (Narration):
There is another group of people attempting to reconstruct the past. Cowboy and I hear about an archaeological dig near Blackfoot Crossing.

In 1960, they had uncovered the site of an aboriginal fortified village about 300 years old. For the last few years, they have been painstakingly working through dirt and stone looking for clues to their origins.

DALE WALDE:
I've been an archaeologist for about 32/33 years. I've worked in primarily the Canadian Plains area. It's Cluny Fortified Village site, and it's the only known aboriginal fortified village on the Canadian plains. I'm sure there are more, and certainly Blackfoot stories tell that there are five or six more.

SHAWN MORTON:
There would have been a sheer structure going all the way around the site. You would have basically seen. Imagine the back of a lean-to, a wooden ramp kind of thing. All the way around.

"Tepee rings like this have been carbon dated, and it's been shown that these are older than Stonehenge or The Great Pyramids of Giza. We know that we're standing in a place that somebody slept in perhaps 5,000 years ago."

- Wes Olsen

This would have kind of been the living floor 300 years ago, and again in this area, this would have been outside the structure and in this area just finding tonnes of broken and butchered bone, fire-broken rock from heating and cooling and heating and cooling the rock.

CHRIS:
That just looks like a regular rock. How do you know that this isn't naturally formed?

SHAWN:
Well in this case, this is just a cobble, but what they've done is they've been bashing other stones with it, so if you actually look on the ends here you can seen where it has been battered repeatedly against something hard.

CHRIS (Narration)
It occurs to me that meaningful history requires effort. Like these volunteer archaeologists it takes a lot of digging, sifting, And analyzing, by a lot of people. A chipped rock, a polished stone, an arrowhead by itself doesn't mean much, but together they paint a picture in our imagination of what could have been here.

DALE WALDE:
This site in particular emphasizes the continuity between the past and the present. We're in an area where many peoples came together on an ongoing basis. Going back in time, who knows how far?

Blackfoot crossing across the way where the Treaty 7 was signed is a part of this whole system. And now up there with Blackfoot Crossing Historical Interpretive Centre again we see an invitation for people to come experience Siksika culture. I think it's a perfect metaphor for present day.

Memories of our Ancestry

It can be difficult to see how tepee rings, chipped rocks, and pottery fragments have anything to do with the present. However, if one sees not the artifact, but the thinking and feeling human being that made the artifact and how it was used, the object comes alive.

Inquiry Questions
Consider the many artifacts that we use. How might future generations gain insight into how we lived? What would it take to understand these artifacts? How do the artifacts link us to our ancestors?

SHAWN:
This is a dynamic place with a dynamic history and a whole kind of swatch of cultural relationships and people kind of moving, interacting and stuff like this. It takes this kind of open plain space and brings it alive. I like that.

Scene 3.2 - Sacred Territory

CHRIS (Narration)
This vast territory is not nearly as flat as I imagined. There are dips and hills, contours and rivers that break up the prairies with areas carved by ancient glaciers.

Writing on Stone: a sacred gathering place for the Blackfoot and many others. After driving for hours looking at a flat landscape, this place immediately seized our attention.

COWBOY:
There's a certain vibration to this place. There's a certain energy I guess you can say. I can see and feel and understand why my ancestors would come to a place like this and perform ceremony, come and make offerings and carry on the centuries old traditions. It's a powerful place.

CHRIS (Narration):
We join up with a group of university students who are also on a field trip to explore Treaty 7 territory. Evidence of Cowboy's ancestors are written on the walls in the form of petroglyphs. These are some of the oldest rock art to be found in North America mixed unfortunately with modern day graffiti.

Much of their original meaning has been lost but some stories have survived through oral tradition. Blackfoot warriors, experts in guerrilla warfare, fight with body-length shields traveling in lines to hide their numbers. Horses brought over by the Spaniards, traded through the Kutenai, were readily adopted by the Blackfoot. Their speed and power perfectly adapted to the plains tribes. A ferocious battle between the Blackfoot and an alliance of Crow, Plains Cree and Gros Ventre.

DESEREE:

A week ago, an Australian tourist came and asked whether the Blackfoot were extinct. My friend Abby, was like “no, no, we’re still here. We’re still trucking along, know what I’m saying.”

CHRIS (Narration)
Some of these petroglyphs have been dated as far back as three thousand years. The Blackfoot, or the Niitsitapi as they call themselves have been here for many millennia. Blackfoot territory went as far south as the Yellowstone river, and as far north as the North Saskatchewan River. And then to the great divide in the West to Cypress Hills in the East,

I had this mistaken notion that they were nomadic, but they travelled to different areas of their land like modern day elites with their cabin in the mountains and winter homes in Palm Springs. The Blackfoot were very territorial and any that wandered into their area had good reason to fear for their safety.

When Columbus landed…

The map shown of the 1500 nations in the film was developed by Aaron Caravelle and can be found at www.tribalnationsmaps.com. Examine these maps.

Inquiry Questions
- How do these maps change our ideas of what was here pre-contact?
- How do the variety of nations and customs that existed challenge our stereotypical notion of an “Indian”?

