Chapter 5

Further Analysis Regarding Native Peoples and the Indigenous Horse of the Americas: Acquisition, Spirituality, Healing, and Husbandry

It is clear from the testimony of project participants in Chapter 4 that the perspective put forth by many Indigenous cultures within the Americas regarding the history of the horse is very different than that offered by the dominant Western culture. In addition, many Western academics and equine experts have highlighted improbabilities within the claim that the horses in the Americas became extinct during the Last Glacial Maximum and were only subsequently introduced to the Native Peoples by the Spanish conquistadors and other European explorers. These early conquistadors and explorers arrived in the Americas with cultural bias, no background with regard to the flora and fauna, and very limited geographical exposure to the North, Central, and South American landmasses. Therefore, if the objective of empirically based Western Academia is in fact to determine the truth, the information provided by Indigenous Peoples should be included in the analysis, as their knowledge regarding the geography of the Americas and its flora and fauna would naturally be more extensive. In this chapter, the contributions of project participants will be interwoven with written records to capture a more accurate picture of the relationship between the horse and Natives Peoples. Origin stories, spirituality, healing, ceremony, and unique animal husbandry techniques surrounding the horse within certain Native Nations will be explored.

5.1 Differences Between Indigenous and Western Academic Historical Perspectives

It is important to note that the perspective of Indigenous cultures varies from that of the dominant Western culture in ways that greatly affect the capturing, retelling, and preservation of what we understand to be “history.” First, the Western culture’s focus on chronology is not shared by many of the Indigenous cultures across the Americas and the world.266 Rather, Indigenous cultures work to preserve the essence of the way in which an event or circumstance affected the Peoples – what it meant to the community at the time and what it can teach them about life and the world – rather than focusing on preserving a timeline. When asked about a

266 Cruikshank, Reading Voices, 37.
timeline with regard to the history of the horse and his People, the Diné, one project participant (Indigenous Academic Scholar and Traditional Knowledge Bearer) responded as follows:

Is putting a historical time on something ... really important? Is it really important to say when the horse was here? ... Who's going to decide it? And even if we do find out, what is it really going to change? Which goes back to my point about, ok so now we found that out, what does it mean to us now? What does the horse mean to us? Our relationship with the horse, but more so [and] deeper, our relationship with the natural processes, the natural world. That's more important because that's the here and now ... Not to say that the past ... is not important.  

Another project participant (Traditional Knowledge Bearer, Ceremonial Leader/Medicine Person, and Teacher) addresses the issue of chronology from the Oglala Lakota cultural perspective in his interview as follows:

In the case of the horse, in the evenings after we had our meal - and back in those days we didn't have electricity. We used candles or kerosene lamps. It was a time for the Elders to speak about "Ohunkan Ehoni." Ehoni, the word Ehoni in Lakota doesn't have a timeline as we talk about in the English language. Remember the English language is linear and there are times, and there are sequences, and there are endings and the beginnings. In the Lakota language when they say Ehoni, it could be 1,000, it could be 10,000, it could be many, many years. So, it's really sometimes very challenging to bring those two things into perspective. Where I'm going with this is, they talked about horse songs, and these horse songs again described it as Ehoni, meaning again I just mentioned it could be thousands of years that these songs honoring, respecting, and valuing the horse to a very high, now when I say high, again that's secular. So, when you say "Sunka canke iyotanghe lika wakan." So, it's describing a horse in ... [the] language of the soul.

As Werito has worked with both urban and rural Native and non-Native student populations for more than fifteen years, this contrast in cultural perspectives is an issue that he deals with on a regular basis. In his discussion regarding the way in which Indigenous research methodologies have been historically devalued by Western Academia, he explains the following:

You know, we talk about research in academia. Research, scientific evidence, is all based upon empiricism. And empiricism is really just observations over time. But even the scientific method says that you can't replicate the same study, so then that kind of brings to the question, well then why do you do it that way, right? But the point I'm going to is that scientific method, there's ... a hypothesis and you prove that or disprove it and that's done through tests, observations, and that's empiricism. What you see, what you hear is hopefully objective, but we know it's not; it's subjective. So, what people don't want to

---

267 Werito, personal communication, August 19, 2016.
268 Braveheart, personal communication, September 10, 2016.
talk about is indigenous history, indigenous stories. There’s empirical evidence in that. Meaning that if a person says, “That plant there will restore you back to health,” and there’s a story behind it. And ... someone else who does not have that way of thinking might say, “Well, whatever.” But then the question is, how do you know? “Well, because my grandparents told me, and their grandparents.” So, that 200 years of observation and testing, that’s evidence; that’s research. It just didn’t happen in a lab, right? It happened through life experience. We know it’s true, but is it valued the same as what Western science does? 269

James Craven’s article, titled “The Survival and Sustainability of the Blackfoot Nation and Culture,” states the following regarding theoretical physicist F. David Peat’s observations after living some time among the Blackfeet Peoples:

From his study of the Blackfoot Culture, with particular reference to the Sun Dance, Professor Peat came to some remarkable conclusions confirmed by other observers. He found for example, in the rituals, allegories, symbolism and values embodied in Blackfoot culture, not only evidence of very advanced “science” and scientific methods, but indeed “science” far in advance of where the Newtonian-based “science” and epistemology of Eurocentric cultures, increasingly under siege, are today. He found for example, concrete notions of key principles and concepts that today make up the versions of Quantum Mechanics “discovered” only in the early 20th century: Superpositionality; Wave/particle duality; Entanglement; Bose-Einstein condensates and mass-energy equivalence, Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle and the four basic laws of Thermodynamics. 270

Peat’s firsthand observations and determinations as referenced by Craven are in direct contrast to arguments published in academic journals, such as Natural History: The Magazine of the American Museum of Natural History, in which D. R. Barton states as follows:

In short, primitives often find it extremely difficult to see the relationship of any one act or phenomenon to another. It is a matter of record that some tribes have no single word for “cow” but content themselves with “white cow,” “brown cow,” etc. Moreover, our familiar Mohicans had a word which meant “cutting wood,” but no word at all from just “cutting.” Now, these oddities boil down to the plain fact that primitives lacked the capacity for abstract thought. Take the Latin word equus. Under this abstract term, zoologists have grouped and classified all the variations and mutations occurring within the whole array of animals who show sufficient measureable likeness to be contained in the horse family. Clearly, primitives who do not perceive the value of inventing a group-

269 Werito, personal communication, August 19, 2016.
term for a horse family would seemingly find such an intellectual achievement a thousand light years beyond their scope. 271

However, despite such historical stereotypes and differences in emphasis, some Western Academic researchers and Indigenous traditional knowledge bearers have come together to merge their two “disciplines.” This is being done in an effort to present a more accurate and complete version of history. Although more modern movements are gaining momentum, there were historians who saw the validity of Indigenous oral tradition and history more than 150 years ago. An example of this can be found in Cushman’s book titled History of the Choctaw, Chickasaw and Natchez Indians. He states as follows:

An ancient Choctaw tradition attributes the origin of the prairies along the western banks of the Tombigbee River, to some huge animals (mammoths) that existed there at the advent of their ancestors from the west to Mississippi. Their tradition also states that the Nahulla, (Supernatural) a race of giant people, also inhabited the same country, with whom their forefathers oft came in hostile contact… That the Choctaw traditions of both the mammoth and great men, was based on truth as to their former existence in the southern and western parts of this continent is satisfactorily established by the many mammoth skeletons of both men and beasts and fragments of huge bones that have been, and are continually being found in different parts of the country, and all of whom, according to their tradition were contemporary with the ancient fathers of the present Indian race. A huge skeleton of one of those ancient animals was found in March 1877, four miles east of the town of Greenville, Hunt County, Texas. I secured a fragment of the skeleton, evidently a part of the femoral bone, which measured twenty-one inches in circumference. A tooth measured three inches in width, five inches in length along the surface of the jaw bone and five inches in depth into the jaw, and weighed the seemingly incredible weight of eleven pounds. The teeth proved the monster herbivorous, the enamel of which was in a perfect state of preservation. The greater part of the frames crumbled to dust, as soon as exposed to the action of the air. 272

