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Abbreviations
MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art
MMAB The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin
MMJ Metropolitan Museum Journal

Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.
Hearing Witness: The Wičhówoyake of Mathó Nážiŋ’s Little Bighorn Muslins

RAMEY MIZE

Mnikhówožu Lakhóta community leader, warrior, and artist Matȟó Nážiŋ (Standing Bear) testified to his experience of the Battle of the Little Bighorn on many occasions, in both words and images.¹ The circa 1920 work by Matȟó Nážiŋ in the Charles and Valerie Diker Collection of Native American Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art vividly details the events of June 25, 1876, the day he and other members of Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Seven Council Fires), along with their Tsistsistas (Northern Cheyenne) and Hinono’ei (Arapaho) allies, defended their families against the illegal attack led by Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer and the U.S. Seventh Cavalry (fig. 1).² This confrontation, dubbed “Custer’s Last Stand” in U.S. popular culture, is referred to by Lakȟótas as the Battle of Phežísla Wakpá (the
Greasy Grass River) where pêhîŋ háŋska kasôta (the “rubbing out of Custer”) occurred.² It is well known for being the most decisive Indigenous victory in both the Black Hills War of 1876 and the wider Plains Wars of the nineteenth century, as well as for fomenting long-lasting controversy and debate.³ Yet another title—“The Battle of Many Names”—marks the multiplicity of monikers and perspectives related to this event.⁴

Arthur Amiotte, an Oglála Lakȟóta artist and great-grandson of Matȟó Nážiŋ, notes that his ancestor’s portrayals, in their intricate immediacy, extend “concentrated memory of the event.”⁶ Amiotte’s use of a form of the word “concentration,” meaning both “the action or power of focusing one’s attention” and “a close gathering of people or things,” is evocative in its pairing with “memory.”⁷ Together, these terms reflect the essential testimonial, relational, and commemorative roles played by images in Lakȟóta culture. The process of Lakȟóta image-making occasioned frequent communal gatherings during which paintings and drawings on prepared animal hide, paper, or fabric fostered memory-keeping through intergenerational connection, corroboration, and exchange.⁸ As explored in more detail below, drawings provided important touchstones for Lakȟótas to share eháŋni wičhówoyake, a category of oral history reserved for “living history,” or “true stories.”⁹

This article proposes Matȟó Nážiŋ’s Little Bighorn muslin at The Met as a form of testimony to Lakȟótas’ right to resist Custer’s assault, as well as the larger incursions of U.S. empire. His extraordinary work elides visual and verbal forms of remembrance and demonstrates how testimonial avowal and interpersonal corroboration are socially embedded in Lakȟóta images. I begin by establishing the battle’s historical context and the ways in which Lakȟóta resistance informs

Mathó Nážiŋ’s composition, followed by an analysis of the entwined workings of images and oral history in Lakȟóta life. I then conclude with a focus on the muslin’s multi-sensory significance as a specific manifestation of Lakȟóta material culture known as the ózay (dew curtain), underscoring its role as a mnemonic reservoir from which Lakȟótas bore witness to personal and collective history. Through the aural/oral, communal dimension of listening activated by the “true stories” concentrated in his images, I suggest that Mathó Nážiŋ’s art poses an alternative to Western concepts of the singular, ocular-centric eyewitness, one that instead encapsulates Lakȟóta values of relationality and reciprocity.

Importantly, Mathó Nážiŋ intended for his Little Bighorn images to testify to both Native and non-Native audiences. His muslins (including the one in The Met’s collection) were likely created for outsiders, their sale necessitated by the restrictions of the reservation system and the imposition of a cash economy. However, the stories projected by these works continued to reverberate in a Lakȟóta context. As art historian Jessica Horton has observed, “Notwithstanding their physical departure, artworks remained knit into the cultural fabric of Lakota life through the vestiges of the stories they prompted.” At this complex cultural crossroads, Mathó Nážiŋ’s art channeled Očhéthi Šakówiŋ vitality and victory within and beyond his community. As elaborated upon below, the muslin in The Met dispels the myth of Custer’s heroic martyrdom, which Khulwíčhaša (Lower Brulé/Sičháŋgú) Lakȟóta historian Nick Estes has aptly linked to the entrenched inversion of United States history “where aggressors become victims and where colonialism looks like self-defense.”

Mathó Nážiŋ’s visual-verbal testimony echoes through to the present moment, as the muslins now
extend his voice and vision in settler-centric museum frameworks at The Met and other collecting institutions. Recognizing my own position as a White settler scholar living and working in Lenapehoking (unceded homelands of the Lenape in present-day New York), I approach this imperfect inquiry from a place of humility, acknowledging that my words are deeply indebted to the knowledge, labor, and generosity of Indigenous thinkers, notably Amiotte, as well as Carchross/Tagish First Nation curator Candice Hopkins and xwélméxw (Stó:lō) sound studies scholar Dylan Robinson. In order to bring balance to what they have identified as an overemphasis on the visual aspects of Indigenous art, Hopkins and Robinson organized “Soundings: An Exhibition in Five Parts” (2019–22). The exhibition, which began at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, presents creative works, writings, and ancestral belongings as “scores,” highlighting their sonic dimensions in order to amplify Indigenous history, sovereignty, and futurity along broader sensory registers. Hopkins and Robinson have also stressed deep listening—a close attuning of focus—as an essential basis for Indigenous concepts of witnessing, recalling the concentration of memory that Amiotte also notes in relation to Matlı́o Nážiŋ’s compositions. With this essay, I work to hear the testimonial score layered within Matlı́o Nážiŋ’s muslin, seeking to offer one possible answer to Hopkins’s question: “How can we reconstitute protocols that animate cultural belongings that have been silenced for so long?”