While the plains tribes were no stranger to intertribal warfare and violence, they also had a sophisticated set of protocols to maintain peace through treaty, ceremony, adoption or marriage. The Sundance was one such ancient tradition that brought Blackfoot tribes together to share food, share stories, and most importantly to perform ceremony.

One ceremony involved the transfer of sacred bundles containing the wisdom and stories of their ancestors. Only those who have been invited by the holy societies and have accepted the responsibility to their community could take on the bundle and learn its significance. In this way Elders and Elders in the Making were like the guardians of their ancestral spirit.

“The Sun Dance survives even today in an unbroken link to ancient times. So for the Niitsitipi, the past is ever present.”
- Chris Hsiung

The sun dance survives even today in an unbroken link to ancient times. So for the Niitsitipi, the past is ever present.

CHRIS (Narration)
The Niitsitipi were just one of a tapestry of indigenous people. Before the Europeans arrived, there were over 1500 nations, each adapted to the land in their own way.

Some grew food, some hunted or any combination of both. There were violent warrior races... And others that were peaceful societies. Some tribes followed the patriarch and many the matriarch. There were complex hierarchical societies, and those that had egalitarian societies.

They survived and thrived, but above all they loved their children and passed on what they learned, each generation building on the next.

When Columbus landed, this was was the world he stepped into. He and the Europeans to follow were foreigners in an established world.

The Role of Ceremony

Ceremonies are often used to signify important processes whether it is the citizenship ceremony, a ritual performance at a church, or a bundle transfer at a sun dance. Among the plains tribes, ceremony played a significant role in all aspects of life whether it was in becoming an elder, renewing an alliance with a neighbouring tribe, or connecting with the land.

Consider the role of ceremony in your life. What purpose does it serve in shaping you? How might it be difficult to understand ceremonies different from your own?

COWBOY:
I want to be of value to the next generations of people not just Niitsitapi / indigenous people. Actually, Niitsitapi can be anybody. You are Niitsitapi. The real people, not the greedy, hungry ghosts that we have all over the place.

CHRIS:
It's not just about being Blackfoot or being Chinese. It's that sense of being human and being able to connect with our humanity that we come from a long line of generations and actually there are many more generations ahead that we have to take care of and look after.

COWBOY:
There's lot of mess to clean up for sure. There's a lot of situations and scenarios…

CHRIS:
How about we leave the kids to clean up the mess. Isn't that how we…

COWBOY:
No, that can't be the way.
We do have to do our best to preserve this beautiful space 'cause this is all we have. Put it into perspective with just our solar system. We're not even a pin prick. Like we're so small in such a vast dangerous vacuum of inimical elements out there in space. You really have to take yourself out of your living room and get out there to the land and talk to the land, hear the land, feel the land, let it affect you…. open yourself up to it. That's what I'm realizing now in this journey, this decision to be this elder in the making.

"When Columbus landed, this was the world he stepped into. He and the Europeans to follow were foreigners in an established world."
- Chris Hsiung

CHRIS (Narrator)
Camping out on a clear prairie night, I was awed by the universe that embraced us for just a moment... but enough to remind me of my human ancestors who also gazed at the same sky.

CHRIS (Narration)
It takes a profound act of imagination to envision the world as it was. Even as I look out into the landscape, I notice one dominant feature missing that was as spectacular as the dinosaurs or the sabre-tooth tiger.

Scene 3.3 Bison Eco-System

CHRIS (Narration):
I'm told there was a ocean buffalo blanketing the plains moving like a swarm so large they were visible from outer space. They supported life for the grizzly bears, the wolves, prairie dog, and the plains tribes. It was the Serengeti of North America.

The Blackfoot, the bison, and prairies were intimately connected, and it is no surprise they had many stories of their territory. We were meeting with Jason Plain Eagle at Head Smashed In Buffalo Jump. Cowboy considers him an Elder in the Making working to keep alive the traditional Blackfoot way of life passed down to him through his parents.

JASON:
What was told to me was, at one time when the buffalo were put into this land and Blackfoot were living in this land. And at one time, it was the buffalo that was killing off the people and they were eating the people. Natosi knew that this wasn't right so he came to the buffalo and told them that they were suppose to eat off the land and help the Blackfoots to live and help these guys. So these guys can hunt them. But it won't be so easy so he gave us these areas like the head smashed-in buffalo jump, buffalo pound. Different ways we can hunt them.

"They tell us stories of this land and how to live off of it. Wolves are really great hunters. Rabbits can live all year. They teach us how to live, find shelter, food and water."
- Jason Plain Eagle

They tell us stories. They tell us stories of this land. They tell us how to live off of this land and everything like that while we hunt the animals with hoofs like the deer, the elk the moose and the buffalo.

Wolves are really great hunters, you know. Cougars can live off this land, so could rabbits. Rabbits can live all year. They can live out there. And they teach us how to live, how to find shelter. You know, where we can find these different places to eat. For water and different stuff like that.

