



GHOST DANCE RETOLD

From Sacred Resistance to Political Spectacle

INTRODUCTION

The systematic extermination, displacement, and marginalization of Indigenous populations across the Americas constitute one of the most devastating and enduring legacies of settler colonialism. While the specific nature and intensity of violence varied across geographic and political contexts, the cumulative demographic collapse was catastrophic. Historical estimates indicate that within two and a half centuries of Christopher Columbus's arrival in 1492, more than 90 percent of the Indigenous population across the Western Hemisphere had been decimated. This decline was driven not only by the introduction of foreign pathogens, such as smallpox and influenza, but also by deliberate mechanisms of structural violence, including forced displacement, cultural erasure, enslavement, and direct military campaigns waged by Spanish, British, French, and later, American colonial regimes (Thornton 43–45; Madley 127–130).

This vast human and cultural loss was compounded by the episodic violence inflicted through historical narration. As Simpson argues, colonial accounts of Indigenous history have often functioned as instruments of erasure, portraying Native nations not as sovereign polities but as impediments to the civilizing ambitions of European modernity (68–70). The dominant historiographical tradition has typically framed Indigenous resistance as irrational defiance and their cultural practices as archaic remnants incompatible with progress. Such narratives were legitimized through a discourse of manifest destiny and divine providence, which positioned the settler as a moral agent of history and cast the Indigenous subject as a tragic figure destined to vanish (Wolfe 390; Deloria 114–116; Dunbar-Ortiz 79; Estes 89).

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This Eurocentric historical framework not only rationalized territorial expansion but also worked to normalize systemic dispossession. It produced a discourse in which the annihilation of Native nations was reimagined as a necessary cost of civilization's advance. As Wolfe reiterates, settler colonialism is not a singular historical event but a structure premised on the ongoing elimination and replacement of Indigenous societies (388). Recent scholarship in Indigenous and decolonial studies has highlighted the need to challenge the colonialist worldview, by including Indigenous perspectives, knowledge systems, and ways of understanding history and relationships. Goeman looks at how Indigenous people have remapped the land and created their own way of telling stories about their relationships to that land, while TallBear explains how the ways Indigenous people care for each other and their environment, or the way they develop Caring Relations, will not permit settlers a future on that land. Rather than having a Land Claim, Indigenous peoples have a relationship with the land and they assert Sovereignty through this responsibility (Goeman 25–27; TallBear 26–29). Such interventions challenge both the archival biases of colonial historiography and the moral logic of erasure that continues to underwrite contemporary political and cultural narratives, such as portrayals of Wounded Knee as an unavoidable “clash” rather than a massacre.

These dominant narratives contributed not only to the erasure of Indigenous histories but also to the denial of genocide. The Sioux Nation holds a prominent place in US historical narratives due to its central role in significant nineteenth-century conflicts, including the Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Wounded Knee Massacre. Historical figures like Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse are emblematic of Native resistance, though they are often interpreted through the settler lens as figures of defiance against “civilization” rather than defenders of cultural sovereignty (Ostler 182). The violent suppression of the Sioux throughout the nineteenth century that was evident in events like the Dakota War of 1862, the Great Sioux War of 1876, and the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890, reveals a sustained campaign of territorial dispossession and cultural annihilation in the past. Contemporary narratives often celebrate national integration and legal reconciliation, a framing that can obscure the enduring cultural consequences of nineteenth-century violence.

The Ghost Dance is based on Indigenous North American spiritual beliefs and practices that arose during the late 1800s due to the desire of Native Americans to restore what had been lost due to colonization. The Ghost Dance was created in 1889 when a creator named Wovoka,

a prophet of the Northern Paiute tribe, described how to create a better world by seeing it through a new moral perspective and how to create a future of peace and unity among tribes by restoring their ancestors. The Ghost Dance was adopted by several tribes, including the Lakota, and continued to evolve as the number of tribes embracing it grew (Mooney 22–45; Stewart 23–27; Kehoe 12–15). Federal law enforcement viewed the Ghost Dance as a threat and took action against those practicing it, which ultimately resulted in the Wounded Knee Massacre on December 29, 1890. Although this event marked the end of the Ghost Dance, it lives on as part of Native American history and culture and remains a key aspect of many Indigenous peoples' spirituality.

Misunderstood by white authorities, the Ghost Dance was perceived as an uprising rather than a spiritual call for renewal. The Ghost Dance movement was fundamentally rooted in nonviolence, collective renewal, and the hopeful restoration of Indigenous life. Central to Wovoka's teachings was a doctrine of peace and patience, calling for harmonious coexistence with white settlers and faith in a divinely ordained future of liberation. Nevertheless, widespread settler anxieties were amplified by the belief that participants wore "ghost shirts" believed to offer supernatural protection from bullets. These rumors, though largely unfounded or misinterpreted, contributed to the growing perception among US authorities that the movement harbored militant intentions. Although often based on misinterpretation or speculation, such beliefs reveal the deep-rooted mistrust the Sioux held toward US military forces, shaped by a long history of broken treaties, violence, and forced displacement and their need for spiritual and symbolic protection in the face of existential threat (Mooney 33–34).

