

University of Nevada, Reno

**‘Bad Medicine’ at *Peehee Mu’huh*:
An Environmental History of Thacker Pass**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History

by

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Abstract

Thacker Pass, located in the remote northern Nevada high desert, is both a lithium mine and a massacre site. To some people, it signals an opportunity to fuel America's electrified, green-energy future and to others, particularly local Numu, Newe, and Bannock peoples, it is a reminder of a violent history. Numu people call this place *Peehee mu'huh* ('Rotten Moon' in Numu) and it is the resting place of their ancestors slain in historic massacres—including one committed in 1865 by the U.S. cavalry. In 2021, the approval of the Thacker Pass Lithium Mine has splashed this contention of the meaning of this place across headlines and blogs and ushered in years of social and legal challenges to the project, some of which were led by tribes and Indigenous groups. To contextualize the deeper history of this current issue, this thesis examines Thacker Pass/*Peehee mu'huh* through many stages of its long history as part of the sagebrush steppe of the northern Great Basin and a culturally revered place to local Native peoples. This environmental history combines recent primary sources, tribal histories, anthropological studies, and scholarship of the American West to provide the 10,000 year historical context of a culturally significant landscape currently contested over extraction. As this *longue durée* framework portrays, Thacker Pass is an ancestral homeland touched by evolving forms of violence over its history that has shaped its specific meaning to Native peoples over time, and a modern place of both extraction and subsequent Indigenous resistance. This study contends this history, while uniquely rooted in place, is also a microcosmic case study for broader trends in Indian Country and histories of the American West.

Dedicated to all Indigenous protectors of land, air, and water, from Turtle Island to the Amazon,
Aotearoa to Sápmi.

A special thanks to the water protectors at Standing Rock for teaching me how to not just pray
for the land, but to see history through its eyes. In memory of LaDonna, Myron, Joye, and Dawn.

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I. Introduction: A Timely Case Study in Environmental History

If you type “Thacker Pass” into Google Maps, your pin will drop onto a crescent-shaped pass wedged between the Double H and Montana Mountain ranges in Humboldt County, Nevada, near the town of Orovada and about 200 miles north of Reno. Type the same toponym into Google News and you’ll quickly learn the locale is the current site of a hotly contested open-pit lithium mine in its initial stages of construction, opposed by a coalition of different groups on environmental and cultural grounds. But beyond the ecological concerns with the open-pit clay mining project underway at the site, members of many Great Basin tribes currently acknowledge Thacker Pass—called *Peehee mu’huh* in Numu/Northern Paiute—as sacred. The sagebrush-covered landscape is home to culturally important foods and medicines, wildlife, and obsidian. It is the location of two massacres: one occurring before European contact that gives it its Numu name of “Rotten Moon,” and another massacre committed by the Nevada Cavalry on September 12, 1865 of at least 30 Native people, including women and children.¹ It is for this memory of historic violence—along with the traditional uses of this sensitive habitat—that some Numu, Newe, and Bannock community members in Nevada regard *Peehee mu’huh* as central to their culture and in need of federal protection against industrial encroachment. Despite legal and social opposition for the last several years, Lithium Americas commenced construction of the multibillion dollar mining project in 2023.

The Thacker Pass Lithium Mine and the controversy surrounding it has made headlines from the *Reno Gazette Journal* to *Al Jazeera* in recent years and invited a deluge of online chatter, pushing this remote place in the north of Nevada’s high desert into the national spotlight

¹ Gary McKinney, “Our Sacred Sites Are More Important Than a Lithium Mine,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (Cambridge, United States: Cultural Survival, June 2022); “Protect Thacker Pass,” *Red Road to DC* (blog), July 13, 2021.

around issues of both EVs and Indigenous genocide. To some, the project is an emblem of America's progress toward its clean energy agenda, since lithium is an essential element in the electrification needed to meet national and global carbon emission goals. To others, the now-underway mine constitutes the latest intrusion of colonialism on sacred Indigenous lands. This time it dons the mask of "green energy." This dichotomy centered around a desert mountain pass has fueled lawsuits, protests, pan-tribal Native activism, and a very public debate about the meaning of history amid a national race to mine lithium.

But behind the headlines, there is a much longer, more complex history at Thacker Pass that goes beyond just the current mining issue. This is an ancient homeland, full of traditions passed down through many generations. For some local Native peoples, the memories of violence here have lingered in place. As a site of historic trauma, Peehee mu'huh is the homeland of the spirits and bodies of the ancestors who fell there in the times before. Thus, the bulldozers turning over soil at Thacker Pass is a defilement of the sacred, the desecration of holy ground—something that would be seen as abhorrent by the general public should the same drills bore into Arlington Cemetery or Gettysburg, to quote the Native litigants in the mining suit. The cultural ramifications for this turning of soil are significant, materially and spiritually. "Our teachings tell us that it's both wrong and dangerous to disturb artifacts, land where our ancestors were brutally murdered," stated Daranda Hinkey, descendant of the sole adult survivor of the 1865 massacre, in a court declaration opposing the mine. "Removing burial sites is bad medicine."²

In many ways, Thacker Pass/Peehee mu'huh is currently a place of contradiction; it is at once a spiritual landscape and a capitalist one, a massacre site and a money pit, a place of "bad"

² Exhibit 3-Declaration of Daranda Hinkey In Support of Reno-Sparks Indian Colony And *Atsa koodakuh wuh Nuwu*/People of Red Mountain's Motion to Intervene, *Reno-Sparks Indian Colony v. Dept. of Interior*, No. 3:21-cv-00103-MMD-CLB (July 20, 2021), 12, 15–17.

“medicine.” While many Native groups regard it as sacred for its distinct environmental character, cultural resources, and association with past violence, this designation has been dismissed or disputed in the recent regulatory and social drama around the mining project. Despite its unbroken history of cultural relevance to the Numu, Newe, and Bannock peoples of modern northern Nevada, the long history of this site is obscured from the broader historical narrative of the West despite its continued meaning to the people who have inherited its place-based history.

Over its long life as a homeland, Thacker Pass/Peehee mu’huh has been made, remade, and reclaimed as a place of historic and cultural significance, particularly over its association with past acts of violence. This place holds meaning to some local Indigenous peoples, and that meaning has changed and been compounded by increasingly complex forms of violence through the years. In this timely case study in both Indigenous and environmental histories, I examine the longer history of Thacker Pass to illuminate a deep Indigenous connection to place and to explain why this site is considered sacred today, and thus why the lithium mine has been so controversial in recent years. This history of a place and its people is unique and significant in its own right, but it is also a familiar one; I argue that Thacker Pass/Peehee mu’huh and its long history is a microcosmic representation of broader historical trends we see throughout the rest of Indian Country. It is a story of a culturally significant place marred by past colonial violence put on the chopping block of extraction despite its designation as sacred by local Indigenous people. Those people, like in other places across Indian Country, mounted a well-organized effort to resist the project using social and legal avenues. Still, the project moves ahead. As historians, we can learn much from the story of Thacker Pass. Through the study of this one place through time, we glean deeper understanding of Indigenous connection to the land, how violence influences

placemaking and intergenerational memory, and how competing meanings over place continue to further marginalize Indigenous communities today.

In order to tell a more comprehensive history of Thacker Pass with more detail and nuance than you would see in some of the press clippings, I have framed this study as an environmental history spanning the long arc of the site that employs a multidisciplinary methodological approach to encapsulate natural, social, and political histories at play in this narrative. Since the land itself is central to both the current controversy and the Indigenous stakeholders' attachment to it, the hybrid environment of northern Great Basin peoples is something of a main character in this story. Beginning with the deposit of the lithium itself, I weave together different histories of one geographic space across 10,000 years of time to bring the full expanse of the site's past into focus. Through this framework I articulate the changes to the place over time and how those changes impact placemaking and the people who have imbued the land with meaning over the ages.

Place and placemaking is the running thread that weaves together this *longue durée*. Through the unique sense of place and emplacement of Thacker Pass/Peehee mu'huh, we see how people have remade place following the spilling of blood and how the distinct cultural meaning of place influences the modern drama around the mine. The first chapter of this thesis analyzes the ancient history of Thacker Pass as part of the northern Great Basin and all the societies therein, and includes the collective memory of a pre-contact massacre at the site as an early touchpoint for the landscape's association with violence. Turning to the nineteenth century, chapter two recounts settler colonial violence in the area, which culminates in the 1865 massacre at Peehee mu'huh. In this section, I analyze the details of the massacre from the historic evidence uncovered by Native litigants and their allies during the recent mining suits. The third chapter

brings Thacker Pass into the present day, where a “white gold rush” to lithium is causing the contestation of place and history at the site—a matter that Numu, Newe, and Bannock organizers are countering with a narrative that reclaims their history in a long, reinvigorated tradition of Indigenous resistance around place-based issues. Finally, I conclude this study with a discussion on the wider historical connections of Thacker Pass as a still-unfolding narrative, including its future implications for Indian Country.

Notes on Positionality & Terminology

It is important to the framing of this study to note that I am not a Native American person penning this history. My background informs my approach to the topic but it is a positionality I try to be aware of in ascertaining my biases and the weight of my scholarly instincts. My interest in both the environment and Indigeneity stems from my background in organizing in climate and Indigenous (predominantly Lakota) spaces over the last eight years, spurred by my involvement in the 2016-17 #NoDAPL movement in Standing Rock, ND and my affiliation with the groups Lakota People’s Law Project and Warrior Women. I was first made aware of the Thacker Pass struggle because of the lingering Standing Rock movement, and in moving to Reno, found this history was not well known in or outside the academy. For this reason, it is a timely case study for a historian and a crucial study in both Nevada’s past and the United States at large. Thacker Pass’s history weds an ancient past with very presentist issues and it requires fuller context to tell the story in whole. I am particularly compelled by the words of Michael Lawson, a fellow non-Native and the author of the groundbreaking book *Dammed Indians: The Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux*: “scholars urgently need to confront the realities of more recent Indian affairs and to place these important events in historical perspective.”³ So too am I

³ Michael L. Lawson, *Dammed Indians: The Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux, 1944-1980* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 199.

compelled by the words of Native elders who have graciously invited me into their lives to use my education as a way to bring more truth to the history of Indian Country and the US at large. As I discuss in the method and theory section in the following pages, I have attempted to include Indigenous voices and worldviews as much as possible while telling this environmental history. In all of this, I of course have a bias. But so does the writing of history. I concur with Rob Nixon in his assertion that “writers who align themselves with resource rebellions may help render decipherable the illegible distance between a far-off neoliberal ideology and its long-lasting local fallout.”⁴ Via my proximity and my subjectivity on the issue of Thacker Pass, I seek to help convey the significant—but previously obscured—historical connections and ramifications of the site in its current context.

A note on terminology: due to the complicated colonial history of Nevada, tribal community members in and around this issue have varying and complex tribal identities or relationships to ancestral communities. But there is no one single cultural identity for the Indigenous perspectives. I use umbrella terms “Native” or “Indigenous” at times to describe larger trends or diverse groups of people within Native America or “Indian Country,” the latter being the space in which Indigenous people live, work, organize, and think regardless of reservation borders. Such encompassing terms are particularly useful for discussing relationships to settler governments and shared experiences under colonialism, but for historians who “endeavor to emphasize Native perspectives and experiences, there remains no substitute for calling people by their communities’ names and using their Native languages.”⁵ As such I prioritize the nation, tribe, or band as a preferred cultural descriptor for Indigenous individuals and use specific linguistic or cultural names where possible to avoid overgeneralization. In

⁴ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 42.

⁵ Brooke Bauer and Elizabeth Ellis, “Indigenous, Native American, or American Indian? The Limitations of Broad Terms,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 43, no. 1 (2023): 74.

referencing Paiute and Shoshone people outside of source texts, I employ the names they call themselves, *Numu* and *Newe*, respectively. As a general disclaimer, Native Americans are not a monolith, and there is no one consensus in tribal politics or on matters of identity, and this paper employs careful language in hopes of reflecting that.

Historiography

As a narrative spanning from the deep past to the current lithium mine controversy, my research is situated within a multidisciplinary pool of scholarship analyzing Great Basin Indigenous history, westward settler expansion, massacre sites, and Native-led land and sovereignty struggles. In this study, I discuss the history of Thacker Pass in conversation with recent scholarship by anthropologists, environmental historians, and scholars of Native America. My analysis joins the emergent cohort of scholars across disciplines and subfields that seeks deeper understanding on how we in the American West either mine or memorialize a place. Through this specific case study, I offer a history that braids together the natural world with settler narratives and Native histories, and demonstrates a fluid connection between moments of past violence and the present extraction project.

Connecting Thacker Pass as a location to an ancient past in the Great Basin, my study is a historical analysis within a rich body of anthropological literature on material and physical remains. Because of its arid climate, archaeological evidence of Indigenous habitation of the Great Basin is exceptionally old. It is not difficult to find studies on the baskets, rock art, or obsidian points for the northern tier of this landscape. But while there is extensive research in this region, it is not without its enduring controversies. As a field science, archaeology is inherently extractive and often exists at odds with the traditional knowledge systems of Indigenous communities—without which the discipline could not exist. An industry over 150

years old, anthropologists today continue to survey public lands used by hundreds of generations of Native people, sometimes with or for extractive industries like in the lithium project. Problems persist. According to Michon R. Eben, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO) for the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony, very rarely do items uncovered during these surveys—which are not federally protected in the same way as human remains—return to the cultural ownership of tribes near the dig sites.⁶ In using anthropological texts, one must be cognizant of these biases therein.

With such ancient material evidence coming out of the northern Great Basin, Numu and Newe people are routinely at the center of ongoing disputes about ethnographic history, genetic affiliation, and rightful cultural ownership of artifacts or human remains. Important to the discussion of Thacker Pass’s ancient history is the controversy concerning a theory called the “Numic Spread,” a documented movement of new Uto-Aztecan speakers into the area some 500 years ago, bringing with them their language and technologies. Because this event was formative in the dispersion of the Numic dialects spoken today, some scholars—at times armed with problematic DNA tests comparing Paleoindians with modern tribal members—propagate a theory, to various ends, that Numic-speaking peoples completely replaced the population living in the Great Basin since time immemorial.⁷ Some deployed this hypothesis in attempts to negate ancestral claims of modern Indigenous people with those of the deep past, especially around issues of the proper cultural ownership of biological remains. One example is the controversy over the genetic make-up of the Spirit Cave Mummy before its eventual repatriation to the Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribe in 2016.⁸

⁶ Eben stated this during a presentation during the Recharge Nevada conference on March 8, 2024 at the University of Nevada, Reno.

⁷ A summary of the creation of the Numic Spread hypothesis and the scholarly and political debates around it can be found in Hittman, *Great Basin Indians*, 197–203.

⁸ Ewen Callaway, “North America’s Oldest Mummy Returned to US Tribe after Genome Sequencing,” *Nature* 540, no. 7632 (December 1, 2016): 178–179.

Despite some of the academic disagreements about the Numic Expansion, this study operates through the understanding that Native people in the Great Basin are directly descended from people who lived here in the western continent for thousands of years. Further, Native people in the Great Basin today, as Michael Hittman notes, disagree with the implications of the Numic Expansion “almost to the person.” Former tribal chairman of the Pahrump Southern Paiute Richard Arnold has stated that the theory implies that his ancestors could not intermix, adapt technologies, or trade. At a 2006 meeting of the Great Basin Anthropological Conference, Arnold held up an empty jar and declared, “Buy Numic Spread...Tastes good, especially on white bread!”⁹ But there are also non-Native scholars who cast their doubts, arguing that the arrival of new people in the anthropological record should not suggest without sufficient evidence an entire genetic replacement, but likely implicates intermarrying, cultural adaptation, and perhaps at times, outbursts of conflict. As Great Basin archaeologist Steven Simms states, “there is no question that living Native American peoples are descended from ancient Americans.”¹⁰

Outside of anthropological records and the scant military or mining mention, the specific place of Thacker Pass/Peehee mu’huh is not well-represented in the historiographies of the West. However, there is increasing scholarship at the nexus of the environment, Indigenous histories, and violence; this trend has led to greater understanding of the sociopolitical and environmental processes that led to the recent and bloody history of the West, including that of the northern Great Basin. The pre-contact massacre and the 1865 massacre of at least 31 Paiutes at Thacker Pass, two major components of my thesis, are inseparable from the larger history of westward expansion into Indigenous territories.

⁹ Hittman, *Great Basin Indians*, 199–204.

¹⁰ Steven R. Simms, *Ancient Peoples of the Great Basin and Colorado Plateau*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2016), 270.

We can contextualize Thacker Pass through broader surveys of violence. Newe (Te-Moak) historian Ned Blackhawk portrays the context of early nineteenth century Native-settler encounters in the Great Basin as “steeped in violence” over competition for resources.¹¹ A compelling body of work on massacre sites in the West helps scholars see the way place-based memory is culturally stored/transmitted, forgotten, or obscured. Painful memories can “haunt” a place, causing ripples that permeate into the present.¹² Some scholars ground their studies of massacres in contemporary issues or engage with discourse in the public or political arenas to weave facts of the past into the fabric of contemporary struggles. Recalling such difficult histories, after all, is a political act, and therefore immovable from the present context of its remembrance. Ari Kelman in his survey of Sand Creek and its memory notes “people engaged in the process of memorialization envision their projects with eyes cast toward the present and future as well as the past.” The Camp Grant Massacre of 150 Apache people in 1871, the subject of the 2009 *Shadows at Dawn: An Apache Massacre and the Violence of History*, was an immediate political issue in its aftermath and still holds sociopolitical implications in the victim community today. Thacker Pass is similarly characterized by a merging of past trauma and contemporary issues—apparent in the contested status of not only the mine, but also of the memory of a state-sanctioned massacre whose few survivors have lineal living descendants.¹³

For scholars, there is and will likely always be a semantic debate around employing the terms “massacre” or “genocide” in histories of the West. Some historians contend that the utility of such words is that they create a frame of reference to understand the scale of human suffering,

¹¹ Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 148.

¹² James F. Brooks, *Mesa of Sorrows: A History of the Awat’ovi Massacre*, National Geographic Books, 2016, “A Gate Unguarded.” n.p.

¹³ Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 3; Karl Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn*; For declarations from descendants, see exhibits in *Bartell Ranch LLC v. Ester M. McCullough*, No. 3:21-cv-80-MMD-CLB (United States District Court of Nevada 2021).

be it yesterday or a century and a half ago.¹⁴ The power of naming atrocity is important. It was immediately clear to Lakota communities in 1891 as they grieved the 300-plus people slaughtered by soldiers at Wounded Knee in South Dakota.¹⁵ As historian David W. Grua explains, Lakota communities advocated through all possible streams of the settler government and called on the shared humanity of settlers for acknowledgement of the site. Kelman similarly interrogates the significance of terminology for atrocities, analyzing the modern debate over “battle” versus “massacre” for the killings at Sand Creek in 1864.¹⁶ In fact, the massacre at Thacker Pass only a year later shares some grim parallels with Sand Creek: it was an ambush attack committed in the morning, with troops targeting fleeing women and children, and stoking little effective retaliation. In both cases, food and material caches were deliberately destroyed.¹⁷ With local tribes demanding federal recognition under the National Historic Preservation Act, similarities to other places of trauma—and the words we use to discuss it—are important to placing Thacker Pass in larger Native, local, or national histories. Discussing mass murders, I use the term massacre, and for events part of the broader agenda to eradicate or forcibly assimilate Native peoples, I use the term genocide.

In the larger historiography of the American West, Native Americans are by no means totally absent from the narrative, but to say the nuance of their existence has been misrepresented is an understatement. For many decades, the chronicle of westward expansion was a chronicle of the defeated or “vanishing” Indian, where first disease wiped out Indigenous communities and military assaults finished the job, culminating with the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890. This

¹⁴ For discussions of “genocide” framework, see Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873* (Yale University Press, 2016); Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Beacon Press, 2014).

¹⁵ David W. Grua, “‘In Memory of the Chief Big Foot Massacre’: The Wounded Knee Survivors and the Politics of Memory,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 31–51.

¹⁶ Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre*, 225–227.

¹⁷ Thierry Veyrié “A Historical Ethnography of the Fort McDermitt Paiute-Shoshone” (Ph.D., United States; Indiana, Indiana University, 2021), 70–72.

sentiment has obscured the nuance of Native experience in the foundational chapters of our national history. In a 1985 article, Rodman W. Paul and Michael P. Malone wrote:

“No topic has loomed larger or received more continuing attention than the [N]ative American, but from the earliest New World contacts few themes have been handled more erratically or with greater disregard for reality.”¹⁸

But this erasure is swiftly changing in the scholarship. Authors like Vine Deloria Jr., Dee Brown, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and Benjamin Madley have made substantial contributions to truth-telling about Indigenous genocide and trauma and paved the way for further studies of darker parts of our shared history.¹⁹ Through the intentional admittance of traditional knowledge and Indigenous paradigms into historical practice, we have been able to uncover more information about Indigenous histories, connection to place, and Indigenous perspectives on settler narratives. A recent model for a place-based history that weds Indigenous history to a modern issue can be seen in *Kul Wicasa* (Lower Brule Lakota) author Nick Estes’ 2019 *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*.

More scholarly attention to Indigenous place-based histories are not without real world ripples. Pawnee historian James Riding In’s research on a massacre site proved to be instrumental in the eventual repatriation of human remains from the Smithsonian Institution.²⁰ Blackhawk cites Native visibility in 2002 Olympic Games ceremonies to demonstrate how “rewriting of histories” in the area can disrupt existing teleologies, in this case disrupting the

¹⁸ Rodman W. Paul and Michael P. Malone, “Tradition and Challenge in Western Historiography,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1985): 41.

¹⁹ Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, Later Printing edition (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988); Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Beacon Press, 2014); Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873* (Yale University Press, 2016); Dee Brown and Hampton Sides, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, First Edition (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2007).

²⁰ Susan A. Miller, “Native Historians Write Back: The Indigenous Paradigm in American Indian Historiography,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 1 (2009): 36.

enduring myth of the “Vanished Indian” of the Great Basin.²¹ The inclusion or contestation of Native memory for a specific geography therefore can help root Native inheritance to a place, connecting communities to the deep past while still showing them as living inheritors and a modern, politically engaged population.²² Estes’ *Our History is the Future* survey of the 2016-2017 #NoDAPL movement blurs activism and academia, working to “chart a historical roadmap to collective liberation.”²³

While there is “significant growing literature” around these topics, the consensus of many scholars in the fields of Indigenous or American histories, however, is that the work has just begun.²⁴ In the Great Basin, there are many more settler and mining histories for every one Native-focused narrative, and the land itself bears many names of famous “Indian killers” and explorers who notoriously propagated racist beliefs about the original inhabitants of this region. As such, there’s still a greater need for more Indigenous perspectives, more analysis of social and political intersections, and simply, just more detail and corroboration of basic facts. In comparison to contact tribes in the East or the larger Native territories of the American West, especially, “Nevada’s Indian history remains underwritten.”²⁵

The specific events of my thesis are sparse in the both the primary and secondary historic record. Native litigants, organizers, and their allies have worked tirelessly to uncover available evidence of this grim history of place and demand its acknowledgement in the courts and in the public discourse. There are a few references in secondary literature to the 1865 massacre from the perspective of settlers. Military historian Gregory Michno synthesizes the event in a brief

²¹ Ned Blackhawk, “Currents in North American Indian Historiography,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2011): 319–24;

²² Blackhawk, “Currents in North American Indian Historiography”; Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre*.

²³ Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (Verso Books, 2019), 22.

²⁴ Susan A. Miller, “Native Historians Write Back,” 26.