CHRIS:
What is it that you see and feel looking at…

JASON:
I feel a lot of pride in this area because for centuries and centuries and even before the time of the ice age, I know my people lived in these valleys and in these hills and we used these rocks for centuries and centuries. We lived off this land, when the Chinooks came, when those harsh winters came. Our people were able to adapt. And that's what I try to share with the children. I try to instil pride in them on what's important about all these stories that were told to us.

CHRIS (Narration):

The oral stories and memory of the land have survived. But many of the Blackfoot youth know as much about the land as I do... a symptom of a broken link that Jason is trying address in his work with the youth.

Head Smashed In was in some ways a memorial to the Inii, the mighty buffalo. Shawna, a guide at the centre shared just how important the Inii was to the Blackfoot.

SHAWNA:
it was our staff of life. It provided us with our, of course your, your food, your shelter, your clothing and transportation, weapontry, and… a very high spiritual component that adds to that. And that was value the sacredness of the buffalo itself.

The Grassland Ecology

It's easy to think of the prairie grassland as an empty land devoid of life. Unfortunately, just as we stereotype people, we also stereotype landscapes. Our first impressions are not necessarily accurate ones. The ecology of the grasslands is rich and diverse and could be studied for years on its own.

Inquiry Questions
- What has surprised you about the grasslands?
- How are the bison and grasslands interconnected?
- Why is it important to understand the ecology of the grasslands to understand the bison?
- In the same way, why is it important to understand ecology to understand human beings?

Today we would say even though we don't hunt the buffalo, it's no longer running freely along the prairies, but we refer to our buffalo, today as, well we encourage the young such as myself to seek a higher education. That's what we refer to as our buffalo today.

CHRIS (Narration)
On the Grasslands National Park, a small group of buffalo is being re-introduced into its original habitat. Wes is a consultant observing the reunion of the bison with its natural habitat on the grasslands. Something traditional Blackfoot would have likely observed.

WES:
Imagine that it's 1750 and there's 30 million plains bison roaming North America. Every one of those deposits a dung patty on average about 10 times a day. That's a lot of dung. This is an example of one that's fairly fresh, probably just was in the last couple days. And it's occupied by a, a successional suite of, of dung-loving insects.

They tend to burrow very quickly into the dung. There's one. So this is a dung beetle that is really common. It is actually of European origin. This little guy over here came over from Europe with cattle. These are dung degrader. They'll have a dozen adults eventually in this patty. You can see how quickly he's moving in there.

CHRIS:
Oh wow.

WES:
These guys fly. And they can travel up to 30 km and a fresh dung pat like this gives off a plume of, it's called um…what's the name of that disease where you forget things all the time volatile compounds.

CHRIS (Narration)

Who knew dung patties could be so fascinating. Millions of bison depositing tonnes of fertilizer for the grasslands, providing a home for bugs who were food for birds including the sage grouse, a bird often mimic'ed at pow-wows. Wes called the bison a keystone species, one that many other species on the prairies depended on.

WES:
Burrowing owls, bison and prairie dogs have a really complex relationship. Prairie dogs require short grass and they have to be able to see their predators coming. And they can't expand their colonies into the tall vegetation very well, so bison come along, they graze it, they love this short grass. And they'll push that tall vegetation back allowing the prairie dogs to expand the size of their colonies.

The Great Plains of North America are one of the largest carbon sinks in the world, and the root systems in these grasses go down 3 metres, and sequester carbon at depths that no other plant does. Tremendous value to that in today's modern ecology.

"The Great Plains of North America are one of the largest carbon sinks in the world, and the root systems in these grasses go down 3 metres, and sequester carbon at depths that no other plant does."

- Wes Olsen

CHRIS (Narration):
To me, Wes was an elder as well... someone who invested himself in understanding how life worked on the plains and sharing what he learned with others.

Today, the rumble of millions of bison are gone from the prairies. The grizzly bears and wolves have retreated to the mountains. And the ancient long prairie grass uprooted. Something must have drastically altered life on the prairies.

The Niitsitapi marked important annual events on a buffalo hide called the wintercount. The logic I assumed was that surviving the darkness of winter is always a notable event.

1877 was when the Treaty was signed, 1878, "the time we had no winter", 1879 was the winter with a deep snow and in the same year was when the buffalo disappeared.

Resource List

The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America
by Thomas King
Thomas King provides an accessible and darkly humorous account of the history of aboriginal peoples in North America. A very worthwhile read that answers many questions non-native people are afraid to ask while creating a base for understanding.

Tribal Nations Map
by Aaron Carapella
Here you will find the most comprehensive maps of pre-contact Native North America to date. These maps illustrate the tribes with their original names on one visual display. It is a helpful

illustration of the complexity and diversity of life on North America. You can find the maps here: http://www.tribalnationsmaps.com.

Episode 4 - Apocalypse

Scene 4.1 - Ecocide

CHRIS (Narration)
As a kid going on school trips to the Calgary zoo the buffalo skull was the symbol for a vanishing species. But how did 30 million buffalo each as a tall as a human being and weighing almost as much as a small car vanish in the 1870's?