**LAKHÓTA VITALITY AND RESISTANCE AT PHEŽÍSŁA WAKPÁ**

On a warm summer morning in Wipazukhá Wašté Wí (The Month When Berries Are Good, or June), seventeen-year-old Matlı́o Nážiŋ woke, took a swim, and was eating breakfast with his grandmother and uncle in the Mnikhówožu camp when the Seventh Cavalry launched their attack. He and his family were among the Lakȟótas who followed Oglála leader Tȟašúŋke Witkó (Crazy Horse) that summer to hunt in the game-lands of their country. Together with at least five other Lakȟóta bands, along with their Tsistsistas and Hitono’ei compatriots, they formed an encampment along the wide ford where Medicine Tail Coulee and Muskrat Creek feed into Phežísla Wakpá (Greasy Grass River) in Montana Territory, a temporary settlement that grew to house as many as seven thousand people. This monumental gathering was occasioned not only by the area’s ample hunting grounds, but also by Wí Wanyáng Wačhípi (the Sun Dance). An annual, mid-summer ceremony, the Sun Dance brought together members of Očhéthi Šakówiŋ in order to renew relationships and alliances as an oyáte (nation), as well as to restore equilibrium and spiritual harmony with other-than-human persons, elements, and forces. Húŋkápíía Lakȟóta blotáhuŋka (resistance leader) Tȟašúŋke Iyótanká (Sitting Bull) hosted this particular convening by Rosebud Creek eleven days before Custer’s attack, during which he received a prophetic vision of Custer’s blue-coated soldiers “falling into camp.”

Across the composition in The Met and at least three other panoramic images, Matlı́o Nážiŋ portrayed the successful defense of Očhéthi Šakówiŋ against the influx of U.S. forces Tȟašúŋke Iyótanká foresaw, rendering their frenetic multitudes in pencil, ink, and watercolor on stretches of unbleached, loose-weave cotton muslin. In keeping with Lakȟóta pictorial conventions, the narrative action in The Met’s muslin proceeds from right to left and follows the sequence of events the artist had experienced there. At right, he depicts the initial repression of additional battalions commanded by Major Marcus Reno and Captain Frederick Benteen near the Lakȟóta encampment. Afterward, Matlı́o Nážiŋ made his way across Muskrat Creek and caught sight of a group of Custer’s men who had disembowled at the crest of a hill. This ragged line of soldiers appears in the top center of the muslin at The Met, where Matlı́o Nážiŋ also pictures the Lakȟóta charge against them. At far left, he shows the chase laid by warriors after loose cavalry horses. Left of center, he includes a scene of troops mired in a ravine; as their ranks were overwhelmed, U.S. soldiers panicked and fled downhill toward this landform, where they were pursued and killed. As Matlı́o Nážiŋ later described it, the altercation left “horses on top of men and men on top of horses” in a desperate entanglement that his battle imagery echoes.

Only one of Matlı́o Nážiŋ’s known compositions combines the Sun Dance and the battle into a synoptic six-by-six-foot image—a muslin in the collection of the Foundation for the Preservation of American Indian Art and Culture in Chicago (fig. 2). In this work, Matlı́o Nážiŋ demarcates the Sun Dance within a vibrant red lodge circle, visible along the muslin’s lower register. Interspersed among these extraordinary spiritual events are other, more day-to-day activities that were also required to sustain the oyáte. From courtship to cooking, the artist pictures the intimate corners of camp and Lakȟóta life, including couples swathed in bright blue and red trade cloths; dogs and horses...
fig. 2 Matȟó Nážiŋ. Events Leading to the Battle of the Little Bighorn, ca. 1899. Muslin, pencil, and red, blue, yellow, green, and black pigment, 72 x 72 in. (182.9 x 182.9 cm). Foundation for the Preservation of American Indian Art and Culture, St. Augustine’s Indian Center, Chicago, Gift of Dorothy C. and L. S. Raisch
lugging travois laden with goods and children; and thípis bearing family symbols, as well as women fetching water, drying hides, preparing food, and caring for their children. Mathó Nážiŋ ensures that the vibrancy of Lakhóta culture is palpable in his portrayal; in so doing, however, he also makes evident that the onslaught of U.S. forces at the Little Bighorn was not a military encounter exclusively between armed combatants. This was an attack waged by soldiers against both Plains warriors and their families.

As Síchán'gu Lakhóta historian Joseph M. Marshall III foregrounds in his study of the battle, the first casualties at Phéžísla Wakpá were in fact the wives and young daughter of Húŋkpapha Lakhóta battle leader Phízi (Gall). Then President Ulysses S. Grant’s “pacification campaign” regularly brutalized unarmed non-combatants, razed landscapes, and destroyed food sources across the Plains, following the “total war” strategy implemented by Union General William T. Sherman during the U.S. Civil War. Sherman called for a similar annihilation program while acting as General of the Army under Grant during the Plains Wars; another former Union general, Philip Sheridan, served as commander of the Division of the Missouri. Sheridan orchestrated Custer’s 1874 military expedition into the Black Hills, which reported findings of valuable resources, including gold. The press seized this information and disseminated it widely, provoking a wave of prospectors to intrude upon Lakhóta territory. At the precise moment of this sudden inundation, Grant withdrew U.S. troops from the region with the express intention of exacerbating conflict between settler-trespassers and Lakhótas. The inevitable, ensuing discord provided his administration with the desired
Custer regularly carried out Sherman and Sheridan’s genocidal tactics, making them an established feature of the Seventh Cavalry’s campaigns; indeed, they were often the deciding factor behind his so-called military “victories.” Custer (and most other U.S. commanders during the Plains Wars) led surprise attacks, capturing and threatening the vulnerable in order to force the army’s opponents into submission. He adopted this approach during a strike against Black Kettle’s Tsistsistas camp at the Washita River in 1868, descending on them at dawn while they were asleep. There, his soldiers killed, raped, and captured women and children. The memory of this unfathomable loss was fresh in the minds of Tsistsistas warriors who were present alongside Lakȟóta at the Greasy Grass in 1876.