More than a century later, the Oregon Department of Geology and Mineral Industries reached out to Indigenous communities in an effort to research prehistoric and historic tsunamis, specifically one of the world’s largest earthquakes, which occurred at 9pm on January 26, 1700 along the west coast of North America. Their website oregongeology.org explains the following about this research in the article titled “Native American Oral Traditions Tell of Tsunamis’ Destruction Hundreds of Years Ago” as they quote an article in the Seattle Post Intelligencer and the Canadian Geological Survey:

272 Cushman, History of the Choctaw, 149-150.
“These stories [from the Quilleute and Hoh Indians] just bristle with information," said Ruth Ludwin, a seismologist at the University of Washington. In addition to using the tools of modern science and technology to study earthquakes, Ludwin has spent considerable effort looking into the tribes' oral histories of these events. ... "When I first started looking into the tribal histories, I was looking for statements that said something like 'the ground shook' or 'the land slid' or that sort of thing, direct descriptions," Ludwin said. But this isn't the way the tribes described things, she said. Major, traumatic events were described in the rich tradition of tribal mythology... "It's not trivial information," Ludwin said. Once you dig deep enough and begin to understand the patterns and symbols conveyed by the words and sentence structures, she said, an astonishing amount of descriptive data begins to emerge.  

Scientists around the globe researching climate change have also learned the value of Indigenous history and traditions when an Indigenous Alaskan “legend” regarding a year without a summer, proved a valuable resource for them. The report by Daniel Grossman titled “Eskimo Climate Disaster Branches Out” as published in BBC World Service explains as follows:  

One year, in Alaska, the summer never came, a tribe of Eskimos nearly died out and a creation myth was born. Stories of “the summer that wasn’t” have been passed from one Eskimo generation to another ... Gordon Jacoby is a leading dendrochronologist at Columbia University’s Lamont Doherty Earth Observatory. He studies climate change by counting and measuring tree rings ... Whilst working with archeologists, Karen and Bill Workman of Anchorage, Alaska, Jacoby learned of the Kauwerak legend. He had collected tree stumps from around the world and from his tree ring studied, he knew of an abnormally cold summer. “I knew this year 1783 because we’d worked on it also. Some earlier dendrochronologists had noted this was a very unusual ring in the Alaska – northern Alaska – series. They just noticed it visibly, whereas we had actually done what they call density measurements of this particular ring.  

Another example of Western trained researchers/scientists and Indigenous knowledge bearers and communities working together to capture a more complete picture of history within a particular geographic area is occurring in the Yakutat Bay in Alaska. A partnership between the Yakutat community, the Smithsonian’s Arctic Studies Center, and the National Science Foundation is “rediscovering this unique history [of the Yakutat Seal camps] by integrating oral tradition, indigenous knowledge, archeology, geology, and environmental science.”  

Crowell, an archeologist from the Smithsonian Institution, explains the following regarding this research project:

We had a small grant from National Science Foundation to demonstrate, if possible, that these camps still existed as archeological sites, and that we could tie archeological information to the oral traditions and historical photos. And we were able to do that; and we are not done yet (min 4:47 to 6:20, The Glacier’s Eternal Gift). 276

5.2 Origins Signify a Spiritual Relationship

When asked about the origins of the horse, many of the project participants told their People’s history regarding the acquisition of the horse from a spiritual perspective. This contrasts markedly with the way in which Western Academic documents and records approach this topic. Whereas modern-day books on horses and Native Peoples credit the Pueblo Revolt, which occurred in New Mexico in 1680 with the event that brought horses to the North American Native Peoples, 277 the Indigenous Peoples who were interviewed for this project did not cite that date or event when detailing the acquisition of the horse for their Peoples.

John S. Hockensmith recounts his view of the history of the Apaches and their relationship with the horse. As stated in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, his references and the conclusions he draws from them are often contradictory. For example, he references that “Apaches were never ‘horse Indians,’ and always readily abandoned their stock to follow the mountains on foot” and that “they ate horses, mules, cattle and sheep alike.” 278 However, on that same page he goes on to state that “Apache myths make it clear that they regarded horses as infused with supernatural powers” 279 and that they believed that “these animals came as gifts from their gods, who guarded them long before bestowing them on man for his use.” 280

One project participant (Academic Scholar, Teacher, and Traditional Knowledge Bearer) from the Diné, or Navajo Nation, explained the following when asked if Western academic historians had ever confused his Peoples with other Native Peoples in their accounts, such as the Apache. He replied as follows:

276 Ibid.
277 Hockensmith, Spanish Mustangs, 45.
278 Ibid., 50
279 Ibid.
280 Ibid.
Oh, certainly ... I mean, even today, people say Navajo Nation, Diné Nation, but you have to ask yourself, “Who defined that, right?” Because when you go to the People, they don’t say, “I’m Diné.” They ... introduce [themselves] through [their] Clans, but for me I’m more “That’s who I am, I’m Taneeszhnii. I’m of that Clan. I’m born from this ...” But even more so I’m of that Clan group from this area. But, to go further ... if we go back in time, just really looking at the world historical accounts, the oral accounts, the stories, at what point, you wonder, did Navajo become different from Apache? Because, you know, I’ve heard Elders say, they always talk about “Diné, Diné.” They’ll say, “Diné nidli.” Or even our clan names like, “Naakai Dine’e.” That name is in there. And so, they will refer to it that they are people of the, like the south, that went south, but that were Diné at some point. But because then you know, like boundaries and territories and everything coming up around them, then people kind of got divided. So, obviously then that, brings up your question that when the Spaniards came by they asked the Pueblos, “Who are these people?” And so, they were all referred to as Apaches and Navajo. At some point then they realized, “Wait a minute, Apaches are different than the Navajos.”  

With this information, conflicting statements, such as the ones given by Hockensmith above, begin to make more sense. As we continue to explore some of the Diné accounts of the acquisition of the horse, it is clear that their history and perspective aligns almost exactly with the latter statement, rather than the first. In the article titled “The Creation of the Horse,” Harry Goldtooth retells the story of the creation of the horse as told to him by his father, Frank Goldtooth. 282 (For the full story, see Appendix A.) This publication was generated as an internal educational tool to teach the Diné youth about cultural and traditional topics of import. Nowhere in this story are the Spanish conquistadors and their horses mentioned. Indeed, Goldtooth states that the people of the Earth were gifted these horses from the Holy People once they had learned how to respectfully ask and care for the horses.

The acquisition of the horse for the Diné People is also addressed in the article by Peter Iverson titled “The Sacred Gift: Acquiring Horses Empowered the Navajo People.” He explains as follows:

The horse plays an important role in Navajo culture – from the sacred myth of the first blue horse to the animal’s helping them to live better on their land to its practical and recreational uses of modern times. According to the Navajo tradition, horses entered their

281 Werito, personal communication, August 19, 2016.
world not through European intervention but through initiative of the Diné, or “the people.”

After detailing the creation story where Changing Woman gave birth to Twins who were fathered by the Sun Bearer, the deity who carries the Sun through the sky each day, Iverson continues to describe what the Twins received after a long journey:

From the Sun Bearer and other powers, the twins received special medicine, songs and prayers for the horses. “Before me peaceful,” the words from one ceremony declare. “Behind me peaceful.” Under me peaceful. All around me peaceful. Peaceful voice when he neighs. I am everlasting and powerful. I stand for my horse.”

The spiritual nature and purpose of the horse for the Diné People is confirmed by Werito during his August 19, 2016 interview. He explains:

In one other story an Elder shared with me, he said that the Holy People, when they emerged into this world, [the] Fourth World, they put two horses side by side. One was a white horse and one was a blue horse. One was to represent white shell and blue shell. And how they embodied the horses with power, and they then let the horses loose. As they did that the horses ran across the night sky, and that’s what we see in their path. What they left behind was the Milky Way that we see as the sky, the Heaven’s above. And so … you start getting into deeper discussions, or there’s deeper knowledge involved there … related to Star Knowledge. You know, stories about the Heavens, how the stars came to be, how they were placed, but also what do they mean? And so, it … became very clear to me … that we were really talking about the horse on … a spiritual level.