SHAWNA:
The buffalo just did not disappear, but rather they were massacred. And the reason for that was um, you know, it was ah government policy and tactics that were imposed. And one of the ways in getting rid of the Indian problem was to slaughter the buffalo.

CHRIS (Narration)
Shawna blames the government. And it's hard not to with the attitudes prevalent at the time both in Canada and the US.

> "The word that comes to mind is ecocide. Human beings were directly responsible for the elimination of an entire species."
>
> - Chris Hsiung

Secretary of the Interior Columbus Delano refused to stop hide hunters from entering Sioux lands, and in his report for 1873 wrote: "I would not seriously regret the total disappearance of the buffalo from our western prairies, in its effect upon the Indians. I would regard it rather as a means of hastening their sense of dependence upon the products of the soil and their own labours"

However, what troubled me was how the bison went from 30 million to less than 100 in a couple of decades. Images of people shooting bison from the train and leaving them to die was wasteful but didn't add up to the annihilation of a species in so short a time.

The Global Market

The mass extraction of bison from North America was also partly enabled by a global market that did not recognize the value of bison. Prices were fixed for hides and as a result, there was a continuous flow of hides purchased for use in Europe. This leads to a larger question of the role of global markets in extraction of resources from distant countries.

WES:
There's certainly a lot of credence to the idea that the US military, in particular, had an active campaign of destroying the livelihood of First Nations people and the landscape. And that meant killing their horses and killing their bison.

But the number one driving reason behind the extermination of bison on the Great Plains was the industrial revolution in Britain, primarily, but throughout Europe.

They discovered a tanning process that allowed them to make leather that was really stiff and firm, that was ideal for driving the industry of the industrial revolution. Grain mills, hammer mills, saw mills, industrial mills; all required steam engines that drove belting that drove the industry.

They weren't able to find enough hides of suitable quality in Europe, so they came to North America.

CHRIS (Narration):
The word that comes to mind is ecocide. Human beings were directly responsible for the elimination of an entire species.

Sometimes I could be lulled into to seeing the loss of millions of buffalo as a historical curiosity, an abstraction having no relevance to today. But to Cowboy's ancestors and other Plains Tribes it was a spiritual disaster coupled with mass starvation. Tribes were seen slaughtering emaciated horses and dogs. Bark was boiled to squeeze what little nutrition there was to feed their children. Ceremonies lost their source of strength.

Have we learned from it? Have we changed our ways? Well, the hundreds of species that go extinct every year say otherwise.

One recent example I discovered hits particularly close to home. On the Eastern Coast of Canada, Newfoundland and Labrador once had cod fisheries that attracted fleets from around the world. But mismanagement of the fishery industry meant cod stocks dwindled to near extinction. In 1992, the Canadian government shut down the industry indefinitely implementing a moratorium on cod fishing. 30,000 people in the province were put out of work. Five centuries of entire way of life disappeared overnight.

The last bison, the last fish, the last tree…

Human beings have long had an impact on the environment. Even ancient historical evidence suggests that wherever human beings appeared, large mammals would disappear unless they were domesticated. However the industrial revolution has dramatically accelerated our ability to extract resources and transform the environment resulting in record levels of extinction. On the other hand, technology has given us the ability to better understand the world and shape it.

Inquiry Questions
- What was the impact of losing the bison on the plains culture?
- What other examples of ecocide in history can you find?
- Why does society allow this to happen over and over again?
- What is the role of technology in ecocide?
- What would be required to change society's behaviour?

WES:
If we're gonna continue to survive, we need to protect the environment. Ah, without the environment we're toast. We are a keystone species. No different than a prairie dog or the bison. We have a huge impact on the ecosystems that we live in. And because we're sentient beings and we know what the impacts of our existence are on this world, I think we have a responsibility to take care of this, to ensure that in 1,000 years time this is still here.

"We are a keystone species. No different than the prairie dog or the bison."

- Wes Olsen

Scene 4.2 - Small Pox

CHRIS:
The massacre of the buffalo was however the second apocalypse. The first apocalypse started when the Europeans landed and introduced a deadly agent that would clear the way for settlement.

Germs. Small pox, measles, flu, typhus, malaria, mumps... To the first nations it was the white man's disease. To the newcomers, it was God's will.

To modern eyes, it was epidemiology. Diseases evolved for generations in Eurasia and Africa through close contact between people and livestock. Cities became a breeding ground all manner of unpleasant illnesses, but It was also a training ground for European immune systems. On Turtle Island there were few domesticated animals and major cities for disease to develop. So when the Europeans arrived, invading germs found no resistance.

It isn't known how many indigenous people lived here pre-contact. Archaeological evidence shows 50 million perhaps as high as 100 million people lived in the Americas. Disease would wipe out over 90% of the population, a rate inconceivable today.

Imagine a city of a million where 900 000 people fall dead.
Governments topple.
Whole families... are wiped out.
Shopping malls are empty.
People fight for what little resources remains.
Homes are abandoned.
Streets are devoid of life.
A once vibrant city is now silent.
A once vibrant culture brought to its knees.