Across each of his four Little Bighorn portrayals, Matȟó Nážiŋ took care to depict the urgent flight of women, children, and the elderly from the encampment upon the Seventh Cavalry’s advance (fig. 3). This specific vignette takes on an even more personal dimension with the knowledge that the veteran-artist’s own first wife and daughter were killed by the Seventh Cavalry at Wounded Knee Creek fourteen years later. While the camp scene in the muslin at The Met is less detailed, it pointedly signals the wider communal context and interpersonal stakes of Custer’s violence (fig. 4). Through the vast scale and swirling scope of this image, Matȟó Nážiŋ conveys the ensuing chaos and cacophony. As he later recalled, “there were so many guns going off that I couldn’t hear them,” and “before the next morning, I couldn’t sleep, because I kept recalling the horrible things I had seen.” The drawings of another Mnihówožu veteran, Šúŋkawakȟáŋ Šá (Red Horse), enumerate the visceral toll of the fighting, including the many horses slain in the course of battle (fig. 5). In this and four other sketches, their spare and recursive forms seem almost to float, weightless. Washed of any color save red from their wounds, their elegiac columns speak powerfully to the conflict’s carnage and loss.

The gravity of the U.S. Army’s atrocities at the Little Bighorn and elsewhere is further compounded by the fact that they were committed without an official declaration of war by Congress. These actions were extrajudicial crimes against humanity and, in the case of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, violated the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie. This treaty had preserved for Očhéthi Šakówiŋ not only Hesápa (the Black Hills of present-day South Dakota), but also exclusive hunting and occupation rights in the area north of the North Platte River and east of the Bighorn Mountains—where Custer’s invasion occurred.

It is therefore significant that Matȟó Nážiŋ situates the battle in space with the representation of Phežísla Wakȟáŋ and a tributary (Muskrat Creek), winding through the encampment. As Kathleen Ash-Milby (Diné), Joyce Szabo, and other art historians have noted, landscape began to appear as a pictorial subject in the work of Native artists once dispossessed and distanced from their homelands through the imposition of the reservation system. Ash-Milby suggests that “there is no strong tradition of landscape painting among Native people before the twentieth century because it was not needed. The places where these events transpired were familiar to both the artist/story-teller and the intended audience; these representations were created for a community that shared experience and place.” In her estimation, place is a pervasive, mutual entity, intimately known and thus imaginatively, if not pictorially, present in pre–Reservation Era images. While Matȟó Nážiŋ may have elaborated the battle’s iconic landmarks as a result of such cultural shifts, it is also possible that his inclusion of these waterways was intended to convey a visual message of Lakȟóta sovereignty in the face of U.S. colonial oppression. In other words, the Little Bighorn River and Muskrat Creek geographically locate the Seventh Cavalry’s incursion in site-specific terms, and thereby mark this attack within the bounds of unceded Lakȟóta Makhóčhe (Lakȟóta Country). Another important detail may also denote Lakȟóta resistance: the United States guidon, visible in the encampment scene. U.S. flag motifs frequently appear in Lakȟóta art made during the early reservation years, especially in beadwork. A number of scholars contend that these images did not necessarily operate in patriotic
terms but rather as a subtle visual code commemorating martial victory against U.S. forces. Along these lines, Amiotte has posited that Mathó Nážiŋ possibly included the iconic military standard here in order to invoke the defense mounted by Thašúŋke Witkó’s warriors against Brigadier General George Crook at Rosebud Creek about a week earlier. A map that Mathó Nážiŋ appears to have sketched for the poet John G. Neihardt during a 1931 interview (explored in further detail below) supports this interpretation (fig. 6). The numerous annotations in English, perhaps added by Neihardt himself, identify the drawing as “S.B.’s [Standing Bear’s] diagram,” detailing events that unfolded “before [the] Custer fight.” Toward the right end of the arc representing Rosebud Creek at the top of the page, Mathó Nážiŋ drew a circle indicating the location of the “Rosebud Fight”; to the left, he pinpoints the site of Thatȟáŋka Iyótank’a’s Sun Dance. Additional lines trace movements of war parties and scouts. Mathó Nážiŋ included a line toward the bottom that someone has labeled “Little Big Horn,” as well as the number and order of Lakhóta and Tsistsistas lodge circles. Having successfully forced the retreat of Crook’s column at the Rosebud, Očhéthi Šakówiŋ and their allies built on this momentum to ensure Custer’s demise eight days later. As art historian Emily C. Burns has noted, flags “often implied the possession of the power of an enemy” for Lakhóta viewers. Mathó Nážiŋ’s composition reflects this symbolic power capture: the guidon fixed in camp echoes the ones clutched by Custer’s soldiers at the top center of the muslin, simultaneously recalling and foreshadowing Lakhóta triumph across both events.

These components—the waterways, camp scene, and U.S. flag—in Mathó Nážiŋ’s muslin establish Custer’s assault as an unjustified and gratuitous ambush on men, women, and children, part of a broader scheme on the part of the U.S. government geared ultimately toward Indigenous genocide. As historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz puts it: “Settler colonialism is inherently genocidal in terms of the genocide convention.” The 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as predicated on an intent “to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” Estes has detailed how the manifestations of U.S.-led genocide were legion for Indigenous peoples, occurring outside the official confines of war in the form of murder, torture, cultural dispossess)]
of resources needed for physical survival.”

Related to the latter category, military-sponsored extermination campaigns—led by Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan—also resulted in the slaughtering of millions of members of Pté Oyáte (Buffalo Nation) over the course of just two decades, on whom Plains communities depended for both physical and spiritual sustenance. By 1895, fewer than one thousand buffalo survived. Federal authorities openly wielded this anthropogenic extinction as the single most effective tool for starving and forcing Native communities into the reservation system. Matȟó Nažiŋ’s art practice took shape in the aftermath of this unspeakable, state-sanctioned violence, further testament to his resilience in the face of immense upheaval.