There exists considerable scholarly debate surrounding the Ghost Dance's meaning and intent. Some non-Native interpretations have viewed it as a response to socio-political stress, including military defeat, ecological collapse (such as the destruction of the buffalo), and reservation life (DeMallie 386; Richardson 22; Roscigno 29). Others, like Robert Lowie, whose interpretation reflects a 1950s anthropological thought, perceived the movement as an expression of despair and aggression, asserting that adherents believed it would result in the annihilation of white society (Lowie 16). In contrast, scholars such as Omar Stewart and James Mooney contend that these interpretations misrepresent the Ghost Dance's core spiritual message, exaggerating its association with violent resistance and overlooking its primarily peaceful and devotional nature (Stewart 184; Mooney 21–24). Importantly, Lakota spiritual expression is not doctrinally uniform.

Each practitioner experiences and interprets the Ghost Dance individually, in line with traditional religious beliefs that allow for personal spiritual autonomy (Adams and Fogelson 155). As such, the accusation that the Sioux “perverted” Wovoka’s teachings by adopting a militant posture oversimplifies both the diversity and the cultural nuance of Lakota religious life. Furthermore, interpretations found in settler and US government narratives that ghost shirts were deliberately promoted by spiritual leaders to manipulate followers reflect settler anxieties rather than Indigenous intentions.

NARRATIVE TRANSFORMATION IN ADAPTATION

Dee Brown and Zimmerman are non-Indigenous authors but approach their respective histories in quite different ways. Brown presents a sympathetic portrayal of Native Americans, offering a perspective that would later lead readers to identify with Native Americans. In contrast, Zimmerman’s writing comes from a white person’s perspective, offering a concise and ideologically-focused account based on edited material and an alternate audience. Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* is widely regarded as a landmark in historical narrative for centering Indigenous voices and revising settler accounts of westward expansion. Dee Brown’s account presents a nuanced portrayal of the events surrounding the Wounded Knee Massacre, highlighting the spiritual significance of the Ghost Dance with a tone of empathy and historical depth. By contrast, Dwight Zimmerman’s *Saga of the Sioux* (2011), tailored for a younger readership, streamlines the narrative for clarity and accessibility, often at the expense of cultural and theological complexity. Presented with illustrations and accessible language, the adaptation re-narrates Sioux resistance with a focus on prominent characters and events between 1860 and 1890 (Blair 123).

These differences are a product of their respective contexts. Brown was writing in the midst of the American Indian Movement, a time when American society was becoming increasingly aware of how Indigenous peoples have been dispossessed of their lands. Zimmerman’s 2011 adaptation was written after the White-Native conflict had been resolved by legal and institutional means. Therefore, Zimmerman’s work is directed towards a younger audience than Brown’s.

While Zimmerman’s version facilitates basic historical understanding, it also necessarily involves compression and reinterpretation. This process entails the risk of reducing narrative complexity and minimizing Indigenous epistemologies. For instance, in privileging certain

characters or emphasizing dramatic events, the adaptation may inadvertently reinforce tropes of the “tragic Indian” or “noble savage,” thereby distancing readers from the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of Sioux life. Zimmerman’s editorial decisions, both in narrative focus and tone, illustrate the ideological stakes of adaptation. The title *Saga of the Sioux* foregrounds one nation within a broader history, possibly reinforcing a US-centric essentialism that treats the Sioux as a homogenous collective and thereby obscures internal tribal diversity. Moreover, framing the Ghost Dance as the central trigger for the Wounded Knee Massacre without adequately contextualizing its spiritual roots risks perpetuating the narrative of Native irrationality or fanaticism.

The question of narrative authority—who has the right or power to tell a story—lies at the heart of adaptation studies, especially when the narratives concern historically silenced or colonized peoples. Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as both “repetition and reinterpretation,” a process that inevitably reflects the cultural and ideological standpoint of the adaptor (Hutcheon 176). Far from being neutral, adaptations carry the imprint of the historical moment in which they are created and the assumptions of their intended audience. Hutcheon’s concept of “palimpsestic” narrative helps explain how successive retellings inscribe new meanings over the original, often obscuring or reframing foundational truths. Retelling is therefore not just a literary act but a political one as well. Adaptations of traumatic histories like Wounded Knee may shift the framing of events, recasting resistance as rebellion or spirituality as superstition.

Postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak have long warned against the appropriation of subaltern narratives by dominant cultures. Spivak’s well-known question—“Can the subaltern speak?”—highlights the structural barriers that prevent marginalized voices from being authentically represented within hegemonic discourses (271). In the case of *Saga of the Sioux*, the risk lies not only in narrative simplification but in reinscribing colonial hierarchies by filtering Indigenous memory through a non-Indigenous lens. Gerald Vizenor further argues that Native histories are often reframed through a settler gaze that romanticizes or flattens Indigenous subjectivity (16). This study adopts his insights to examine how Zimmerman’s version both gestures toward the Indigenous perspective while subtly redirecting narrative authority away from Native epistemologies and toward settler comprehension.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, comparative textual analysis framework, drawing on narrative theory and postcolonial literary criticism to examine how historical meaning and Indigenous representation are shaped across source and adaptation texts. The primary objective is to examine how the Ghost Dance, as both a sacred ritual and a symbol of resistance, is represented differently in Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and Dwight Zimmerman's adaptation *Saga of the Sioux*. These two texts offer contrasting narrative frameworks, authorial voices, and ideological orientations, making them suitable for exploring questions related to voice, representation, adaptation, and cultural translation.

The two texts selected for analysis were chosen based on their direct relationship as source and adaptation. Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* is a landmark historical narrative that privileges Indigenous voices and perspectives by incorporating speeches, testimonies, and biographical narratives of Native leaders. Zimmerman's *Saga of the Sioux*, designed for a younger audience, reinterprets Brown's original narrative through simplified language, enhanced visual content, and an instructive tone that prioritizes accessibility over historical and cultural nuance. The adaptation claims educational intent but necessarily involves narrative compression and ideological filtering. The contrast between these works provides fertile ground for examining how meaning shifts through the process of retelling.

The corpus of data consists of narrative segments from both texts that explicitly address the Ghost Dance movement and the surrounding historical context, particularly leading up to the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890. Selected chapters, narrative segments, and descriptive passages were systematically analyzed for their thematic significance to the Ghost Dance, with particular attention to the portrayal of Indigenous agency, spiritual expression, narrative voice, and character representation. These excerpts were organized in parallel to allow for direct comparison of narrative elements.

The selection of passages for the purposes of analysis was based on three main criteria: (1) An explicit reference to the Ghost Dance or its immediate effects, (2) the way the United States government views and responds to it, and (3) instances in which Indigenous voices or explanations or leadership are included or excluded from the discussion. Rather than relying only on individual quotes, the focus was on clusters of passages that exemplify patterns of narrative through repeated use of direct testimonials (as seen in Brown) as opposed

to summaries (as found in Zimmerman), or examples of shifting from collective to individualized blame.

The present study focuses on six key narrative elements in order to critically assess how the Ghost Dance is represented and reinterpreted in both *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and its adaptation, *Saga of the Sioux*. For the purpose of the study, the analysis focuses on the following elements: (1) narrative voice and point of view, (2) character focus and personalization, (3) the representation of spiritual content, (4) tone and emotional framing, (5) the use of quotations and rhetorical presence, and (6) historical contextualization and moral framing. Each component is essential in understanding the transformation of meaning that occurs through the process of adaptation, particularly in relation to Indigenous historical and spiritual narratives.

The analysis of narrative voice and point of view addresses who holds narrative authority in each text—whether the story is told through Indigenous testimony or mediated by an external, omniscient narrator. Scholars such as Leitch (9) and Rhonda Y. Williams (64) have emphasized that voice in historical storytelling is not merely a technical feature but a political one, as it reflects decisions about whose perspective is authorized to speak. A shift from first-person Indigenous testimony to third-person external narration, as seen in the adaptation, risks displacing Native epistemologies in favor of settler-colonial narrative structures (Lyons 64). This also impacts character focus, as personalization of key figures like Kicking Bear or Wovoka in the original text provides historical specificity and emotional immediacy, whereas their reduction to collective representations in the adaptation erodes narrative intimacy and cultural depth (Smith 91).

The representation of spiritual content is another critical area of inquiry, particularly considering the Ghost Dance's significance as a religious and cultural practice. Contemporary scholarship in Indigenous studies underscores the critical importance of preserving the sacred integrity of Native rituals in narrative retellings, cautioning against reductive interpretations that strip these practices of their spiritual and cultural significance. Settler narratives often secularize or exoticize Indigenous spirituality, transforming sacred acts into either folklore or threats (Tuck and Yang 1–2). In *Saga of the Sioux*, the Ghost Dance is portrayed less as a sacred prophecy of cultural and spiritual renewal and more as a misinterpreted or misconstrued episode, illustrating “settler common sense” that is a dominant interpretive framework that normalizes colonial perspectives while marginalizing Indigenous worldviews (Gilio-Whitaker 75).

Tone and emotional framing further mediate how the reader is invited to interpret both historical trauma and Indigenous resilience. Brown's original work is imbued with grief, mourning, and resistance, reflecting what LaRocque describes as "writing through wounds" (LaRocque 83). By contrast, the adaptation employs a neutral, instructional tone, which, while appropriate for younger readers, inadvertently minimizes the affective gravity of colonial violence. This leads to a dilution of rhetorical power, particularly in the use or omission of Native quotations. The original text preserves Indigenous oratory, giving readers access to the language and cadence of resistance. In contrast, the adaptation frequently paraphrases or excludes Indigenous voices, thereby diminishing the narrative texture and undermining what David Herman describes as "narrative fidelity"—the degree to which a narrative authentically conveys the lived experiences and cultural truths of its subjects (Herman 113).