"Chief Crowfoot opened the doors for all of Albertans. So if it wasn't for his decision to make treaty, then Alberta wouldn't have been Alberta."

- Herman Yellow Old Woman

Scene 4.3 - Blackfoot Crossing

CHRIS (Narration):
September 1877 at Blackfoot Crossing, the survivors of an apocalypse gathered together to make treaty with an up and coming nation: the Dominion of Canada.

HERMAN:
They say that this area right here, where we stand, is the area where the, the treaty actually took place, and we had the, Commissioner situated under aa lean-to with the Northwest Mounted Police, the British people.

Right down over this ridge here. That was the big camp. The was the camp of the Blackfoot and the Bloods. Further down was the Peigans. Down in the prairie over there, the Sarcees, and then further back was the Stoneys.

So they knew that ah, the lifestyle that they lived wasn't going to be the same anymore. One, the buffalo were disappearing.

Most of the people that were here at that time, at the time of the treaty. It was scary because they didn't know what the future, what the future holds for them. And all they can do is trust in their spiritual connections with the bundles and the pipes and all the stuff that they, the ceremonies they performed, right up leading to the treaty.

CHRIS (Narration)
The written version of the treaty differed greatly from the oral stories passed down from the Elders. Many things were written that were not said. Many things were said that were not written. Translation was notoriously difficult. Jerry Potts, the translator, was said to be rendered speechless when the Treaty document was read in its Victorian style legalese. Even those that were there must have found it difficult to understand what was being agreed to. From the accounts of the Elders, There was no talk of surrendering land or giving up their hunting grounds ever. Promises were made to help the First Nations people in times of starvation, provide education for a transition to an agricultural life, protect the buffalo and their way of life. In exchange they would settle on reserves and keep the peace.

Iiniistsi - Treaty

Iiniistsi is the Blackfoot word for treaty, an agreement. Treaties were made with not just people but also the land and the animals. The most sacred of treaties were reinforced through ceremony and continued relationship.

Inquiry Questions
- How might treaties have been helpful to the plains societies?
- How does the Blackfoot idea of treaty differ from the European idea of treaty?
- Why is the treaty considered significant even today by the Treaty 7 nations?
- What does the phrase me “we are all treaty people”?

HERMAN:
Our people still considered the treaty a very holy treaty. We say we're never gonna break that treaty. We’re gonna keep it strong, and every time we commemorate that treaty, there’s always a pipe that takes place to reenact that holiness that took place at that day.

CHRIS (Narration):
I was really surprised at Herman's view of it as a holy treaty. When you read the text, it is more like a mortgage document with a bunch of conditions and escape clauses.

For the First Nations, however, the treaty was a relationship that was meant to be renewed year after year, generation after generation. History shows that the early relationship between First Nations and Europeans was not always hostile. The first Europeans who arrived on the shores of Canada were too few in number to settle the land. They relied on indigenous people for navigation, for survival, and for military alliances against the Americans.

The indigenous, on the other hand, valued European steel, guns and horses trading fur and buffalo hides for them. Mixed marriages were also common between two cultures learning from each other.

Here was the possibility of a Canada based not on violence, but on a multiple cultures co-existing together.

HERMAN:
Chief Crowfoot opened the doors for all of Albertans. So if it wasn’t for his decision to make treaty, then Alberta wouldn’t have been Alberta. We as Blackfoot people always talk about sharing our land, and we still carry on the treaty. We kept up our promises. But then we look at the other side. Not a very good picture.

CHRIS (Narration):
Devastated by disease, hungry for food, and desperate for help the First Nations turned to the Dominion. Canada's response went from one of protection, to one of civilizing which was to become a code word for destroying Indian culture.

Founding Partners

Early settlers and explorers of Canada could not survive without the support or help of First Nations people. The British and French were too few in number and lacked the knowledge and skills to survive in the Canadian wilderness.

In addition, the early relationship involved much exchange of culture. Many early settlers adopted indigenous ways of living.

How does the importance of First Nations people in the establishment of Canada change our relationship with indigenous people?

Resource List

Guns, Germs, and Steel
by Jared Diamond

The True Spirit and Intent of Treaty 7
by Walter Hildebrandt, Dorothy First Rider, and Sarah Carter

This book provides an account of the signing of Treaty 7 based on oral stories of Elders. It does a good job describing the many players involved, the events of the day, the mis-interpretations, translation problems and the competing agendas. A summary is also provided on a different understanding of what a treaty is.

Clearing the Plains
by James Daschuk

James Daschuk gives a detailed account of the impact of Old World diseases, climate, and most disturbingly, Canadian politics in the subjugation of thousands of aboriginal people particularly in the plains. This is an authoritative examination of the politics of ethnocide distinguishing between what was a result of intent and what was the result of disease.

A Fair Country

Episode 5 - A Broken Treaty

Scene 5.1 - Civilizing the Indians

CHRIS (Narration):
From Canada's perspective, the Indian was a problem needing a solution. In 1879 a report by Nicholas Flood Davin recommended the Canadian government operate industrial schools partnering with churches to teach them skills and replace their spiritual beliefs with Christianity.