**TESTIMONY THROUGH TRUE STORIES: EHÁŋNI WICHÓWOYAKE IN MATȟÓ NAžIŊ’S ART**

After surviving the Black Hills War, Matȟó Nažiŋ remained with Thašuŋke Witko’s Ogála Lakȟótas until they were forced to settle at Wází Aháŋhaŋ Oyáŋke (Pine Ridge Reservation) in southwestern South Dakota. He was recruited by the impresario William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody to perform with the Wild West Show on European tours in 1887, 1889, and 1890. During the last season, he sustained an injury that kept him behind at a hospital in Vienna; around that time, he also heard word of his wife’s and daughter’s deaths at the hands of the U.S. Cavalry at Wounded Knee, along with more than two hundred other Mníhkówožu Lakȟóta men, women, and children. While convalescing and grieving, he formed a bond with his Austrian nurse, Louise Rieneck; they later married and returned together to Pine Ridge in 1891. There, they cultivated a living through a combination of farming, cattle-raising, casket-making, midwifery, and art commissions, sharing their bounty with the wider Ogála community in keeping with Lakȟóta principles of generosity and kinship. It was in this hybrid household that Matȟó Nažiŋ grew his art practice. Louise’s fluency in English, German, and Lakȟóta, along with Matȟó Nažiŋ’s community leadership, made their home a vibrant crossroads for travelers and neighbors alike. Evinced in the drawings themselves, this social context meaningfully mediated the artist’s compositions. As Christina (Standing Bear) Mesteth, Matȟó Nažiŋ’s daughter (and Amiotte’s grandmother) recalled, “Wašičus [White people] were always coming around and having Standing Bear draw things for them on muslin.” The prevalence of Little Bighorn subject matter in the surviving works bespeaks patrons’ preoccupation with the battle—as well as the artist’s awareness of and responsiveness to this fact. Though technically produced for sale to White buyers, Matȟó Nažiŋ’s muslins also channeled Očhéthi Šakówiŋ vitality and victory for the benefit of Lakȟóta audiences during and after their making.

In 1931, toward the end of his life, Matȟó Nažiŋ again imparted his memories of Přežislá Wakpá from his Pine Ridge home—this time, however, to furnish historical context and to vouch for the life narrative and spiritual vision that his friend Heyáka Sápá (Nicholas Black Elk, an Ogála Lakȟóta wícháša wakȟáŋ, or spiritual leader) was sharing with Neihardt. Neihardt compiled and published these testimonies in *Black Elk Speaks*, a 1932 chronicle that also featured illustrations by Matȟó Nažiŋ. Heyáka Sápá’s son, Benjamin Black Elk, interpreted their accounts in a series of interviews that Neihardt’s daughter Enid recorded stenographically, a painstaking process memorialized in a photograph from her personal scrapbook (fig. 7). Lakȟóta culture holds that visions, battle trials, and historical incidents alike are to be narrated only by individuals who experience them, to prevent others from inappropriately claiming someone else’s accomplishment or story. Though Heyáka Sápá had been present, he was too young to fight in the Battle of the Little Bighorn; he thus left this event to the telling by those who had actively taken part: Matȟó Nažiŋ and another veteran, Čhetáŋ Máza (Iron Hawk). These respected confidants served the additional purpose of bearing witness to the truthfulness of Heyáka Sápá’s story. Following an interview session on May 21, Enid Neihardt attested to this corroborative dynamic in her diary: “We learned a lot from the old men, Black Elk, Iron Hawk, and Standing Bear. They are telling us about the life of Black Elk and how it corresponds to Black Elk’s vision.” As Heyáka Sápá underscored in the interviews, these various episodes—whether told by him or by his companions—were true experiences, not fictional tales. Heyáka Sápá drew this distinction by engaging the Lakȟóta verb wóyakapi, the third-person form of the verb wóyaka, meaning “to tell things, tell a story, relate, speak.” This verb anchors the term *eháŋni wichówowyake*, which Amiotte has described as denoting events that have “taken place within the living memory of the people as Lakota Oyate,” and represents a type of storytelling actively employed by his ancestor during family and community gatherings. *Eháŋni wichówowyake* should be understood as distinct from *eháŋni ohiŋkakan*, which instead feature mythic stories and fables drawn from the very distant past. The premise of truth in the recounting of *eháŋni*
wichówoyake is of such significance that Dakhóta writer Elizabeth Cook-Lynn stresses its relevance in both Lakȟóta spaces of oratory and federal legal testimony, while Estes emphasizes the role of these true stories in calling for the return of stolen lands and addressing histories of genocide.75

It is possible that Heháka Sápa made a point of highlighting the testimonial validity of these tellings due to the doubt settler-interrogators often cast on Indigenous insight. The Battle of the Little Bighorn, which resulted in the death of Custer’s entire battalion, represented an especially fraught instance of this pattern. In art historian Janet Catherine Berlo’s words, “there were no white survivors and no white eyewitnesses, so there was no ‘official’ version by the hegemonic culture.”76 Many White officials, soldiers, and writers construed the conflict’s outcome as shocking, impossible, and inexplicable, and they pressured Native eyewitnesses to substantiate theories that were, to them, more tolerably aligned with settler-colonial narratives of White supremacy.77 The causes and conditions of the Seventh Cavalry’s demise were detailed by Native American participants to outsiders again and again, frequently under great duress and amid what Dakhóta historian Jeanne M. Oyawin Eder has described as a serious “fear of reprisals”—especially when their version of events did not align favorably with the prevailing mythos around Custer.78

Historian Herman J. Viola and others have noted how White interrogators tended to reject Indigenous responses due to their contradiction of the prevailing assumption that Custer and his men mounted a last stand of heroic martyrdom.79 This mythic construct cemented into an enduring pictorial trope after the first newspaper illustration of the event was published by William de la Montagne Cary in the New York Daily Graphic a few weeks later (fig. 8).80 In his precedent-setting image, Cary visualized the Seventh Cavalry valiantly holding their ground, Custer front and center. Archaeological findings at the battle site, however, have since confirmed that Native American testimony communicated the fundamental facts from the beginning: Custer fatally misjudged the size, ammunition capacity, martial skill, and resilience of his Lakȟóta, Tsistsistas, and Hinono’ei opponents.81 His dissolution came quickly “in the face of superior firepower,” and the ensuing panic prevented troopers from forming any meaningful defense, let alone a “last stand.”82