Although the idea of a People “emerging into this world” may sound fanciful from a Western cultural perspective, as the Western-trained researchers who are working on projects that merge Western science and traditional knowledge have learned, there is more to “oral history” or “creation stories” than meets the eye. Vine Deloria, Jr. provides an interpretation of such “emergence stories” that deserves consideration. He describes this in his book titled God Is Red as follows:

The Pawnees and Arickara also speak of an ancient people emerging from the darkness into a lighted world. The pueblos are led by Mother Corn [plant life] into the new world of light from the world of darkness. The Mandans climb a vine rope from the underground until a large woman proves to be too heavy for the rope and it breaks it, leaving some of the people remaining under the earth. Other tribes have had variations of this general theme of emerging from the underground, where they had survived a great

---

284 Ibid., 9.
catastrophe or at least begun their existence in this present world as a people. There would appear no good reason for a number of tribes to share this story, unless there was some event behind it, even though the event was very dimly recalled in tribal memory. Perhaps the disaster of which the Near East spoke did not affect the peoples of North America, who had prepared an underground shelter for themselves in anticipation of the event. At the least we can suggest that some common experience must be shared by some of the tribes, as emergence legends among other peoples of the globe appear to be rather sparse. 286

In Iverson’s account detailed above regarding the Diné Peoples, he refers to a song and ceremony that the Twins were given as they acquired the horse from the Holy Beings. Werito also addresses such songs and the spiritual teachings they offer. Again, this contrast between what the Western culture aims to “capture” with regard to recording history and what the Indigenous cultures aim to preserve is evident. He explains:

But what is interesting about those songs is that they describe the horse in terms of what they symbolized. In terms of, like, for example: its hoof prints are white shell, shell, abalone shell, the hair is rain, right? The eyes are stars and so forth. So, when you hear the songs, that’s what they are singing. But, I think you go deeper, deeper into understanding that, you realize that those are natural elements. The earth, the sky, even human beings, we are the earth and the sky. And those are the natural elements of life that came to be to create this thing, or this being … And so, as you then think about that, you realize then, going back to what I said about how the horse was sung into existence, and how it was created by associating its hooves, its hair, its eyes, its ears to different natural things. There’s a really deeper understanding there. So, going back to the point about you know, our people said that the horse was here. That’s what they were talking about, I think. That the horse has always been here. Because the world, the life that we see, the energy, the life energy, the life force, has always been here … but I think in Western science, the Western thinking, there always has to be like this concrete evidence. There has to be “a date,” and I think it’s very contradictory to Indigenous ways of thinking that maybe it’s not really the question.” 287

It is rare that an Indigenous story regarding the acquisition of the horse is corroborated or acknowledged by Western historians. In this case, a program participant (Academic Scholar, Caretaker, and Teacher) from the Métis and Ojibwe Nations shared some traditional knowledge, which was validated by previous Western research. She states:

I was speaking to a traditional Elder the other day, and she indicated to me that horses came from the West. She stated that this was traditional knowledge that was passed down to her from her ancestors. She explained they came to Indigenous peoples from the

287 Werito, personal communication, August 19, 2016.
West with the rain. When I further inquired about this, she specifically indicated to me that they came out of the ocean, rose from it. She said that horses came to the Indigenous peoples as a gift from the Creator to help the Indigenous with their hardships and to "doctor" them. This story coincides with other traditional knowledge ... given to me by traditional Elders from various Nations in fragments during my learning journey and directly contradicts the dominant colonial history of how the horse came to this land [i.e., from the East with Europeans].

This version of the origin of the horse is corroborated by the research performed by John Canfield Ewers with regard to the Blackfoot Nation. He states the following:

Since Blackfoot horse acquisition preceded first white contacts with these three tribes, we must rely rather heavily upon an evaluation of traditional data in determining the source of their horses. Wissler heard Blackfoot traditions to the effect that their first horses were received from the Shoshoni and Flathead. One tradition told me stated that a Blackfoot, Shaved Head by name, went west and obtained the first horses known to his people from the Nez Percé, who told him that they had taken them out of the water.

The claim of the Nez Percé having horses early on and supplying other Native Peoples with them is confirmed in other sources. William Berg’s work recounts the statements found in his father’s volumes of the Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. He states as follows:

I noticed, too, that the Mandans, who had a few horses, said that they had obtained their first horses from the Crows, and that, in response to inquiry, they told Captain Clark that the “Pierced Nose Indians” on the other side of the mountains had plenty of horses.

Indeed, Ewers collected three “beliefs regarding the origin of the horse” from Piegan Elders in Montana in the 1940s. To view these in their entirety see Appendix B, C, and D. If we are going to carry forward Deloria, Jr.’s teaching that oral history references real events, such as natural disasters, which occurred in ancient times and the Peoples’ perceptions and experiences around those events, it is interesting to note that two of these three accounts from Blackfeet Elders claim that the horses “came out of the water.” In the case of the instances

---

290 Ewers, The Horse in Blackfoot, 18.
291 Berg, Mysterious Horses, 182.
293 Deloria, Jr., God Is Red
294 Ewers, The Horse in Blackfoot, 294-296.
cited in Ewers’ work, these horses emerged from large lakes, while in the account relayed from our project participant, the horses came “out of the ocean.” The Blackfoot Nations today are known as Blackfoot/Siksika, Blood/Kanai, Pikuni/Peigan, and the North Peigan Pikinu.

Regarding the territory that they covered, Ewers explains:

At its largest extent, prior to the first Blackfoot treaty with the United States Government in 1855, the territory of the three Blackfoot tribes extended from the North Saskatchewan River in Canada southward to the present Yellowstone National park. The Rocky Mountains formed its western boundary. The mouth of Milk River, some 300 miles eastward, marked its easternmost limit.\(^{295}\)

As the Blackfoot Confederacy today includes three First Nation bands in the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia, and one in the Montana area of the United States and it included more of this before First Contact with European explorers, it is possible that each of these horse acquisition stories is accurate. Indeed, even Western-trained historians have been puzzled regarding the origins of the Nez Percé horses and their sophisticated horse culture, as it does not “match” with the predominant theory. However, such historians still manage to attribute a fairly modern European origin to their horses even though this is not supported by traditional knowledge or recorded Western historical accounts. For example, Frank Gilbert Roe agrees with Francis Haines’ argument that as a breed the Appaloosa was different than the Spanish horses. They hypothesized that it was “developed in the Orient, and reached the Spanish Netherlands from the Near East by the ordinary channels of Mediterranean Sea-traffic” and that it was “brought direct from the Netherlands to Mexico, and was never in North Africa or Spain.”\(^{296}\)

Whether these creatures appeared to a dying man in need, as Soop recounted in his June 24, 2016 interview, emerged from the waters, or came out of a high place in the clouds (as referenced in Appendix’s B, C, and D), it is clear that these Indigenous Peoples understood the acquisition of the horse to have been the result of a spiritual event. Therefore, it was perceived and treated as a powerful gift for the entire community. As Soop (Caretaker, Teacher, and Traditional Knowledge Bearer) of the Kainai or Blood First Nation explains in his interview:

They say that the horse was a gift from God because it is Spirit. We look at the horse not as an animal, but as a spiritual being. And that spiritual being came to us when we needed

\(^{295}\) Ibid., 121.
\(^{296}\) Roe, The Indian and the Horse, 255.
it. I think it came to us when we needed it to protect ourselves from other warring tribes, but really the settlers; invasion. We needed that horse.\textsuperscript{297}

In the book titled \textit{A Cheyenne Voice: The Complete John Stands in Timber Interviews} by John Stands in Timber of the Cheyenne Peoples and Margot Liberty, Stands in Timber also shares a horse acquisition story. He explains that his people knew that the horse could be ridden because of a prophecy handed down to them by their prophet, Sweet Medicine, rather than because they watched Spanish people riding horses and copied them. He also distinguishes between “Indian ponies” and “white man’s horses.” Stands in Timber states the following about the horses in the area now known as Wyoming:

The first man ever seen a horse, he saw the animals come in down to a lake, and they came back out and he went down closer. And then he thought, when he came back to the village, he told the old Indians: we remember what the old Indians have told, the prophecy of Sweet Medicine, that there would be animals with round hoofs, and a shaggy mane, and tail, that we could ride on its back to that blue vision there is a short time. I saw that animal. So they made a move across over there, they did find it. They came to the same place and caught the first one by using a snare; the horse stepped into it and was caught then. And when he started to run off, they came to him and tied him down, and got rawhide on him, and all hung on, and got him broke that way. The idea was that the prophecy had been they would ride him on the back; after they tamed him up so tame that he would follow a person, they rode on his back and used him to find others. They call that river than comes in and empties into North Platte, Horse River or Horse Creek; that was where 1851 treaty was signed by the Indians and the United States. It was a long time before they caught others; they tame them the same way, tying them with rawhide. And they caught small ones and they got gentle, and then they would ride and use them, and after they got so many tamed up, the other tribes like Apaches kept coming back – they were one of the first tribes with the Cheyennes ... First they thought – there was a question – there was the first white man they seen up further south, a darker color than these ones from the east with light skins, so he must be the Spanish. The Southern Cheyennes and all the tribes fought the Spanish. And they did mention the difference in color of the people, and they found more horses there than up here. When the white man came, they brought bigger horses; most of the ones which they caught were small. They called them Indian ponies. The big horses they called white man’s horses.\textsuperscript{298}

In addition to these horse acquisition accounts, the Choctaw Peoples have an account which today has been translated into English as “The Tale of the Wind Horse.” (The full story of the Wind Horse can be viewed in Appendix F). This story addresses both the acquisition of the horse for the Choctaw Peoples as well as details the way in which the horse would serve to help

\textsuperscript{297} Scoop, personal communication, June 24, 2016.
the Choctaw Peoples to spiritually find their way “home” to the next world. In this account, a wild horse comes to a young boy who was suffering from a fatal injury. During this time of great need, this horse appears and merges with the boy spiritually to take him to a place of complete renewal and healing. It has been documented that the horse was considered so important to the Choctaw Peoples, that they buried the deceased with their horses “so that they would have something to ride in the afterlife.” 299 Indeed, as this story shows, the horse would also serve to help those who were frightened to make a safe transition from this world into the afterlife. An excerpt of “The Tale of the Wind Horse” as relayed by Pinti is as follows:

“... Wind Horse knew that the wound that the Boy had was one that could not be fixed or healed. He was taking the boy to the place of the Indian Hunting Ground. This place was where all were made whole and had no fear or need. Wind Horse felt sadness that one as young as this Boy had to go to the Ground ... As they traveled, the Boy noticed that the trail was always changing. First it was as it was when the Boy had been hurt, then it was as it was when he had been happy. Then it was the time when he had not been born. Soon he saw things that he did not recognize... Wind Horse turned his head and nuzzled the Boy’s head. He began to slow, for the end of the journey was near. The Boy looked up and saw the home of those who had gone before ... the Boy realized that he had two good legs and that all of his wounds, hunger, need and hurt, were gone.” 300

5.3 Horse Healing, Horse Medicine, and Ceremonies

As the horse was considered to have been a gift from the Creator and held a deep spiritual significance for many Indigenous Peoples throughout the Americas, many ceremonies and healing methodologies and methods surrounding the horse were developed and cultivated. These included those that benefited human beings, horses, nature, the Earth, and even those who had passed from flesh. As Indigenous Peoples, overall, view health holistically, the mind, body, and soul needed to be addressed in order to achieve balance and true wellness. Innocent Okozi, Andrea Zainab Nael and Maria Cristina Cruza-Guet describe this perspective of health in their paper titled “Promoting the Wellbeing of Indigenous People in Mental Health and Education” as follows:

American Indians and Alaskan Natives, as many other indigenous peoples throughout the world, understand ‘wellness’ holistically, that is, in terms of a combination of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual elements.  

Kawagley explains the worldview of his People in the following manner: “The original Yupiaq based their philosophy and life-ways on maintaining and sustaining a balance among the human, natural, and spiritual worlds.” Therefore, in order to understand horse healing, medicine, and ceremony from an Indigenous perspective, it is important to understand this concept of “total wellness.” This is very different than the more compartmentalized, dominant Western culture perspective on healing, which often attempts to treat each symptom as separate and unrelated.

Stands in Timber and Liberty relay the following about a horse worship ceremony and horse medicine. They explain as follows:

The first they caught was a blue-colored horse, and the next was buckskin, both caught by these southern people; and there was something about that horse, and that ’how they start this horse worship. The members of that clan they call Horse Men, and the Apaches got that medicine called horse medicine, they claim they got from the Shrine Mountain, or Bear Butte. The Sioux called it “Butte,” the Cheyennes, “Medicine Mountain,” or “Holy Mountain,” because that was where Sweet Medicine obtained the Arrows … This came from Apaches; they originated this ceremony. The Cheyennes mention that they and the Apaches were together one time, and the Cheyennes joined to go through that ceremony and became a member of that lodge. They called it na a mo, horse men. That’s the way they called it. A lot of things, there’s no word to compare the exact meaning with English, like I told you what they call that white man – they don’t say white man, but their prophet Sweet Medicine said there will be strangers, and he called them earth men. They come to find out, they tore up the ground and raise a living from the earth, and strangers come from another country … one time the horse men had the worship — the way they do when they come together and fast, and worship. They come together and put

---


364 Kawagley, A Yupiaq Worldview, 13.
up a big tepee and had a lot of food, and they sang these horse medicine songs – there were some words in these songs, mentioned about something like a horse. And that buckskin or blue horse that was the first horse obtained by the Indians.  

Braveheart (Traditional KnowledgeBearer, Ceremonial Leader/Medicine Person, and Teacher) relays a description of one such Oglala Lakota “horse ceremony” in his interview, as quoted below:

They used to have a ceremony. I don’t see them anymore, but they used to have a ceremony we call ‘Anpo natan.’” “Anpo” means before the sun comes up, and “Natan” means “to move to be.” Because “to be” and “motion” are synonymous. There’s no difference; that’s ancient. So, what does “Anpo Natan,” mean? It means acting out a ritual with the light. So, I don’t think there is a logical answer to that. That has to be mystical. I’ve always questioned that because in the morning before the sun comes up we go and camp and do many prayers and songs in and around how this early morning charge [is] going to take place. And I heard some of my grandparents say, “Wan eya. Hehanighe” so that’s a mystery. They would participate in a sacred light. So, what they would do before the sun comes up, is each family had a horse and a rider and they would prepare the horse. They would paint their particular symbols. Some are shared, the circle. And it’s interesting that if you look at the history with the Hebrew, the Persians, the Greeks and the Egyptians and the Babylonians, and if you look at some of the petroglyphs with the Cro-Magnon and the Neanderthal, that circle is the same. It means, “God is a circle and He is in the center.” And so, they paint it around that eye. What does that mean? They had a profound knowing of the most sacred things that is from the beginning. It’s a primordial understanding. So, when I said the center is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere. That’s the same principle around the eye. They also put a hand. There is a constellation that Natives have. It’s not the Greeks, but it’s a hand. And the way I was told it was the hand is an extension of our soul. So, whenever we touch someone like this. So, are they saying that when we touch the horse and putting the symbol on there we are one with the horse? Absolutely, so that’s one symbol. But they also put other symbols on there that the family may have. It’s almost similar to the Sundance ... And so, when the sun just starts to come up, they mount the horse. And the horse, that’s where I saw the horse dance. They sang the songs and the horses [danced]. They are reenacting the horse dance now, but that was the horse dance that I saw.