John A. MacDonald agreed saying: "When the school is on the reserve, the child lives with his parents who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write." - John A. MacDonald

This lofty approach to education was not new. Industrial and Reformatory School programs were setup in Ireland to reform orphans and problem children. Honest labour and ruthlessly cutting ties from home life would help reform the child's character.

It was declared a success until decades later, a commission report revealed that many children had been subject to systemic physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Here on Turtle Island, the experiment with children was to be applied to a foreign culture en masse. They were to be separated forcefully from their parents, their language and their culture.

There’s something different about seeing the evidence for yourself. At the Glenbow Museum, these artifacts, like the writing on stone or chipped rocks crystallize the stories in my mind.

Each student photo, each story of trauma cries out from the past to make itself known in the present.

CHRIS reading attendance records punishing students for skipping class.
CHRIS reading Medical Records highlight the high number of deaths in schools by tuberculosis.

CHRIS:
The Indian Residential schools were only the tip of the iceberg. One year before Treaty 7 was even signed, the Indian Act had already been put in place, a document that controlled every aspect of Indian life treating all Indians as wards of the state.

Traditional ceremonies like the potlatch and sundance were banned punishable by fines or jail sentences. Rations withheld until the Indians complied with government edicts. Indian Agents given extraordinary power over reserves created their own pass system. Indians could not leave their reserve, sell or buy without their permission. A receipt is repurposed as a sheet.

It was like watching a genocide in slow motion. The goal was to kill the Indian in the man, but instead both were killed. Was this the best civilization could do?

The treaty we broke was not so much the written one filled with augers and shovels and five dollars. It was the unwritten one that was made based on trust and a commitment to help.

Whether through incompetency, indifference, or disdain, it was a treaty broken over and over, generation after generation.

The trauma of the past continues to ripple outward... crashing through the present.

Scene 5.2 - Residential School

NARCISSE BLOOD:
We're at what is now Red Crow College. And prior to that it was St. Mary's Residential School. And this is the school I attended. Um, my mom attended this school. My uncles, you know. So I'm about third generation of ah people that, that came here.

It's a facade that's misgiving, you know. It was built in 1924. And the reason that Red Crow is in here is that we don't have any money to build a college, right? And structurally, these were very well built.

My playmates would be gone, eh, in September, and I'd miss them. And I'd ask my mom, "Where are they?" And they'd say, "Well, they went to school." "Well I wanna go where they're going." Little did I know what was in this building.

NARCISSE:
It's almost like going to jail, I guess, you're processed and then, the you're brought up to your, to the rec hall. And I was assigned the number 27—27 was… It's funny how you remember things, eh. All the clothes that are issued to you put that number on, so you get punished if you can't find your shoes or your because the supervisor will say 27.

NARCISSE:
You did what you needed to do to survive this. I became Christian. That was my survival. And now I'm not, you know, after realizing that. I have nothing but sad memories of that church. But our people are really involved in it, and, and they get mad when they hear things like that. And, and they'll take me up on it, and that's fine.

But this represents a lot of damage that has been done to our community. This is very new, taking the children away from the home and bringing them up. It doesn't even work for the people that brought it to us, right.

So it works even less with us, and it creates a sense of confusion of who we are as native, or in this case Kainai. And I know that from my own personal journey. I've been sober for going on 27 years.

NARCISSE:
It was so refreshing to see this awful place from a different perspective. You know, you worked on those little, little victories. That's what sustained us.

It's kind of interesting, somebody was telling me that in these concentration camp, the Jews would wear their lapel in a certain way to defy what's going on. That they're not going to give in. They're not going…their spirit is not gonna die.

The biggest defiance is who I am now, (hm) who I have become, which is complete antis-, anti- to this place.

COWBOY:
I was worried I was going to come back and find you guys gutted.

So when I look at this building it's almost like this is a rejected transplant. This is a rejected way of life. Because there's no honour to it, no respect for it like it's been completely dilapidated. And I see that with a lot of things. People talk about well we have houses that are run down on the reserve. That's not the inherent lineage of culture and relationship to home and land, gidoksin, that what sustains us.

Thousands of years of connection to home and the way you live is completely severed. The way people are going to adapt to that epigenetically is 9 times out of 10, will be a rejection of whatever that transplant is especially if it's delivered… especially if the transplant surgery is a violent one and destructive one.

And when we first walked in here, two owls come bursting out. In Blackfoot culture, the owl is a messenger. They've been connotated in the last hundred years negatively as messengers of death. And I don't know what that means.The way I feel it right now is I'm taking it as a positive connotation. The only death that is occurring here is in this journey, in this film, is the death of the conditioning, is the death of the imposing constructs we get ourselves trapped in. And that's what enables humanity to do those inhumane things.

NARCISSE:
I'm very critical of Western education, because to me they're very complicit into what we're with dealing today in terms of the environment. That's where a lot of the engineers, that's where a lot of the geologists go. That's where a lot of the CEOs go, and they end up in these board offices.