²⁵ Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land*, 272.

passage in his book *The Deadliest Indian War in the West*, which, written through a settler and military lens, summarizes that “Indians resisted poorly” during the event.²⁶ This assessment does not include any Native perspective. Michno also appears as a contentious figure in Kelman’s book for comments he made disputing the perception of the Sand Creek massacre and “politically correct Native American histories.”²⁷ A recent ethnographic dissertation (2021) has added more detail to the legacy of the 1865 massacre through a committed inclusion of traditional knowledge. Author Thierry Veyri , having collaborated with Fort McDermitt tribal members, includes critical local oral testimony that is sparse in other histories of the area.²⁸

By putting primary sources in conversation with the limited existing scholarship on this area, I am able to tell a hyper-localized history that illuminates more detail about Thacker Pass as a place as well as possible avenues for further inquiry.

Method & Theory

The exact location of this study, now called Thacker Pass, is located at the southern end of the McDermitt Caldera 65 miles north of the current day city of Winnemucca, Nevada. (See Fig. 1 & 2) It is situated in the high-elevation ecologies of the upper Great Basin and the broader sagebrush steppe of the western side of the North American continent. In writing an environmental history of this remote place in northern Nevada—with a narrative that includes Native peoples holistically—I employ an eclectic, multidisciplinary methodological framework to capture all the complexities of the site’s past and present. This includes secondary sources from a variety of fields and primary accounts from the nineteenth century all the way up to early 2024. More than an ethnographic survey, this history describes a physical location with its own

²⁶ Gregory Michno, *The Deadliest Indian War in the West : The Snake Conflict, 1864-1868* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Press, 2007), 131.

²⁷ Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre*, 242.

²⁸ Thierry Veyri , “A Historical Ethnography of the Fort McDermitt Paiute-Shoshone” (Ph.D., United States, Indiana University, 2021), 70–72.

geologic and ecological history that informs the spiritual and material history of local Native people, as well as its presentist context as a place of conflict and historic trauma.

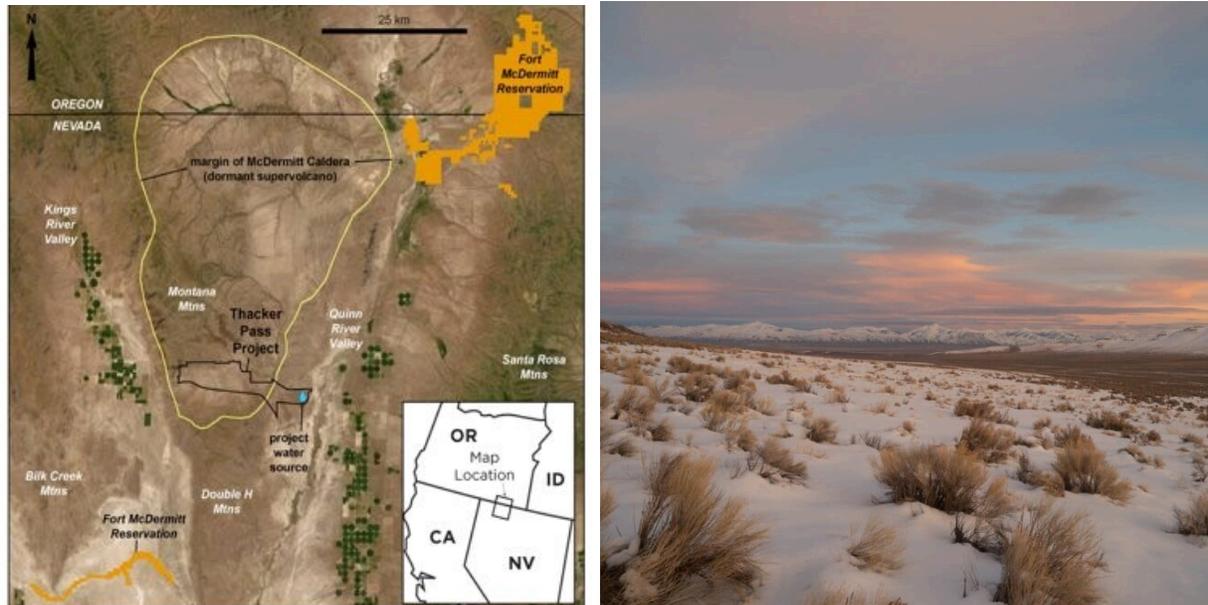


Figure 1 & 2: Lithium Americas' Map of Thacker Pass Project (left) shows the relation of the mine to the McDermitt Caldera, nearby mountains, state lines, cities, and reservation boundaries. Right, the Thacker Pass landscape covered in snow, photo by Max Wilbert.

One notable and recent contribution to the field that inspires my methodology is *The Small Shall Be Strong: A History of Lake Tahoe's Washoe Indians* (2018) by Matthew S. Makley. The author, who is not Washoe but has lived in Washoe lands and collaborated with their community, endeavors to chart a 10,000 year history of their people: “a people who refused to disappear, and when they stabilized following the initial devastating wave of American arrivals, they began to wage legal battles to recover and protect their homeland, their sovereign rights, and their culture.”²⁹ In this timely and sensitive work, Makley asks not just how Natives lost their land but how they have worked to get it back. The author weaves together a similarly eclectic body of sources to this study—archaeological texts, tribal oral histories, governmental

²⁹ Matthew S. Makley, *The Small Shall Be Strong: A History of Lake Tahoe's Washoe Indians* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 8.

documents, and his own perception of Native peoples as part of a *living* culture—to prove the significance of small western tribal histories in challenging ingrained notions that relegate them to the past.

Alongside aforementioned secondary scholarship and primary historic texts, my methodological framework relies greatly on the oral testimony of Indigenous people as transmitted through historic texts, contemporary press, or the legal filings submitted during the Thacker Pass lawsuits. The inclusion of such oral history is essential to a decolonial or subversive historical practice. Indigenous people have shown to accurately recount details of intergenerational traditional or ecological knowledge, passed down through hundreds of generations. Such memories add more detail, even if speculative or in metaphor, to a more encapsulating view of human experience, past or present. Further, oral storytelling is aligned with many communities' traditional historical practices and offers academic historians a way to not only honor that heritage, but submit voices to the record that can challenge or subvert harmful narratives.

Verbal testimony is itself a production of new sources for historians.³⁰ While scholars may once have believed that Native people, as “non literate” societies, did not have records of past knowledge, “the ingenuity and patience of researchers have regularly proven skeptics wrong.”³¹ For many global Indigenous communities, oral testimony “retains legitimacy” as a way to pass down historical information, in many cases infused with parables or a broader meaning important to the person transmitting the message.³² Despite previous colonial biases in the historic discipline, Indigenous people are perfectly capable of recounting intergenerational

³⁰ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2012), 154.

³¹ Sarah Maza, “How Is History Produced?,” in *Thinking About History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 118–56, 152.

³² Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 595.

traditional or ecological knowledge, passed down through hundreds of generations. In her research on Indigenous activism and academia, acclaimed Māori author Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes that research still exists within a colonial system of power, one that has strategically sought to erase, obscure, or bastardize Indigenous inclusion. As such, “[I]ndigenous work has to ‘talk back to’ or ‘talk up to’ power.”³³ By platforming Indigenous histories, authors can help to “talk back” to colonial powers that have historically excluded them from robust or fair documentation. Thus, through inserting Native voices in their own words, I attempt to enter into the record a narrative that is uniquely shaped by the perspectives of people who were previously excluded or outright dismissed as modern historic agents and authors of our shared history.

To shine light on stories obscured by colonial or nationalistic archives, historians must undertake the labor of “painstaking multipronged reconstruction...or reading sources against the grain.” The history of Thacker Pass has thus far been characterized by Indian-settler conflict and the displacement and subjugation of Native communities in the West—a story that continues to this day. As such, archival records and secondary analyses of this general region privilege the settler narrative, with all the anti-Native rhetoric and assumptions contained within. In regards to histories of colonial encounters, the vast expanse of the archive features predominantly a European perspective on so-called “savages.” Any attempt to narrate the perspectives or lives of “the other side” of our dichotomic history, therefore, requires reading between the lines of archival sources to come at new interpretations of history where the marginalized may speak.³⁴

While this history is especially local to northern Nevada, it has much farther reaching connections to places outside the region. Thacker Pass is just one Native land struggle rooted in a darker history, and it mirrors other histories across Indian Country. In excavating an Indigenous

³³ Smith, 225.

³⁴ Maza, *Thinking About History*, 150.

and environmental history around the current mine that connects to wider Native realities, we can see the “commonality of difference” across different nations and political struggles. Choctaw scholar Devon A. Miheusuah employs this phrase to describe the way Indigenous people, specifically Indigenous women in her analysis, “react to common experiences of externally induced adversity and change in dissimilar ways.”³⁵ Borrowing this paradigm for my study, we can account for the innate diversity of Native nations and the unique experience of tribal members while uplifting notable themes that arise in the historiography. Through a commonality of difference, we see how Thacker Pass is a unique place with its own distinct history while having key similarities to other locations across Native America as well as Indigenous lands all over the world. From a long cultural legacy rooted in place to the Native-led land defense movement, the historic actors in Thacker Pass’s history have much in common with other communities regarding challenges they faced along with their collective responses to them.

Even with limited primary sources, scholars looking at environmental and/or Indigenous histories can creatively reimagine what sources constitute archival sources. By employing non-traditional types of primary sources, scholars can help to paint more holistic portraits of moments in time as experienced by historically-marginalized subjects. Such transformative methodology is the topic of Indigenous scholar Andrea Low’s “Against the Grain: Reading Photography in a Shadow Archive.” Upon her grandmother’s passing, Low was given a 90-plus year old set of photo albums owned by a Te Arawa relative named Wehi; the albums’ moth-eaten photos depict Indigenous Oceanic performers touring colonial territories in the late 1920s. They are modern, smiling, and in an informal, domestic context not readily found in colonial archives. Moreover, Wehi’s albums contain photos created *by* Indigenous women, contrasting significantly

³⁵ Devon A. Miheusuah, *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians* (University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 38.

from usual archival captures of Indigenous people: taken *of* them and often through an anthropological or settler gaze. Ultimately, this “hidden history...is at odds with dominant settler narratives about [I]ndigenous peoples of Oceania.”³⁶ As such, we should reconsider what constitutes a source and how the pushing of methodological bounds can, in fact, tell a richer story with more agency to its human participants. Through this line of reasoning, I employ activist materials and press coverage to make Indigenous people and their efforts more visible, inserting a sort of “shadow archive” into this narrative.

Historians, moreover, have the ability to remake and transform histories by paying close attention to the lived experiences of Native people and including them in their studies. And sometimes that simply means showing up. In one 2007 article, scholar John R. Wunder directly calls on historians to “become involved with [N]ative peoples, their leadership, and their traditions regarding scholarship.”³⁷ In cadence with the growing trend of place-based history, Wunder urges scholars to become familiar with the physical landscape they are studying, as well as the learning knowledge of local elders. Of course, gaining access to traditional knowledge is not always possible or appropriate for an academic writing of history, as it can be naive or problematic to assume access to internal Native histories. I have attempted to find this delicate balance by attending events in 2023 dedicated to the Thacker Pass and speaking with those who are associated with the movement against the mine; due to geographic and time constraints, however, this has been limited and this subject invites even more community involvement and/or Native authorship for full representation in the historic record.

³⁶ Andrea Low, “Against the Grain: Reading Photography from the Shadow Archive,” *New Zealand Journal of History* 52, no. 1 (April 2018): 3.

³⁷ John R. Wunder, “Native American History, Ethnohistory, and Context,” *Ethnohistory* 54, no. 4 (October 1, 2007): 594.

Scholars can glean a much deeper understanding about social, environmental, and political histories by focusing on place-based storytelling: “every date is an emplaced happening [...] indissociably linked with space.”³⁸ By platforming the history of the people who have an intergenerational tradition of turning this space into a place—a place called Peehee mu’huh—I am able to examine the way violence has influenced placemaking, and how the meanings association are changed and challenged through time. Looking back thousands of years, we see a story where a place became a place due to an enduring cultural significance and a violent history that holds great meaning to local Indigenous peoples. The genesis of this long narrative takes us back to time immemorial in the rocky pass in an ancient volcanic field, when nomadic bands of peoples began imbuing this land with layers of meaning.

³⁸ Edward S. Casey, “How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Time,” in *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), 13–47, 37.

II. Rotten Moon, a Deeper History

“Hear me now, let my families for generations to come, walk the same region my ancestors walked since time immemorial. If you take the land away from us, there is no culture, the Indigenous in us dies.” - Deland Hinkey of Atsa Koodakuh Wyh Nuwu.³⁹

This story of place begins in the deep tectonic past of the Great Basin. Around 16 million years ago, long before humans ever called this area home, the earth ripped open at the present Oregon-Nevada border and released an intense build-up of magma in what was possibly the first eruption from the Yellowstone Hotspot. Now empty, a dome of volcanic rock collapsed in on itself and settled into the landscape as a lightbulb-shaped basin we now call the McDermitt Caldera. At the raised edges of this topographic scar formed the Montana and Double H mountains, giving way at Thacker Pass at the southern end of the lightbulb. Over time, water and sediments flowed into the caldera floor, slowly enriching the soil with bits of metals like gallium, mercury, uranium, and most importantly for this story, lithium.⁴⁰ As hydrothermal flows churned away deep underground, more lithium-rich sediments rose upward and concentrated in the clays in the curvature of Thacker Pass.⁴¹

It is this volcanic genesis that forms Thacker Pass as both a geographic space and a contemporary political controversy. The abundance of lithium wrought in deep geologic time recently catapulted the McDermitt Caldera, a fairly obscure location in the American West, into wider consciousness as a valuable source of the element needed for electric batteries. But Thacker Pass was a storied place long before anyone ever thought about the technological or

³⁹ Letter to Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, dated April 19, 2021, appended in “Thacker Pass/Peehee Mu’huh: A Living Monument to Numu History and Culture,” Traditional Cultural Property Eligibility Statement (Submitted to the Department of Interior, February 3, 2023), 98.

⁴⁰ Richard K. Glanzman and James T. Rytuba, “Relation of Mercury, Uranium, and Lithium Deposits to the McDermitt Caldera Complex, Nevada-Oregon,” United States Geological Survey, 1978; Michelle Werdann, “How Lithium-Rich Ores Are Made,” *Nevada Today* (blog), University of Nevada, Reno, December 23, 2022; Max Wilbert, “The History of Thacker Pass,” *Sierra Nevada Ally* (blog), February 26, 2021.

⁴¹ Thomas R. Benson et al., “Lithium Enrichment in Intracontinental Rhyolite Magmas Leads to Li Deposits in Caldera Basins,” *Nature Communications* 8, no. 1 (August 16, 2017): 6.

monetary implications of the lithium beneath the surface. It is a place with a distinct cultural legacy that is the cultural inheritance of modern day Indigenous peoples in the Great Basin.

Between the deposit of the lithium and the arrival of Europeans, hundreds of generations of humans traversed the area we now call Thacker Pass, using the area for various ends over the centuries. Situated within a geography that contains material evidence of complex human activity going back at least 14,000 years before the present, this is a unique, culturally significant, and sacred place to modern Native communities. This environment is home to foods, medicines, obsidian, and animals central to both spirituality and subsistence. While the environmental character of Peehee mu'huh no doubt influenced the placemaking of the pass for generations, the land is made a place in part due to a massacre that occurred there in the days prior to Euro-American colonization, an event that is said to give it its name "Rotten Moon." This ancestral connection to place and the specific recollection of past violence here are central to the tribal opposition to the lithium mine that is currently underway at the site.

To understand the historical context of the current lithium controversy in the present day, we must look backward. In this chapter, I analyze a place-based history of Thacker Pass/Peehee mu'huh and the surrounding region as a place people lived, prayed, and interacted with the landscape since time immemorial. I trace a broad and incomplete picture of human occupation as situated within the wider history of the northern Great Basin, discussing place/placemaking, the pre-colonial history of this location, and an intergenerational memory of a massacre at Peehee mu'huh. This chapter's approximate survey conveys what is known about life in this landscape and establishes the historical basis for the ancestral connection to place that lives within modern Indigenous communities.

With or without a contested lithium project, though, this land and its history are important in their own right. Peehee mu'huh was a camp, garden, pantry, and pilgrimage site for millennia of human families. We may not know what they called themselves or what they may have believed, but we know that they were here and their lives were intertwined with the Great Basin landscape they made a homeland. In a country and discipline that has historically dismissed Indigenous heritage as primitive or unimportant, it serves us well to think more critically about how places are constructed, held, or sanctified in Indigenous memory. It similarly is important to consider the meaning of long held historic connections to land in analyzing a modern debate concerning environmental extraction.

Place in the Northern Great Basin

In the field of environmental history, the study of “place” is an increasingly useful vantage point for interpreting the near or distant past. The distinct circumstances of a location—climate, physical characteristics, resources, placenames, social attachments, etc.—helps to inform the ways people survive, how they see themselves, and ultimately, how we as scholars help narrate their stories. In the study of a past without a written record, place also serves as a vehicle for analysis that allows us as remote viewers to chart change over large scales of time.⁴² But an important question looms in this study: how do we, from our distant vantage point, interpret the role of location in a history that is and will remain largely obscured by the mere passage of time? While there exists local material evidence of a complex cultural past in this general area, conjuring an environmental history of Thacker Pass/Peehee mu'huh is inherently a fraught endeavor for a historian. If the past is a different country, the ancient history of the northern Great Basin may as well be another planet. There are so many details we may

⁴² Simms, *Ancient Peoples of the Great Basin and Colorado Plateau*, 13.

never know, no matter the advancements in archaeology or shared knowledge from descendant tribal communities.

But “stories do not precede places. Rather, places help create stories.”⁴³ In attempting to conjure a glimpse of a hazy, distant past, we can look at how place has informed the unique history of Thacker Pass as a distinct environment within the northern Great Basin. Place, crucially, is distinct from space. “Undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.”⁴⁴ As we experience a location, sensorially or emotionally, we cultivate within ourselves a sense of place that may or may not be shared with those around us. This is how we attach meaning, good or bad, to physical assets of a landscape, like towns, rivers, rocks, etc. The construction of place, therefore, is dependent on many factors, including but not limited to the environmental characteristics, sensorial traits, and historic or cultural meaning. Place can also hold memories, like that of Aboriginal Australian sites associated with the Dreaming: “recollecta have been kept securely in place, harbored there, as it were.”⁴⁵ At Peehee mu’huh, we see a place that holds meaning for the memories associated with it.

Thacker Pass exists in distinct—and, at times, overlapping—environmental and cultural contexts that help define it as a place. It is located within the Great Basin, a geographic space with a total landmass that makes up a sixth of the contiguous United States. Without any external drainage between the crests of the Rocky and Sierra Nevada mountain ranges, the Great Basin is the largest endorheic watershed on the continent. This enduring place name describes this vast stretch of ranges and playas that lacked an outlet to the sea. Nestled in the Basin’s northern prong, Thacker Pass/Peehee mu’huh is also part of the Far or Intermountain West, in a cultural

⁴³ Paul Jonathan Willis, “The Forest in Shakespeare: Setting as Character” (Doctoral Dissertation, Washington State University, 1985), 2.

⁴⁴ Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6.

⁴⁵ Casey, “How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Time,” 25.

area specific to archaeologists as the Upper Lahontan Basin containing the Double H/White Horse Obsidian Deposit. Geologically, it is adjacent to the King's River and located within the Quinn River Valley, with the river's main crossing about 25 miles to the southwest of the Pass.⁴⁶ Thacker Pass is currently held within the jurisdiction of Humboldt County in Nevada, but shares a cultural history with that of the southern Oregon desert, with the state border only 25 miles to the north.

Beyond the location's more quantifiable characteristics, placemaking in this part of the Great Basin is more challenging to pinpoint with precision and impossible to describe with any objectivity. Experience of place, and any transcribed sense of it, is subjective down to the individual. Similarly, any essential character of the Great Basin remains elusive in scholarly or literary writing. American nature writer Barry Lopez called the Great Basin "one of the least novelized, least painted, least eulogized of American landscapes."⁴⁷ It is a region that non-Native writers have consistently narrated with a great emphasis on its vastness, its openness, and an enduring sense of enigma. The northern tier, like the larger Great Basin, is a place of great contrasts: playa and marshland, heatwaves and snowpacks, bighorn herds and Burning Man, a lithium mine and a burial ground.

A sense of place is built via different modes of experience, whether visual, tactile, sensorimotor, or conceptual. We can calculate a sense of this region through its natural characteristics that we can see, feel, touch, or otherwise perceive.⁴⁸ As a whole, the Great Basin is a large, open environment with an earthy palette of gray-green and brown, dotted with

⁴⁶ Craig D. Young et al., "Geochemical and Hydration Investigations of Source and Artifact Obsidian from Selected Sites in the Double H Mountains, Humboldt County, Nevada" (Far Western, February 2008).

⁴⁷ Barry Lopez, "Forward" in *The Sagebrush Ocean: A Natural History of the Great Basin* by Stephen Trimble, (University of Nevada Press, 1999).

⁴⁸ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 5–7.

“somber mountains and nearly devoid of cities.”⁴⁹ It is blanketed by an ocean of sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) and part of a larger multi-state habitat that environmental scientists call the “Sagebrush steppe.” Mark Twain called the expanse of shrubbery “an imposing monarch of the forest in exquisite miniature.”⁵⁰ The plant’s gnarled wood and oily green-gray leaves are a symbol of this specific environment, and the smell of it is distinct. Naturalist Stephen Trimble wrote that the scent “simply evokes the Intermountain West.”⁵¹

The western Great Basin tells of an ancient watery past on its rock formations and hillsides visible to even an untrained eye. The Pleistocene-era Lake Lahontan, which at its peak spanned over 8,500 square miles and would have been one of the largest bodies of water on the continent carved out much of the unique topography of this region. “Benches” marking previous lake levels can be seen on the foothills and lakeshores of Pyramid Lake today, one of the few living remnants of Lahontan. During the last glacial period, from 1.8 million years ago to around 12,000 years ago, this area was “abounding in water” and the landscape wears the scars of this past on its face.⁵² It is this geology, combined with the volcanic activity of millennia prior, that give the upper Great Basin some of its remarkable mineral deposits. As the lake began to dry up 12,000 years ago, it left marshlands, lakes, and streams in its place, acting as lifelines to animals and humans who relied on them.

Now, the northwestern Great Basin is a remarkably dry place and has been for around the last 9,000 years. Sitting in a rainshadow, this region receives considerably less precipitation than other parts of the Far West. This northern habitat is also colloquially known as “the cold desert,”

⁴⁹ Richard V. Francaviglia, *Mapping and Imagination in the Great Basin: A Cartographic History* (Reno, Nev: University of Nevada Press, 2005), ix.

⁵⁰ Mark Twain, *Roughing It*, (American Publishing Company, 1873), 15.

⁵¹ Trimble, *The Sagebrush Ocean*, 12; Donald K. Grayson, *The Great Basin: A Natural Prehistory*, Rev. ed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 57.