Indeed, Black Elk, a Lakota Holy Man who was born in the 1860s, describes the way in which the spiritual essence of the horse came to him in a vision and helped to heal him from his fear. Black Elk’s horse dance involved “four black horses to represent the west; four white horses for the north; four sorrels for the east; four buckskins for the south ... and a bay horse for

---

305 Stands in Timber and Liberty, A Cheyenne Voice, 74-75.
[Black Elk] to ride, as in [his] vision."  

John G. Neihardt describes the way in which Black Elk’s vision was interpreted within *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*:

I was so afraid of being afraid of everything that I told him about my vision, and when I was through he looked long at me and said: "Ah-h-h-h!," meaning that he was much surprised. Then he said to me: “Nephew, I know now what the trouble is! You must do what the bay horse in your vision wanted you to do. You must do your duty and perform this vision for your people upon earth. You must have the horse dance first for the people to see. Then the fear will leave you ... So we began to get ready for the horse dance.  

Another example of the use of the horse in traditional Native American healing ceremonies is detailed in Vine Deloria, Jr.’s book titled *The World We Used to Live In: Remembering the Powers of the Medicine Men*:

A horse, which had flannel tied around his neck and calico and feathers around his mane, was tied to the pole. Paint was put on, beginning from his mane and passing down the entire back, and the top of his nose was reddened ... After several songs, the performer walked to the horse, untied him, and brought the rope to the lodge (tipi)... the shaman unpinned the front of the lodge, so that the horse could enter. At the next intonation of the song, the horse walked into the lodge and began smelling the sick man ... Whenever the horse took a breath, smoke of various colors — blue, red, black — issued from his mouth ... The horse walked out to the pole and stood facing the lodge entrance. The patient suddenly felt like rising...  

In the past, it was not uncommon for horses to enter the tipis and/or stay the night in the tipis with their human companions when healing work or spiritual preparation for ceremony or battle was taking place. According to some sources, even the standard tipi size changed over time for some Nations in order to accommodate this. “Originally, [some] tipis were roughly twelve feet high, but when [certain] Native American [Peoples] acquired horses, they doubled the height in order to fit the horses.”  

Soop (*Caretaker, Teacher, and Traditional Knowledge Bearer*) is from the *Kainia or Blood First Nation. Today he serves his community as an equine therapist. Like his ancestors of

---

308 Ibid., 123.  
the past, he credits the horse with having great healing powers and understands them as spiritual beings, not livestock. He states that he always begins his sessions by reminding people that they, as well as the horses, have a spiritual essence. He explains as follows:

... When I do my equine therapy I always start that off because I want people to know that they are spirits. They are not human beings ... They're light. They're energy. But as that spirit you could also be dark ... And I'm a spirit, I'm a light spirit now. But there was a time I was dark, and those times are gone. And it's the horse that brought me back to the light. I never used to believe in anything before, even though my Elders told me. And maybe that was because I was a U.S. Marine ... I've got no skills from the Marines. The only thing they trained me to do was to hate and to kill. Hate and kill. That's all I learned in the Marines. So, when they let me out, that's what I was. I hated everybody and I wanted to kill. And I had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. And it still comes back to me once in a while, where I will come in and I still have these thoughts of wanting to kill. What takes it away is the horse. And I never believed anything. I thought, when I die that's it, black out. So, I'm going to live the way, and I'm going to do some damage while I'm here on earth. Well, one day ... I picked a fight with the wrong guy. He had nine friends. Me being a Marine, I really in my mind thought I could beat all ten of them up. So, I went outside and I fought them. They killed me. I died. They said I died for a minute and a half. They revived me. I had 110 stitches to my head and face. They severed my main artery, and in that time of death, I seen my body, laying there. And I was holding onto this tree for dear life. I didn't want to leave that tree because I felt, "If I let go of this tree, I'm gone." And everything around me was dark and black. And I was scared. And I thought, "Where am I going?" And all of a sudden I woke up and they were sewing my ear back up, I was in the emergency room. And I thought, "Was that a dream?" And they said, "You died." But in that dream, within that time of death, they put me in a CAT scan to see if I had brain damage or a skull fracture. I didn't. But they found a tumor in me. Cancer; I had cancer. And they said it's the kind of cancer you have [that] by the time you feel discomfort, you would have died. So, my oncologist said ... God works in mysterious ways because you would have died if you started feeling it, and it's a good thing you were beat up. That time being beat up changed my world. I wasn't that person anymore, that dark person, but I still had those suicidal, homicidal thoughts. What saved me was the horse. It helped me become who I am now as an equine therapist ... So, ... what I did after that was I really explored the light of the horse because they were coming to me, and they were calling me to them for my healing ... My horses saved me. So, long story short, that's why I became an equine therapist. Because I was the extreme, and if it could work for me, I know it could work for anybody else. 311

The examples of healing that Soop has experienced extend from the psychological, emotional, and spiritual realms into the physical. He shares the following two examples:

I was diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. COPD I think they call it. And I was always, always coughing. I mean, it was just non-stop. And everyone would

---

311 Soop, personal communication, June 24, 2016.
[say I] really need to get it checked ... I was diagnosed with COPD. So, ... I have this 20-year-old horse who just loves me ... And you can tell he does. Even the way he looks at me, with his ears up when he sees me and he’s always just happy to greet me. One day, I just stopped coughing. And I was going, “Wow, I haven’t coughed for days.” All of a sudden at the barn my horse was just coughing and wheezing, so I called the vet and she diagnosed my horse with COPD. Which, there’s no cure for it. So, he’s got it. He took it from me. And I was telling you about my knees. I’ve got ACL in one knee. In this right knee. It’s all ripped the cartilage. It’s damaged. And I was really sore one day on my right knee. I could barely walk. I was just limping around. I had to use a cane actually ... I was putting my hands on my horse. I don’t know why. I was just putting my hands on my horse and I was closing my eyes. And then, I got on him, and all of a sudden he was limping on his right knee. And I had to get off because I am a roper. I couldn’t rope with him that night. My pain was gone. And he took it. He was limping, for two days he was limping. Third day he was fine. He took it away. So, these horses take away ailments that you have if they love you. If they love you, they will do that.  

Another example of the emotional and physical healing that is possible with horses was offered by a project participant (Caretaker) who self-identifies as being of Choctaw and Cherokee descent. She shared the following regarding her battles with cancer:

My first experience ... was in 1996. I had breast cancer and I had worked with the colts, at halter breaking and helping Bryant with them and just knew their personality. You just have to get close to the horse to learn them. I would just sit out on a bucket, and they would come to me. And so, when I would have a bad day, I’d go sit out in the pasture and the horses would come up around me. And the colts would get where they would come up, and I would just sit there and they would visit with me all day long. And you could talk to them, you could cry, and you could do whatever you wanted to. I believe the horses have helped me. I’ve had breast cancer again the second time, and you just don’t know how much. Having just a spiritual relationship with the horses, and they don’t talk back or tell you how you should feel and how you shouldn’t feel. And they knew then that I wasn’t going to do anything to hurt them. I still have that relationship with them now. Going out, taking pictures, just walk out amongst them ... They learn to respect you too. But you walk up, and get up, and you can start petting on them. And then when you go out there they will just come up to you saying, “Hey talk to me today.” I don’t say much to them, but I feel like that’s what’s kept me going.

Afraid of Bear-Cook (traditional Knowledge Bearer, Ceremonial Leader/Medicine Person, and Teacher) of the Oglala Lakota Peoples also credits the horse with having great healing powers. She is the granddaughter of George Sword, a society leader who was known to have come back to life after three days with the help of prayers from his People and horse medicine. She states:

---

312 Ibid.
313 Darlene Rickman, interview by Yvette Running Horse Collin, in Soper, Oklahoma, May 29, 2016.
... my grandfather was killed when they were stealing horses ... And so, because he was one of the leaders, society leaders, his cousins threw him on a horse and told the horse, "Take him home." ... The Bear Medicine Society Leaders would follow a few days behind them when they go on those kind of, I don't know if you call it hunts, or like an event. They have to have their horse getting events ... They have to take their Medicine People because you never know what's going to happen ... So, they brought him back for three days, and when they laid him down and the Bear Medicine People came, they laid him down and they start working on him. And when they took him in they said the sun was just coming up. They worked on him; put medicine in him, tried to work with him. They did breath work, they did prayers, they did ... smudge. Whatever materials they were using, all day long that went on. They didn't stop for a minute. And just as the sun was going down, he opened his eyes. And when he opened his eyes, he had no fear in his eyes. And so, from that, the Society named him. The scariest thing back then was like grizzly bears or bears, so that's what they named him. That "Even the Bears are Afraid of this Man." And he had no fear, and from that point on, my family always tells us, "Be very thankful for life because we come from a man who was dead for three days." And they brought him back and there was a purpose for him to come back, and he came back. His people were crying for him and he came back. And what was he supposed to do? He was supposed to do medicine work.  