And to me, these universities teach you not to be human. You know, they take, you know, they take away your feelings, your humanity that you can make strict business decisions, and that it is okay. It isn't, right.

Now that kinda thinking has been established. Today it's called capitalism, and it becomes very senseless. I say we got treated like women, as natives. The land got treated like women because these words "we can rape the land," you know. It's very derogatory, but that's what you hear.

CHRIS (Narration):
Narcisse saw a different future for Red Crow College, a path towards healing for his people. Years ago he started a college level program called Kaini Studies that would teach the history and culture of the Niitsitapi.

NARCISSE:
I hated this ceiling 'cause I'd be looking at it. And those are the original cupboards and sister was in that room. We had a good sister. Her name was Sister Delia Bork. She was Metis. She'd try to mother us. They would send word to punish us and she would lie and say I'd punish them

when she didn’t. Just because there were nuns like that and I had good teachers doesn’t justify what they did here ‘cause we’re still dealing with it here today. And through Kainai studies we’re trying to turn it around. There’s a lot of beauty in who we are as Niitsitapi and we snub our nose and say you did not succeed in destroying us.

NARCISSE:
I want to become Niitsitapi, a person, a human. So for me, becoming that through experience and all the mistakes I have made and all the wonderful things I have done, all come together to make me who I am. A person that wants to learn. A person that respects myself so that I can respect you guys. That’s why our ways are lifelong learning. If I can become a human then I can relate to the land better.

When we say land people think right away in this language of geography and stratigraphy. Well for me when I say land in the back of my mind I’m saying [Blackfoot word], what sustains us. It’s very inclusive of the four-legged, of the animals that take flight, the rivers, the plants. We had relationship to all of them.

There’s enough for all of us. Take what you need. Don't take more than you need. So, that teaches us. That is very relevant to today, because the first thing I get told is that we can't go back to that time. Well of course we're not going. We can't. Who said we could?

But what did that time, what can it teach us? Well, they say we can't put the buffalo back because it's unrealistic. Well, the road we are on, if we're gonna talk unrealistic is unrealistic and unsustainable.

Episode 6 - Death and Renewal

Scene 6.1 A New Treaty

CHRIS (Narration):
It shouldn't surprise me that the people who have lived so close to the land, hold so many stories, would also speak so passionately about the earth. South of the medicine line near Browning, Montana there is a historic gathering of native and non-native people attempting to repair what was broken. For the first time in over a hundred and fifty years, the Plains tribes were gathering to sign a treaty.

BRENT SCOUT:
Well we're here today at the signing of the Buffalo Treaty. It's basically a repatriation treaty to bring the buffalo back home to its homeland range. And to bring, really bring back hope and unity back to the Blackfoot people and the Plains tribes of this area.

KEITH AUNE:
The wildlife conservation society convenes stakeholders in 2006 to talk about this second recovery of bison, an ecological restoration and that means we've got to have buffalo on lands of scale and we've got to let them be buffalo and there's a lot of initiatives in North America. A lot of very interesting ones, most come with challenges, but most come with a lot of willing partners like we're seeing here at the treaty. And we need to do it fairly quick because temperate grasslands are disappearing rapidly and now is the time for us to act to restore buffalo to these intact landscapes.

LEROY:
The Treaty that's going to be signed, that's already ratified by the pipe ceremony is a treaty of cooperation. It's bringing our people back together to work together on a common cause.

TREATY PARTICIPANT:
We need to adapt those treaties to today so that they apply, so that the spirit and the intent of those treaties continue to go on. The Lakoda, Dakoda, Nakoda the Blackfoot, the Cree Nation, whatever as First Nations let's redefine who and what we are with the return of our buffalo.

CHRIS (Narration)
Like so many treaties between people, it is easier said then done. I wonder whether the divide that prevented the Plains Tribes from unifying against the British would divide them again today. I hear news of tensions between the Blackfoot, the Cree, Tsuu T'ina, and even the Metis and the Mormons.

It's hot in the tent. I wasn't prepared for the hours of stories to be told and the many songs and ceremonies to make the treaty.

When Cowboy and I sign as a witness, I realize this is only a small step in a larger journey. The Plains tribes understand better that it is a process that must be renewed and revisited time and time again.

BRENT:
Well I've been involved in our holy societies back in on the Blood Indian reserve. I've been there for about 10 years now. So I'm still really in my infancy, on my journey. And really that's what being an Elder, I believe, is, is a journey.

And being an Elder in the Blackfoot ways, is a, is a, is a culture, really, of transference. So when we go out on a hunt, we have to be transferred that right to go out on a hunt. We have to be transferred the right to learn a song. We have to be transferred the right to hold a pipe. in general, you know, it's the goals and mandate of the collective. And they're owned collectively by the people, and they're held and they're transferred down through the generations.

You know, one time ah, ah somebody asked, was asked, "What does the past mean to you?" And one of Blackfoot students stood up and said, "We have no past because we're still singing our songs and we're still singing our stories." You know, through the generations, so we are living history.