According to one count, Greasy Grass events appear in paintings and drawings by at least thirty Plains artists, including Matȟó Nážin.83 Together, their works belie the dramatic flourish and cool resolve of “Custer’s Last Stand” imagery that characterized compositions by White artists.84

When Plains warrior artists depicted the Battle of the Little Bighorn, they did so for many cultural reasons beyond settler demands. The portrayal of war honors—often referred to as coup (French for “strokes”)—in paintings on hide, muslin, and paper was in keeping with long-standing warrior artistic precedents.85 In her
study of Dakhóta writing, pictography, and world view, Onondawaga (Seneca) scholar Penelope Myrtle Kelsey highlights how visual representations of war constituted vital historical records that were subject to rigorous protocols of public scrutiny and verification. Amiotte likens autobiographical images of warriors’ deeds to military honors, such as ribbons and medals, intended to “record and commemorate . . . acts of valor, sacrifice, and skill.” To this end, Plains pictorial arts were historically intended for public display and validation, whether on hide worn as a cloak or stretched across thípis. As Tsistsistas leader Ben Nighthorse Campbell has explained, these acts of courage required a separate eyewitness for their visual representation as well as their verbal acknowledgment. Mathó Nážin’s participation in the Neihardt interviews reflected this protocol, with his presence indicating his personal sanction of Heháka Sápa’s story. As explored below, the eháŋni wičhówoyake of the battle he and Čhetáŋ Máza relayed there also echoed the relational, dialogic stance of the drawings he made of the same event.

Amid this historical and cultural context, Mathó Nážin’s muslin emerges as a form of testimony, a material conduit for bearing witness to collective resistance and resilience in the face of trauma—and one that adamantly refutes the narrative of Indigenous aggression and White innocence that Last Stand images would have viewers believe. Since the late twentieth century and the emergence of fields like witness and holocaust studies, testimony has increasingly been studied as a generative discourse for representing the historical trauma of war, violence, and genocide in ways that expand beyond “legal, religious, or otherwise formal” frameworks. Hoaist survivor and scholar Elie Wiesel construes testimonial discourse as a diverse representational mode that elicits the bearing of witness as a creative process. For survivors of genocide, war, and persecution, witnessing also carries the important role of “sensemaking,” the social process of imbuing collective experiences with validity and meaning. In the words of philosophy scholar Kelly Oliver, witnessing “in both senses as addressing and responding, testifying and listening—is a commitment to embracing the responsibility of constituting communities.”

Testimony, in consolidating community and effecting the reciprocity of address and response, has been regarded by Indigenous scholars as a remedial practice to the rupturing effects of settler colonialism, as well as a vehicle for cultural preservation and reclamation. Gloria Bird, a poet, scholar, and member of the Spokane Tribe of Washington State, regards witnessing and

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*fig. 8* William de la Montagne Cary (1840–1922). *The Battle on the Little Big Horn River—The Death Struggle of General Custer.* Engraving in *Daily Graphic* (New York), July 19, 1876, 122
testimony as “viable tools that serve the purposes of decolonization by providing details of individual processing of the complexities of inheritance that living in the aftermath of colonizing provides.” In this vein, Māori professor of Indigenous education Linda Tuhuiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou, Tuhoourangi) claims testimony as a central project of Indigenous researchers and communities. Smith describes testimony as capable of making space for the reclamation of history, culture, and self-determination, with a “sense of immediacy.” She writes: “Indigenous testimonies are a way of talking about an extremely painful event or series of events. The formality of testimony provides a structure within which events can be related and feelings expressed. A testimony is also a form through which the voice of a ‘witness’ is accorded space and protection.” Non-Native scholars like Julia Emberley, Carla Taunton, and others have also posited Indigenous storytelling—whether in writing, word, or visual media—as a form of testimony and resistance to violence and oppression. The large-scale drawings made by Mathó Nážiŋ of the Battle of the Little Bighorn align with this testimonial framework through their role in supplying an essential basis for the veteran-artist to fortify community through the act of bearing witness.

**Witness as Listening and Refuge in the Ózaŋ**

For Lakȟótas, pictorial and oral histories are symbiotically related, preserving and affirming cultural memory by virtue of its retelling through visual and verbal means. Historical depictions of coups, for instance, carried with them a “verbal parallel.” Images by Plains warrior artists precipitated a structured form of oratory that elaborated their feats; coup narratives and coup drawings were therefore closely interrelated. Métis scholar and artist Sherry Farrell Racette speaks further to this visual-verbal nexus, one that figures in many Indigenous epistemologies across time: “Oral traditions were never solely oral. Images and objects were a form of visual literacy that through mnemonic practice, supported oral text rather than replaced it. . . . Objects engage individual and collective memory and clear space for story and history, not only of the individuals who visit them, but for the ancestors who created and used them.” Storytelling and images intertwine, aligning past and present, people and objects in reciprocal relationship, and giving rise to various forms of testimony. Like Linda Tuhuiwai Smith, Farrell Racette speaks to the ways in which an object—as a material concentration of memory—brings forth and safeguards shared space, or common ground, for those engaging it to conjure story and reinforce connection to heritage and past events. In this way, the object catalyzes a call-and-response—the call-and-response inherent to a testimonial utterance.