⁵² David Rhode, “Building an Environmental History of the Great Basin” in Catherine Fowler, Don Fowler, and Amy Gilreath, *The Great Basin: People and Place in Ancient Times*, vol. 2 (Routledge, 2010), 17.

due to plunging temperatures and consistent snowfall in colder months. Strong cold gusts of wind, called “zephyrs,” sweep from over towering mountain ranges to chill valley floors between peaks. Mark Twain quite famously said that a “Washoe wind” was “by no means a trifling matter.”⁵³ With clearly demarcated seasons, however, this region can have severe weather extremes that can make life challenging for plant, person, or animal. Survival in this arid environment, therefore, is predicated around access to water and sufficient nutrients. This is true in both the distant past and today. The existence of both droughts and frost in the area around Thacker Pass limits the expansion of sustenance-providing woodlands, which are already relatively new to this area.⁵⁴ The many fauna that call this landscape home, like the chisel-toothed kangaroo rat, sage grouse, or pronghorn antelope, are specially adapted to this challenging environment and like the sagebrush, are similar symbols to this cold desert’s unique sense of place.⁵⁵

The ecological markers of an environment, however, are only one part of the feel, perception, or attachment that people experience when occupying physical space. In his thoughtful rumination on the “spiritual geography” of the Great Basin, Richard Francaviglia considers how various communities perceive this particular place as one imbued with an intangible and philosophic significance that borders on the sublime. He posits that the high-altitude desert inspires for people inward reflection and a desire to reconnect with the sacred, whatever that means to them.⁵⁶ The characteristic “remoteness” of this area that once confounded early white explorers has become an increasingly attractive trait for spiritualists,

⁵³ Mark Twain, *Roughing It*, 160.

⁵⁴ Evidence indicates that the Pinyon-Juniper Complex as we know it has only existed for the last 2,000 years or so and is virtually absent from before 6,000 years ago. Grayson suggests a dramatic expansion of the woodlands as late as the nineteenth century and stipulates that modern pinyon lands may still be moving north. Hittman, *Great Basin Indians*, 235; Grayson, *Great Basin: a Natural Prehistory*, 11.

⁵⁵ Francaviglia, *Mapping and Imagination in the Great Basin*, 10; Trimble, *The Sagebrush Ocean*, 67.

⁵⁶ Richard V. Francaviglia, *Believing In Place: A Spiritual Geography Of The Great Basin* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2003).

wilderness enthusiasts, and others seeking refuge from busy mainstream society over the course of the last century and a half. Mormons, of course, historically heralded this broader region as their Zion, settling in Utah and being early traversers of some of the Great Basin's most threatening environments. The physical characteristics of this landscape, with ancient waterways and sweeping desert hills, have invited comparisons to the Holy Land of the Middle East. The sea of Galilee scene in the 1965 film *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, for instance, was filmed at Pyramid Lake. Burning Man—a controversial but enduring symbol of New Age spirituality—occurs every year at the heart of the Black Rock playa. And for modern campers or hikers seeking atonement in Nature with a capital N, Nevada's abundant federal lands are an inviting destination to just get away from it all. These views, of course, are outside an Indigenous paradigm, and there exists inherent problems with the concept that anyone can flee to a pristine state of “wilderness.”⁵⁷ All the same, even in the non-Native worldview, the confluence of specific variables in this locale make it a spiritual one for people across different communities.

Scholarly or western perspectives on the Great Basin's distinct sense of place often diverge significantly from that of an Indigenous vantage point. For tribal community members in Nevada, Utah, Idaho, Oregon, and California, the Great Basin is more than a landscape they escape to when in need of spiritual absolution, but the foundation to their entire worldview. As a shared and deeply interconnected environment, this environment is one of the most fundamental expressions of “home.” Attachment to one's homeland is a seemingly worldwide phenomenon, but one that is particularly present in case studies of modern Indigenous communities.⁵⁸ The concept of “home” can root a specific place as the center of a person or community's cosmological (or spiritual) universe. Visible marks of this homeland, like a mountain or lake,

⁵⁷ For a discussion on this, see William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 7–28.

⁵⁸ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 154.

“serve to enhance a people’s sense of identity.” Considering Numu and Newe people, the inheritors of the cultural legacy of the Thacker Pass locality, “landscape is personal and tribal history made visible.”⁵⁹

While we are not able to chart out exactly how ancient humans perceived their landscape or constructed place out of it thousands of years ago, we are able to work backward from the traditions of living Indigenous communities. Though specific customs, place names, legends, and meanings have no doubt been changed, adapted, or simply lost over time, we can see a glimpse of long-standing traditions of Indigenous placemaking rooted to this landscape via modern culture-keepers.

In the contemporary Numu worldview, the landscape is alive. It takes on specifically human qualities, existing in a continuum with human bodies.⁶⁰ People are just one actor among many lifeforms they share the land with, be they winged, two-legged, four-legged, or entities prescribed to environmental features such as mountains, rocks, or bodies of water. Topographic features, like the Stone Mother at Pyramid Lake or Sentinel Rock at Thacker Pass, are frequently descriptive in their naming. According to Numu oral tradition, rocks hold stories of the past. Important rocks or other sites can be sources of *puha*, a fluid power or energy that is central to northern Great Basin spirituality and likely stems from traditions spanning thousands of years of history.⁶¹ It is the essence that flows through both the physical and spiritual planes, transcending temporal boundaries to bring together people with the souls of the land who have long since departed. *Puha* spatially anchors people to their landscape and all the cultural meaning therein.⁶²

The *Koodakuh* people (the People of Red Mountain,) now localized near Fort McDermitt,

⁵⁹ Tuan, 149-158.

⁶⁰ Veyrié, “A Historical Ethnography of the Fort McDermitt Paiute-Shoshone,” 258-259.

⁶¹ Hittman, *Great Basin Indians: An Encyclopedic History* (University of Nevada Press, 2013), 76-77.

⁶² *Puha* is sometimes spelled *booha* in literature, but I have opted for the *puha* spelling in reflection of recent usage in scholarly works as well as in Numu uses.

identify the geologic feature of their name as “a living feature, salient yet inspiring respect and deference, a physical embodiment of the native character of the Great Basin.”⁶³

The land in the Numu-Newe worldview blends the sacred with the material, the past and the present. Rather than an inert background to their history, landscape is more accurately described as a mutual partner to people, with whom they are constantly interacting and renegotiating physical and spiritual relationships. Placemaking therefore is a cultural activity, “a way of constructing history itself, of inventing it, of fashioning novel versions of ‘what happened here.’”⁶⁴ The high desert landscape is not only the visage of a long Indigenous history, it is *how* history is recorded. Joseph Lent of the Bridgeport Paiute writes:

“Mountains, canyons, valleys, and lakes all reflect points of contact of origins; for instance: the mountain where this happened, the lake where such and such originated, the canyon that was carved out by so and so, and the valley where the people once congregated before such and such took place. The entire landscape within Paiute country was rolled out like a monumental history scroll, and the people knew how to read it.”⁶⁵

It is through this framework that we can understand how land holds memory for living tribal communities, including distant memories of trauma or violence, as in the case of Thacker Pass/Peehee Mu’huh. Perhaps not all of us know how to read this landscape. For the people who regard it as part of their inherited ancestral territory, though, place is the bridge between the geographic features and collective memory and storytelling. It is within this spatial and sensorial context that the expansive history of human occupation in and around this site takes center stage.

An Ancient “Human Wilderness”

Traveling across the northern Great Basin today, you would be hard pressed to notice any glaring evidence of a busy ancient human past on the surface. “The remarkable stories of this

⁶³ Veyrié, “A Historical Ethnography of the Fort McDermitt Paiute-Shoshone,” 35.

⁶⁴ Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 6.

⁶⁵ Joseph Lent, “The Ever-Changing World of the Paiute,” *Eastern Sierra History Journal* no. 1 (January 1, 2020), 1.

land are not obvious,” but they are there, especially if one knows where to look.⁶⁶ Petroglyphs appear in bright contrast on stone faces. Discarded flakes of obsidian, the byproduct of some ancient craftsman, lay discarded in the soil near major rock outcroppings. Remnants of projectile points, once possibly tipping atlatl darts, litter a sea of creosote and sagebrush. Such evidence allows archaeologists to confidently date the earliest known human habitation of the northern Great Basin as far back as the Paleoindian period (14,500-12,800 calibrated years before present.) A breadcrumb trail of artifacts similarly show a consistent, though varied, presence across Nevada’s northern tier in the millennia that follow.⁶⁷

For many of the Indigenous residents in the area today, though, the time of the “peopling” of the Great Basin is more or less inconsequential to their own connection to their history before settler colonization. There is no need for “an origin point” of their history. Washoe, Numu, Newe, and Bannock people’s stories hold that they have been here since “time immemorial,” and their creation stories reflect that. The Numu—whose ancestral territory encompasses much of the northern Great Basin—say that their people originated from Malheur Cave just across what is now the Oregon border.⁶⁸ “We’ve lived here forever. We even have stories of our people living here when that McDermitt Caldera was still active.”⁶⁹ Whether the origin point of this history is “time immemorial” or 14,500 years before the current era, the certainty is that the northern Great Basin has been home to Native American communities for a very long time. By putting existing

⁶⁶ Trimble, *The Sagebrush Ocean*, xi.

⁶⁷ William R. Hildebrandt et al., “Prehistory of Nevada’s Northern Tier: Archaeological Investigations along the Ruby Pipeline. (Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, No. 101),” March 11, 2016, 365.

⁶⁸ Wilson Wewa, *Legends of the Northern Paiute: As Told by Wilson Wewa*, ed. James A. Gardner (Chicago: Oregon State University Press, 2017), 5; Talli Nauman, “Tribes Say ‘No’ to Lithium Mining at Nevada Massacre Site,” *Buffalo’s Fire* (blog), February 19, 2023, <https://www.buffalosfire.com/tribes-say-no-to-lithium-mining-at-nevada-massacre-site-2/>.

⁶⁹ Paul Feather, “Finding Ourselves at Peehee Mu’huh: An Interview with Daranda Hinkey,” *CounterPunch.Org* (blog), June 4, 2021, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2021/06/04/finding-ourselves-at-peehee-muhuh-an-interview-with-daranda-hinkey/>.

(and evolving) archeological studies in conversation with tribal histories, though, we are able to see emergent patterns about life in the ancient Great Basin. Despite fluctuations in settlement patterns, population make-up, or the availability of resources over time, there exists continuities in both the material culture and oral tradition that help point to an unbroken line of cultural inheritance for modern day Indigenous communities. Moreover, while many people today seek out the Great Basin as a remote wilderness, “in the ancient past, it was a human wilderness” where people influenced their environment as much as it influenced them.⁷⁰

We can understand some details about people who lived in the northern Great Basin many thousands of years ago due to the region’s tendency to preserve certain types of artifacts. Experts term this a “preservation bias.” As such, this region is the home of many archaeological “firsts” that have helped push back the date of human habitation in this part of the continent. Some projectile spear points from the Archaic period from this general area are dated to a maximum of 14,000 years old, pointing to the possibility of a projectile tradition in the West even older than Clovis.⁷¹ Experts believe fishing cordage found at Pyramid Lake, dated at least 9,000 years old, are possibly “the oldest fishing implements in the New World.”⁷² The area of our study, Thacker Pass, neighbors culturally significant cave sites to the east, northwest, and south that contain burial bundles or other meaningful artifacts of ancestors. It is thought that places containing these objects or the burials of ancestors would be significant sources of *puha* and were to be revered in practical and spiritual use.⁷³

Contrary to the perception of “isolated tribes” espoused by earlier generations of anthropologists, the ancient Great Basin was a region characterized by widespread

⁷⁰ Simms, *Ancient Peoples of the Great Basin and Colorado Plateau*, 271.

⁷¹ Hittman, *Great Basin Indians*, 4.

⁷² Hittman, *Great Basin Indians*, 10.

⁷³ Fowler, in Fowler, Fowler, and Gilreath, *The Great Basin: People and Place in Ancient Times*, x, 112-114.

interconnection between communities who were mobile and nimbly suited to their challenging desert environment. Obsidian projectile points, woven textiles, and seashells help trace intricate migration routes across large areas of land and through generations of people. Included in these routes is obsidian gathered near or in the deposit in the Double H Mountains at Thacker Pass.⁷⁴ Archaeologists also point to a transmission of technology across wide spaces that point to a Great Basin where people were very much keeping up with their neighbors. “For the past 13,000 years, the wilderness of the Ancient Desert West was a human wilderness.”⁷⁵ While some of the early literature on this region has emphasized its long history as “prehistory” (as in, “empty”) and characterized by “primitive” hand-to-mouth subsistence, more recent scholarship on the subject emphasizes the utility of past Great Basin peoples in living a semi-nomadic lifestyle that was uniquely suited to this particular environment, with systems of knowledge that were finely attuned to their surroundings and cultural needs. People lived in cadence with the year and resource availability, moving seasonally and rarely creating permanent settlements; not because they could not, but because they did not need to. While the northern Great Basin can surely be a place with “feast or famine” conditions of survival, the ancient Indigenous residents of this area created intelligent and agile modes of existence that were “flexible to survive the periodic failures.”⁷⁶ “The lifestyle was a traveling one, but like the high mobility we often observe in modern America, the mobility of ancient foragers was not aimless.”⁷⁷

If you were a person living in the ancient northern Great Basin several thousand years ago, you would likely live in a small, kinship-based community that was tied to a larger cultural or regional identity. Whether you were a hunter, medicine person, craftsman, etc., you spent a

⁷⁴ David Rhode, *Meetings at the Margins: Prehistoric Cultural Interactions in the Intermountain West* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2012).

⁷⁵ Simms, *Ancient Peoples of the Great Basin and Colorado Plateau*, ix.

⁷⁶ Martha C. Knack and Omer C. Stewart, *As Long as the River Shall Run: An Ethnohistory of Pyramid Lake* (University of Nevada Press, 1999), 6.

⁷⁷ Simms, *Ancient Peoples of the Great Basin and Colorado Plateau*, 32.

portion of your day doing limited repetitive physical labor, like the scraping of an antelope hide or the carving of a bone awl for making fishnets, depending. This workload would be determinant on your age, gender, and station or specialization within your community. You would collaborate within your kinship group on day-to-day chores and provisions, occasionally connecting with the larger group or people from other cultures to trade, intermarry, ally, or war with. You might be working on something you can hopefully trade for a bear's tooth or other precious item you could make an accessory for yourself, as a gift, or as a valuable trade item. If you had a partner, it is likely you two would be monogamous, though polygamy was probably not culturally forbidden, especially for siblings marrying a single spouse. You would also likely spend a good deal of time walking from one place to another, taking turns carrying packs or caring for children, able to traverse many miles a day by today's standards. Like the rest of your people, this lifestyle would give you an intimate knowledge of the land, including places to find food or medicine, stash your things for later, or access the spiritual realm through ritual. One night, you and your family would perhaps stop in the crescent-shaped cover of what is now called Thacker Pass, prized as a shelter for its rocky defenses on all sides. In the morning you and your party would stash some seasonal items in a nearby cave, then scout for plants, root vegetables, or perhaps a piece of obsidian before you continue your journey through the cold desert.⁷⁸

The specific details of ancient life in Thacker Pass would of course depend greatly on the time as much as the place, and the who as much as the where. Yet we can broadly imagine what life was like here thousands of years ago through the existing body of knowledge within tribal

⁷⁸ This speculative summary is based on broad trends in anthropological and ethnographic literature that include studies of the northern Great Basin. For details regarding ancient lifeways broadly, see Fowler, Fowler, and Gilreath, *The Great Basin: People and Place in Ancient Times*; See Simms, *Ancient Peoples of the Great Basin and Colorado Plateau*, for analyses regarding migration routes, toolmaking, and social relationships. For brief summaries and further reading recommendations on specific topics, like "Paleoindians" or "rock art," consult the encyclopedic volume *Great Basin Indians* by Hittman.

nations and studied by anthropologists. Speaking generally, the high desert environment often necessitated a semi-nomadic lifestyle in this region over the last 10-14,000 years, and depended greatly on larger climatic shifts or changes to resources. In the Middle Archaic around 8,000 years ago, for instance, the receding waters of Lake Lahontan would have made life a touch harder for locals. With warmer temperatures and recurrent droughts during this period, resources may have become scarce. Village sites that were occupied centuries prior were abruptly abandoned.⁷⁹ In the formidable aridity of the Upper Lahontan, people, generally, followed the water, fleeing from sites of desiccation. When people did stay put for longer periods of times, they often did so near rivers, lakes, and marshlands. The productive zones offered nutrient-rich opportunities for fishing and gathering and access to important resources for textiles and other goods needed to make clothing, shelter, and tools. “Wetlands...may well turn out to have been the engine of Great Basin prehistory, as changes to their character drove shifts in regional and local population densities.”⁸⁰

Ancient peoples were not passive victims to a difficult environment. Nor was the environment a deterministic influence into all chapters of human history in this area. Archaeological evidence points to a long tradition of people ingeniously managing their landscape for their needs; this can be seen in the construction of hunting blinds or the use of fire for culling and regenerating native grasses.⁸¹ Similarly, a rock art boom in the Late Archaic period in the Great Basin attests to a heightened use of the environment to express spiritual or practical knowledge about the environment. Petroglyphs could recount creation stories, provide warnings or directions, or note the place where a successful hunt had taken place. The excavation

⁷⁹ Hittman, *Great Basin Indians*, 57.

⁸⁰ David B. Madesen and Robert L. Kelly, “The ‘Good Sweet Water of the Great Basin Marshes’” in Fowler, Fowler, and Gilreath, *The Great Basin: People and Place in Ancient Times*, 85.

⁸¹ Simms, *Ancient Peoples of the Great Basin and Colorado Plateau*, introduction

of flat pebbles with glyphs inscribed onto them in this region speaks to a culture of transporting small pieces of rock art, which could have also been used by medicine people as “doctoring stones” in healing or spiritual ceremonies.⁸² People, similarly, have been engaging and reengaging with the Great Basin’s famed rock art for a very long time. Anthropologists have shown that ancient Native people “enhanced, modified, or otherwise reworked some rock art panels” hundreds or thousands of years after the original creation.⁸³ This pokes at interesting lines of evidence to think about change over time and how people actively reimagined their shared landscape. Did they do this ritualistically? Did they believe something akin to *puha* was transmitted via the act of retracing the lines of a glyph?

Of course, artifacts do not tell the full story and neither do scholars. Anthropologists are inherently limited in their ability to articulate the significance of a deep Native past given their proxy to colonial academic tradition that has historically disregarded Indigenous perspectives on their own histories or their modes of conduct for analyzing cultural materials. The field continues to integrate more oral histories and traditional knowledge to supplement information gleaned from the scientific method and usher in new collaboration between tribes and academics. But it remains difficult to capture the inextricability of Indigenous relationship to place through an academic lens, with intergenerational connection to the land existing in oral tradition and in ways outside of a colonial quantified grasp. From a contemporary Numu viewpoint:

“The expanse of our traditional land and vastness of our existence which has been integrated into the archive of the earth itself extremely predates the thoughts and developmental understanding of those who desire to categorize a living force into the four walls of western science’s imagination.”⁸⁴

⁸² Hittman, *Great Basin Indians*, 56, 259.

⁸³ Alanah Woody and Angus Quinlan, “Rock Art in the Western Great Basin,” in Fowler, Fowler, and Gilreath, *The Great Basin: People and Place in Ancient Times*, 138.

⁸⁴ Lent, “The Ever-Changing World of the Paiute,” 8.

Oral tradition in Indigenous communities helps to relay ethnobotanical information and reinforce social codes of conduct.⁸⁵ Numu oral histories, as recounted by Warm Springs Paiute Wilson Wewa, are profoundly rooted in the precise environment of their landscape. The land, “human people,” and “animal people” are all equal and share the same environment and expectations for behavior. Important resources, like obsidian for knapping or plants for healing, are a compact between Creator and the Numu (meaning literally, “The People.”) These gifts are to be respected and not taken for granted, as is warned in oral tradition. Walking through a Numu landscape comes with it a specific set of conduct that stems from this enduring attachment to their specific homeland.⁸⁶

Today, Numu and Newe people speak of a long tradition of use at Thacker Pass in opposition to the current mining projects in the caldera, including the lithium project centered in this study. Fort McDermitt tribal elder Myron Smart stated in a 2021 radio broadcast about the lithium development that local Native Americans have used the Double H obsidian deposit for thousands of years.⁸⁷ Archaeologists posit that the obsidian was likely a valuable resource to ancient craftspeople for its quality and color, including brilliant gray-green, green, purple, or blue intrusions in the deposits. Points that scientists confirm to originate from the Double H Mountains have been found across northern Nevada, especially from the Middle to Late Archaic periods (8,000-3,000 years ago.) The distribution of these projectiles speak to ancient travel and trade networks with the geochemical signature of the rocks at Thacker Pass serving as one point of contact.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Angela Cavender Wilson, “Grandmother to Granddaughter: Generations of Oral History in a Dakota Family,” in Devon A. Mihesuah, *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians* (University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 29.

⁸⁶ Wewa, *Legends of the Northern Paiute*.

⁸⁷ Hildebrandt et al., “Prehistory of Nevada’s Northern Tier”, 176.

⁸⁸ Frank X. Mullen, “The Lithium Paradox,” *Reno News & Review*, April 26, 2021.

It is also probable that Thacker Pass was a destination for hunting parties, as big game animals tend to frequent the foothills and the nearby Quinn River Crossing. *Pee'zeh* (Sentinel Rock), a prominent feature to the landscape, is an ancestral lookout point in times of conflict or in search of big game.⁸⁹ This is also a place to forage plants, some that are considered powerful medicines. Two important local Native foods, wild onion and *toza*, grow in the area; tribal community members still gather these items near the Pass today. The craggy rocks surrounding the Pass may have also been natural defenses and cache spots for semi-nomadic travelers of yesteryear seeking protection or to stash food, weapons, or medicines to lighten their load and/or create a store for lean times. People in this region have also been historically known to bury their departed loved ones in bundles wedged inside rock formation. The propensity to use rocks as storehouses and cemeteries makes the Numu conception that rocks “hold stories” a rather literal one for our purposes, given the historical analyses these remnants make possible for this study. While we may not be able to know exactly how people perceived this site over the last 10,000 years, we can glean that Thacker Pass was a place that was traversed and used by people who no doubt imbued and nurtured changing meanings and values to this place.

There is much that is still unknown about the tens of thousands years of history in the Great Basin, but putting archaeological understanding in conversation with tribal histories can assist in crafting a clearer view of the experience of ancient life in this blustery desert. In both anthropological and Indigenous knowledge systems, an ancient northern Great Basin is one of mutual interaction between people and environment. The land changed, the people changed, and vice versa; and so goes the story of Indigenous presence in the Great Basin for the better part of 14,000 years. A continuous and visible thread exists between prehistoric populations and

⁸⁹ “Thacker Pass/Peehee Mu’huh: A Living Monument to Numu History and Culture,” Traditional Cultural Property Eligibility Statement (Submitted to the Department of Interior, February 3, 2023), 35.

Indigenous communities across northern Nevada today. Tule duck decoys stowed away in Hidden Cave 4,000 years ago are virtually the same design as those sold at the Pyramid Lake tribal gift shop an hour to the northwest. According to anthropologist Kay Fowler, who dedicated her life's work to the Great Basin's rich textile traditions via Indigenous collaboration, you can trace changes in weaving patterns in an unsevered chain, connecting basketmakers from 10,000 years ago (at least) to modern day Native artists in Numu and Washoe territories.⁹⁰ These are only small glimpses at a challenged, but resilient cultural legacy—one of adaptation, flexibility, and innovation—that is as tangible as a rock carving or picking up a local Native-made souvenir.

Peehee Mu'huh: Memory of a Massacre

Not all of Peehee mu'huh legacies are positive cultural uses, though. The curved east-west mountain pass is the epicenter of a painful memory of a violent act committed against ancestors of the Numu people. It is this event in the far-off history of the Great Basin that first associates this place with trauma. While the place in our focus is now called Thacker Pass, some of the living people who regard it as a sacred, cultural district refer to it by its Numu name *Peehee mu'huh*, literally meaning “Rotten Moon.” Both the Numu and Newe have a tendency to name environments descriptively, whether for their physical likeness or to invoke some kind of collective memory. This toponym is said to allude to not only the Pass's unique moon-like shape through the Montana and Double H mountains, but its longstanding associations with violence. (See Fig. 3)

⁹⁰ *Hidden Cave*, Short film (University of Nevada, Reno, 2013), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEc958dkotE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEc958dkotE;); Fowler, Fowler, and Gilreath, *The Great Basin: People and Place in Ancient Times*, 61.