NARCISSE:
The land is like our Mother. It's the nurturer. It sustains us. We don't take life for granted. [Speaking Blackfoot] If I could just speak my language it would be a lot easier to explain. We don't take for granted that the sun is going to come up every morning. We greet the sun, because we woke up, right?

That's life, because the alternative is some time, some time soon we're not gonna wake up, eh. So we wake up. That gives us, gives life, eh. [speaking Blackfoot] That Source that gives us life, eh. And all those other, our non-human relations have rights to be here.

The folly is when we think that man is it. We get what we have here. It's a folly, and that's a kind word for stupidity.

CHRIS (Narration):
Months later Narcisse would not wake up again. A head on car accident on the snow blown highways of Saskatchewan killed him and four other people. Among them was our dear friends Lacy Morin-Desjarlais, Michael Green, and Michele Sereda.

Scene 6.2 - Death and Renewal

CHRIS (Narration)
Even in death, Narcisse, our beloved friend and Elder was teaching us his final lesson. His wife Alvine was taking us to his sanctuary, a place where he would often go to reflect.

ALVINE MOUNTAINHORSE:
This is what he called his forest…. our forest. He just loved taking pictures and looking at all the plants. And he liked looking at the changes that were taking place down here.

CHRIS: You get a sense you're entering a different space. You know… it's not yours alone.

ALVINE: Narcisse has always just tried to guide anybody that he has come into contact with. Never told anybody that this is what you're suppose to do. You make your own choices. And he's always telling people, [speaking Blackfoot], "Be wisely aware of your surroundings." And that's what Elders want you to do.[speaking Blackfoot] "listen."

Narcisse has, had always told us, "In the event that something happens to me, I don't want you guys to fall apart. You need to carry on." I've been really angry. It's really hard. I can't… Nobody will ever replace him. Such a gentle person.

CHRIS: It's hard to not look at these pictures and not miss them.

CHRIS: Their deaths really put things into so much focus because, you know, when you talk about Elders and the next generation and preserving life for the next generation. Well, we're only talking about that because our time on here is limited.

CHRIS: we are still learning from Narcisse. The many talks that he's made, the presentations, the people that he's affected, the projects he's built… all these things are things that continue on and carry his spirit.

in a way what Narcisse was doing was creating these little bundles of wisdom and knowledge that's been passed down for the generations, and sharing that with people and allowing people to carry that on.

It kind of makes you wonder. It's like well what, well what's the bundle that we're making? What's the bundle that we're passing on?

What are you hoping to leave for your son, Wyze?

COWBOY:
I'm hoping to leave a long list of ah, of my mistakes so he doesn't have to make them, you know. I've made quite a few in my short life. Books I read, projects I get involved with and my own knowledge bundles that I, I build it for him and for his children, grandchildren, all the other generations.

CHRIS:
We've seen ecocide. We've seen genocide. We've seen that we're on a path that's gonna hurt a lot of people, and a lot of life. We better prepare a bundle that's going to help us through this.

COWBOY:
Check it out. We've got five visitors over there. Our dear friends.

CHRIS:
What's next for me is that I really want to learn a lot more about life, because I feel like I have actually grown up separated from it. So, yeah, that should take the rest of my life to do.

COWBOY: Good choice Chris. Good choice.

Scene 6.3 - Return Home

COWBOY: Okay sir. I will see you in 40 years.

CHRIS: Sounds good.

COWBOY: Hopefully we both make it that far. Stay Black…. foot”

CHRIS (Narration):
It’s time to head home.... even though there’s so much more to learn. I have only begun to understand the stories of this territory. But already home looks different. Names and places carry meaning.

History has deepened my sense of place while revealing the tragedy of a broken relationship. I see more clearly the mistakes civilization has made and continues to make. But I am also inspired by the spirit of cooperation of our ancestors.

In Blackfoot culture becoming an elder is a conscious choice and a sacred responsibility. I prefer this idea of an elder over our modern one where seniors are shuffled into retirement homes to be forgotten.

It seems to me, we need many people to choose the path of becoming an elder. To become someone who understands and respects life, both human and non-human, native and non-native.

We will need those who can build bridges between the past and the future to give guidance for today. For as long as the sun shines, the rivers flow and the grass grows, we will always need to make treaty with each other and the home we live on.

Resource List

The Comeback
by Jean Ralston-Saul
Jean Ralston-Saul astutely observes that what aboriginal people want is not sympathy but their rights. He sees aboriginal people making a comeback to a position of strength within Canadian society. Ultimately Ralston-Saul reminds us that we are all treaty people and must begin the hard work of re-building the relationship in the spirit and intent of the treaty.

Resource Rulers
by Bill Gallagher
Today, the courtroom is the battlefield, the boardroom is the trading posts, and it’s chiefs (not governors) who recite winning proclamations to the losing side. Bill Gallagher describes the most impressive legal winning streak in Canadian history by the natives. This book suggests a way forward with new rules of engagement for resource development and for winning outcomes in the road-to-resources sweepstakes.