It is through family oral history that we also perceive how Matȟó Nážiŋ’s muslins were themselves a kind of gathering place, how they cleared space for witnessing. Forced acculturation by missionaries and federal officials involved the replacement of the thípis with one-room log cabins. The federal government awarded special privileges and rations to those who adopted log houses as their residence; often, however, Native people continued to maintain family thípis alongside their cabins. Matȟó Nážiŋ and his family built and resided in a cabin, with a shingled roof, wooden floors, and frame windows, but also kept canvas tents in the summer months. Matȟó Nážiŋ often utilized the plain-woven cotton fabric of muslin yardage for his artistic support, laying long stretches of the cloth across the dining room table until it hung down from the sides. According to family oral history, Amiotte has described the way in which his great-grandfather’s artistic process involved the active congregation of peers and fellow Greasy Grass veterans. To accommodate them all, Louise would remove furniture from the main room of their cabin. Amiotte describes how the dialogue unfolded after a shared meal:

Standing Bear would unroll the unfinished muslin painting, holding it up to show the drawings to his age mates. In turn, they would verify if he had properly portrayed them and the people they knew in the various scenes. Seeing the painted images, the guests inevitably recalled memories. People might talk about other details of the events of scenes portrayed. The discourse continued late into the night and early morning hours. Upon completing the entire painted muslin, Standing Bear would host another feast, and the guests would give their final imprint on the work.

The interpersonal mantle of Matȟó Nážiŋ’s artistic output is made vivid through this passage of family memory. His paintings hum with this colloquy and emerge as the calibrated products of group knowledge, care, and contribution—in much the same way he inflected Heȟáka Sápa’s verbal story during the Neihardt interview.

Iháŋktȟúŋwaŋ (Yankton) Dakȟóta ethnographer Ella Cara Deloria identified the practice of seeing, speaking, and hearing Lakȟóta images as one in keeping with the ôzaŋ tradition, an aspect of Plains
material culture that was maintained into and beyond the Reservation Era. In Speaking of Indians, she wrote of this “ingenious adaptation”:

At one period they transferred the art decorations of the tipi to the loghouse. Out of G.I. muslin they made very large wall coverings, a carryover from the dew curtain of a tipi and called by the same term, ozan. On these they painted beautiful designs and made lively black and white drawings of historical scenes of hunting or battles or peace-making between tribes, and courtship scenes, games, and suchlike activities of the past. People went visiting just to see one another’s pictographs and to hear the stories they preserved (emphasis added). 108

In Deloria’s fluid pairing of both the aural and the visual, the multisensorial dimensions of Lakhôta image-making and image-telling take shape. As she indicates, ozang, or dew curtains, bridged not only two distinct dwellings and modes of life for Lakhôta people, but also represent what Amiotte has referred to as the missing link in the “development-evolution of the Lakota painting tradition.”109 With the decimation of buffalo herds, muslin came to supplant hide out of necessity and was among the annuity goods distributed to Native communities by the U.S. government following treaty obligations established in 1867–68.110 Like hide, muslin served a dual functional-aesthetic purpose.111 In log cabins, muslin provided interior adornment and a protective layer for occupants against drafts and loose chinking, and signified one of the hallmarks of a well-kept household. Families with gifted artists—both men and women—filled these broad swaths of cloth with narrative drawings or geometric designs in continuation of the ozang tradition, resulting in a form of painting on canvas that was particularly appealing to non-Native collectors. According to Amiotte: “In time, tribal artists, like Standing Bear and Louise, saw the financial benefits of such paintings specifically for sale and no longer as an enhancement of the ozang.”112

The ozang as an embellished thiipi liner is documented in a 1907 image by Cree photographer Richard Albert Throssel (fig. 9). Suspended along the lower half of the thiipi’s interior, the ozang also provided privacy for those inside. This speaks again to the protective properties of both the liner and the larger thiipi; in the words of Apsáalooke (Crow) historian Alma Hogan Snell, “The lodge . . . is a place of refuge. It protects you.”113 The ozang would have carried forth vestiges of these safeguarding attributes in its adjustment as a cabin liner; its transitional, unembellished form is evident in the bedroom of Wašičun Tȟašúŋke (American Horse; Oglála Lakȟóta), who lived at Pine Ridge near Matȟó Nážiŋ (fig. 10).114

Though there is no family record to show that Matȟó Nážiŋ ever hung his muslins along the walls of the cabin, the oral process surrounding these works still aligned with what Kelsey calls “the moment of narration” that the ozang precipitated—the seeing and hearing of eháŋni wičhówoyake, channeled through the images they featured.115 Amiotte, an artist in his own right, has produced collages that recast this testimonial discourse amid reproductions of family photographs and drawings rendered in his great-grandfather’s style. In When We Gathered (2002), for instance, Amiotte commingles images of Matȟó Nážiŋ and Louise, as well
as his grandparents, great-aunts, and others, alongside the family cabin (fig. 11). They are shown congregated beneath a clouded sky in which Amiotte has embedded his own reprisal of a buffalo hunt drawing by Mathówáŋpiŋ, copied from another muslin by his ancestor in the Museum of the South Dakota State Historical Society. Tucked into the lower left corner is a piece of ledger paper. On it, the artist has written, “When my friends and family gathered we remembered and talked about all the things we did and all that happened to us long ago and now.” Here, Amiotte not only threads throughout the composition a sense of the image-and-memory-driven discourse Mathówáŋpiŋ and peers engaged in, but also directly inhabits his great-grandfather’s voice. This strategy recurs throughout Amiotte’s collages and underscores the visual-verbal fulcrum of Lakhóta pictorial practice.116

The ọzay’s narration recalls Dylan Robinson’s assertion of the expansive role that listening plays in Stó:lō and other Indigenous concepts of witnessing, which move beyond the ocular-centric premise of eye-witness testimony. Robinson argues that listening is “a form of attention in which we are attentive not just to sound but to the fullest range of sensory experience that connects us to place.” In making this point, Robinson invokes an installation curated by Jordan Wilson (Musqueam) and Sue Rowley, “časnawam, the City Before the City,” which was on view at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, in 2015–16. The exhibition, dedicated to the original Musqueam city in Vancouver, explores this history not through settler-oriented object collection and display culture, but rather through a single darkened room dedicated to surround-sound audio featuring members of the Musqueam nation. The room, incorporating only chairs and a table covered with an oilcloth and several photographs, was enlivened through an immersive audio installation of a conversation between Musqueam leaders sharing memories in their language (fig. 12). Wilson called this installation sqaq’ip—gathered together, a title that evokes Amiotte’s own homage to community in When We Gathered. As Robinson argues, sqaq’ip entails an active kind of “listening in relation” that encompasses an idea of the hearing of, in addition to the bearing of, witness. Scholars Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas similarly describe the specific form of address that bearing witness enacts as one that “occurs only in a framework of relationality” between the “survivor-witness and the listener-witness.” Wilson also claims oral history’s role in securing communal cohesion and validation, and clarifies how witnessing is done in recognition of the fact that “knowledge, history, [and] life narratives are dispersed amongst many” and that “gathering together as individuals is akin to bringing together components of a history.”