Finally, the analysis examines how each text contextualizes the Ghost Dance within broader histories of violence and dispossession. Brown's work situates the ritual as the culmination of cultural endurance and collective despair, while Zimmerman's version frames it as a precursor to military confrontation, thereby reshaping its moral and historical meaning. This framing aligns with what Glen Coulthard describes as the tendency of liberal settler histories to narrate Indigenous resistance as irrational or tragic rather than political and purposeful (115). By critically evaluating these six narrative components, this study demonstrates how shifts in form, tone, and voice across source and adaptation not only reshape the meaning of the Ghost Dance but also reflect broader ideological tensions in the representation of Indigenous histories.

The analysis was guided by the theoretical frameworks of narrative theory and postcolonial literary criticism, which provided critical tools for examining the construction of voice, agency, and cultural representation within the texts. From the viewpoint of narrative theory, particular attention was paid to the concept of narrative authority—that is, who tells the story, from what perspective, and with what interpretive weight. The presence or absence of Indigenous narrative voice, especially in relation to sacred practices such as the Ghost Dance, was central to the inquiry. The analysis also drew on Gérard Genette's concepts of voice and focalization, particularly in tracing how narrative perspective mediates access to characters' interior worlds (Genette 186–192).

Postcolonial theory, particularly the works of Edward Said (1978) and Gayatri Spivak (1988) informed the critique of representational

politics. Said's notion of *positional superiority* and Spivak's interrogation of the silencing of the subaltern provided a framework for assessing how Indigenous voices are either preserved or overwritten in historical adaptation. Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, especially her notion of adaptation as an act of ideological re-inscription and narrative negotiation, was instrumental in identifying the socio-political implications of Zimmerman's retelling.

REFRAMING INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE

A key difference between Brown's and Zimmerman's narratives lies in narrative voice. Brown structures his text around direct testimonies and quoted speeches from Native leaders such as Sitting Bull, Kicking Bear, and Red Cloud. This stylistic choice serves not merely as a literary device, but as a restoration of voice to those historically silenced. In doing so, Brown reconstructs the history of conquest as a lived and spoken experience of grief, dignity, and resistance.

Zimmerman, on the other hand, shifts to a third-person omniscient narrator. While effective for simplifying exposition, this move distances the reader from the rhetorical power and immediacy of Indigenous speech. The adaptation no longer "hears" Native voices but "reports" them. This reflects what Spivak describes as the "epistemic violence" of representation: even when the subaltern is included, their voice is mediated through the language and lens of the dominant (284). Such a narrative shift may also reflect assumptions about the young reader's cognitive or emotional capacity. Yet this assumption risks reinforcing the hierarchy it seeks to overcome, positioning Indigenous speech as too complex or intense for broader consumption.

In Brown's original, the Ghost Dance is portrayed as a sacred ritual or an expression of spiritual continuity and collective renewal. Rooted in Wovoka's prophecy, the dance was nonviolent, hopeful, and deeply religious. Brown includes direct testimony about the spiritual teachings of peace, humility, and patience that underpinned the movement (Mooney 25). This framing aligns with Indigenous cosmologies that view ritual as a living relationship with the metaphysical world. On the other hand, Zimmerman's version reframes the Ghost Dance as a vaguely militant activity, as seen from the whites' perspective. Although he does not explicitly pathologize the dance, his omission of spiritual language and emphasis on settlers' fear changes the interpretive center. The ritual is no longer a form of sacred resistance but a prelude to political unrest.

Both the texts have the same interpretation of the Ghost Dance—a sign of submission and fear towards American troops (Brown 435; Zimmerman 167). The writers state that Ghost Dances were perceived as dangerous by American Soldiers. There are some differences in the way the Ghost Dance was described in both books:

At Pine Ridge, the frightened agent telegraphed Washington: “Indians are dancing in the snow and are wild and crazy [...]. We need protection, and we need it now. The leaders should be arrested and confined at some military post until the matter is quieted, and this should be done at once.” (Brown 436)

The excerpt quoted above is a direct quotation from Dee Brown’s book, which demonstrates an example of the perception of the Ghost Dance by white Americans. The words “wild” and “crazy” were defined by the reservation agent, which exemplifies the negative connotations that were associated with the Ghost Dance from a white American’s perspective. The resulting idea conveyed in this quote portrays the fact that the Ghost Dance was viewed as a form of submitting to white people and the threat that the Ghost Dance posed to them. The quote above shows how this fear resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of the Ghost Dance leader. The use of the word “leader” does not refer to a specific figure; it could refer to any Native American who participated in the dance.