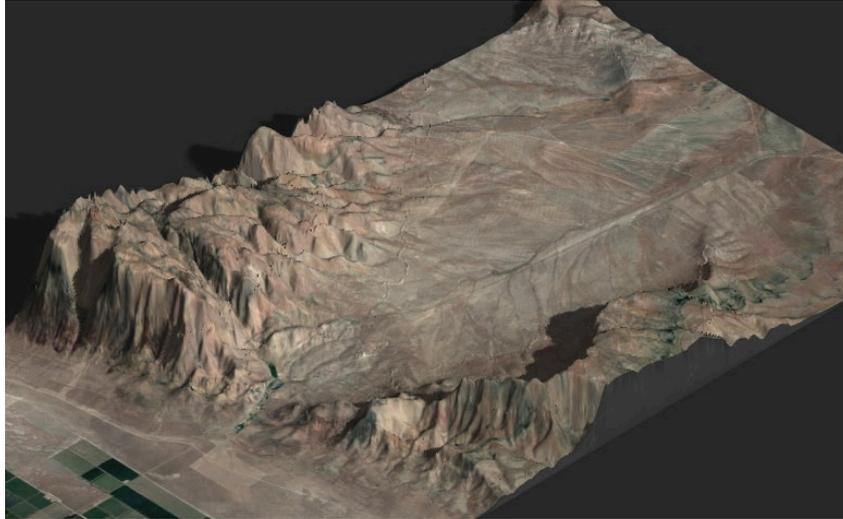


Figure 3: The crescent shape of Thacker Pass is visible via this geographic model from USGS Earth Explorer.

In several of the legal filings surrounding the current lithium mine at the site, tribal plaintiffs have included the massacre at Peehee mu’huh prior to European invasion in their explanation of the place’s sacredness. As intervenor plaintiffs in the larger *Bartell Ranch LLC v. McCullough* lawsuit against the lithium project, the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony (RSIC) and the group *Atsa Koodakuh Wyh Nuwu*, submitted a declaration of Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone tribal member Daranda Hinkey testifying to an enduring memory of a massacre at Peehee mu’huh. The case filings state that another tribe—at one point identified as Pit River to the west—massacred a camp of Numu people while their hunters were away. When they returned to camp, they found their family members “murdered, unburied, rotting, and with their entrails spread across the sagebrush in a part of the pass shaped like a moon.”⁹¹ While many media outlets state that it is the 1865 massacre that gives the site its Indigenous name, statements made in the *Bartell* case and the suits brought forward by RSIC are consistent in asserting that this

⁹¹ *Bartell Ranch LLC v. Ester M. McCullough*, Case 3:21-cv-00080-MMD-CLB (United States District Court of Nevada 2021), 10, 4–10.

place is called Rotten Moon due to a memory that reaches much further back in time than the colonial violence of the nineteenth century.

Hinkey’s full July 2021 declaration speaks to the cultural significance of Peehee mu’huh’s particular biome, but emphasizes that it is sacred because the “bones, blood, and flesh” of her people’s ancestors “form part of the soil.”⁹² This view is contextualized best in the shared Numu-Newe perception that a landscape holds the bodies of the dead to be treated with spiritual reverence. Those raised within the culture are taught to be careful gathering plant medicines at places with such a history. Hinkey also mentions the Numu tradition of placing their deceased to rest in geologic formations, saying “we also believe that some of our ancestors are buried in Peehee mu’huh. Peehee mu’huh’s many caves, stone outcroppings, and similar geologic features were likely used by our ancestors to bury their dead in.”⁹³

It seems very little is known about this incident beyond the oral histories passed between generations of Numu and Newe people. Outside of court documents, no other sources have surfaced that provide any additional detail to this event, including how many people it might have impacted or when exactly in history it occurred. An amended complaint filed to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in 2021 includes the record of a phone call between Tribal Chairman Dale Barr and BLM archeologist Peggy McGuckian, where Barr informs McGuckian in 2009 of his knowledge of the “Pit River-Paiute” massacre occurring in the precolonial era, long before the lithium project was finally approved.⁹⁴ It is clear that, while incomplete, an intergenerational collective memory of this event exists and continues to permeate the consciousness of Numu people today.

⁹² Exhibit 3-Declaration of Daranda Hinkey In Support of Reno-Sparks Indian Colony and Atsa koodakuh wyh Nuwu/People of Red Mountain’s Motion to Intervene, Reno-Sparks Indian Colony v. Dept. of Interior, No. 3:21-cv-00103-MMD-CLB (July 20, 2021), 8, 18–19

⁹³ Declaration of Daranda Hinkey, Reno-Sparks Indian Colony v. Dept. of Interior, 11, 12–15.

⁹⁴ Kelsey Turner, “Tribes Claim BLM Violated Multiple Federal Laws in Permitting Thacker Pass Lithium Mine in Nevada,” Native News Online, December 10, 2021.

Relayed oral memory, like in the signed declarations of litigants, can often describe the archival memory of events that, even if metaphorically, convey information about the past that would have otherwise been lost to time. Further, these stories are “declarations of amazing resiliency and tenacity of a people who have survived horrible circumstances and destructive forces.”⁹⁵ Many Indigenous communities in North America employ commemorative place names that speak to past events at that location. This can be seen in battle sites of the Great Plains tribes or the naming tradition of the White Mountain Apache in the southwest, where names mark “the site of some sad or tragic event from which valuable lessons can be readily drawn and taken to heart.”⁹⁶

By all accounts, there are very few reasons, if any, to indicate that a massacre never occurred at Thacker Pass before European contact. We cannot prove it did *not* happen. The transmission of intergenerational memory is learned skill and one that is honed over generations in a way that can transmit objective truths even if embedded in allegory or nuance. Moreover, Paiute-Shoshone cultural memory generally holds that the Pit River population was something of an ancestral enemy prior to colonization. There are oral traditions locally that attest to “battles” between members of the Pit River band and those of Numu communities in various locations across northern Nevada. A 2002 survey of cultural resources funded by the BLM Nevada Office includes a site near the confluence of the Truckee with Pyramid Lake, where traditional knowledge holds one can see the footprints in the earth from a giant from Pit River who was slain by Numu warriors.⁹⁷ It is quite possible that the naming of Peehee mu’huh is part of this larger tradition to pass down the memory of historic atrocities.

⁹⁵ Wilson in Mihesuah, *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indian*, 35.

⁹⁶ Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 29.

⁹⁷ Ginny Bengston, “Northern Paiute and Western Shoshone Land Use in Northern Nevada: A Class I Ethnographic/Ethnohistoric Overview,” Cultural Resource Series (Bureau of Land Management Nevada State Office, December 2002,) 100–101.

After Peehee mu'huh earned its association with violence among Numu people, a whole new wave of violence was about to sweep in from the east. With it came a novel cast of characters, never before seen in this part of the Great Basin, who would seek dominion over people and place and add a new layer of cultural significance to the caretakers of the high desert.

III. Violence to the Land & People in the 19th Century Great Basin

*“Soldiers were sent from California and a great many companies came. They went after my people all over Nevada. Reports were made everywhere throughout the whole country by the white settlers, that the red devils were killing their cattle, and by this lying of the white settlers the trail began which is marked by the blood of my people from hill to hill and from valley to valley.”⁹⁸ - Sarah Winnemucca, *Life Among the Piutes* (1883)*

In the early hours of September 12, 1865, 18 men of Company E in the 1st Nevada cavalry moved into the Quinn River Valley to investigate campfire smoke coming from an Indian camp.⁹⁹ The cavalry planned to ambush the camp’s sleeping inhabitants as the sun rose, but some waking Numu were alerted to the military’s position and began to flee. Captain R.C. Payne then split his men into two groups to surround the canyon or the opposing valley. The men, as ordered, shot and killed any people trying to escape.¹⁰⁰ Many were still sleeping when guns sounded. At least 31 Numu people perished that morning. Only one cavalry volunteer, a soldier named E. Billings, was injured from being shot by a rifle ball in the leg. Following the attack, the troops took a trove of spoils from the massacred camp—horses, dried berries, poison darts, etc.—and set fire to any other caches of resources found lodged in the area. The men, women, children, and infants were left where they fell.¹⁰¹

This is an event that lives in the darker past of Nevada’s history. Occurring as part of the Snake War from 1864 to 1868, the atrocity at Thacker Pass is only one massacre among many committed against Native peoples during this period and only covered briefly in literature about the conflict. For Numu descendants of the few survivors of the attack, the blood spilled on

⁹⁸ Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1883), 75.

⁹⁹ “The Recent Indian Fight in Queen’s River Valley,” *Humboldt Register*, September 23, 1865; Michno, *The Deadliest Indian War in the West*, 131.

¹⁰⁰ Michno, *The Deadliest Indian War in the West*, 131.

¹⁰¹ “The Recent Indian Fight in Queen’s River Valley,” 1865; See also “Thacker Pass/Peehee Mu’huh: A Living Monument to Numu History and Culture,” 2023.

September 12, 1865 continues to mark the land in and around Thacker Pass as a place of great historic injustice. The spectre of mass murder at Peehee mu'huh in the mid-nineteenth century likely compounded the existing memory of violence at the site, wherein a surprise attack left dead kin scattered among the sagebrush.

The following chapter situates Thacker Pass and the 1865 massacre within a rapidly changing landscape in the nineteenth century, characterized by new and complex forms of violence on the environmental, collective, and individual levels. The exact location of our study begins to gradually emerge in the settler consciousness during this period: first as *terra incognita*, then in proximity to nearby geographic features, Indigenous groups, emigrant trails, military forts, and eventually, permanent settlements and reservations. Thacker Pass—known during this period only via its proximity to nearby mountain ranges, the Queen's River, and the Black Rock Desert—undergoes a transformation as the result of emergent colonial violence as both a physical space and as a legacied cultural place for local Native peoples.

With new footsteps in the northern Great Basin came new agendas and notions about the meaning of place. During the opening half of the nineteenth century, white explorers and settlers record the enduring perception that the northern Great Basin is a landscape that is barren, useless, devoid of meaning, and full of dangerous “savages” either in a state of war or desperation. The high desert was not anyone's ideal homeland, nor could it be viewed as sacred. This settler construction of place remakes the northern Great Basin in a non-Native image and is a core foundation of the racialized treatment of Indigenous inhabitants.¹⁰² A social climate of routine violence toward the land and the Native people who relied on it created the conditions for the outbreak of the Snake War and the killing of at least 31 people at Peehee mu'huh in 1865.

¹⁰² Francaviglia, *Believing In Place*, 132; Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land*, 272.

To explain the origins of the widespread violence of the mid-nineteenth century, I begin with a brief discussion of early non-Native surveying of the broader region surrounding Thacker Pass as the bedrock for migration into and colonization of the region that brought with it significant environmental and social changes for local Native peoples. Following that is an analysis on the violence to both people and place that percolates among white settlers and the American military at this time. This historical background serves to contextualize the Thacker Pass Massacre and describes the event through available primary accounts from both Native and non-Native perspectives. I conclude with a brief discussion of the settler place naming of Thacker Pass and provide an overview of the site as a twentieth century locale in northern Nevada. Through this chapter in the site's history, the meaning of Peehee mu'huh as a place is transformed through the entrance of new forms of violence into the Great Basin, culminating in environmental and social changes to the landscape. In the Numu world, the massacre of 1865 intensifies the area's association with violence and becomes, again, a burial ground of victims of mass killings. It is also during this period when Rotten Moon, the revered campground of northern Great Basin tribes, becomes Thacker Pass: an unoccupied, remote place rarely mentioned in the wider histories of the region.

Invasion & the “Foundation of Empire”

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, much of the interior of the northern Great Basin was still isolated from much colonial influence. However, Numu, Newe, and other Indigenous peoples across the landscape knew of the existence of the newcomers in the east long before they ever personally saw white faces or covered wagons. Invisible pathogens may have been the first sign; As one scholar has written, “It's likely that the effects of smallpox, chicken pox, measles,

and cholera were felt by Native groups of the western Great Basin prior to actual contact.”¹⁰³ The gradual dispersal of new resources via local trade networks may have been another indicator of impending Euro-American encroachment. Numic-speaking Bannock people integrated horses in the early 1700s. Glass beads and other materials originating from European cities appear in the archeological record in the latter part of the century at sites all along the Sierra Nevada range, also near a common migration route near the Humboldt River approximately 75 miles south of the McDermitt Caldera.¹⁰⁴ Still, in the remote reaches of the high desert just below the eventual Oregon border, Native American communities sequestered themselves from traders and the imperial affairs of British and Spanish actors for many decades following initial contact in North America’s western interior. Thacker Pass at this time likely retained its special meaning to local peoples, alongside its practical uses for hunting, foraging, and obsidian collection.

At the start of the nineteenth century, the area now known as northern Nevada appears on maps as a large white space, enigmatic in its contents or inhabitants. It was still *terra incognita*, which in a Euro-American paradigm “was often *tabula rasa*—a blank state ready to be embellished.”¹⁰⁵ As trappers and explorers started to move across and into the northern Great Basin, they began filling in the unknown parts of the maps. Oftentimes, this would have been with guidance from local Indigenous informants, without whom the mapping of the West would likely not have been possible. With an intimate geographic and ecological knowledge of the environment, Great Basin tribal people would have been valuable allies for explorer parties untrained in the ways of the desert. McDermitt tribal elder Oren George recorded an oral history in 1962 that recalls the collective memory of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark’s arrival in

¹⁰³ Brooke S. Arkush, “The Protohistoric Period in the Western Great Basin,” *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 12, no. 1 (July 1, 1990): 28–29.

¹⁰⁴ Arkush, “The Protohistoric Period in the Western Great Basin,” 31. See also Donald R. Tuohy, *Archaeological Survey in Southwestern Idaho and Northern Nevada* (Nevada State Museum, 1963).

¹⁰⁵ Francaviglia, *Mapping and Imagination*, 24.

the Snake River region around 1805, “led” by a Shoshone woman named Sacagawea. The white men, George says in a Numu dialect, “they made this map of the way through here.”¹⁰⁶ The contributions of Sacagawea, the wife of a French fur trapper, to the safe passage of Lewis and Clark are well documented in both popular and academic history. Her appearance in George’s oral history speaks to a lingering memory of early encounters in the northern Numu homelands when white men sought to chart this landscape.

As explorers and trappers traversed the forbidding Great Basin environment in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the lines recorded in their journals began to draw up the initial “blueprints for American Expansion” in the Indigenous homelands of the Intermountain West.¹⁰⁷ Gathered intelligence about trails, local peoples, waterways, and resources proved to help facilitate further white exploration, trapping, and eventually settler invasion into the area in subsequent decades. These early colonial encounters, according to Ned Blackhawk, laid “a foundation for empire” in the West that would help fuel the campaign of Manifest Destiny with all its deleterious impacts to local Indigenous communities.¹⁰⁸

Further, by traversing and at times naming the forbidding, enigmatic Great Basin environment, explorers and trappers engaged in a sort of placemaking that diverged from the Numu and Newe perception of their homelands. For many of the white newcomers, this uncharted territory was somewhere to master and dominate. For fur traders, it was a place to plunder for valuable animal skins. During the 1820s to the 1840s, white accounts of the land also helped found the racialized treatment of the people who lived on it. The trapper Peter Skene Ogden wrote in 1826 of the “poor wretches” of the Newe who subsisted on locusts and ants. These were racially-motivated and hypocritical admonishments, Brendan Lindsay argues, as

¹⁰⁶ Veyrié “A Historical Ethnography of the Fort McDermitt Numu-Shoshone”, 29–33.

¹⁰⁷ Francaviglia, *Mapping and Imagination in the Great Basin*, 71.

¹⁰⁸ Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land*, 148.

white parties traveling through the area would have been subsisting on the same type of fare.¹⁰⁹ Pitying their seeming impoverishment, Ogden notes, confounded: “[yet] they live contented and happy; this is all they require.”¹¹⁰ When John C. Frémont trudged his party through the northern Great Basin in the 1840s, he recorded his dehumanizing opinions about “root digger” peoples and showed surprise when they were able to communicate the flows of water sources in what is now western Nevada.¹¹¹ Regardless of how well suited to the landscape or how accurate their knowledge of it was, white men’s perception that Native peoples here were primitive or somehow less-than those of European descent. If early exploration in the Great Basin charted a path for the American empire to take root in this part of the West, it also helped sow the seeds of white supremacy. This foundation was critical in the accelerated exploitation of Native peoples’ resources and the subjugation of their communities in the mid to late nineteenth century.

White encroachment advanced with greater speed in the 1840s and subsequent decades. American settlers started crossing the northern Great Basin chasing the opportunity for land or riches out West. Following the discovery of gold in California, the “trickle of emigrants [through Nevada] became a stream.”¹¹² What was once *terra incognita* to non-Native society in the East had become dotted with trails and settlements on maps. The new influx during this period would create the envirosocial ingredients necessary to foment massive social disruption for Numu, Newe, and Bannock communities and the places they revered or utilized.

¹⁰⁹ Brendan Lindsay, *Murder State: California’s Native American Genocide, 1846–1873* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 91.

¹¹⁰ Entry from February 26, 1826 in Peter Skene Ogden and T. C. Elliott, “The Peter Skene Ogden Journals,” *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 10, no. 4 (1909).

¹¹¹ Frémont recounted that Numu people drew a map on the ground using sticks of the Truckee River from Pyramid Lake to Lake Tahoe, along with the Sierra Nevada and other water systems in northern California. John C. Frémont, *Reports of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843–44* (Washington DC: Blair and Rives, 1845), 206.

¹¹² Russel R. Elliott, *History of Nevada*, Second ed., (University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 1987), 34.

Violence to the Land, Violence to the People

Blackhawk describes a fundamental “primacy of violence” that was born during the early colonial encounters in the Great Basin. Prior to actual settlement, the punctuated introduction of guns and novel forms of warfare and enslavement had already left a violent mark on local Indigenous communities. By the time emigrants followed the explorers’ routes through this landscape, Numu and Newe populations were already dramatically changed from the equestrian revolution, old world diseases, and the adoption of the gun.¹¹³ Toward the mid-nineteenth century, newcomers with their rifles, wagons, and bibles created a maelstrom of widespread environmental shifts and social challenges. From the spread of invasive plants to mining operations chiseling away at the earth, colonization quite literally changed the face of the Great Basin, with the ecological ripples encompassing the northern pass at the focus of this work. A rapid upheaval of lifeways formed over hundreds of human generations resulted from widespread changes to the landscape. New competition for resources, combined with escalating anti-Native fervor on the part of settlers, created the conditions necessary for profound hostilities against the original stewards of the land. This violence left a mark on the land of Peehee mu’huh, a place changed by the ecological and cultural legacies of this period.

From a tribal community standpoint, the changes to their territories in the mid-nineteenth century must have seemed immense and visible. Over just 150 years, “[N]ative Great Basin cultures may have changed more than they had in the previous nine or ten millennia” having to adapt and innovate due to new environmental and social circumstances.¹¹⁴ For some bands, the radical shifts to the land and their culture occurred in the span of a single generation. The Paiute author Sarah Winnemucca recalled her grandfather’s first encounter with white men when she

¹¹³ Ned Blackhawk, “The Primacy of Violence in Great Basin Indian History,” *Journal of the West* 46, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 14.

¹¹⁴ Arkush, “The Protohistoric Period in the Western Great Basin,” 33.

was a child to then narrate the numerous social changes she witnessed over the span of a couple decades.¹¹⁵

The violence to the land followed the earliest white missions into the Great Basin and the deleterious impacts rippled for decades. The Hudson Bay Company openly employed a “scorched earth policy” in the lands near the Oregon-Nevada border. Fueled by capitalist and imperial rivalries, their trappers “quickly exterminated” beaver in Newe lands in the earlier part of the century. Ogden was committed to this destructive mission to create a “fur desert” in the area to stave off any additional outside competition. Already an important winter resource to Indigenous groups in the northern Great Basin, beaver depopulation altered waterways and depleted essential foods and medicines.¹¹⁶ Buffalo, though already not especially common in northern Nevada, disappeared by 1830 due to the bloodlust of financially-motivated hunting parties.

The significant environmental changes to this region were not limited to animals hunted for their fur, however. Perhaps the most enduring environmental legacies of colonization happened to the distinct plant ecologies of this region. Settler livestock depleted native grasses within just 15 years of their introduction. Cheatgrass, an invasive species, arrived with Europeans and dominates the entirety of the American West today. The annual plant dries out quickly, and in outcompeting indigenous flora, has dramatically increased fire danger in the Great Basin. Further, as diseases killed large numbers of Indigenous people, which, along with other adverse effects, forced a halt to annual land management practices that nurtured soil and staved off unwanted burns.¹¹⁷ While extraction of the land from fur trapping was already a

¹¹⁵ Hopkins, *Life Among the Piutes*, 1–7.

¹¹⁶ Blackhawk, *Violence Over the Land*, 147; Veyrié, “Historical Ethnography,” 28; Michael J. Makley, *Imposing Order without Law: American Expansion to the Eastern Sierra, 1850–1865* (University of Nevada Press, 2022), 15.

¹¹⁷ Grayson, *The Great Basin: A Natural Prehistory*, 46.

violent act, the environmental changes to tribal territories helped stoke intense social conflict. Across history, rapid changes to a place is often associated with the outbreak of violence. This is especially true in the northern Great Basin, a place where for thousands of years, survival was predicated on an intentionally careful relationship between humans and their environment. The cascade of impacts from environmental change challenged traditional Indigenous ways of living and forced Native peoples to attempt to quickly reinvent modes of survival, sometimes at peril of further threats to their collective or individual safety.

Where there was violence to the land, there was also sporadic violence to the people. In 1834, Joseph Meek and Joseph Walker, two fur trappers, massacred 30-40 Numu people near the Humboldt Sink over accusations they had stolen “trinkets” from their camp. By the end of the Walker expedition, his party had killed over 50 Native people and his grazing herd had certainly done damage to the grasslands in the area. The camp members did not appear to be making war on Walker’s men.¹¹⁸ Frémont quite famously ordered the massacre of hundreds of Wintu people near the Sacramento River in 1848, citing concerns he thought the scores of people might mount an attack on his caravan, simply because they had the numbers to do so if they wished.¹¹⁹ The advance took the Wintu by surprise and cornered people near the river, who were then unable to flee on foot. Expedition accounts recall a total slaughter, with Frémont’s men hunting them down to the person. “The bucks, squ*ws and paposes [sic] were shot down like sheep and those men never stopped as long as they could find one alive.”¹²⁰

Alongside firearms and fur traps, “pioneers” also imported with them a particularly virulent belief system of white supremacy that caused significant eruptions of violence on behalf

¹¹⁸ Myron Angel, *History of Nevada* (Oakland: Thompson and West, 1881), 145; “Thacker Pass/Peehee Mu’huh: A Living Monument to Numu History and Culture,” 12.

¹¹⁹ Makley, *Imposing Order*, 9.