The Lakhóta notion of witnessing is also aligned with the relational basis of listening. The maxim mitakuye oyásiŋ ("I am related to all things," or “all my relatives”) conveys the fundamental Lakhóta belief that all life forms, human and non-human, are endowed with personhood and united in kinship networks involving “reciprocal obligations, responsibilities, and mutual respect.” This mentality is reinforced by the symbolic valence of ears in Lakhóta rhetorical discourse, referenced with particular frequency in treaty councils. Those with “no ears” were those who refused to listen; conversely, those described as having “open,” or “pierced,” ears were understood as receptive to truth, reciprocity, and responsibility. This metaphor carried
none of their possessions from them,’ he said.”124 The abrogation of the Fort Laramie Treaty at the Little Bighorn thus signaled to Lakȟóta that U.S. soldiers had acted in bad faith, or “with no ears”—a willful unhearing perpetuated again through the ultimate rejection of Indigenous survivor testimony.125 Accordingly, Matȟó Nážiŋ shows in the muslin in The Met, U.S. soldiers splayed and tumbling from the battle register above, seemingly toward the encampments—“like so many grasshoppers.”126 With this visual intonation in mind, it is clear that the gatherings—and listenings—occasioned by Matȟó Nážiŋ’s testimonial muslins served to pierce settler-imposed silence.

The precision with which Matȟó Nážiŋ delineated his composition marks a final, revelatory index of the image’s verbal overtones. An examination of the muslin in The Met with infrared reflectography in 2021 uncovered very few corrections or underdrawings, thereby implying how well-practiced the artist was in both the battle’s depiction and diction—conducted again and again, across time, toward the maintenance of history, memory, and relationships (fig. 13). Amiotte speaks to the importance of rhythm and cadence in Lakȟóta oral tradition, emphasizing the crucial role of “repeated listenings and tellings” as an “actual ingredient in the process of absorbing the spoken message.” He concludes, “the capacity to remember what one was taught”

![Image](fig. 12)

Jordan Wilson (Musqueam). “sqəq’ip—gathered together,” 2015. 4-channel audio installation, 25 mins, featuring the voices of Howard E. Grant, Howard J. Grant, Larry Grant, Wendy Grant-John, Johnny Louis, and Mary Roberts. Installed in the exhibition “Cesnawem, the City Before the City” (2015–16), Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

![Image](fig. 13)

Infrared reflectogram of The Battle of the Little Bighorn (fig. 1). Infrared reflectography completed with an OSIRIS InGaAs near-infrared camera with a 6-element, 150 mm focal length, f/5.6-f/45 lens; 900-1700nm spectral response.
represents the “very foundation of the Lakȟóta way of life.” As family oral history relates, these muslins, or ózaŋ, served such an intergenerational, didactic purpose in the midst of their production. Though Mathó Nážiŋ did not explicitly refer to one of these muslins during the Neihardt interviews, the constellation of depicted incidents nevertheless corresponds with the recollection he verbally delivered there. In the syncopation of figures across this and other muslins, we can discern a kind of visual cadence that echoes the verbal framework of his eháŋni wičhówoyake. Indeed, if we allow an awareness of eháŋni wičhówoyake to animate our understanding of his art, we sense how a composition like this would have aided in visually mapping the stages of Mathó Nážiŋ’s testimony, enhancing his narration with additional layers of detail. To borrow Deloria’s resonant phrase, we might begin to see and hear this image, to attune ourselves to the multiple perceptive registers it activated.

OPENING OUR EARS
Mathó Nážiŋ’s ózaŋ prompted opportunities for bearing and receiving witness in kind, registering multi-vocal contributions at the level of form and function, and acting in contrast to the one-sided accumulation of information engaged by settler-artists. Moreover, the muslin’s materiality reinforced its purpose as a kind of gathering place: the textile’s broad expanse served to physically ground viewers together in space, just as its composition grounded their memories. Shielding, grounding, and fostering testimonial exchange in both image and story, the ózaŋ acts as a material and conceptual vehicle for Lakȟóta to bear, and hear, witness through eháŋni wičhówoyake—to the Greasy Grass, the Sun Dance, and other events considered important by Mathó Nážiŋ’s community. In this way, Mathó Nážiŋ’s image occasioned the recitation, reclamation, and preservation of Lakȟóta spiritual and cultural values amid colonialism and cultural genocide, carrying forth a message of resilience that rang throughout his community despite settler attempts to muffle it. This work, which the veteran-artist conceived to communicate across Native and non-Native space, invites settlers (like me—and perhaps other readers of this article and viewers of his work) to tune into its enduring frequencies. By cultivating an awareness of the vital oral vibrations indelible to Mathó Nážiŋ’s visual testimony through eháŋni wičhówoyake, by centering and honoring Lakȟóta language and ways of knowing—by opening our ears—we might work to better hear the sovereign histories these cultural belongings contain and the decolonial resistance they resound.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
I am grateful for the essential funding support provided by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Douglass Foundation, and the Buffalo Bill Center of the West. Isabelle Duvernois dedicated numerous hours to examining Mathó Nážiŋ’s muslin with me in The Met’s Paintings Conservation studio, and Evan Read captured incisive infrared reflectograms. I greatly appreciate their time, kindness, and expertise. In The American Wing, I thank Patricia Marroquin Norby, Sylvia Yount, and Stephanie Herdrich for their encouragement and support. I owe additional heartfelt thanks to my dissertation committee members, Michael Leja, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, and Janet Catherine Berlo, who have each informed this research in profound ways. I am indebted to Jessica L. Horton and Emily C. Burns for their vital feedback, as well as to friends and family who read drafts and provided essential input—thanks especially to Jane Robbins Mize, Laurel McLaughlin, Anne Strachan Cross, and Christine Garnier. Finally, I offer my deepest gratitude to Arthur Amiotte. His patient guidance and extraordinary generosity made this essay possible—I dedicate this work to him.