On the other hand, Zimmerman limited the focus of the Ghost Dance:

Government agents were terrified and pleaded for military help. On November 20, the Indian Bureau in Washington, reservation agents were ordered to telegraph the names of all the leaders of the disturbances. That list was then transmitted to Bear Coat Miles’s army headquarters in Chicago. Miles saw Sitting Bull’s name and immediately assumed he was to blame. (167–168)

The quote provided does not include the word “dance,” nor does the book specifically reference the Ghost Dance. While the book clearly states that the Ghost Dance posed a threat and needed to be dealt with urgently, it excludes the terms of both the “wild and crazy” description of the dance and its participants. Rather, the book states that the dance was perceived by reservation agents to cause them fear or panic. The Ghost Dance was characterized in the book as not being reckless or insane, but rather presenting an immediate need for policing. The book identifies Sitting Bull as the person responsible for the uprising. In particular, the book appears to place emphasis on the confrontation between Sitting Bull and the representatives of the American govern-

ment. In doing so, it conveys the perspective of white Americans, who created a bias against Sitting Bull based on preconceived notions. This bias allowed for Sitting Bull's arrest by the American government.

The reframing of Indigenous spiritual practices in colonial and postcolonial narratives carries significant ideological implications, particularly when sacred rituals are extracted from their epistemological roots and recontextualized through a Western interpretive lens. Gerald Vizenor argues that the displacement of Indigenous narratives often transforms sacred expressions into stylized or anthropological representations, undressing them of their rooted ceremonial significance and severing them from the epistemological frameworks that originally gave them meaning (11). This process renders the rituals not as acts of living knowledge but as symbolic performance artifacts, often appropriated to satisfy settler curiosity or to reinforce tropes of mysticism and primitivism. The result can be understood as a form of cultural de-spiritualization, in which Indigenous cosmologies are emptied of their relational, ethical, and metaphysical meanings and subsequently reframed within interpretive model shaped by colonial rationality, often diminishing ethical significance (Smith 44; Wenger 112).

This phenomenon is particularly evident in the treatment of rituals such as the Ghost Dance, which has been persistently misrepresented as a dangerous or irrational response to colonial expansion rather than as a coherent theological system rooted in Indigenous futurity and relational ontology. Jeffrey Ostler documents how settler institutions, particularly military and bureaucratic agencies, interpreted the Ghost Dance through a lens of fear and suspicion, framing it not as a spiritual strategy of survival and renewal but as a precursor to violent uprising (Ostler 221–224). Such interpretations are not merely misreadings, but they serve to justify state surveillance and violence, thereby reinforcing colonial structures of power. In this way, the decontextualization of Native ritual becomes a discursive tool that not only discredits Indigenous religious epistemologies but also legitimizes their suppression.

Recent scholarship further elaborates on this point by linking the secularization of Indigenous sacred traditions to regimes of colonial control, demonstrating how spiritual practices were reinterpreted through legal and administrative framework that enabled suppression, surveillance, and oppression (Smith 42–48; Ostler 221–224; Wenger 110–115). Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues that the state's classification of Native religious practices as either folkloric or threatening constitutes a form of epistemic violence that denies Indigenous com-

munities the authority to define the spiritual on their own terms (72–74). Similarly, Mishuana Goeman observes that Indigenous rituals, when narratively reconfigured for settler consumption, frequently lose their intergenerational and land-based dimensions, transforming into spectacles rather than expressions of living resistance (Goeman 295–300). This reduction is emblematic of what Mark Rifkin describes as “settler common sense”—the normalization of settler colonial legal, political, and affective structures as the self-evident conditions of everyday life, rendering Indigenous sovereignty and agency largely invisible within dominant epistemological frameworks (Rifkin 4–6). As a result, when sacred rituals like the Ghost Dance are abstracted from their ceremonial and cultural contexts, they do not merely lose spiritual meaning—they are re-scripted in ways that legitimize colonial historiography, undermine Indigenous sovereignty, and obscure the continuity of spiritual resistance.

The depiction of the Native American struggle provided by Brown highlights various tribal identities (e.g., Oglala, Hunkpapa, and Teton Sioux), thereby showcasing some of the internal intricacies of the Sioux Nation and the relationship of the intertribal political landscape.

Their outstanding leader was Red Cloud, thirty-eight years old, a shrewd warrior chief. Still too young to be a warrior was Crazy Horse, an intelligent and fearless teen-aged Oglala. Among the Hunkpapas, a smaller division of the Teton Sioux, a young man in his mid-twenties had already won a reputation as a hunter and warrior. (Brown 10)

In above Brown’s texts, one can find a greater level of complexity when considering the leadership of the Sioux and how they constructed their strategies for resistance as opposed to Zimmerman’s generalization below leading to a homogenized and therefore less complex portrayal of the tribes, “Their leaders included some of the most famous warrior chiefs in Indian history: Red Cloud, the Sioux’s greatest diplomat; Sitting Bull, the Sioux’s greatest strategist; and Crazy Horse, the Sioux’s greatest field general” (Zimmerman xiv).