¹²⁰ John C. Frémont, *Memoirs of My Life* (Belford, Clarke & Co., 1887), 418–420; Thomas E. Breckenridge, “The Breckenridge Papers,” (The State Historical Society of Missouri, 1894), 56.

of settlers toward Native people, characterized by routine and extrajudicial violence against Indigenous communities, including non-combatants.¹²¹ To many white settlers, whether surveying or starting a new life out west, the “the Interior, though sparsely populated with Amerindians, was seen by Europeans as thickly colonized by Amerindian spirits” that threatened the white male Christian American hegemony.¹²² The northern desert was a place where Indians lived, and Indians were dangerous. But as some scholars have pointed out, danger on emigrant trails were very rarely due to Native peoples. Still, as Brendan Lindsay argues in his 2012 *Murder State: California's Native American Genocide, 1846-1873*, “mortal terror [over Indians] went west with the settlers.”¹²³

Gruesomely, sometimes violence to Native people was just for the thrill of it and not for any perception of a real threat. An 1851 party led by Bill Hickman, a leader of a vigilante Mormon group called the Danites, murdered four to five Newe people near Stony Point on the Humboldt River. They murdered one woman and scalped another victim. Hickman gave no reason for the brutality but for “the pleasure that killing of redsk*ns,” according to Myron Angel in his 1881 *History of Nevada*. Such remorselessness would only fester as a flood of “reckless” settlers began pouring into the Nevada territory, some of whom—as Angel writes—“thought the reputation of having killed an Indian would transform them into heroes.”¹²⁴

When the mineral bonanzas arrived, the roiling smelters devoured huge quantities of timber from local woodlands, which devastated an important food source for Numu-Newe peoples. It was a resource that had already been disproportionately impacted by increasing changes on the landscape. Following the silver strike on the Comstock, “both [N]ative peoples

¹²¹ Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land*, 148.

¹²² D. Graham Burnett, *Masters of All They Surveyed: Exploration, Geography, and a British El Dorado* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 183.

¹²³ Lindsay, *Murder State*, 85.

¹²⁴ Lindsay, *Murder State*, 71; Angel, *History of Nevada*, 146.

and the native environment were thrown into mining's crucible. Like everything else associated with mining, they emerged transformed by the experience.”¹²⁵ When settlers imported with them new capitalist economies of cattle, silver, and transit, they initiated a mass privatization to the land that would compound the accelerating threats to Indigenous survival and core tenets of their cultures. In this already resource-scarce environment, “every fish or duck taken by the Anglos was one less for Native Americans,” and it was Natives who suffered in the difference.¹²⁶

By the start of the 1860s, the majority of Numu people were facing starvation due to the swift environmental and social changes; some raiding of settler resources increased as Indigenous people struggled to feed themselves or their families. However, as Sarah Winnemucca notes in the quote at the top of this chapter, Native people were often blamed regardless of any objective responsibility for theft or threat. Any people or livestock that disappeared from the trail, Lindsay notes, were seen as having “fallen prey to thieving Indians,” thus compounding the sentiment that offensive violence was the most practical solution to traveling whites.¹²⁷

During this time, the US government was attempting to round up and relocate Natives in response to the increased tensions, but did little to meet material needs of a people whose traditional modes of survival were swiftly upended. The federal government remained unmoved to judicate against the frontier violence in Nevada, and also likely too preoccupied by the national slavery debate as war clouds loomed on the horizon to demand any real civil order from the western territories.¹²⁸ As such, many Numu and Newe people—along with the Washoe and other nearby Native nations—were compelled to enter a wage economy working in settlements,

¹²⁵ Richard V. Francaviglia, “Into the Crucible: Mining’s Lasting Impact on the Native American Great Basin,” *Mining History Journal*, 2002, 8.

¹²⁶ Makley, *Imposing Order without Law*, 17.

¹²⁷ Lindsay, *Murder State*, 80.

¹²⁸ This is a key argument of the author in Makley, *Imposing Order without Law*, 158.

further removing them from their ancestral lifeways. The Inter-Tribal Council of Nevada's (ICTN) 1976 history of the Numu speaks to the area around the Humboldt as particularly affected by both colonial violence and environmental change:

“Old conflicts sprang up again: whites shot with little or no provocation and the Indians retaliated by stealing or shooting stock. [Numu] were not only killed in these conflicts; they were also driven away from the areas where they had lived for many generations, since the white man's stock destroyed many of the plants that they depended on for food. The area along the Humboldt River, which once supported hundreds or thousands of the [Numu], could no longer feed the people.”¹²⁹

Such dire straits fueled unrest, expressed in increased raiding and outbreaks of bloody skirmishes like that of the Pyramid Lake war in 1860.¹³⁰

Settler violence would have also had a distinctly gendered nature to it—a trend we see displayed elsewhere in the history of Indian Country.¹³¹ Sarah Winnemucca's account testifies to the constant threat of sexual violence against Numu women and girls, writing “the men whom my grandpa called his brothers would come into our camp and ask my mother to give our sister to them. They would come in at night, and we would all scream and cry, but that would not stop them.”¹³² ICTN's history corroborates this:

“Indian women, as well as Indian lands, were taken and despoiled. So many women had been abused that all [Numu] women hid from the white men. In their minds, Indian women, like ancestral Indian lands, the animals who roamed the forest, the nut bearing trees, and the clear waters, existed solely for the white man's use.”¹³³

¹²⁹ Qtd in “Thacker Pass/Peehee Mu'huh: A Living Monument to Numu History and Culture,” 13.

¹³⁰ For a thorough examination of the Pyramid Lake War, see Knack and Stewart, *As Long as the River Shall Run: An Ethnohistory of Pyramid Lake*.

¹³¹ Sexual violence surfaces in many of the western histories of extraction and migration in the west. Blackhawk (2006) discusses human trafficking and the public rape of Ute women (p. 17); For secondary analyses on anti-Native rape culture in California's history, see Clifford E. Trafzer and Joel R. Hyer, *Exterminate Them: Written Accounts of the Murder, Rape, and Slavery of Native Americans during the California Gold Rush, 1848-1868* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999) and Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873* (Yale University Press, 2016).

¹³² Hopkins, *Life Among the Piutes*, 34.

¹³³ *Numa: A Northern Paiute History* (Inter-Tribal Council of Nevada, 1976), 20.

While obscured by time and the lack of sources from a Native perspective, we can glean that sexual violence was part and parcel to a vastly changing social landscape in the Great Basin. Today, there is still a crisis in Indian Country—both in the west and broadly—concerning rape and homicide of Indigenous women; there are many scholars and Native people who trace the modern crisis’s origin to such dark corners of “frontier” history.¹³⁴

While Numu-Newe people suffered from sickness, hunger pains, and the regular threat of death or injury, the national economy benefited from the dispossession of their lands. It would have also marked a significant, spiritual kind of violence to the land of the Numu and Newe peoples, forcing changes to how they related to each other, the environment, their Creator, and the newcomers their prophecy had told them were their relatives. Current tribal descendants believe that “a very rapid loss of *puha* occurred after European encroachment.”¹³⁵ The accelerating displacement resulted in widespread destabilization and unrest, culminating in flare-ups of violence between previously-peaceful Numus and the new Nevada territory residents.¹³⁶ The eventual boom on the Comstock would only compound the subsistence and cultural crises facing Indigenous communities. Resources dwindling, their prerogative may have, quite understandably, been to “resist or die.”¹³⁷

The Outbreak of War

A hostile social landscape set the stage for the eruption of the Snake War beginning in 1864. One of the bloodiest wars fought in the West, the Snake War is named for the settler name

¹³⁴ Today, Native American and Alaska Indian women and girls are disproportionately impacted by domestic violence, rape, and homicide. For the colonial history of this issue specifically, see Andrea Smith, “Not an Indian Tradition: The Sexual Colonization of Native Peoples,” *Hypatia* 18, no. 2 (2003): 70–85.

¹³⁵ Richard W. Stoffle et al., “Tribally Approved American Indian Ethnographic Analysis of the Proposed Escalante Valley Solar Energy Zone,” October 2011, 39.

¹³⁶ Along with periods of famine, the winter of 1859-60 was a fairly severe one, compounding subsistence issues. Measles epidemics, similarly, were not uncommon during this era in congregated groups of Natives; Veyrié, “Historical Ethnography,” 98. Makley, *Imposing Order without Law*, 160, 187.

¹³⁷ Gregory Michno, *The Deadliest Indian War in the West*, 6.

for Newe, Numu, and Bannock peoples in proximity to the Snake River who clashed with military regiments across parts of Oregon, California, Idaho, and northern Nevada.¹³⁸ While Native parties “rarely attacked troops,” military officials thought they tended toward “plunder and hostility” in interactions with troops and emigrants, and thus necessitated military action.¹³⁹ Colored by extreme retaliation to any resistance of Natives to military rule, the Snake Conflict was nothing short of a “war of extermination” against Numu-Newe-Bannock people.¹⁴⁰ Historian Gregory Michno argues that the Snake War has a higher death toll than any of the Indian Wars of that era, providing an in-depth survey of the four year long conflict through primary documentation from military and personnel records.

1865 was all-around a bloody year in the northern Great Basin. Michno tallied 14 battles in northern Nevada, with 288 Indians and six soldiers killed that year alone.¹⁴¹ The military in the spring of that year commenced a genocidal campaign to eradicate any “hostile Indians” left in the greater Humboldt Valley. In April, Numu leaders Captain John and Soo met with the 1st Nevada Cavalry and made an “unauthorized treaty” to move noncombatants down to the Carson River; any remaining Native people in the area after a week’s time would be considered “hostile.” It is likely that people of various Numu, Newe, or Bannock bands were “left ignorant of the pact,” especially given the short timeframe, but military officials used the agreement to legitimize the series of massacres perpetrated in the following months.¹⁴² Nine of the fourteen “battles” waged in Numu country occurred in that spring and summer prior to the September 12 Thacker Pass Massacre. Michno provides a comprehensive examination of the details of events

¹³⁸ Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Oregon, Volume II, 1848-1888*, (The History Company, San Francisco, 1888.) 462.

¹³⁹ See Colonel George Wright’s October 1860 report, cited in Michno, *The Deadliest Indian War in the West*, xi.

¹⁴⁰ Veyrié “A Historical Ethnography of the Fort McDermitt Numu-Shoshone,” 54.

¹⁴¹ Michno, *The Deadliest Indian War in the West*, 351–352.

¹⁴² “Thacker Pass/Peehee Mu’uh: A Living Monument to Numu History and Culture,” 16; Michno, *The Deadliest Indian War in the West*, 94; Veyrié “A Historical Ethnography of the Fort McDermitt Numu-Shoshone,” 54.

during this period, with some of the violence epicentered in or near Paradise Valley or the Quinn River.¹⁴³

As bloody as the war already was, the killing of Lieutenant Colonel Charles McDermit in August of 1865 is a particularly crucial moment in this history. The leader's men had crossed the Quinn in early August, having found evidence of Indian camping in the region. A Numu warrior, who Veyrie identifies as *Awaaga?yu* (Quick Off The Mark), was hidden in the canyon and shot McDermit in the chest. His officers rushed for reinforcements, but came back to McDermit lying bleeding in the willows; he would only survive for another several hours.¹⁴⁴ His military successor decreed the camp at the Quinn River named in his honor, later becoming the reservation of the Fort McDermitt Paiute-Shoshone Tribe. His death instigated a retaliatory zeal among the Nevada-California cavalries, one that led to two major massacres of camps of non-combatant Numu people. Just weeks before the Thacker Pass Massacre, California Cavalry Volunteers slaughtered a camp during the night at an old hunting ground at Table Mountain, the site of a Numu victory against the military on May 20 of that year.¹⁴⁵ The Nevada Cavalry would use the same horrifying tactic when they came upon a camp of sleeping families at Thacker Pass.

“All Were Killed That Could Be Found:” 1865 Massacre Near the Quinn River

Until recently, the Thacker Pass Massacre of 1865 was generally obscured outside tribal histories or narratives of the Snake War. The massacre did not even have its own historical name until the twenty-first century lithium controversy cast a spotlight on this historic atrocity. There are, however, several key pieces of primary evidence that tribal advocates have introduced into legal proceedings that describe a brutal, hours-long assault in and around Thacker Pass on the

¹⁴³ In June, specifically, 21 Indians were killed in a raid in Paradise Valley, with another five people slain near the Quinn. See Michno, *The Deadliest Indian War in the West*, for a comprehensive summary.

¹⁴⁴ Angel, *History of Nevada*, 173.

¹⁴⁵ Veyrié “A Historical Ethnography of the Fort McDermitt Numu-Shoshone,” 53.

morning of September 12, 1865. These include contemporary newspaper accounts, an eyewitness account in the autobiography of Big Bill Haywood, and a pool of primary reference and military works. As discussed in the introduction of this study, there are only a few secondary pieces of scholarship that have included the event in their historical narratives. Michno includes the event, albeit briefly. A 1999 ethnohistory of the Pyramid Lake Reservation states “an entire camp [was] slaughtered along the Quinn River.”¹⁴⁶

Only recently termed the Thacker Pass Massacre, this event is referred to in several military and newspaper accounts not by the modern place name but by the attack’s proximity to local tributaries, either the Quinn River or Willow Creek. From the limited sources, we know the attack commenced at daybreak, and forced many of the unsuspecting Numu people to scatter over a swath of land northwest of the Quinn River Valley. According to an online almanac, the sunrise in northern Nevada that day would have been around 5:45 a.m. By the time a Colonel Silges arrived at Payne's camp at 8 a.m., it had been approximately an hour since the cavalry’s “engagement with the Indians.”¹⁴⁷ The bloodshed would have spread out from the initial Numu camp at the mouth of the eastern pass. According to a September 23 article in the *Owyhee Avalanche*, soldiers assailed “the scattering devils over several miles of ground for three hours, in which time all were killed that could be found.”¹⁴⁸ Some Numu people were shot in their wickiup, while others tried to flee the scene to be hunted down by Payne’s men over three long hours that morning.

One of the cavalry volunteers, Jim Sackett, told famed labor activist Bill Haywood his account of the ambush of the camp near “what is now” Thacker Pass. Sackett, by that time

¹⁴⁶ Knack and Stewart, *As Long as the River Shall Run: An Ethnohistory of Pyramid Lake*, 81.

¹⁴⁷ Stilges 1865, appended in “Thacker Pass/Peehee Mu’uh: A Living Monument to Numu History and Culture,” 2023.

¹⁴⁸ “The Recent Indian Fight in Queen’s River Valley,” 1865.

“grizzled and gray,” described galloping into a quiet camp in the dawn hours: “In a second sleepy-eyed squ*ws and bucks and little children were darting about, dazed with the sudden onslaught, but they were shot down before they came to their waking senses.”¹⁴⁹ Some tried to resist, likely to give their kin opportunities to escape the bloodshed. Some were struck down where they fought, and “many were shot as they ran.”¹⁵⁰ No one was to be spared. Sackett emphasizes the indiscriminate killing: ““From one wickiup to another, we went pouring in bullets.”” Finding young children in their cradleboards, “one soldier said ‘make a clean up. Nits make lice.”” Recounting this eyewitness statement in his 1929 autobiography, Haywood comments on his own disillusion about the great frontier wars:

“Old Sackett's tale seemed to pull a lot of the fringe off the buckskin clothes of the alluring Indian fighters I had read about in dime novels. There was nothing I had ever read about, with heart palpitating, of killing women and little children while they were asleep.”¹⁵¹

Local newspapers, a thermometer for the social attitudes of the time, celebrate the attack as a victory of war. On September 23, 1865, the Saturday edition of the *Humboldt Register* published an account of this event with the headline “Recent Indian Fight in the Queen’s River Valley,” saying the engagement was “conducted with perfect success” by Payne and Littlefield.¹⁵² A week later, an *Owyhee Avalanche* article wrote that the soldiers acted with “true bravery and commendable discretion.” The racialized, degrading treatment of Native Americans during the period is apparent in the outlet’s depictions of the event. While the *Avalanche* referred to the Cavalry as “the boys” and “good soldiers,” the Numu people are called “savages” and “scattering devils.” The author also reports on the surprise attack with a certain cheekiness, recounting the

¹⁴⁹ Bill Haywood, *Bill Haywood's Book: The Autobiography of William D. Haywood*. (New York: International Publishers, 1958), 27.

¹⁵⁰ Michno, *The Deadliest Indian War in the West*, 131.

¹⁵¹ Bill Haywood, *Bill Haywood's Book*, 28.

¹⁵² The Quinn was historically referred to as the “Queen’s River Valley,” lying east of the King’s River.

death toll as “thirty-one *permanently friendly* Indians.”¹⁵³ The kind of dehumanization levied at the Numu during the Snake War is not an isolated example of particularly anti-Native rhetoric. Regarding another massacre a month later near Unionville, Angel states the *Avalanche* is particularly valuable in capturing “public sentiment at that time in Nevada.”¹⁵⁴

The number of exact fatalities varies slightly in the primary documentation. We are likely to never know exactly who and how many people lost their lives to the Nevada Cavalry that day. The account in the *Register* 11 days after the slaughter states that 35 “Indians bit the dust, right there,” but adds that additional victims were found nearby in the days following the attack. The author concludes “It’s not extravagant to estimate the mortality in the valley of Queen’s river, the morning of the 12th, at 50 heads.”¹⁵⁵ *History of Nevada* records an exact 31 dead. But given that the camp was documented to have a higher number of people prior to the attack, recent legal filings contend that as many as 70 people could have been massacred during that fateful morning at the site.¹⁵⁶

There are only several known survivors of the massacre, including some who have living descendants today: a man named Ox Sam, who fled and hid, and two children that were taken alive by a Charley Thacker, a Native scout. Sackett recalls that he saw one man successfully escape on a “big gray horse.” In this account, Sackett also states that Thacker asked to keep the two “papooses” they found in the wickiup and eventually rode off with them. According to Haywood, the children—Jimmy and Charley Thacker—grew into “fine, stalwart men,” and had returned to Native life by the time he knew them: “as men, I imagine, [they were] much better than those who had helped kill their fathers and mothers, relatives and friends.”¹⁵⁷ Haywood also

¹⁵³ “The Recent Indian Fight in Queen’s River Valley,” 1865; “Indian Fight in Quinn River Valley,” 1865.

¹⁵⁴ Angel, *History of Nevada*, 174.

¹⁵⁵ “Indian Fight in Quinn River Valley,” 1865; “The Recent Indian Fight in Queen’s River Valley,” 1865.

¹⁵⁶ See Philip Dodd Smith, *Sagebrush Soldiers. Nevada’s Volunteers in the Civil War*, (Reno: Nevada Historical Society, 1962), 80; Angel, *History of Nevada*, 174; Bartell Ranch LLC v. Ester M. McCullough, 2021, 5, 7–8.

¹⁵⁷ Haywood, *Bill Haywood’s Book: The Autobiography of William D. Haywood*, 28.

includes in his narrative that he knew Ox Sam and asked him about what had happened at Thacker Pass. Recounted in what Haywood calls Sam's "pidgin English," the author relays an emotional oral testimony from the Numu man stemming from the days before contact with white men and concluding with the massacre at Thacker Pass:

“Lots of Indians going Quin River sink to get ducks, goose. That morning soldier come quick, shoot, shoot. I cut wickiup skin behind, go quick and get on big white horse, ride fast; soldier no catch em, no shoot em. I ride Disaster Peak. Long time hide. My father, my mother, my sisters, my brothers, I no see no more. Long time ago. Not much talk about now.”¹⁵⁸

A 1920 census records Sam's birth year as about 1840, making him 25 years old at the time of the massacre.¹⁵⁹ Haywood places Sackett's and Sam's accounts in his autobiography sometime in the mid-1880s, when Sam would have likely been around 40 years old. A 1968 thesis from University of Oregon states that a W. Miner, a McDermitt rancher who moved to the area as a boy in the 1880s, told the author that a man named Ox Sam escaped an ambush on a white horse in the 1860s and was “later allotted land at McDermitt.”¹⁶⁰

As Haywood mentions and tribal records confirm, Sam went on to father children and grandchildren. Today, his descendants make up several generations of families of the Fort McDermitt Paiute Shoshone tribe, including Sam's great granddaughters, who have been active participants in the nonviolent protest camps at Thacker Pass in 2022 and 2023, in opposition to the present day mine.¹⁶¹ As an homage to the survivor, some tribal activists dubbed the resistance base “Ox Sam Camp.”

¹⁵⁸ Disaster Peak is 25 miles north of Thacker Pass, and was possibly named for the death of four prospectors in an “Indian attack,” though it could also stem from its usage as a refuge for Native people fleeing from disasters or colonial violence in the valleys below. J.P. Marden, “The Events That Led to the Naming of Disaster Peak,” (Humboldt County Library, 1989); Veyrié, “Historical Ethnography,” 28.

¹⁵⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, Fourteenth Census of the United States, Paiute Indian Res, 1920.

¹⁶⁰ Footnote in Ruth Edna Meserve Houghton, “The Fort McDermitt Indian Reservation: Social Structure and the Distribution of Political and Economic Power” (Thesis, University of Oregon, 1968), 7.

¹⁶¹ Jarrette Werk, “Extraction and Resistance at Thacker Pass,” *ICT News*, June 9, 2023.

Given that the majority of sources regarding this event are from settler—if not outright combatant—perspectives, further specific details about September 12 remain unclear. Due to limited excavation, the exact boundaries of the massacre are not known with any certainty. In an 1868 survey, just a few years after the engagement, US Deputy Surveyor Abed Alley Palmer recorded finding remnants of “Indian lodgings” as well as human remains, which he thought are associated with Payne’s 1865 attack. His field notes state: “there are many Indian skulls and other remains to be found scattered over this portion of the Township. I found some also opposite here on the east side of the River.”¹⁶² Modern archaeological findings, as is summarized in the environmental statements for the lithium mine, have not found evidence of any victims—but it is unlikely that any noticeable traces of them would remain in the high desert environment if they remained scattered or unburied. Moreover, we are unable to know much about the terrifying experience of any of those who were murdered that day. From limited resources, though, it is clear that this second massacre at Peehee mu’huh was a massacre, not a battle under typical terms of engagement in war.

The September 1865 massacre was not the first or last mass execution of non-combatants amid the Snake War, but just one drop in a bigger ocean of violence. Just two months after the Thacker Pass Massacre, the Second California Cavalry went scouting for Black Rock Tom, a Numu-Bannock leader; a battle in November 1865 left 55-120 of his people dead. The location, Leonard’s Creek, is now remembered by Numus as *Wo?ahuu* or ‘Maggot Creek’, where “an entire village was massacred on this site, and people remember the maggots floating down the creek from the site of the massacre.”¹⁶³ In the 1860s, mass murder, battles, and famines among Natives along the Oregon-Nevada-Idaho borders accounted for devastating and dramatic

¹⁶² Abed Alley Palmer’s United States General Land Office 1868 Field Notes, appended in “Thacker Pass/Peehee Mu’huh: A Living Monument to Numu History and Culture,” 2023.

¹⁶³ Veyrié “A Historical Ethnography of the Fort McDermitt Numu-Shoshone,” 23.

decreases in Native populations.¹⁶⁴ The climate of war would have created other social harms. One Numu-Newe oral history speaks of a mass rape of Newe women taken prisoner by the cavalry.¹⁶⁵ In total, the four year Snake War claimed close to 2,000 lives, with Natives suffering far more fatalities. The war concluded in 1868 with peace talks that created the reservation at Fort McDermitt, where waves of hungry Native people entered a more sedentary life than that of their ancestors in exchange for provisions provided by the military. Summit Lake, another reservation near Thacker Pass with small tribal membership, was created several decades later. This move from war to reservation remains a violent and contentious memory in Nevada tribal politics today.

While the 1865 massacre at Thacker Pass is not well known, recent media and legal attention to the event has drawn more sources out of the archive/general obscurity as well as given a platform to living descendants of the massacre's few survivors. What we can glean from the primary sources is that a military assault happened against unarmed families, a small community of people was slain in several hours, and that local Indigenous people still recall the incident of violence tied to a place that is now a politically-charged site of extraction.