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NOTES

1 Unless quoted from an original source, the Lakȟóta orthography I use in this article follows the diacritical markings in Ulrich 2011. Wherever possible in this article, I use Lakȟóta or other Indigenous names, as opposed to their English translations. I have had the privilege to begin learning this language, Lakȟótiyapi, thanks to the important work of the Lakȟóta Language Consortium (https://lakota.org).

2 Hámalainen 2019, ix. Očhéthi Šakówiŋ (Seven Council Fires) refers to the confederation of seven Lakȟóta, Dakhóta, and Dakota (sometimes called Nakȟóta) oyáte (people or nation), who together compose what is also sometimes called the “Great Sioux Nation.” The term “Lakȟóta” encompasses the seven tribes of the westernmost, or Thítȟúŋw (Teton), band of Očhéthi Šakówiŋ; the Oglála (Oglala), Síiȟáŋ (Brulé), Húŋkápaŋ (Hunkpapa), Mnóȟówažu (Minneconjou), Itázipčho (Sans Arc), Oóhenunpa (Two Kettle), and Siháñsapa (Blackfeet).

3 DeMallie 1984, 184.

4 J. Neihardt 2014, 315n9. The wider Plains Wars involved a series of conflicts that took place from the early 1850s through the late 1870s between Native Americans and the United States over control of the Great Plains, the region between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. The Black Hills War is also sometimes called the “Great Sioux War of 1876.”

5 Buffalo Bill Center of the West, “Selected, Annotated Bibliography for the Battle of Many Names,” 2021, https://centerofthewest.org/research/mccracken-library/bibliographies/battle-of-many-names/. As such, Lakȟóta and English battle names will be used interchangeably throughout this essay to reflect this diversity of perspectives.


9 Rice 1989, 3; Gonzalez and Cook-Lynn 1999, 62.


11 Horton 2018, 84.


13 In addition to the work at The Met, Matȟó Nážiŋ created three other known images of the battle between 1891 and 1933, now held in collections at the Foundation for Preservation of American Indian Art and Culture in Chicago, the Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the Karl May Museum in Radebeul, Germany. Amiotte, Warren, and Berlo 2014, 23.

14 Hopkins 2016, 78; Robinson 2020, 71. Hopkins (2019) notes that the term “deep listening” is often associated with the late composer Pauline Oliveros; see Oliveros 2010.

15 Hopkins and Ramirez 2020.


17 Powell 1993, 81–82.

18 Lookingbill 2015, 21.


20 DeMallie 1993, 517.

21 Torrence 2018, 50.

22 Berlo 2000, 15.

23 Seven battalions commanded by Major Marcus Reno and Captain Frederick Benteen were also present at the battle. Unlike those under Custer’s command, their forces were able to hold out until reinforcements from General Alfred H. Terry’s column arrived the next day. See Fox 1997, 159.

24 Matȟó Nážiŋ would later isolate this incident in a drawing for Black Elk Speaks (J. Neihardt 1932).


26 For an in-depth description of the Animal Dreamers’ Dances along the Rosebud that Matȟó Nážiŋ pictures, see Powell 1993, 84–87.

27 Ibid., 87. See also Berlo 2006, 9.


29 Wright 2016, xxxi and 59.

30 Lookingbill 2015, 21; Wright 2016, 59.

31 Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper 1875, 127.


33 Ostler 2004, 60–61; Wright 2016, 86.

34 Wright 2016, xvii.


36 It is important to note, however, that many women among Plains nations were warriors, and a number also actively fought at the Little Bighorn, such as Tȟašína Máni (Moving Robe Woman). Hardorff 1997, 93; Estes 2019, 114.


38 Here, I am summarizing the testimony provided by Matȟó Nážiŋ to John Neihardt in 1931; DeMallie 1984, 184–89.

39 Berlo 1996, 35; Sagan 2017, 31. Horses hold deep cultural significance for Lakȟós; for an exploration of this rich relationship, see Horse Capture and Her Many Horses 2006.

40 Wright 2016, xiii.

41 Ibid., 63 and 55–56. For a longer history of Očhéthi Šakówiŋ resistance, see both Ostler 2004 and Estes 2019.

42 Burke 2019.


44 Ash-Milby 2007, 22.


47 Amiotte in discussion with the author, August 24, 2021.


49 Powell 1993, 81.

50 Burns 2019.

51 As Matȟó Nážiŋ related during the interview with Neihardt, “I felt that the white men would just simply wipe us out and there would be no Indian nation. I felt this when I was a [boy, old enough to realize].” DeMallie 1984, 106.


53 Quoted in Estes 2019, 78.

54 Ibid., 78–79.

55 Hansen 2013, 39.

56 Calloway 2014, 32.

57 Posthumus 2016, 278; Amiotte 2018, xvii.

58 Sprague 2004, 7.


62 Amiotte 1983, 12.

63 Greene 2012, 58.

64 Horton 2018, 84.


67 Photograph by Hilda Neihardt Petri, in the scrapbook of Enid Neihardt Fink, John G. Neihardt Trust, University of Missouri, Columbia.
These treaties included the Medicine Lodge Treaty (1867) and the Fort Laramie Treaty (1868); see Rosoff and Zeller 2011, 9. For a technical analysis of another nineteenth-century Plains drawing on muslin, see Pearlstein, Brostoff, and Trentelman 2009. In it, the authors note that from 1850 to 1930, bleached and unbleached cotton muslin was widely available throughout the United States in a variety of widths and weights.

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