In *Saga of the Sioux*, the protagonist is defined as “Sioux” by generalization, which includes generalised assessments of the Native American leaders. In contrast, when describing Red Cloud’s diplomacy, for instance, Brown gives one many examples of how Red Cloud operated as a diplomat. Brown uses as an illustration, Red Cloud’s encounter with President Grant at the White House; this episode illustrates the stark contrast in the style of writing between Zimmerman’s and Brown’s works. Brown’s writing is focused on illustrating historical processes and conveying political action. On the other hand,

Zimmerman's works tend to condense Native American leaders into categories of concise terms, stripping them of the historical context and the complexities associated with their leaderships.

Brown's work offers rich portrayals of specific figures like Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, Crazy Horse not merely as historical actors but as emotionally complex individuals. These figures speak, mourn, and act with agency. These narratives humanize and individualize the broader historical trauma of Indigenous genocide, transforming abstract loss into lived, personal experiences that resist erasure. Zimmerman's adaptation is an example of his placing a collective emphasis on Civilizations rather than individuals. In addition to being educational for many due to the simplification of a complex history, this stance effectively eliminates the potential for portraying the internal diversity of views held by members of the Sioux tribe. It also renders resistance abstract, thereby dulling the ethical urgency of the historical moment. This flattening of character parallels what Spivak terms "strategic essentialism," the political reduction of diverse individuals into simplified identities for the sake of visibility or critique (287). While often well-intentioned, this strategy can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes and suppress individual agency.

Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* evokes a profound emotional resonance, conveying the complexities of grief, endurance, and historical trauma through vivid narrative techniques and the inclusion of firsthand Indigenous testimonies. The language is weighted with grief, injustice, and spiritual resilience. This emotional charge is central to Brown's political project: to expose the brutality of conquest and evoke empathy for its victims. Zimmerman, in adapting for a younger audience, adopts a more neutral, informational tone. The emotional weight is softened, and the Wounded Knee Massacre is described with brevity and caution. While such a move may be intended to shield young readers from graphic content, it also sanitizes the past.

This tonal shift raises important ethical questions about historical affect: How should trauma be represented, especially to younger audiences? How much should be told, and in what way? As Hutcheon notes, adaptation always involves ethical as well as aesthetic decisions (106). In this case, the ethical cost of softening history may be the erosion of its moral clarity.

Brown's text includes frequent use of Indigenous quotations that are rich in oratorical tradition, metaphor, and spiritual vocabulary. These speeches are not merely informational; they are performative acts of resistance and memory. They allow readers to encounter

Native worldviews directly, not as filtered summaries but as living words. Zimmerman largely omits these quotations, replacing them with paraphrases or general narration. This erases a key site of Indigenous rhetorical presence. As Spivak reminds us, voice is not simply a matter of being referenced; it is about having one's form of expression recognized and preserved (285). The omission of Native quotations thus constitutes a form of discursive displacement.

SPECTACLE AND SILENCING

Dee Brown's use of first-person accounts from Native leaders such as Kicking Bear and Sitting Bull anchors the Ghost Dance within the worldview of those who experienced it. This approach foregrounds Indigenous epistemology and rhetorical sovereignty, allowing Native participants to speak from within their cosmological framework. In contrast, *Saga of the Sioux* employs an omniscient third-person narrator who describes the dance as an external observer. This narrative repositioning produces a distancing effect, in which Indigenous perspectives are mediated through a didactic and externalized viewpoint. This narrative transformation reflects what Spivak identifies as the silencing of the subaltern (285), where the Ghost Dance is no longer portrayed as an active, lived expression of Indigenous resistance, but rather recast as a passive and externalized spectacle within the dominant colonial discourse. The Indigenous subject becomes an object of narration rather than a narrator of their own story. As a consequence, the Ghost Dance loses its discursive agency and is instead interpreted within the dominant epistemic structures of Western historical explanation.

In Brown's original work, the Ghost Dance is rooted in Wovoka's prophecy—centered on peace, renewal, and ancestral return. This spiritual context is essential to understanding the dance as a non-violent form of resistance, steeped in cultural symbolism. Brown's portrayal respects the metaphysical weight of the ritual and its theological coherence within Native belief systems. The adaptation, however, reframes the dance through settler anxiety. It foregrounds whites' fears and military misinterpretations, effectively minimizing the sacredness of the movement. This reframing echoes what Gerald Vizenor describes as the manifest manner: the tendency of colonial discourse to recode Indigenous spirituality into a sign of irrationality or danger (Vizenor 4). The Ghost Dance, once a profound expression of hope and cosmological restoration, is recontextualized in colonial narratives as a perceived threat. Its spiritual intent is overshadowed

by settler misinterpretation and state-driven anxieties. The spiritual dimension, essential to its cultural logic, is thus flattened into a political event that is a precursor to rebellion rather than a sacred invocation.