Looking Ahead at “Thacker Pass”

When Peehee mu’huh became known as Thacker Pass locally is rather unclear. The specific place name we know the pass as today does not appear on maps until the early twentieth century, and is not included in any late-nineteenth or twentieth century reference texts regarding place names in Nevada. It is not readily known when locals began referring to the Pass by the Thacker toponym and could have stemmed from associations formed around the time of the

¹⁶⁴ Veyrié “A Historical Ethnography of the Fort McDermitt Numu-Shoshone,” 23, 54–55.

¹⁶⁵ Whitney McKinney, *A History of the Shoshone-Paiutes of the Duck Valley Indian Reservation* (Salt Lake City: Institute of the American West and Howe Bros, 1983), 8–17.

Snake War. Some activists associated with the current protest of the mining project believe that it is named for a John Nelson Thacker, a Wells Fargo Detective who lived from 1836 to 1913, who is most famous for arresting the notorious stagecoach robber Black Bart.¹⁶⁶ Thacker was also elected Humboldt County Sheriff in 1868, serving until 1870. He is mentioned in an 1871 edition of *The Silver State* newspaper as selling a 160-acre parcel of ranching land in the King's River Valley, giving credence to the notion that Thacker may have owned the area around the Pass and gives it its current place name.

According to a conversation with Dana Toth, executive director of the Humboldt County Museum, there are no available descriptions or tax records of the range sold during this transaction, meaning we are currently unable to define the exact boundaries of any land owned by Thacker. Toth also mentions that a few years back, protesters told her they believed the namesake for the site was Charley Thacker, the man who took the two young children from the massacre site in 1865. He's known at times as "Paradise Charley." An article from *The Silver State* in 1878 about a murdered Chinese man features Charley Thacker, denying that it was Paiutes who were responsible, and mentions that the Paiute man had lived with J.N. Thacker and adopted his name. (See Fig. 4) As such, we cannot be certain from our distant vantage point the exact origin of the place name that appears on twentieth century USGS maps. Toth wrote in an email, "It's extremely plausible it's one or both of them. I know of other locations in Humboldt County named 100+ years ago after people who were only around the area for a year or less, yet their names still hold today."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Wilbert, "The History of Thacker Pass."

¹⁶⁷ Dana Toth, email message to author, March 7, 2024.

It so happens that we are acquainted with Charley Thacker, having known him since he was a boy, living with J. N. Thacker, whose name he adopted, and we are not entirely unfamiliar with the habits of the Indians. It is a fact susceptible of proof that Indians *do* beat their enemies, and even members of their own tribe, to death with stones, though it must be admitted that they are not in the habit of throwing their dead into wells, probably for the reason that wells are not always at hand for that purpose. While it appears that there is no positive evidence that the Chinaman was murdered by Indians, it by no means follows that he was not, because his head was beaten with stones and his body thrown into a well.

Figure 4: Segment of the article “The Murdered Chinaman” from an 1878 edition of the *Daily Silver State* that mentions the editors are familiar with Charley Thacker and mentions his affiliation to J.N. Thacker.¹⁶⁸

It is rather reflective of not only this period of history, but the state of Native America today, that a site of tremendous Indigenous loss—one that would later come into fame for its rich lithium deposit—bear the name of a man who protected mining profits in his lifetime and possibly for a man who participated in the killing and kidnapping during the 1865 massacre. Like so many other places in Indian Country, the reminder of a bloody past is branded directly into place itself, expressed via place names carried by word of mouth and eventually inscribed directly into the cartography of the region.

While the toponym Thacker Pass graduated from a local name to an official geographic designation, many more changes flooded the wider landscape that would continue to remake

¹⁶⁸ “The Murdered Chinaman” *Daily Silver State*, March 30, 1878.

both the physical space and a place of historic significance. In years following the Snake War, the larger northern Great Basin became the epicenter of the pan-tribal Ghost Dance movement, which was an adapted form Indigenous resistance that tapped into deep cultural roots of the land's "complex spiritual geography and history."¹⁶⁹ But while Indigenous people worked to adapt to changing social and political circumstances from a changing landscape, exterminationist agendas were replaced with assimilation projects, further changing the way Native people related to the places their kin had lived, fought, or died, like that of Thacker Pass.

By the early 1900s, virtually all of the Numu, Newe, or Bannock people whose ancestors seasonally camped at Thacker Pass were living a sedentary life on nearby reservations across northern Nevada, but their use of the area for hunting, foraging, and ceremony persisted.¹⁷⁰ Over time, settler homesteads in the Kings and Quinn River valleys became larger ranches and businesses, changing the landscape physically and in the perception of its meaning. The area between the Double H and Montana Mountains became pasturage for large cattle and domesticated sheep herds. Local tensions of land use, alongside groundwater issues, permeated local politics in the area during the mid-century and continue to this day.¹⁷¹ Still, the specific place of our study remained fairly shielded from much national attention until the latter half of the twentieth century, when mining companies stake claims in the mineral-rich McDermitt Caldera. Even then, Thacker Pass remains little more to the national zeitgeist than as a place name on maps of the area. Of course, though, for communities whose ancestors were impacted

¹⁶⁹ Francaviglia, *Believing In Place*, 109.

¹⁷⁰ Specifically these are the Duck Valley, Fort McDermitt, Lovelock, Fallon, Pyramid Lake, Summit Lake, and the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony reservations.

¹⁷¹ Kate A. Berry, "Fleeting Fame and Groundwater," *Water History* 1, no. 1 (July 2009): 59–74.

by the Snake War's violence, the memory of a massacre in the region endures through the decades.¹⁷²

¹⁷² While popular press states that many of the pieces of primary evidence were “uncovered” in the twenty-first century, evidence of the massacre exists in settler accounts as well as twentieth century tribal histories. See Veyrié “A Historical Ethnography of the Fort McDermitt Paiute-Shoshone” for a summary.

IV. Thacker Pass/Peehee Mu'huh, or a Mine & a Massacre Site

“I don't want to have the lithium to come here...Because it's our sacred land. They don't know our history. We do!” - Karianna Kailani John, a child from the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony, at Pee'zeh (Sentinel Rock) on January 31, 2022.¹⁷³

One sunny spring day in 2023, several Indigenous activists—some of them descended from Ox Sam—staged a “die-in” protest at Peehee mu'huh emulating the events of September 12, 1865 (See Fig. 5.) In the photo from the action, you can see them lying among the dried brush, reenacting the way victims of the Cavalry's attack may have fallen lifeless in and around the pass. Near the center of the frame sits a bright sign reading “Life over lithium,” and “Protect Thacker Pass Peehee mu'huh.” This symbolic action was undertaken in opposition to the mining project approved for the area, and speaks to a reinvigorated placemaking by Indigenous people and their allies to raise awareness of this place's association with violence, its sacredness, and their effort to reclaim a local place and its history that has obscured this bloody event from the popular narrative of northern Nevada's past. With few words inscribed to the photo, this action conveys its message rather loudly. More than 155 years since the 1865 event, this place retains a deep meaning over past violence, and that history warrants an inclusion in the consideration of breaking ground for a lithium mine.

¹⁷³ *Inside the Resistance at Thacker Pass*, video (Lakota People's Law Project), 2:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWl_4Dk_emY.



Figure 5: Indigenous people and allies, resisting the Thacker Pass Lithium Mine, stage a “die in” protest at the site to bring attention to the land’s history as the place of massacres that left their ancestors unburied in the Pass. Photo from People of Red Mountain.

While Thacker Pass hosted different uses through the twentieth century, it was not until very recently in the twenty-first century that the location gained significant notoriety outside of local and Indigenous communities. Beginning in 2017, people in national and international spaces start to acknowledge Thacker Pass for its exceptional abundance of lithium, a critical mineral in today’s increasingly electrified society. Newspapers, magazines, and blogs—particularly those writing within a climate tech or green investment beat—pick up the story as an optimistic signal toward a future powered by clean energy. But it was not long into the project’s development that Thacker Pass became the central location in a public debate about the historical significance of the grounds planned for extraction. Several groups mounted an opposition to the project citing cultural and environmental concerns following its speedy approval in 2021. Some of the opponents to the mine are local ranchers or environmentalists looking to conserve the land, and some are Numu, Newe, and Bannock community members

who revere Thacker Pass as a sacred place, marked twice in their history by the spilling of their ancestors' blood.

In this current story of Thacker Pass, the landscape is the site of divergent and competing conceptions over the meaning or the value of this place. The discovery of a vast quantity of lithium has created a Thacker Pass in one cultural context as a place rich in opportunity and devoid of any significant history that should stall a project of national importance. However, Peehee mu'huh today is both a connective touchpoint for some local Native communities to their long history, including that of colonial violence or dispossession, and the locus for the effort to reclaim the pass as a Native place, one that requires Native inclusion for the permitting of large scale extractive projects. Following the approval of a mine at the site, the contention between these contrasted meanings came to a head in the legal and ground resistance, launching a discourse on the meaning and appropriate handling of a mine planned for a massacre site.

The lithium mine, and the protest against it, is the latest plot development in a long history, and the last several years constitute a moment in time where a place's past is at odds with its present. Currently, Thacker Pass is both a burial ground and a source of profit, a signpost for progress and a painful reminder of Indigenous genocide. This friction has played out over the last several years in courts, press, and in nonviolent protests at the site, some which have resulted in lawsuits and arrests. Over the last several years, Indigenous people have worked to reclaim Thacker Pass as Peehee mu'huh, not a pass named for a Wells Fargo detective, but a storied, sacred place that serves as a physical reminder of the violence Native peoples faced and continue to recall today. In the modern chapter of this site's long life as a human locale, Indigenous people have taken on new forms of placemaking through direct action/occupation of the site, along with narrating its history in legal proceedings and to the press.

Within the controversy over this place, there is a timely discourse that amplifies both the environmental and cultural character of Thacker Pass. It invites consideration of the meaning of a violent past at the site of a promising mine—a past that frankly has not been reckoned with or repaired, let alone even widely acknowledged in either historical or public discourse. Crucially, Native people organizing against the mine have leveraged this moment to accomplish several key things: integrate their worldviews and cultural beliefs into the narrative, bring the 1865 massacre out of archival obscurity, and force a debate on the appropriate interpretation, acknowledgement, or reclamation of certain Indigenous histories as they relate to a “progressive” mine. As such, the unfolding story of Thacker Pass/Peehee mu’huh is emblematic of other frontlines in Indian Country past and present, where, despite the organized effort of Native peoples to protect ancestral sites and include their histories into the public discourse, their lands are used as sacrifice zones for larger economic ends.

This chapter discusses the modern history of Thacker Pass as a narrative that is still playing out in the public arena today. As such, this contemporary installment in the site’s long history relies on a pool of primary sources such as newspapers, blogs, court filings, and interviews with people as recorded in video or transcribed in press. I first outline the approval and development of the now-underway lithium mine, framing the national campaign for lithium mining as the new mineral of the hour, then discuss the social opposition as it has formed over the last several years, centering the Indigenous voices in both the legal and activist protests to the project. Lastly, I discuss the debate over Thacker Pass as a massacre site and the Native-led direct action against the mine that has brought its bloody history into focus. Through all of this, we see the ardent effort of Indigenous people and their allies to amend a skewed historical

narrative that often refuses to honor or acknowledge cultural reverence or Indigenous connection to place, a trend exhibited elsewhere in the modern history of Indian Country.

The “White Gold Rush” at Thacker Pass

Deposited all those millions of years ago, the lithium under the surface of Thacker Pass remained untouched until the twentieth century’s atomic era brought uranium exploration in the McDermitt Caldera. Chevron conducted lithium testing of the Thacker Pass reserve in the 1980s, later selling the property to the Western Lithium Corporation in the following decade. In 2017 the company, under its new name of Lithium Nevada Corporation (LNC), conducted a seismic survey that bore into the earth at Thacker Pass to find a larger deposit than previously recorded.¹⁷⁴ Company leaders began floating the idea of the mine shortly after. The estimation is that there may be as many as 600 million tons of lithium buried there, worth billions in potential revenue and impact to global markets. Both the financial and technological implications of the deposit has made people many miles away from northern Nevada consider this a space that is valuable—a far cry from the settler construction of a useless Great Basin desert in the nineteenth century.

American lithium mining historically is a rather small industry due to limited applications of the soft metal. The only operating lithium mine in the United States today is located in Silver Peak, Nevada, which provides a slight two percent of all global lithium. But as the element is currently an essential component in laptop, cell phone, and electric vehicle (EV) batteries, demand is skyrocketing, tripling since 2017. Demand could possibly grow tenfold by 2050.¹⁷⁵

Political leaders and advocates alike champion electrification as our society’s most realistic

¹⁷⁴ “Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Thacker Pass Lithium Mine Project” (Bureau of Land Management, September 2023), 1-7, 1-8.

¹⁷⁵ “The Role of Critical Minerals in Clean Energy Transitions” (International Energy Agency), accessed April 1, 2024, <https://www.iea.org/reports/the-role-of-critical-minerals-in-clean-energy-transitions/executive-summary>.

prospect to convert our fossil fuel-based grid, making lithium a crucial ingredient in the transition to cleaner energy. As such, the mineral is often viewed as a sort of technological saving grace in the era of climate change.

Lithium Americas, the parent company of LNC, has proffered the Thacker Pass Lithium Mine as a source of domestic innovation and a climate-friendly energy solution since the project's inception. In 2019, LNC Chief Operations Officer (now CEO) Jonathan Evans called the mine a "critical catalyst that will ignite extensive downstream business development."¹⁷⁶ The company's website on the project emphasizes, in big letters, that this mine is "the most significant opportunity to create a North American lithium battery supply chain for electric vehicles."¹⁷⁷ Moreover, the company's public-facing messaging regularly articulates that this project is actually motivated by shared concerns for the environment, and is less extractive than traditional hard-rock mining in other lithium mines around the world. Evans, in a 2021 interview, said that he was getting contacted weekly on LinkedIn by people who want to work in a climate-focused space, concluding "this isn't a gold mine. This isn't an oil refinery. It's something [where] they can utilize their skill-sets, utilize their smarts, to address an issue that is dear to them." Vice president of LNC Tim Crowley said that the mine is "simple truck and shovel mining," and the project will only "mine down to 400 feet, which is really shallow in mining terms."¹⁷⁸

LNC, and the broader lithium industry in the U.S., currently enjoys bipartisan political support that has helped greenlight and finance the mine at Thacker Pass. Lawmakers on both

¹⁷⁶Jonathan Evans, "Senate Testimony to the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources" <https://www.energy.senate.gov/services/files/819DCC04-C238-4F79-BF95-6C1A5CD25B85>.

¹⁷⁷ Lithium Americas. "Thacker Pass." Accessed April 4, 2023. <https://lithiumamericas.com/thacker-pass/overview/default.aspx>.

¹⁷⁸ Daniel Rothberg, "Amid Plans to Mine Lithium in Rural Nevada, Indigenous, Rural Communities at Center of the Energy Transition," *Northern Nevada Business Weekly*, June 22, 2021; Seth Lightcap, "Thacker Pass: The Crossroads of Lithium, Wild Snow and Sacred Land," *Tahoe Quarterly*, December 6, 2021.

sides of the aisle support domestic buildout of lithium infrastructure, and both the Trump and Biden administrations have identified lithium as a critical mineral for energy and national security, with Trump fast tracking Thacker Pass before the end of his term. Biden's administration, as part of his "Green Energy Agenda," very recently bankrolled the Thacker Pass project by providing the last essential loan, in the sum of \$2.26 billion, to complete construction on the project. This is part of a larger federal push to bring more lithium into the domestic energy portfolio. Current Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm tweeted the news on March 14, 2024, stating "Thacker Pass is a treasure trove of lithium—key to strengthening U.S. energy security and electrifying America."¹⁷⁹

As of now, the project has moved past all regulatory, legal, and financial hurdles—including years of litigation that stalled the project's commencement. Should everything go according to the company's plan, the Thacker Pass Lithium Mine will be up and running and supplying a significant portion of U.S. lithium in a few years. According to the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), the mine will operate for an estimated 46 years.¹⁸⁰ The total project area extends over some 18,000 acres, but the area of disturbance is only around 5,500 acres. Once operational, Thacker Pass will be the world's first lithium claystone mine, using a new extraction process where the mineral is sourced from the clay via hydraulic shovels. This is a less energy-intensive extraction process, but still creates a fair amount of waste due to the chemicals used. Currently, Lithium Americas plans to produce lithium carbonate, but could also pivot its production to lithium hydroxide depending on market demand.¹⁸¹ The mine could potentially harvest enough lithium to supply the batteries for a million vehicles every year,

¹⁷⁹ Hannah Northey, "Biden Admin Offers \$2B Loan for Thacker Pass Lithium Project," *E&E News by POLITICO*, March 14, 2024.

¹⁸⁰ "Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Thacker Pass Lithium Mine Project," 2-16.

¹⁸¹ Lightcap, "Thacker Pass: The Crossroads of Lithium, Wild Snow and Sacred Land."

providing the supply for our collective transition away from fossil fuels. For this reason, General Motors—one of the leading manufacturers of EVs—made a \$650 million equity investment with a supply agreement granting the corporation exclusive Phase 1 access to the lithium mined from Thacker Pass.¹⁸²

The mine is expected to bring around 2,000 temporary jobs to the area and once operational, will employ at least 500 permanent workers. Similarly, it is likely that by the time the Thacker Pass mine is fully online, it will be just one project in a score of others in Nevada and the American West created to turn a profit while meeting growing demand. Journalists and industry writers do not shy away from calling this contemporary mineral bonanza for lithium the “White Gold Rush,” a play on lithium’s silvery-white appearance.¹⁸³ These comparisons to the boom-and-bust cycles of yesteryear are not entirely hyperbolic in the remote reaches of northern Nevada. As Nevada is both fairly rural and full of lithium, the new race to these deposits is driving new people into remote towns or communities for mining jobs: work that ultimately changes the landscape. And just like the silver and gold rushes of Nevada’s past, the new boom is causing strife within Indigenous communities whose cultural commitments to the land are compromised by emergent industry centered around place.

Opposition at Peehee Mu’huh

For many people, Native and otherwise, the sagebrush sea of Thacker Pass—with its pronghorn, plants, and cultural past—is too important to lose to the transformation of lithium mining, regardless of the potential benefits of the operations. And for Indigenous stewards, the land is tied to not only traditional modes of survival, but is directly linked to their cultural

¹⁸² Ernest Scheyder, “GM to Help Lithium Americas Develop Nevada’s Thacker Pass Mine” *Reuters*, January 31, 2023.

¹⁸³ Austin Price, “The Rush For White Gold,” *Earth Island Journal*, 2021; Oliver Milman, “There’s Lithium in Them Thar Hills – but Fears Grow over US ‘White Gold’ Boom,” *The Guardian*, October 18, 2022;

existence. As Frantz Fanon wrote in his 1963 *Wretched of the Earth*, “for a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread, and, above all, dignity.”¹⁸⁴ In the intersectional opposition to the mine, there are several key issues at play concerning the water, the environment, and the impacts of the mine. In the Native-led circles of resistance to the mine, Thacker Pass is a site where great violence occurred and that memory, alongside shared environmental and social apprehensions over the project, is paramount to the way the modern placemaking reshapes the construction of this space as a place worth protection.

The considerable place-based opposition to the Thacker Pass Lithium Mine has colored the discourse around the project, making it the controversy it is in northern Nevada today. It also changed the landscape itself, as a portion of the opposition camped directly on the ground in protest, adding layers of meaning to Thacker Pass as a site of modern Indigenous and environmental resistance. The occupation and the legal challenges delayed the construction of the project until the spring thaw of 2023. A district judge dismissed one of the last major lawsuits against the mine, despite some ardent legal effort from 2021 to the end of last year, but other cases are still pending. The consolidated opposition to the mine includes voices from both non-Native and Native people, and is characterized by a confluence of issues around the landscape, safety and sustainability of the mine, and its impact on the cultural sites of the Numu, Newe, and Bannock peoples.

Grassroots resistance to the mine began almost instantaneously, and became an increasingly Indigenous-focused struggle over time. The same day the project was approved in the late winter of 2021, two non-Native environmentalists—Max Wilbert and Will Falk—established the first resistance camp at the site, calling it “Protect Thacker Pass.” Falk

¹⁸⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove/Atlantic, Inc., 1963), 41.

would also serve as the attorney in several of the lawsuits against the mine. Both men remain prominent figures in the messaging around the protest, and have organized for several years alongside their allies in the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony. Over the last several years, various campers of different causes and backgrounds have stood in nonviolent resistance, occasionally stopping construction and risking arrest. This activism occurs in parallel with several legal suits, interventions, and appeals attempting to put a stop to construction. It has garnered not only press attention, but also the attention and solidarity of much larger national or international environmental and/or Indigenous advocacy groups.¹⁸⁵

The first lawsuit against the project was originally brought forward by local rancher Edward Bartell in 2021, alleging that the lithium mine would cause irreparable damage to local water systems and thus harm his livelihood. It is an ongoing case. Nonprofit environmental organizations—Basin and Range Watch, Great Basin Resource Watch, Wildlands Defense, and Western Watersheds Project—have thrown their hats in the court cases attempting to blockade the project, citing concerns with the flawed permitting process alongside concerns to water, wildlife, and the like. In the summer of 2021, several tribal groups joined the litigation as intervenor plaintiffs and moved forward with arguments that the permitting process did not adequately consider the specific cultural history of Thacker Pass. Such a multi-cultural coalition is not new to land-based protests in Native America, with many non-Native causes historically standing in a unified front with Native-led initiatives. One such example is the Cowboys and Indians Alliance of the Northern Plains, which formed a united front of white ranchers,

¹⁸⁵ The National Congress of American Indians, among other Native groups, expressed support for the protest of the mine. NCAI called on the Department of the Interior to rescind the Thacker Pass permits in June of 2021. This is also couched within a broader pan-tribal solidarity effort both locally and across the internet. See “Protect Thacker Pass Campaign Timeline,” *Protect Thacker Pass* (blog), accessed April 1, 2024, <https://www.protectthackerpass.org/protect-thacker-pass-campaign-timeline/>.

environmentalists, and Native activists in the late twentieth century over mutual concerns over the land.¹⁸⁶

This coalition has raised critical questions about the project. Litigants have argued that the rapid permitting process violated federal laws such as the Endangered Species, National Environmental Policy, and National Historic Preservation acts.¹⁸⁷ Even though the company's supporters emphasize the less-invasive style of mining at Thacker Pass, opponents remain skeptical of the overall toll on the local environment and the communities who rely on it to various ends. Among shared concerns about the effect on the flora and fauna, members of the movement against the mine have also argued extensively that the project will bring an exorbitant amount of environmental contaminants—like diesel and sulfuric acid—to this portion of the sagebrush steppe. Further ranchers, environmentalists, and Native peoples alike express significant anxieties over the project's exorbitant water budget that will seep a precious resource from the high desert locale. The water issue is a particularly poignant one in the Indigenous part of the movement, as in many other land-based struggles in Native America. As Estes notes, “water is settler colonialism's lifeblood—blood that has to be continually excised from Indigenous peoples.”¹⁸⁸

While LNC emphasizes the potential of this deposit, often called one of the largest in the world, there are also concerns that the mine will set a precedent for opening up more tribal lands for lithium extraction. John Hadder of Great Basin Resource Watch, one of the organizations involved in the litigation, expressed anxiety over the LNC reports being used to pressure frontline communities, who often have limited legal recourse in large energy projects, into

¹⁸⁶ Zoltán Grossman, “Cowboy and Indian Alliances in the Northern Plains,” *Agricultural History* 77, no. 2 (2003): 355–89.

¹⁸⁷ Jeniffer Solis, “Report of Giant Lithium Find Underscores Need for Less ‘sloppy’ Permitting, Conservationist Says,” *Nevada Current*, September 22, 2023.