Afraid of Bear-Cook goes further to explain that there was a specific type of "medicine" used to help her grandfather rise from the dead. Below, she refers to what people call the "chessnut," "chestnut," or "night eye," a callosity on the body of an equine. These are described as appearing "on the front legs of a horse above the knee, or on the back legs of a horse below the hock." She explains:

They said it's their medicine, and so when a horse dies you take that and keep it. You have to dry it and work with it so that it stays "alive." I guess alive would probably not be the right word but they said it really smells bad. And so, you have to work it so that that smell is not so bad. But it gives you the medicine for you to do your medicine work. And the way they told us about it is that they took that and they put it on the back of my grandpa's head right here and they worked with him on it. And so, when he woke up and he wasn't afraid anymore, he always kept that in his "Wok phun." "Wok phun" being his sacred bag, it's kind of a literal translation I am giving you because I don't know how you would translate it [into English] -- "Wok phun." It's like ... I don't know how, "Wok phun." "Wo" is like "everything" and "kphun" is like "in a small enough container," or something like that.

---

There have even been recorded accounts of Indian warriors utilizing their horses to help them maneuver successfully enough in battle conditions to rescue the wounded and to take the bodies of those who have lost their lives back to the community to receive their proper ceremonial burial. The majority of the Plains Indians and other Indigenous cultures did not place the bodies of those who had passed immediately into a box and into the ground as many Christian-based cultures prefer. Instead, many Native Peoples throughout the Americas practiced “tree and scaffold burials,” were the bodies of the deceased were ceremonially placed high, close to the sky. In the book titled *Introduction to the Study of Mortuary Customs Among the North American Indians*, Harry Cresey Yarrow offers his observations and opinions regarding this practice:

These scaffolds are 7 to 8 feet high, 10 feet long, and 4 or 5 wide. Four stout posts, with forked ends, are first set firmly in the ground, and then in the forks are laid cross and side poles, on which is made a flooring of small poles. The body is then carefully wrapped, so as to make it watertight, and laid to rest on the poles. The reason why Indians bury in the open air instead of under the ground is for the purpose of protecting their dead from wild animals. In new countries, where wolves and bears are numerous, a dead body will be dug up and devoured, though it be put many feet under the ground.  

In addition, Dan Aadland references the following description of Cheyenne warrior burials in his work titled *Women and Warriors of the Plains*. He explains:

When a Cheyenne warrior died, his body dressed in its finest clothes, was wrapped in robes or blankets, securely lashed with rope, then deposited in a burial lodge or on the open prairie with little to protect it from the coyotes, wolves and eagles. For predators to use the body was natural and not to be feared. Sometimes burial was in a tree on a platform of poles. Sometimes the body was placed in a natural cave or hole in the rimrocks, the opening then being sealed with rocks to complete the tomb. The warriors best war implements were placed with him (although a favorite piece of equipment might first be given by his relatives to a good friend), and his best horse was brought nearby, saddled and bridled, then killed for the brave’s use after death. Next the warrior’s soul would ride until it had found a trail where all the tracks pointed one way. This trail would lead him to the Milky Way.

An example of Indigenous warriors in the Americas utilizing the horse to help them to rescue the wounded or recover the bodies of those who had been killed in battle can be seen

---

within Neil Coleman’s article titled “The Feathered Horse Soldiers.” He recounts the following observation from General Patrick Conner regarding an Arapaho warrior:

An Arapahoe rode up and down in front of the command ... and while his horse was galloping was seen to swing himself down under his horse’s neck, come up on the other side, and resume his seat, repeating the feat many times.” This by any standards was quite a feat. The above was only one of myriad feats in combat for which he was quickly to become famous. For example, riding at full speed, usually within range of the enemy, the Indian often turned about and tried to help wounded comrades out of their plight. To enable them to perform such a service, the Indian drilled himself as a cavalry soldier with the following exercise: Running at a gallop, the Indian would lean over and reach to the ground for an object which had been placed there for that purpose. The same procedure was repeated with the object until he was capable of handling it with ease. When this was accomplished, the weight of the object was increased ... This procedure, often performed during battle by two Indians riding abreast, was very frustrating to the Army. Because of the Indians’ practice of returning for their wounded and dead, it was almost impossible for the army to come up with any accurate number concerning Indian casualties during any one battle. 319

This practice of risking one’s life to recover bodies of those slain in battle is clearly one that fascinated Western authors. Colonel Theodore Ayrault Dodge also references this practice in his article titled “Some American Riders” as published in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine. Although his piece is derogatory in many ways, he states the following about this practice:

While wonderfully agile and with great endurance, the Indian lacks the strength of our athletes; and in boxing or wrestling, even after a course of instruction, would be no match for an average American. But he can perform equestrian feats which strike us as wonderful enough. It is a point of honor with him, as it was with the ancients, not to leave his dead or wounded in the hands of the enemy, liable to butchery or deprived of the rites of burial; and he will pick up a warrior from the ground without dismounting, almost without slacking speed, throw him across his pony, and gallop off. This requires much practice. Sometimes two men act together in picking up the man, but one is quite able to accomplish it. A buck represented the dead or wounded man. He lies perfectly still and limp if the former, or aids as far as is consistent with his hurt if the latter. Perhaps this is the best of the numerous feats the Indian can exhibit. 320

5.4 Husbandry

Indeed, there was an entire realm regarding what many of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas felt was appropriate care and cultivation of the horse. This realm was considered sacred, and not secular. As the horse was considered a spiritual being, this involved the healing and spiritual fortification of the horse, as well as the equipment, riding techniques, training, breeding, preparation for battle, and other ways of caring for their physical health. In his article titled “Indian Horse Healing” as published in *Real West: True Tales of the American Frontier*, Raymond Schuessler focuses on the “horse medicine men” who had the ability to cure horses and determine the fate of others. His interpretation of them is as follows:

Almost obscured in formal Indian history was the horse medicine man and his collection of drugs and herbs with which he used to keep his horse in good health, ward off evil horse spirits and diminish the capacity of enemy horses in war and races. As mystic as some of the concoctions and procedures seemed to be, we must remember that the American Indian did add half a hundred botanical herbs to the medical science’s list of useful medical drugs. Up until recently we have known little because the art was kept very much a secret and it took a great deal of prying by Smithsonian researchers to unearth the information from surviving Indians with whom they had become friends. 321

Schuessler’s comment regarding the Western research community’s difficulty in securing information regarding the sacred is important to note. It may help to explain why so many of the “facts” gathered by Western academia about the life-ways, beliefs, and practices of Indigenous Peoples are incorrect, misleading, and/or based upon assumption rather than fact. As it was illegal for Native Peoples in the United States to practice their religions and ceremonies, anything sacred had to be kept hidden. 322 This ban was not lifted within the United States until President Jimmy Carter signed The American Indian Religious Freedom Act into law in 1978. 323

In addition, within Native cultures, themselves, sacred knowledge is carefully guarded by traditional knowledge bearers and shared only at appropriate times and within appropriate settings, such as times of ceremony, teaching, or certain seasonal periods. Indeed, the recipient of such knowledge is also required to have “earned” the honor of carrying such knowledge by their selfless behavior, respectful attitude, and accomplishments. Therefore, as the horse is considered

sacred, Western Academia would have had to understand and respect these protocols to receive deep and accurate knowledge regarding Indigenous horse husbandry practices.