Brown carefully contextualizes the Ghost Dance by detailing Wovoka's vision, including the anticipated return of buffalo and dead ancestors, and the prophesied nonviolence toward whites. This framing asserts Native motivations and provides readers with insight into how the Ghost Dance functioned as a spiritual and cultural response to existential collapse. Zimmerman's adaptation offers only a cursory mention of Wovoka's message, quickly pivoting to white interpretations of the dance as dangerous. This centering of settler response reflects a broader discursive pattern in which Indigenous actions are interpreted not on their own terms but according to their impact on the colonizer. As Edward Said notes in *Orientalism*, such centering constructs the "Other" not as a subject with agency, but as a source of disturbance within a presumed civilizational order (108). The result is that the Ghost Dance is not presented as a legitimate religious expression, but as a misinterpreted episode obscured by colonial lenses. This reframing removes the Indigenous voice from the center of meaning-making and reinforces a settler-centric narrative logic.

In *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, the Ghost Dance is a symbolic climax or a final spiritual stand against the erasure of culture, land, and life. It encapsulates a desperate hope for renewal and justice. The ritual's place in the narrative arc serves to elevate it beyond a historical event; it becomes a cultural allegory of resistance and mourning. The teachings of Wovoka on the Ghost Dance are very apparent in Brown's (435) statement, "You must not hurt anybody or do harm to anyone. You must not fight. Do right always," which echoes Wovoka as well as the emphasis placed on brotherly love, peace, etc. This doctrine calls for no other actions from Native Americans other than to do the ritual dance and sing. In essence, the Messiah (Wovoka) is believed to be able to resurrect the dead. This statement directly reflects on the followers of the Ghost Dance in regards to their practice of "a stay-still policy" or "non-resistance." They do this by dancing and singing, without any acts of violence. This quote represents the concept of surrendering to the will of the United States among Native Americans at the time of Wovoka. Wovoka taught that the way to achieve this resurrection was through submission. Therefore, the essence of the Ghost Dance as expressed in this quote is to relinquish one's resistance to the dominant culture, rather than engaging in violent resistance. Thus the Ghost Dance marks a significant change in the overall pattern of fighting that had previously occurred between

Indigenous people and the United States. But instead of continuing to resist for short term goals such as land or food, many Indigenous people viewed the Ghost Dance as a way to spiritually protect themselves through moral and spiritual resistance from the United States while seeking sanctuary within themselves (Arn 2017). Zimmerman does not include this account in his book. The lack of recognition of the Messiah's message diminishes the significance of the Ghost Dance as a cultural identity and is representative of the subservience of the American Indian to the White man. Additionally, it prohibits the establishment of the American Indian cultural resistance.

In *Saga of the Sioux*, however, the Ghost Dance is presented as one of many episodes leading to the Wounded Knee Massacre, its symbolic potency diluted. Rather than representing a unifying act of resistance, it is rendered as a misunderstood precursor to violence. This fragmentation reduces the Ghost Dance's narrative importance, shifting its function from a central act of sacred protest to a mistaken provocation within a military timeline. Linda Hutcheon's notion of adaptation as reinterpretation helps illuminate this process: the adaptor, shaped by audience and medium, chooses what to retain, simplify, or exclude (6). In this case, the symbolic richness of the Ghost Dance is sacrificed in favor of narrative linearity and pedagogical accessibility, yet at a high cost to Indigenous representation.

Brown's depiction of the US government's reaction to the Ghost Dance is explicit in its condemnation. The state's fear and ignorance are portrayed as driving a disproportionate and brutal crackdown. The narrative critiques systemic oppression and racialized violence, highlighting Wounded Knee as not merely a massacre but the culmination of decades of injustice. Using direct quotes from official sources, Brown demonstrates how fear and a lack of understanding of race influenced how the US Government reacted to the Ghost Dance. For example, Brown cites one dispatch from Pine Ridge, wherein "Indians are dancing in the snow and are wild and crazy [...]. We need protection and we need it now" (436). As shown in the example above, this spiritual expression of the Ghost Dance was reinterpreted by many as an act of war. In addition, the alarmist language indicates that the government's response to the Ghost Dance was out of proportion to the actual threat posed by Indigenous peoples, and the government ultimately arrested Indigenous leaders as a result of bureaucratic hysteria and a misunderstanding of colonial oppression as expressed in Brown's work.

In the adaptation, the government's response is framed more ambiguously. Zimmerman presents an account of the actions taken by the U. S.

government in connection with Sioux affairs through a procedure and an orderly manner. Zimmerman described how, despite their being frightened, “government agents were terrified and pleaded for military help” (167), and how governmental actions were immediately focused on procedures for identifying those who were responsible for the “disturbance” (problems). By presenting the decision-making process of governmental institutions, the author attributes blame to Sitting Bull, which serves to diminish emotion and to view the involvement of the government in the situation as a logical consequence of an event, rather than an act of cultural misunderstanding.