¹⁸⁸ Estes, *Our History Is the Future*, 149, 166.

accepting mines on culturally significant lands. “Regardless of how much lithium may be extractable, the sloppy permitting process that led to the Thacker Pass mine must not be duplicated...Indigenous communities should have the right to say no.”¹⁸⁹

Some proponents of the mine, however, remained unmoved by either the environmental or cultural concerns. Glenn Miller, an environmental chemist and a professor emeritus at the University of Nevada, Reno, called the coalition “dead wrong on their opposition” in a column he penned in early 2022. “As a critic of the mining industry for 40 years, this mine is the most benign mine I have examined.”¹⁹⁰ Further, Miller weighs the potential contribution of the Thacker Pass Lithium Mine to Nevada and the world’s effort on climate change over the concerns of both environmental and Indigenous groups. But for some groups, the “shallow” open-pit brine still has the potential of more insidious environmental legacies than what the company stated in the EIS. For the Indigenous people who hunt or gather medicines like Indian tea or *toza* in and around Thacker Pass, any extraction that carries with it the risk of environmental contamination is anything but “benign.” For one Numu resister, who requested anonymity in the press, the Thacker Pass Lithium Mine is just an updated version of the same colonial playbook that seeks to dispossess them: “This is just the same old program. Neocolonialism. Extract and exploit. But now it’s ‘for’ the climate.”¹⁹¹

Environmental concerns are not unfounded, especially for Nevada residents. This state is no stranger to pollution or environmental racism, the latter term describing the colonial tradition of putting toxic activities near historically marginalized communities. On tribal lands all over Nevada, legacy hard-rock mines have led to chronic exposure of unsafe metal mixtures which

¹⁸⁹ Solis, “Report of Giant Lithium Find Underscores Need for Less ‘sloppy’ Permitting.”

¹⁹⁰ Glenn Miller, “Opinion: Thacker Pass Lithium Mine Important for Nevada, US and the World,” *Reno Gazette Journal*, February 22, 2022.

¹⁹¹ Christopher Ketcham, “Neocolonialism: Pillaging the Earth for the ‘Climate,’” *Truthdig* (blog), August 28, 2023.

can result in long term harm to a population.¹⁹² The 900-plus nuclear tests that the U.S. detonated on Newe lands in violation of treaty rights are still making people sick today, as discussed in a 2020 op-ed from “the most bombed nation on earth.”¹⁹³ Closer to the site of our study, the mining industry specifically has left a particularly toxic legacy. The drinking water on the Duck Valley Reservation in 2016 showed high levels of lead, arsenic, barium, and copper, and other contaminants associated with mining operations. Mine waste containing mercury and arsenic from the McDermitt and Cordero mercury mines was used as fill in various locations in the communities of McDermitt and the Fort McDermitt Paiute-Shoshone Reservation; the EPA underwent a remediation effort to clean up and cap the mine waste in 2013.¹⁹⁴ Still, there are more polluted places in Nevada—like Indian Country as a whole—that are surely understudied or unmitigated to the deleterious effects to human health. Given this history, it makes sense why people in tribal communities might vehemently object to any new extractive industry in their homelands, regardless how green the project may be billed as. For Numu, Newe, and Bannock peoples like Daranda Hinkey, the benefit of electric batteries do not outweigh the impact to the landscape: “The Paiute and Shoshone can’t eat lithium; they cannot drink or hunt or weave lithium.”¹⁹⁵

Fort McDermitt elder Reva S. Northrup wrote a letter to the Department of Interior including the mining-related health problems she’s witnessed over her 83 years:

“Living here I see what’s happening here on the reservation. There are a lot of sicknesses here. Some of our people working at mines have passed on. They died from cancer. They had arthritis and other diseases caused by the mine. Some people did not know where the

¹⁹² Johnnye Lewis, Joseph Hoover, and Debra MacKenzie, “Mining and Environmental Health Disparities in Native American Communities,” *Current Environmental Health Reports* 4, no. 2 (2017): 130–41.

¹⁹³ Ian Zabarte, “A Message from the Most Bombed Nation on Earth,” *Al Jazeera*, August 29, 2020.

¹⁹⁴ “Site Profile - McDermitt and Cordero Mercury Mine Sites - EPA OSC Response,” EPA On-Scene Coordinator (OSC) Response, accessed April 2, 2024, https://response.epa.gov/site/site_profile.aspx?site_id=7029.
<http://www.environmental-defense-institute.org/publications/DuckValleyFebR1.pdf>

¹⁹⁵ Daranda Hinkey, “Peehee Mu’huh Speaks (Opinion),” *This Is Reno*, August 31, 2021.

sickness came from, but some people did know about it and they didn't want to say anything about it. It wasn't just Indian people who got sick from the mine – some of the townspeople got sick and are gone now. This is the reason why I don't want the lithium mine opening up around here.”¹⁹⁶

For Elwood Hinkey—himself a former miner, McDermitt tribal resident, cattle rancher, and the grandfather of Daranda—the company has not allayed fears that chemicals from the mine will not affect the water table or the land his tribe relies on for their livelihood. Similarly, the legal challenges and movement materials regularly feature the uses of foods/medicines and game for hunting. During Covid-19, the needs for traditional medicines for their anti-viral properties increased the tribal need for these resources. While the mining company plans to perform reclamation every seven years, there's continued fear that new contamination to the area will compound existing environmental injustice and poison the plants and animals the Numu, Newe, and Bannock peoples use and consume in their everyday lives.¹⁹⁷

We can view the lingering effects of environmental destruction for tribal communities as a manifestation of “slow violence:” a term coined by Rob Nixon to describe “an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.” As in the incremental sinking of the Maldives from climate change, slow violence “is rapid in geological terms but (unlike a tsunami) not fast enough to constitute breaking news.”¹⁹⁸ Like mercury in a food chain, violence accumulates gradually in the land and body over time, entrenched and amplified by social hierarchies on the lines of class or race. Nixon also argues that Indigenous resource rebellions are the result of the disparity in how people view the visible effects of these changes over time. In

¹⁹⁶ “Thacker Pass/Peehee Mu'huh: A Living Monument to Numu History and Culture,” 97.

¹⁹⁷ Discussion of the importance of medicines, wildlife, and obsidian are included in a document compiled by RSIC and the Burns Paiute Tribe. Numu elder Inelda Sam is quoted as saying “we usually go [to Thacker Pass], go and get sagebrush there, and there's a fishing pond right below it. We fish there. We got *toza* and sage and Indian tea out there growing on the mountain nearby. They're all out there.” See “Thacker Pass/Peehee Mu'huh: A Living Monument to Numu History and Culture,” 27–28.

¹⁹⁸ Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2, 263.

the instance of Thacker Pass, there's a slow environmental violence that compounds the historic memory of colonial bloodshed at the site.

Native lands are frequently made into sacrifice zones due to the enduring practices of settler colonialism. Historian Traci Brynne Voyles uses “wastelanding” to describe the decades of uranium mining on the Navajo Nation—another history wherein the mining industry left a trail of bodies in its wake. In the process of wastelanding,

“The logic of settler colonialism denies that its ‘wastelands’ could be sacred, could be claimed, could have a history, or could be thought of as home. Instead, to wasteland a space is to defend the notion that the land is, always has been, and always will be ‘empty except for Indians’: to mark it and make it, ultimately, sacrificial land.”¹⁹⁹

Mining law in particular, as historical archaeologist Paul White argues, has always been used to dispossess Natives of their homelands. This stems back to early days of settlement across the continent and is particularly highlighted in White’s research of the land-and-water grab of Timbisha Shoshone lands near Death Valley over a mining stake.

In 1872, the General Mining Law opened up public lands to individuals and companies for any mineral discoveries and continues to sacrifice Native lands today on the altar of progress. This 19th century law, written at a time while armed settlers were still attacking groups of Native people all over the West and dispossessing them of their lands and traditions, continues to influence the way living Indigenous peoples can govern their ancestral territories when they contain rare earths or other valuable deposits. While the recent legal challenges to the Thacker Pass mine pushed the Biden Administration to update the law in accordance with 21st century standards, it still in many cases supersedes tribal objections to energy projects. Following the end of RSIC’s lawsuit late last year, former chairman Arlan Melendez discussed the need for further policy change in a press conference:

¹⁹⁹ Traci Brynne Voyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 26.

“The 1872 mining law has to be changed. It means that mines can come anywhere within the state. Even if you were to go to court the only thing you’re going to be able to do is maybe mitigate a few small things or maybe, if you’re lucky, to put a temporary hold on it. You won’t be able to stop the mine.”²⁰⁰

However, like in many other land or water struggles in Indian Country, the tribal politics on this matter are complicated. There are many Native people who support the mine on the grounds of economic stimulus or other factors. The closest tribal government to the Thacker Pass mine project, Fort McDermitt, officially supports the project despite contention within the tribe. In public-facing media, Lithium Americas/LNC advocates that the company is in “active dialogue” with tribal people, working to “accommodate the community needs they have identified.”²⁰¹ But for some tribal members, extraction of any kind, is antithetical to their cultural or spiritual practices regarding the land. This creates a rift in some Native communities. “This mine is pitting tribal members against each other,” McDermitt tribal member Shelley Harjo observed to the press, “Tribal nations against tribal nations; family members, lifelong friends and young adults are having to choose a side—for or against the mine—based on the propaganda of economic viability for one of the poorest tribes in Nevada.”²⁰² In many of these cases, as is present in the current mine project, companies try to soothe cultural irritations with job development or other programs. The performativity of such strategies, however, is often suspicious to those who may stand to lose more than gain from a multi-billion dollar mine.

The delicate relationship between LNC and Great Basin Native nations, further, is reflective of a longer historical trend in Indian Country, wherein mining companies have increasingly sought tribal collaboration and contracts out West with high royalty programs. Such

²⁰⁰ Paul J. White, *The Archaeology of American Mining* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017), 120; Scott Sonner and Matthew Daly, “Biden Administration Clarifies 1872 Mining Law; Says Huge Nevada Lithium Mine Can Proceed,” *AP News*, May 16, 2023; Jeniffer Solis, “NV Tribes Will Not Appeal Most Recent Lithium Mine Ruling,” *Nevada Current*, December 7, 2023.

²⁰¹ Chris Aadland, “Green Energy’s Hidden Costs Spark Opposition,” *Investigate West*, April 7, 2022.

²⁰² Talli Nauman, “Confronting the Lithium Contagion,” *CounterPunch.Org* (blog), May 3, 2023.

financial incentives, notes Native historian Donald Fixico, often place tribal nations in a “dilemma,” forcing leadership to prioritize funding for community development over conservation/protection of natural resource-heavy lands.²⁰³ From nuclear storage in Newe homelands in the late twentieth century to fairly recent debates about oil infrastructure, (like operational pipelines Dakota Access, Line 3, and the now-canceled Keystone XL), economic stimulus is frequently levied to mitigate cultural concerns to extractive infrastructure.²⁰⁴

Alongside environmental concerns, opponents to the mine emphasize their unease about the social ramifications the lithium could have in local areas. Bringing an influx of new people and new wealth into an area, boomtime economies can often result in social problems in and around reservation lands: “domestic violence, alcoholism, mental health issues, and violent crime tend to rise, while the temporary nature of mining jobs creates economic insecurity despite the influx of new money.”²⁰⁵ Some residents of the nearby town of Winnemucca have voiced concerns about the impact of a new population in the area, implying the mineral boom could be more reminiscent of the “Wild West” days of Nevada’s boomtowns than they would like.²⁰⁶ Some of the Indigenous activists have expressed concerns over what some call “the man camp phenomenon,” where temporary workers are stationed in rural areas, with high paychecks and little to do with it, can exacerbate systemic problems for rural and tribal communities. Critically, man camps can compound the existing crisis of sexual violence toward Indigenous women and children and Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP), two converging crises seen in both northern Nevada and across Indian Country today.

²⁰³ Donald L. Fixico, *The Invasion of Indian Country in the Twentieth Century* (University Press of Colorado, 2011), 144.

²⁰⁴ Debates about infrastructure projects on Native lands often include discussion of economic development for tribes, despite not always constituting a significant boost to tribal economies. For an encompassing example from the Keystone XL debate, see “Environment, Economy at Heart of Keystone XL Pipeline Debate,” PBS NewsHour, October 10, 2011.

²⁰⁵ Voyles, *Wastelands*, 188.

²⁰⁶ Ray Hagar, “Winnemucca Braces for Massive Lithium Mine,” *Nevada Appeal*, September 18, 2023.

As in other critical land-based movements of recent years, though, Thacker Pass has also brought together a great many Native people in an unprecedented level of pan-tribal political organization. Early in the movement, a group of enrolled tribal members along with other Numu, Newe, and Bannock relatives formed *Atsa Koodakuh Wyh Nuwu* (People of Red Mountain) in 2021 to formally organize against the development despite Fort McDermitt’s formal support. It was this group that propped up “Life over lithium” billboards above the highways in northern Nevada. Other governments among Nevada’s 20 federally recognized tribes, including RSIC, Summit Lake Paiute Tribe, and the Burns Paiute Tribe, joined the litigation effort to oppose the project on cultural and environmental grounds and have contended that they were not adequately consulted in the mine’s permitting process. As a reservation with Numu, Newe, Bannock, and Washoe people, RSIC has headed a great deal of the organizing efforts to bring together tribes and allies to oppose the mine. *Atsa Koodakuh Wyh Nuwu*, RSIC, AIM Northern Nevada, Protect Thacker Pass, and other Native groups have helped organize rallies, protests, and prayer runs in Orovada, Winnemucca, Reno, Carson City, and at Thacker Pass itself. Some of these have annually occurred on the anniversary of the 1865 Thacker Pass Massacre.²⁰⁷ In March 2023, RSIC hosted a tribal meeting about lithium developments in the Great Basin that was attended by over 15 tribes. Together, tribal representatives made a video calling on Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland to rescind the permits for the Thacker Pass mine.²⁰⁸

Over the last two and half years, people have camped many a cold night at Peehee mu’huh, tending a sacred fire and singing traditional songs to honor the land that houses the dead. The occupation of the site wears familiar trappings to both the past and present. The Native

²⁰⁷ See “Protect Thacker Pass Campaign Timeline,” *Protect Thacker Pass* for a summary of events.

²⁰⁸ I attended this meeting on March 8, 2023. Some of the footage of the video campaign can be seen in the video *Defend the Sacred! Help Us to Protect Thacker Pass Massacre Site from Lithium Mining!*, video (Lakota People’s Law Project in conjunction with Reno-Sparks Indian Colony), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFVw9LSUO_I.

resistance camps in the area were intentionally reminiscent of their ancestors' use of the site as a safe place to camp in the remote valleys of the high desert. Back patches, signs, stickers, and chants of the protesters employed phrases of recent Indigenous rebellions across the continent such as "keep it in the ground," "defend the sacred," or "water is life." Through this movement, we see a confluence of specifically Numu tradition within a broader, contemporary culture of Indigenous resistance.

As of the time of writing, the mine is moving forward and the direct action activities at the site have ceased. This has not been without a great struggle, though. Protesters have been met with regular threats of arrest and made great sacrifices to their freedom and livelihoods for their stand against the mine. In the fall of 2021, the original campers of Protect Thacker Pass, Falk and Wilbert, were fined close to \$50,000 by the BLM for "trespass" on federal lands after building "structures" for compost toilets and a windbreak.²⁰⁹ A little less than two years later, LNC filed a civil lawsuit with characteristics of a SLAPP suit (a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) against a cadre of activists associated with the protests, some of whom are descendants of the 1865 massacre survivors. Those named are Protect Thacker Pass, Max Wilbert, Will Falk, Paul Cienfuegos, Bethany Sam, Dorece Sam, Dean Barlese, and Bhie-Cie Zahn-Nahtzu. Several of these people were arrested at an action in the spring of 2023. To some, this forced scattering of Native occupiers of the site was salting an old, but unhealed, wound. Bethany Sam, descendant of one of the massacre victims and the Public Relations officer for RSIC, told the press: "Our people couldn't return to Thacker Pass for fear of being killed in 1865, and now in 2023 we can't return or we'll be arrested."²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Jeniffer Solis, "Feds Slap Fines on Thacker Pass Protestors," *Nevada Current*, September 29, 2021.

²¹⁰ "Protect Thacker Pass Campaign Timeline," *Protect Thacker Pass*; Scott Sonner, "Court to Hear Appeal over Biden-Backed Lithium Mine Opposed by Tribes, Environmentalists," *Arizona Capitol Times*, June 27, 2023.

Contestations of Place & Reclaiming of Narratives

On a windy day in the spring of 2023, Josephine Dick and Dorece Sam sat in camping chairs in front of a tipi erected near *Pee'zeh* at Thacker Pass. (See Fig. 5) Speaking to the camera, “Auntie” Josephine spoke in a Numu dialect while Sam translated her words into English. Together, they asked for people to come join them at their newly-founded Ox Sam *Newe Mogonee Momokonee* (Indian Women’s) Camp, saying “bring your prayers, bring your good thoughts.” These “camp grandmas,” along with other relatives and allies were conducting prayerful ceremony at the site in memory of their ancestor, Ox Sam, who fled the violence of the 1865 Thacker Pass Massacre. A sacred fire crackles nearby. Dorece Sam said:

“We are the descendants of him. There was a massacre here...Ox Sam escaped on his horse to the north, riding to a place called Disaster Peak. He went on to tell that story of how his people were, were killed on their land...Their remains are still here.”²¹¹

Ox Sam Camp was not the first direct action camp established at the site, but one in the grassroots resistance effort spanning over two and a half years. It is a moment where a violent past is put on display amid a contentious present.

²¹¹ A recording of this moment was made available to me via the Lakota People’s Law Project digital archive. For a press release about the event, see Last Real Indians, “Tipi Erected At Thacker Pass - Law Enforcement Issues Final Warning,” news release, May 12, 2023, <https://lastrealindians.com/news/oxsamcamp>.



Figure 6: Lakota activist Chase Iron Eyes joins the Numu “camp grandmas” for a day of prayer and nonviolent resistance in the path of the Thacker Pass Lithium Mine on May 12, 2023. Screenshot taken by author from the Lakota People’s Law Project digital archive.

The history of violence at Thacker Pass/Peehee mu’huh is central to the Native-led opposition of the lithium mine, but, critically, it is more of a footnote to federal agencies and Lithium Nevada. Through the course of the controversy, this history has been dismissed and called into question in both the governmental and public discourses on the topic. The result was a legal and public debate over the 1865 massacre and more broadly, the continued lack of acknowledgement or protection of sites of historic trauma for living Native peoples, peoples whose inherited attachment to place spans back to time immemorial. In this contest over Thacker Pass, there’s a visible and well-organized effort on the part of tribal community members and their allies to reclaim the narrative to more fully include their past and cultural beliefs into decisions regarding the way land is used. The activists and elders of the Thacker Pass movement

thus joins a cohort of pan-Indigenous frontlines that have platformed Native connection to place within presentist land struggles.

Critical to this conversation is also the issue of tribal consultation, the process by which large companies are legally obligated to weigh cultural concerns of Indigenous people *before* they start drilling. The BLM stated it sent out letters “but no comments or concerns have been raised during formal government to government consultation for the Project by the tribes.” However, due to the nature of the consultation process, some tribal officials still felt sidelined by the project’s approval. Fort McDermitt councilmember Billy A. Bell did not even know about the mine was moving forward—or his tribe’s lack of comment—until *High Country News* asked for his comments. Janet Davis, former chairwoman for the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe, felt that the outreach effort was shallow: “one letter and some emails to the THPO [Tribal Historic Preservation Officer] during the pandemic when she was furloughed does not constitute ‘meaningful consultation.’”²¹² Tribal nations farther than Pyramid Lake, like the RSIC, were not consulted during the permitting process at all, despite having enrolled members who designate Thacker Pass as a revered cultural site. The timing of the COVID-19 pandemic in part of the permitting process is also significant, in that many tribal nations in Nevada and the U.S. were overwhelmed with the effects of the disproportionate toll of the virus.

One of the clearest emblems of the narrow and flawed consultation process for tribal litigants is the fact that the EIS or other permitting materials did not include a single mention of the September 12, 1865 massacre. “That’s a historic event that should have been evaluated according to the National Historic Preservation Act,” stated Michon Eben, THPO for RSIC.²¹³

²¹² “Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Thacker Pass Lithium Mine Project”, 4-120; Maya L. Kapoor, “Nevada Lithium Mine Kicks off a New Era of Western Extraction,” *High Country News*, February 18, 2021; Maddie Stone, “Native Opposition to Nevada Lithium Mine Grows,” *Grist*, October 28, 2021.

²¹³ Eben is quoted in Noah Glick & Alejandra Rubio, “Tribal Members Say They’re Overlooked in Lithium Mining Dispute,” *Energy News Network*, October 13, 2023.

and the BLM's own records. In court proceedings in 2021, tribal attorneys have inserted into the record the primary evidence of the massacre, including the aforementioned newspaper accounts, the Haywood account, and the surveyor's record—the last of which was in the BLM archive. Alongside the evidence, litigants have included declarations of living descendants of Ox Sam and records of various tribal groups lodging their concerns with BLM about the cultural importance of the project area. Intervening plaintiffs argued that to move ahead with excavation of the site “where their ancestors were massacred, would be like building a lithium mine over Pearl Harbor, Arlington National Cemetery, or the Gettysburg Battlefield.”²¹⁴

But while the EIS and archaeological surveys needed to clear the mine involved cultural inventories, they do not factor the possibility that human remains may rest in the project zone. In a statement provided to *Boulder Weekly*, Lithium Americas says studies of the area “suggest the presence of historic obsidian tools as well as roads and sites related to ranching and the Civilian Conservation Corps. The study does not indicate that Thacker Pass is a burial location.”²¹⁵ U.S. District Court Judge Miranda Du, presiding over the *Bartell* suit, ruled in the fall of 2021 that the evidence presented was “too speculative” to place the events of the 1865 massacre within the construction area. Her decision reads:

“While the Court agrees with RSIC and the Burns Paiute Tribe that this additional evidence further highlights the shameful history of the treatment of Native Americans by federal and state governments, it does not persuade the Court that it should reconsider.”²¹⁶

Lithium Americas has also publicly acknowledged the fact that the massacre happened, but just not anywhere near the mine. VP of the company Crowley told the press, “It’s been analyzed and studied extensively that regrettably there was a massacre in the Quinn River Basin, which is

²¹⁴ *Bartell Ranch LLC v. Ester M. McCullough*, 2021, 29, 12–14.

²¹⁵ Angela K. Evans, “‘This Place Is Sacred,’” *Boulder Weekly*, June 10, 2021.

²¹⁶ *Bartell Ranch LLC v. McCullough*, 570 F. Supp. 3d 945, 2021.
<https://casetext.com/case/bartell-ranch-llc-v-mccullough-4>

several miles from our project.”²¹⁷ To date, no evidence has surfaced of graves in the mining zone from limited archaeological surveys; if they did, it would trigger federal action under the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act. However, as the engagement took place over a larger space and many victims went unburied as reported by Palmer’s 1868 survey, it is unlikely that there would be ample and readily available anthropological evidence of the event.

Arguing that the massacre site is eligible under the criteria of the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), Reno-Sparks Indian Colony (RSIC) and the Summit Lake Paiute Tribe submitted a Statement of Eligibility for the Thacker Pass Traditional Cultural District on February 3, 2023. In the 100-plus page document, the tribes included maps, primary evidence, statements regarding federal eligibility, statements regarding the cultural significance of the site, and letters from community members. It contends that the massacre at Rotten Moon merely began at the site of Palmer’s survey and stretched over a much larger area, including the land within the lithium project footprint, as shown in Fig. 6 below. The Winnemucca BLM responded to the statement in a letter, agreeing that the historic violence makes Thacker Pass eligible under NRHP and pushed the matter down the bureaucratic line without any delay to the mine’s construction.²¹⁸ As of the beginning of 2024, the BLM had not forwarded the nomination to the National Park Service as required to begin the monumentalization process.