In her article titled “Spiritual Commodification and Misappropriation: What Native People Want you to Understand,” Maria Jones encourages readers to respect the right of Native Peoples to decide “under which circumstances their ceremonies will be ‘shared’ with non-Indians.” ³²⁴ She quotes Russell Means, *Lakota*, as follows:

> The process is ultimately intended to supplant Indians, even in areas of their own customs and spirituality. In the end, non-Indians will have complete power to define what is and is not Indian, even for Indians. When this happens, the last vestiges of real Indian society and Indian rights will disappear. Non-Indians will then “own” our heritage and ideas as thoroughly as they now claim to own our land and resources. ³²⁵

Another reason for the high degree of inaccuracy regarding the information written and circulated about the historical relationship between the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas and the horse has to do with the high degree of assumption and projection that has been present in the research data gathering process utilized by Western-trained academics to date. An example of this can be seen in Diana Serra Cary’s article titled “Horses and the Plains Indians.” Although this author is not of the Blackfeet culture, does not speak their language, and does not appear to have a mastery of the perspectives shared by the Indigenous cultures to which she refers, she states the following:

> Having used dogs as pack animals for centuries, American Indians had first been inclined to see the horse as merely a larger travois dog, or an elk without antlers. For this reason, the Blackfeet dubbed the first horse they encountered “great elk dog.” Other tribes favored “big dog” or “medicine dog.” But soon the “dog” derivatives were dropped. Why waste these magnificent animals as pack dogs for women and children? ³²⁶

Unfortunately, bias and prejudice are also a primary reason for the proliferation of inaccurate “information” that exists within this area of history. Examples of this can be routinely seen in mainstream publications. Such propaganda does have an effect on the minds of those

---


³²⁵ Ibid.

who read it and trust the source, and it has had grave side effects for Native Peoples. 327 328

Colonel Dodge even uses phrases such as “the old savage” and “old time Indian,” to describe
Native Peoples and the “average bareback rider of civilization” to describe average American
riders. 329 He states the following about the horse husbandry practices of the Indigenous Peoples
of the Americas:

The Indian has never developed a system of training his ponies. Each man teaches his
own to suit himself, and accept imitation, or a certain trick shown from father to son, and
thus perpetuated, there was none but individual knack in his horsemanship. The Plains
pony was quickly taught after a rough and ready fashion, more by cruelty than kindness;
in a manner, in fact, as different from the system of the Arabs as the fine shape of the
Barb differs from the rugged outline of the bronco. 330

Schuessler credits the Smithsonian Institution as his main source in the compilation of his
piece. His article includes references to complete cures of animals that were “feeble and near
death,” treatment for horses with “colic and distemper,” cures for broken bones and battle
wounds, and even ways to ensure successful raids on enemy horses and escape from enemy
hands. 331 He also offers a table summarizing data regarding some of the medicinal plants certain
tribes utilized to cure their horses (See Appendix E). He states the following regarding Oglala
horse medicinal practices:

The horse medicine cult of the Oglala [Lakota] was composed of persons who had
dreamed of horse medicines and who held ceremonies in a teepee followed by a
spectacular parade around the camp. One descendent claimed his great-grandfather
originated the cult among the Oglala and recited the entire tale. The Oglala ceremony
included dancing in imitation of horses. Oglala used horse medicine to make horses swift
and fearless. Brood mares were also treated to produce fine colts. 332

John R. Swanton also made reference to herbs utilized in the curing of horses with
respect to the Choctaw Peoples in his book titled Source Material for the Social and Ceremonial
Life of the Choctaw Indians. He states:

330 Ibid., 852.
331 Schuessler, “Indian Horse Healing,” 56-57.
332 Ibid., 56.
The butterfly root (Choctaw, *hatapushik okhish*, “butterfly medicine”) was used for human beings in cases of colds. The tops could be employed as well as the roots. However, it seems to have been more often employed as a medicine for horses, being given when they had the blind staggers or seemed physically broken down. It was also given to them in the Fall to protect them from such sickness the following Spring.  

Indeed, the husbandry and care of the horse involved precise protocols that took into account their spiritual sensitivity and nature. Afraid of Bear-Cook (*Traditional Knowledge Bearer, Ceremonial Leader/Medicine Person, and Teacher*) is from the Oglala Lakota Peoples. She explains that her grandparents had specific responsibilities with regard to husbandry of the Nation’s horses, and states the following about the way that she was taught to treat the horse:

... from the start the only thing that I would ever hear from my mother is she would always talk to the horses and she would call them, “Takoja.” “Takoja” in our language means “grandchild.” ... So, the relationship between my family particularly as it relates to the horses, is that loving, nurturing part that they gave to the horses by calling them “grandchildren.” And, each generation as it went would carry that same. So, today my parents are gone and my aunts, I’ve got one aunt left that I call “mom.” But even she was a horse woman. So, my family were always horse people. So, we always had relationship with these horses. And we always have called them “Takoja” and now it’s my turn. And so, that’s what I speak to the horses if I see them, talk to them, it’s in that language, it’s in the Takoja language. And there’s something about trust that happens when the horses hear you talking in that grandmother/grandfather way. Because they may have had different names to the horses depending on what the behavior of that horse was. They picked the names very seriously, and with spirit. And so, our horses were not named just because you threw a can and heard the sound of that can. You didn’t name them like that. They were treated just like you would treat your grandchildren. So, within that trust they extended themselves spiritually to their horses, and the horses in return responded to them in that trust ... And I don’t just go up and touch them because either they are going to look at you and you are going to immediately establish that contact. Or, if they even just look away, then I don’t get in front of them. There’s behaviors that you just don’t do in front of the horses. You don’t ride horses when you are on your moon time [menstruation]. They tell us when you are going to feed the horses, don’t feed them when you are on your moon time. It’s a time for that woman that is on the strongest time that she could be because she is renewing. And the only other time she’s stronger than that is when she is pregnant. But in that place where your creation, your pregnancy, it nurtures that horse. So, it’s different ways for different things ... I think if more of our people begin to have that strong relationship with the horses and accord them that relative part, the “grandchild, what can we do for you?” It’s always what can you do for them. But

---

those are feelings that have come to us from our grandmothers, from before their grandmothers, on so on and back. 334

The Lakota People’s classification of horses as loved ones with sacred power is supported in the book titled Healing Power of Horses. Wendy Beth Baker explains as follows:

[Horses] were special beings, in the same classification as children and the elderly, containing powers from which they could draw; certainly more meaningful than a mode of transportation. Horses took people not only on external journeys but also on internal journeys to an awareness of feelings and healing, and to the growth of the soul. Horse medicine men had dreams or visions in which they gained knowledge about herbs and roots from wild horses or stallions. With this knowledge, they could not only cure sick horses but people as well. 335

In addition to such protocols regarding the way in which horses needed to be approached and cared for, many of the Indigenous horse cultures throughout the Americas adorned their horses with objects, paint, and protective coverings to strengthen them and keep them spiritually and physically safe. One of the ways in which these ponies were adorned carried forward the ancient Indigenous tradition of utilizing masks. Most masks were made of organic materials that quickly decay. However, Western trained academics agree that masks such as those referred to as “transformation masks” on the Northwest Coast of North America are “thought to have emerged over a thousand years ago.” 336 Indeed, “tribal masks have been part of the dance regalia and traditional ceremonies of many Native American tribes since ancient times.” 337

Although Western authors state that the Indigenous Peoples began adorning the heads of their horses with masks because they were copying the Spanish tradition of covering their horses with “conquistador horse armor,” they deduce this based upon their claim that there were no horses in the Americas before the arrival of the Spanish horses to the mainland in 1519. However, Mike Cowdrey, Ned Martin, and Jody Martin do admit that “masking horses in North America is more than five centuries old” 338 and do note that many of these masks were covered

in pre-Columbian designs. They state the following on page vii of his book titled *American Indian Horse Masks*:

Iconic motifs, some of which can be traced back into pre-Columbian times, are repeated again and again on many of these masks in contexts which reveal their intended meanings. This symbolism is explored in detail to reveal that many protective masks originated in visions of the powers which reside above the earth, or within it. Wrapped in thunder, stitched with lightning, braced by prayerful songs and plangent with the sound of bells, these masks translated an ordinary horse into a being of extraordinary abilities, which might carry a man into that place between cloud shadow and sunshine where neither arrows nor bullets could ever find him.  