There is evidence of a narrative break between these excerpts. Direct quotes provided by Brown highlight the fear and prejudice that lie beneath government policies and how the government’s response to the situation is seen as an extension of colonial violence. On the other hand, Zimmerman represents the military intervention as a normal occurrence that would occur in the course of administering to any administrative concerns, which allows for a level of normalizing state authority, and therefore, the military response would be seen as part of administrative management. This creates two different images of the US government. One image presents the US government as a panicked colonial power that is trying to make sense of Indigenous spirituality, while the other represents the US government as a rational institution responding to unrest with a simplified version of history.

This narrative shift reflects what Patrick Wolfe famously conceptualized as the “logic of elimination,” grounded in the understanding that settler colonization is “an ongoing process, not an episodic event,” in which “invasion is a structure not an event” (Wolfe 388). In this framework, elimination is not solely achieved through physical violence or population displacement; it is equally enacted through epistemic and symbolic means—including historiographical omission, cultural appropriation, and narrative reframing. Recent scholarship has expanded Wolfe’s thesis to explore how this logic persists in educational materials, public memory, and media representations that sanitize colonial violence or render Indigenous disappearance as an unfortunate side effect of modernization rather than a deliberate strategy of dispossession (Mitchell 71; Gaztambide-Fernández 44–45).

By portraying settler violence as either accidental or the result of historical misunderstanding, such narratives contribute to what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang identify as the “grammar of settler innocence”—a discursive strategy through which the settler subject absolves themselves of historical and ongoing complicity in colonial domination (10–12). This ideological maneuver is especially evi-

dent in adaptations and historical retellings that frame events such as the Ghost Dance or the Wounded Knee Massacre not as systemic outcomes of settler colonial control, but as tragic miscommunications or bureaucratic errors. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues, this rhetorical softening of structural violence undermines Indigenous political claims by relegating their struggles to the realm of historical inevitability, rather than recognizing them as acts of continuous resistance to ongoing occupation (95).

Moreover, this tendency to engage with historical and contemporary narratives of settler-colonialism promotes settler futurity (Tuck & Yang 5–7), which is understood as a temporal understanding/support for the permanency of settlers and a means to represent Indigenous sovereignty as continuously delayed or already in the process of fading away. Coulthard identifies this same logic at the foundation of the state's politics of recognition (151–154). Within this context, narratives that obscure or dilute the systemic nature of Indigenous dispossession do not merely reflect interpretive error; they actively sustain the colonial present by reinforcing settler entitlement to land, authority, and historical legitimacy. The framing of Indigenous erasure as accidental or benign thus operates as a calculated ideological act affirming the one that reinforces the structural foundations of settler colonialism under the guise of historical closure and reconciliation. The Obama administration supported reconciliation efforts through events like the 2009 Congressional Apology and the Cobell Settlement (United State, Congress). These reconciliation efforts illustrate the ability of the US Government to reframe Indigenous Erasure as a history that has been recognized, but still has no legal or structural resolution, and creates a sense of closure, which legitimizes the continued existence of Settler Colonial structures through a historical narrative rather than through Decolonial Transformation.

CONCLUSION

The adaptation of Indigenous historical narratives presents significant ethical and representational challenges. While *Saga of the Sioux* may succeed in making a significant chapter of Native American history accessible to new audiences, it also illustrates the risks of narrative simplification and ideological filtering. The reinterpretation of the Ghost Dance from a sacred ritual embodying hope and spiritual renewal to a symbol of militant defiance illustrates how adaptive processes can alter meaning in ways that marginalize Indigenous voices and obscure the original cultural and theological significance

of the practice. Reclaiming narrative authority in Indigenous histories requires not only the inclusion of Native perspectives but also a commitment to preserving spiritual complexity, cultural nuance, and historical accuracy. As this study has shown, adaptations, especially of historical trauma, must be approached with sensitivity to voice, power, and context, lest they reproduce the very structures of silencing they aim to resist.

Abstract: This article investigates the transformation of Amerindian narratives through the adaptation of the Ghost Dance episode in Dwight Jon Zimmerman's *Saga of the Sioux* (2011), a derivative work based on Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970). While Brown's original is often commended for its emphasis on Indigenous perspectives and resistance, Zimmerman's adaptation, intended for a younger audience, illustrates the consequences of narrative simplification, editorial framing, and ideological reframing. This study critically examines how themes of resistance, spirituality, and cultural identity embedded in the Ghost Dance are reinterpreted, diminished, or altered in the adaptation. Employing comparative textual analysis informed by postcolonial theory and narrative ethics, the research highlights how retellings of traumatic histories, especially by non-Indigenous authors, may simultaneously preserve and distort subaltern voices.

Keywords: Amerindian narratives, Ghost Dance, adaptation, postcolonial theory, narrative ethics

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