²¹⁷ Glick & Rubio, “Tribal Members Say They’re Overlooked in Lithium Mining Dispute.”

²¹⁸ Kathleen Rehberg, “BLM Winnemucca Eligibility Letter to RSIC,” February 23, 2023, https://sierranevadaally.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2023_0223-Thacker-Pass-Historic-District-eligibility-letter-to-RSIC-L.pdf.

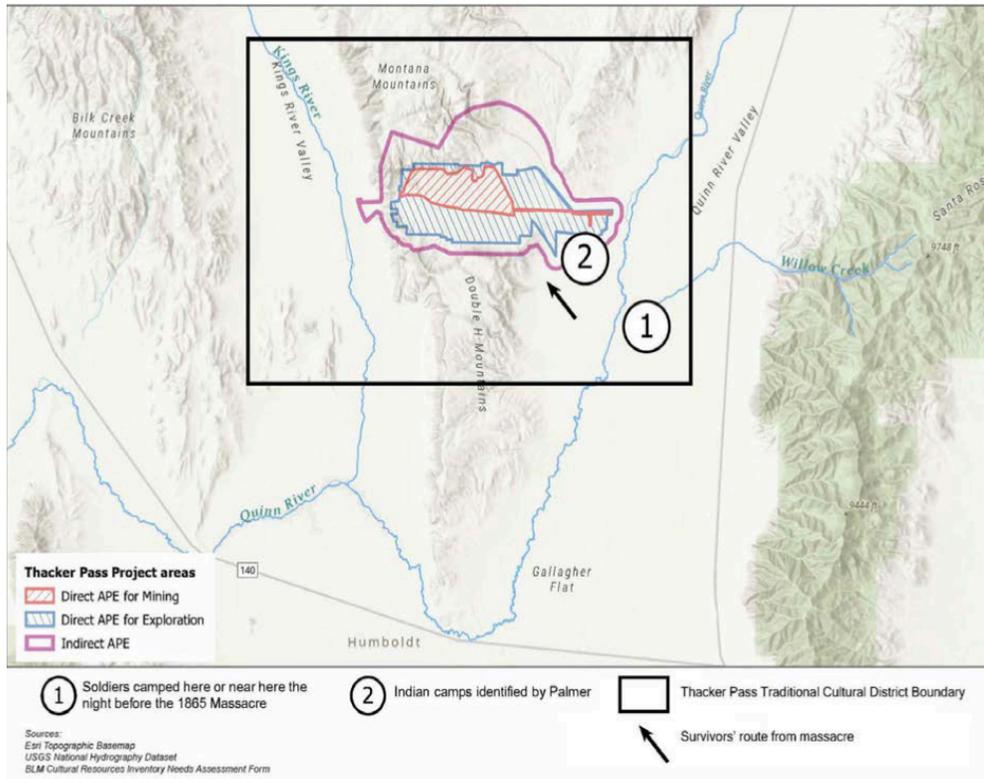


Figure 7: In this map included in the NHRP Eligibility Statement, the authors from RSIC and Burns Paiute Tribe argue that the events of the 1865 massacre, according to available sources, must have encompassed the boundaries of the mine project area.²¹⁹

The controversy has invited comparisons to other massacre histories across Native America. In August 2021, former National Parks Superintendent and board chair of Sand Creek Massacre Foundation Alexa Roberts wrote an email to the Winnemucca BLM District Manager about the “striking similarities” between the 1865 massacre at Thacker Pass and the 1864 Sand Creek massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho people in southeastern Colorado:

“Both surprise attacks were carried out by the U.S. volunteer cavalry against non-combatant Native people, under cover of darkness in pre-dawn hours as the victims slept... Both atrocities were ‘running engagements’ in which troops pursued their intended targets over many hours and over many miles. Both resulted in the murders of innocent men, women and children, and the subsequent, deliberate destruction of the villages’ stores of food and supplies.”²²⁰

²¹⁹ “Thacker Pass/Peehee Mu’uh: A Living Monument to Numu History and Culture,” 21.

²²⁰ For Roberts email in full, see “Former National Park Superintendent: ‘Striking Similarities’ Between Thacker Pass and Sand Creek Massacre Sites,” Protect Thacker Pass (blog), September 12, 2022.

Roberts also notes in her email that it is likely that the Peehee mu'huh massacre site encompasses more land than currently acknowledged by initial archaeological surveys, like in the case of Sand Creek, and thus shares a similar archaeological and historical significance under federal law. As detailed in Ari Kelman's study of the contestation over the memory of Sand Creek, there is a similar debate over the preciseness of location that limits federal protection of sacred or massacre sites. The difference between the two locations is that Sand Creek has been designated as a National Historic Site in acknowledgment of its true legacy, designed as a space to honor the past and push for a better future for the inheritors of intergenerational trauma. So why shouldn't Thacker Pass receive the same federal recognition?²²¹

In the Standing Rock movement in 2016-17, a controversy with a similar convergence of historic and environmental injustice issues, the lingering intergenerational memory of the Wounded Knee massacre was deeply influential in the movement's historical context and activist messaging. This connection between two violent Indigenous histories is part of a broader intertribal solidarity movement. Hunkpapa-Oglala Lakota activist Chase Iron Eyes, a prominent figure in the pipeline protest, traveled to Ox Sam Camp at Peehee mu'huh in the spring of 2023 as a grassroots delegate from the Lakota nation. As shown in Fig. 5 earlier in this chapter, Chase, Dorece Sam, and Auntie Josephine sit together in the photo in front of a tipi. This structure is something of a physical manifestation of the nation-to-nation solidarity, with its canvas coming from the Lakota and poles from the Numu. Donning a feather, Chase speaks to the connection between his people's history with the one on display at Peehee mu'huh:

²²¹ "Striking Similarities' Between Thacker Pass and Sand Creek Massacre Sites," September 12, 2022.

“This is hallowed ground. This is the ground of the bones, the flesh, and the blood of the Paiute people. Just the same way my family was killed at Wounded Knee in 1890. That’s what happened here.”²²²

Disturbing that hallowed ground, according to the tribes, would further obscure an already hidden part of America’s genocidal history with Indigenous peoples. “Destroying massacre sites destroys the evidence of massacres,” stated Falk, the tribal attorney who conducted much of the primary historical research for the lawsuit and eligibility statement.²²³ Further, in the Native paradigm, interfering with a sacred burial ground is “bad medicine” for anyone involved, not just those who are cultural inheritors of the landscape. Daranda Hinkey’s declaration includes this point:

“We aren’t just concerned about ourselves and our ancestors. We believe that people risk sickness if they remove or take artifacts or burial remains. So, we are concerned for the health and safety of the archaeologists and machine operators who will be involved in desecrating Peehee mu’huh.”²²⁴

In the words of Karl Jacoby, “history is thus seldom about past violence alone, but violence in the present and future as well.”²²⁵ As memorialization is a process, the centering of the memory of massacres at Rotten Moon weaves together the past and the present through action, from inclusion of the massacres in the controversy or in the memorialization of Ox Sam and other ancestors at the site. Visual imagery of the protest, like the die in protest at the top of this chapter or a Native artist’s rendition of the grim events of September 12, 1865 (See Fig. 8), re-memorialize the atrocity and its victims, creating new forms of place attachment for living Indigenous peoples where they are able to engage with historic trauma and work to include the

²²² Chase Iron Eyes’ full commentary while at Ox Samp was made available to me also through the Lakota People’s Law Project digital archive. This quote is from 11:10–11:36 in a 23 minute video recorded on May 12, 2023.

²²³ Jeniffer Solis, “Judge Says No Evidence of Massacre at Proposed Mine Site, Tribes Say Otherwise,” *Nevada Current*, November 16, 2021.

²²⁴ Exhibit 3-Declaration of Daranda Hinkey, *Bartell Ranch LLC v. Ester M. McCullough*, 2021, 13, 1–5.

²²⁵ Karl Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn: An Apache Massacre and the Violence of History* (East Rutherford, US: Penguin Publishing Group, 2009), 26.

importance of their land-based histories in the decision-making over the use of the lands and its resources.



Figure 8: An artist's rendition of the 1865 massacre, showing soldiers flying an American flag shooting into wickiups. Sentinel Rock is visible in the foreground. Photo by Tanya Novikova.²²⁶

While attempts to halt development have met unsuccessful ends, the Native-led movement around this land and a lithium mine has pushed this darker history into the public discourse, forcing a dialogue on the meaning of a bloody past in a presentist land issue. Along with legal documentation, tribal litigants and activists have used the deluge of press and blog interest on the topic to challenge, subvert, and ultimately reclaim a historical narrative that has excluded their contributions or crises. They have demanded, both literally and metaphorically, their seat at the table in discussions of a new extractive project. This places Peehee mu'huh in a growing community of Indigenous land and water defense movements in North America and across the globe, where peoples already disproportionately impacted by extractive industry and

²²⁶ Photo was originally published in Nauman, "Tribes Say 'No' to Lithium Mining at Nevada Massacre Site" but does not indicate the artist's name.

histories of marginalization are using the avenues available to them to loudly resist new forms of settler colonialism in their ancestral territories—regardless of the perceived “greenness” of them.

At the same time, the fact that the lithium business continues as usual at the site is another reminder of the continued bias state and private actors have in acknowledging the more difficult parts of a placed-based history that involves Indigenous genocide and the settler violence. Like in the recent events at Standing Rock and Line 3, a coalition-backed Native opposition to an energy project in both the courts and on the ground did not stop the encroachment into the landscape. Resounding evidence of impact to the tribes and problematic environmental assessments were not enough to halt huge billion dollar projects. At Peehee mu’huh, the long American tradition of dismissing or disrespecting the spiritual significance of Native resources and burial sites, unfortunately, carries on.

If you traveled to Thacker Pass at the time of this writing, you would likely find the western side of the snowy Pass full of bulldozers and yellow-vested construction crews working away on the lithium mine. Along the roadway leading up to the construction zone, you might see some lingering remnants of the occupation, in the form of a wind-torn banner, prayer ties or a “Life Over Lithium” billboard or passing bumper sticker. At this point in time, the mine will likely operate for several decades as planned. So, too, will persist the legacy of the intersectional social movement at Thacker Pass/Peehee mu’huh, a political drama that played out in both courts and at the site itself during the years 2021-2023.

V. Conclusion: A Still Unfolding History

The Thacker Pass Lithium Mine may be operational as soon as 2026. With tens of thousands of new lithium claims in the state of Nevada, it is one project in slew of other developments that will likely influence the future of the state and national energy economy in the coming decades should lithium demand grow as predicted.²²⁷ While the mining project has triumphed over Indigenous land-based resistance, the history of this current event is still being written. At the start of this year, a new character entered the conversation: a teeny-tiny snail called the Kings River Pyrg that lives in springs around Thacker Pass. If Fish and Wildlife deem the critter in need of federal protection under the Endangered Species Act, propelled by a petition from the Western Watersheds Project, it could change the rules of engagement for mining in the area.²²⁸

Through the current controversy over extraction, this outlying mountain pass in the northern Nevada desert has reached new levels of attention that has demanded attention to its past. Any time before the last several years, it would have been inconceivable that the Indigenous connection to place at Thacker Pass would be a Jeopardy question on national television.²²⁹ Within this timely and urgent case study in environmental history, we see a place that has a rich, 10,000-plus year human history that has not been platformed in national narratives around Nevada histories or in the history of westward expansion. We also see a place, changed over time, by both violence and the enduring legacies of settler colonialism.

²²⁷ “Lithium Claims,” Nevada Division of Minerals Open Data Site, February 29, 2024, <https://data-ndom.opendata.arcgis.com/pages/lithium-claims>.

²²⁸ Michael Doyle and Hannah Northey, “Feds Weigh Protections for Tiny Snail near Massive Lithium Mine,” *E&E News* by *POLITICO*, February 8, 2024.

²²⁹ *Jeopardy* aired the following on January 1, 2024: “The people of Red Mountain are battling to protect their Nev. homeland at Thacker Pass from an open-pit mine for this battery element.” The correct answer was “What is lithium?” To see a screencap of the question, see Basin & Range Watch’s tweet: Basin & Range Watch [@BasinRange], “The Thacker Pass Eco-Disaster Made Jeopardy the Other Day!” Tweet, *Twitter*, January 5, 2024, <https://twitter.com/BasinRange/status/1743271820353232986>.

In many places, and no more true than in the United States, to tell the history of the land is to tell the story of the people who informed entire worldviews and cultivated centuries of knowledge around it. In the context of today's politically contentious lithium development, someone has to speak for the land and it should be the original stewards who regard it as central to their existence dating back to time immemorial. At Thacker Pass/Peehee mu'huh, Indigenous people are speaking for the environment, for the ancestors, and for the next seven generations—a perspective that has been historically sidelined from conversations around energy projects.

Daranda Hinkey is one of the people who have spoken from the perspective of place, writing in 2021:

“Peehee mu'huh does not want to be sold. She does not want to be stripped of its sagebrush and contaminated with chemicals. She does not want her animals to flee. She does not want the ancestors' bones to be unearthed. My people before me and the people far after me have spoken; they say to keep lithium in the ground.”²³⁰

The recent drama over the lithium mine is just the latest installment in the long story of human placemaking at Thacker Pass/Peehee mu'huh. It remains an ancient homeland, but it is one that has been changed by the violence it has witnessed over the years. At the start of colonization, Rotten Moon was already known as a place where the dead rested. In 1865, it gained new association with specifically settler violence and became the final resting place to at least 31 documented victims during one of the settler-Native deadliest wars in the American West. Now, in its present context, Thacker Pass is both a sacred Indigenous site and an important parcel of land for the country's domestic green energy agenda. Operating in this friction, Native peoples have worked to emphasize their connection to this place as shaped by a culturally significant, albeit obscured, history, and reclaim their right to assert that this past matters and

²³⁰ Hinkey, “Peehee Mu'huh Speaks (Opinion).”

should be considered a crucial factor in the greenlighting of a project that will potentially disturb the remains of the dead.

The Sacred Fire Continues

On a cold November day in 2016, I was at the *Oceti Sakowin* resistance camp in Standing Rock, North Dakota. I was seated in a camping chair, processing cedar to be burned in the nearby sacred fire. I was one of thousands of people there that day, many of whom were non-Natives who had traveled to the high northern reservation to stand alongside Lakota water protectors in protest of an oil pipeline. This place, the main fire, was something of a meeting point at camp. Like at a powwow, there was usually one of several rotating MCs providing camp updates, sharing thoughts, praying, and passing the mic to members of the many represented nations at camp. As I sat there, the MC was talking about taking the embers of the sacred fire and lighting them in the land or water struggle wherever you had come from. I cannot recall his name, or quote exactly what he said, but I remember him saying that this moment—this movement—was special, it was making history, and that this fire would spread across Turtle Island and protect *Unci Maka* (“Grandmother Earth” in Lakota) for the next seven generations.

I cannot help but feel that Thacker Pass is one of those sparks, one of several Indigenous-led land struggles to ignite in the years following Standing Rock. The connections to the 2016 movement are apparent in the activism around the lithium mine. The late Myron Dewey, a Walker River Paiute tribal member and a prominent leader in the Thacker Pass struggle before his untimely death in 2021, was one of the key drone flyers and activists at *Oceti Sakowin* as the leader of the outlet Digital Smoke Signals. As previously mentioned, the protest signs and materials within the Peehee mu’huh discourse abound with the same sentiments as those during the occupation against the Dakota Access pipeline, centering around water, tradition, ceremony,

and a continued tradition of Indigenous resistance to colonial oppression. There are parallels in both histories to massacres as formative moments contextualizing the eventual outbreak of resistance. These two histories of Indigenous agency, further, are connected in not only the twenty-first century, but before that in the Red Power Movement of the mid-twentieth century as well as the Lakota-Paiute connection during the nineteenth century Ghost Dance—a relationship that historians Ned Blackhawk and Louis Warren note is fairly understudied in histories of the American West.²³¹

The connection between Standing Rock and Thacker Pass are not abstract to Indigenous activists, either. RSIC places the 2016 #NoDAPL movement in their timeline of historically relevant events leading up to the current lithium controversy. Thomas Joseph, an organizer from the Hoopa Valley Tribe in California told *The Nation* “we knew that Standing Rock was something new in the making.” Like the return of the white relatives in Numu tradition, he added that the rising of Native nations around Turtle Island was foretold by the old ones: “A lot of Indigenous tribes have stories of this time. In English, we would call it ‘prophecy.’ We were waiting for something to ignite that, so when Standing Rock lit up, we knew that was it. It’s time to move.”²³²

For some of the Thacker Pass activists, the difference between an oil pipeline and an open-pit lithium mine is inconsequential when Indigenous sovereignty and lifeways are at risk. In both the North Dakota and Nevada movements, the cultural inheritance of people to their land was called into question and the resulting activist fronts were met with punitive action for their stand. Police raids closed both Oceti and Ox Sam Camp. In 2023, one young camper at Ox Sam Camp told a *Truthdig* reporter that his father had attended Standing Rock and recounted the

²³¹ For a discussion on Lakota-Paiute connections, see Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land*, and Louis S. Warren, *God’s Red Son: The Ghost Dance Religion and the Making of Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

²³² Evan Malmgren, “The Battle for Thacker Pass,” *The Nation*, September 23, 2021.

violence he witnessed. When the reporter asked why the young man had taken up the protest against the Thacker Pass construction, at that point readying a water pipeline for the project, he responded: “I’m here to fight the pipeline!”²³³

When it comes to extraction on tribal lands, Indigenous people *are* on the move. There are tens, if not hundreds, of small political struggles here in the U.S. that center Native association with place in contention over settler colonial use of the land. The tendrils connecting these histories, like those of Standing Rock’s influence on the Thacker Pass opposition, present an urgent call to action for future scholars to move holistically interweave these narratives and interrogate the academic traditions that have contributed to the underrepresentation of these stories in the wider American discourse of history. Similarly, this movement has broader global connections that are not investigated in this paper but invite further study. The majority of the world’s lithium is located in or near Indigenous lands worldwide, which has stoked the flames of resource rebellions over rare-earth mining and its effects.²³⁴ While living in a rapidly destabilizing climate, attention to Indigenous perspectives on land are not only important, but existential for the wellbeing of sensitive ecosystems, and therefore people, the world over.²³⁵ In a time increasingly characterized by climate change, alleged “solutions” to global carbon emissions, and a renewed call for Native rights, further inquiry into the links between land, lithium, and Indigenous identity may be crucial in charting the path to our collective future.

²³³ Ketcham, “Neocolonialism: Pillaging the Earth for the ‘Climate.’”

²³⁴ Lithium mining in Argentina and Chile near Indigenous homelands has recently incited protest, at times with the response of militarized police. See Michael Sainato, “‘We Were Not Consulted’: Native Americans Fight Lithium Mine on Site of 1865 Massacre,” *The Guardian*, October 13, 2023.

²³⁵ Despite legally owning 20 percent of the planet’s land, Indigenous people manage and protect 80 percent of the world’s biodiversity, including sensitive ecosystems that help regulate the earth’s climate; see “Indigenous Peoples: Defending an Environment for All,” International Institute for Sustainable Development, accessed May 14, 2023.

A Microcosmic History

Environmental extraction has caused controversy in Indian Country as long as there has been empire on the North American continent. Case studies span from gold mining in the Black Hills to uranium mining in Navajo country, tar sands pipelines in the First Nations to lithium mining here in northern Nevada. Thacker Pass is just one timely example of how extraction often intersects with places that hold Indigenous trauma. After all, stolen or ceded land does not just stop being sacred to those who revere it just because it has a new utility under corporate capitalism. To some local Native community members, activists, and their allies, the mine at Thacker Pass represents more than just the extraction of an element needed for batteries and electric storage. It is yet another story of traumatic Indigenous history disregarded—quite literally by a government institution—for the sake of extraction. But this mine, we're told, is actually *good* for the planet.

There are a great many things to be learned by the unfolding events at Thacker Pass/Peehee mu'huh whether you're a scholar, activist, or mining executive. The lithium mine and the subsequent movement against it has shown a light on the deep, rich history that can be associated to an Indigenous place, and how quickly extreme events of violence can be consigned to the dusty shelves of reference texts and outright dismissed as important by the dominant settler narrative, especially when there's money to be made and minerals to be mined. In the coming years, it may be the case that Thacker Pass is continually remade as a place of great industry, of great green energy potential, but there should be no doubt that Native peoples will continue to hold Thacker Pass as a place that is a physical manifestation of their history and a marker of the violence their ancestors suffered, endured, or resisted.

In this thesis, I have asserted that Thacker Pass—as a place and political issue—is microcosmic of the larger issues that Indian Country has faced in the past all the way to the present. Through the lens of this location in the sagebrush ocean, we see a dynamic but contested history that ties living Native peoples into a chain of inheritance to place spanning back 10,000-plus years, not unlike other land fights from the Great Lakes to the Four Corners. Within this heritage, there is a well-documented relationship between the environment and the sacred that is compounded by the occurrence of historic atrocity. The nineteenth century of the pass called Rotten Moon reveals how settler colonialism imparts violence to both the land and its people, helping provide a deeper understanding of how colonial ideologies can inflict such suffering on Native peoples to only disregard the incidents from the annals of history. In particular, the relative obscurity of the ambush attack on camp of sleeping Numu people on September 12, 1865, prior to the tribal movement to acknowledge this event, is indicative of the wider culture of violence that made mass murder a mundane occurrence in the history of the American West and Indian Country more broadly. All of this culminates in the dispute over the lithium mine, a project that in itself is representative of the way governments and companies work in unison to force their operations onto Indigenous communities.

As discussed in the last chapter, the contemporary debate over the meaning of the site's sacridity, the meaning of historic violence, and the appropriate handling of land known to carry trauma, tells us about what is more important to regulators and the dominant non-Native narrative. The friction—between mining and a massacre site, “green energy” and memories of genocide—further, represents a much larger trend in our society that fails to privilege Indigenous perspectives on how land should be used or regarded. And as in other modern frontlines in

Indian Country, it is Indigenous people who are demanding their rightful place in history, as stakeholders seated at the table, and as a voice for the land itself.

My hope in examining Thacker Pass as an environmental history, as a non-Native historian, is revealing how such swift and merciless violence can be forgotten, challenged, and reinterpreted. Understanding the atrocities of this piece of land does not bring the deceased back, nor does it bring any justice to the descendants of the victims of historic violence. It does not even stop a mine, even if federal law intends to protect such sites from excavation. But acknowledging this history and interrogating the various perspectives and transformed meanings of place helps deepen collective understanding of our shared responsibility to understand the past in all its many vignettes through time. That also requires reckoning with the uglier environmental and social legacies that linger in our current society.

The announcement of acreage of mineral extraction in Yosemite or Gettysburg—places held sacred for their environment or historic violence, respectively—would draw immediate, intense public backlash on the bases of conservation or cultural reverence. Yet, the Thacker Pass Lithium Mine moves ahead. In this still unfolding history, there's much left to uncover and many more historical connections to make. Thacker Pass/Peehee mu'huh is just one land struggle among many, one massacre site in a much wider sea of historic violence, and just one example of the way Indian Country's past and present fuse around issues rooted in place. This is a call to action for historians and other scholars to more rigorously interrogate the history of extractive places as they connect to living Indigenous communities. The depth of historic trauma present in this singular mining issue begs the question: how many other Thacker Passes are there across Indian Country? The globe? What can they tell us about our collective past, and how should that inform our future?

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