In the book titled *A Song for the Horse Nation: Horse in Native American Cultures*, editors George Horse Capture and Emil Her Many Horses offer the following perspective, which can possibly help to offer context regarding Cowdrey, Martin and Martin’s dilemma in understanding the historical timeline of Indigenous horse masks. They explain the following:

Although it is easy to forget, we must remember that American Indians have lived on this continent for tens of thousands of years, and their imprint can be seen across the landscape. Prehistoric drawings and carvings—the earliest of art forms—decorate the walls of cliffs and caves across North America and tell us of spiritual journeys, supernatural beings, animals, and the exploits of warriors from long ago. By identifying stylistic motifs, scholars can often determine which groups created the drawings and occasionally, a match can be found by comparing figures in rock art to those items made by contemporary tribes, confirming that some ancient art styles reach across the centuries.  

Cowdrey, Martin, and Martin continue by including the following intriguing descriptions of Native “leather armor” from their book:

Such leather armor continued in Indian usage until the early 19th century, for the Lewis and Clark expedition found it among the Northern Shoshone in August, 1805: “They have also a kind of armor which they form of many folds of antelope’s skin [and] unite with glue and sand. With this they cover their own bodies and those of their horses. These are sufficient against the effects of the arrow.”

Cowdrey, along with Ned and Jody Martin, provide an overview of their understanding of the significance of painting the horse for the Cheyenne Peoples. It is important to note that

---

339 Ibid., vii.
Indigenous Peoples do not use the word “shamanic” when referring to their own spiritual practices. However, they are known to use such words if they are trying to communicate with others who do not understand their culture or language. As has been mentioned by a number of project participants, many Indigenous concepts cannot be adequately captured or described by the English language. They explain as follows:

A painted horse, like a masked horse, enhanced its rider’s power through shamanic means. Traditional Cheyenne painting derives from a shamanic world-view, based in a cosmology and belief system first manifest in the area of the Great Lakes. Central to the shamanic ideology are concepts shared by many other New World traditions: that there is fundamentally but one life-giving energy – Exhasto – comprised of a Cosmic Duality having both male and female aspects, opposed but complimentary; that the universe is characterized by three major divisions or worlds: the Above world, the Middle World, and the Underworld or Below World, each stratified; that form is a mask that can be changed at will by persons such as shamans, who have the ability to shape-shift from one form to another in their spirit bodies. Painting the face or body is a manifestation of this ability, a kind of masking creating an idealization of self that aligns one’s person and spirit with the universe. The horses’ paint, like other forms of masking, extends the idea of the riders’ selfhood. The horse becomes part of an enveloping mask of spirit. 342

In addition to the way in which they viewed, cared for, prayed with, and adored their horses, the way in which they rode them was also distinct from the style that was introduced by the Spanish conquistadors. Roe quotes Larocque’s description of the Crow way of riding and horse husbandry practices. Interestingly, he equates this treatment of the horse as “a much closer approximation to our own ideas” 343 rather than the abusive behavior graphically described by the author Dobie in a quote used on the previous page. This includes seeing Natives saddling their horses and “tear[ing] raw flesh until the blood flows” only to “saddle and ride them with indifferent composure” the following day. Roe states the following regarding the Crow:

Their saddles are so made as to prevent falling either backwards or forward, the hind part reaching as high as between the shoulders and fore part of the breast. The women’s saddles are especially so. Those of the men are not quite so high, and many use saddles such as the Canadians make in the Northwest Country. They are excellent riders, being trained to it from their infancy. In war or hunting if they mean to extract their horses to the utmost they ride without a saddle. In their wheelings and evolutions they often are not seen, having only a leg on the horseback and clasping the horse with their arms around his neck, on the side opposite to where the enemy is. Most of their horses can be guided to any place without bridle, only be leaning to one side or the other they turn immediately

342 Ibid., 53.
343 Roe, The Indian and the Horse, 263.
to the side on which you lean, and will not bear turning until you resume a direct posture. They are very fond of their horses and take good care of them; as soon as a horse has a sore back he is not used until he has healed, no price will induce a man to part with a favorite horse on whom he places confidence for security either in attack or flight.  

In the book titled *A Song for the Horse Nation: Horses in Native American Cultures* edited by Horse Capture and Her Many Horses for the National Museum of the American Indian, the issue of “horse equipment” is addressed. Here, the authors differentiate from a gentle pre-Spanish bridle and a Spanish—style bridle that was later adopted by Native Peoples. They state the following:

It is said that some Indian riders long ago didn’t always use bridles but guided their ponies by applying pressure to the horse’s ribs with their knees. A well-trained mount could quickly respond. Another method of not only guiding the horse but also of leading it was the use of a buffalo-hair braided rope that, when inserted into the natural gap in the horse’ teeth and tied under the jaw, formed a basic bridle. Later, Spanish-style bridles were adopted, although the bit caused more pain. Beaded strips over the harness leather added an Indian flavor to these bridles.  

Finally, within his book *The Indian and the Horse*, Roe addresses his understanding of Native horse breeding as follows:

Breeding seems to have become very largely a matter of individual (tribal) capacity or practice; or perhaps even inclination … The great Indian defect as breeders was not, in Dobie’s opinion, poor stallions as much as nonselection of mares. He observes that a few of the Northern tribes came to understand breeding. Like so many other Indian phenomenon, this varied among tribes. The Sarcee were seemingly good horse breeders, the Cree made no attempt to control breeding. The outstanding horse breeders among the Northern tribes were indisputably the Nez Percé. The foremost authority on this tribe is Francis Haines. The famous Appaloosa horse of the Nez Percé is classified by Haines as “a direct result of care in breeding,” and not to be confused with the pinto.  

According to Rickman (*Caretaker and Teacher*) a project participant of Cherokee and European ancestry who helped to save the traditional Choctaw horse, the Choctaw, Cherokee, and Chickasaw Peoples had a very precise breeding program based on phenotype. Here he refers to the “old saddle test,” which was handed down to him by the Whitmire family. This Cherokee family brought their Native ponies with them to Oklahoma during the forced march known as the “Trails of Tears.” The Whitmire’s utilized this “test” to help them to determine whether or not a

---

344 Ibid., 263.
346 Roe, *The Indian and the Horse*, 254-255.
horse would be allowed into their carefully managed herds. As published in an earlier article of mine, Rickman explains as follows:

The Chickasaw, Choctaw and Cherokee horses are basically the same horses. [Their tribal affiliation] depended more on who owned them then it did on their genetic DNA. I think many Native Americans had the same horses, and these horses had “been there forever” ... [The Whitmire's] would say when you were selecting your stallions to breed, ‘Make sure that this saddle will fit. If it does not fit, do not introduce that horse into the herd.’ If the saddle fit, then you knew that if you rode that horse it would always bring you home... [The Choctaw/Cherokee/Chickasaw horsemens] were looking for a high withered horse that was deep-chested, sure-footed, with stamina and the ability to live off the land. 347

5.5 Summary

In merging the testimony of project participants with what has been written by the dominant Western Culture, Native scholars, the media, and mainstream academia, a more accurate picture of the origin, spirituality, healing practices and husbandry surrounding the horse within Indigenous American cultures emerges. Likewise, the consistencies – and inconsistencies – become more obvious. As the information in this chapter has shown, much of what Western Academia has put forth regarding this topic and the Native Peoples in general, was written and compiled from a place of bias and ignorance as to the ontology, epistemology, and axiology of Indigenous Peoples. As Russell Means pointed out, when this occurs “non-Indians will have complete power to define what is and is not Indian, even for Indians ... [and] the last vestiges of real Indian society and Indian rights will disappear.” 348 As scholars, when such illusion is exposed, we must utilize our knowledge, skills, and ethics to ensure that the necessary corrections are made so as to present the most truthful and accurate accounts possible. We cannot erase the past, but we can create a future that allows our children and our children’s children to benefit from the lessons we have learned.