

What Haunts the Land?
An Introduction to our Speakers
From the Indigenous Circle of Flagstaff
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One of the most popular TV series in America right now is called Yellowstone, now in its 5th blockbuster Kevin Costner-led season. I've been watching it since the first season and I'd describe it as a well-made, beautifully written, and historically sensitive soap opera centered on the largest contiguous ranch in America – the fictitious Yellowstone Dutton ranch, located in Paradise Valley near Bozeman, Montana.

Once its popularity was firmly established, the creator Taylor Sheridan launched two origins stories about the Duttons. The first is titled "1883," and it chronicles the dangerous journey of the original Dutton family from Tennessee to the West on the storied Oregon Trail. Encounters with Native Americans within this series vary. There are the expected raids on the wagon train we've come to see as the only response of Native people to settlers. But this is not accurate.

During their embattled trek, the Dutton daughter Elsa marries a Cherokee man named Sam who renames her "Lightning with Yellow Hair," and she promises to come back to him after the family arrives in Oregon. As they cross the Lakota land, her mother tells her to take off the beaded vest and fringed breeches that Sam gave to her, signifying that she is married to a Native man. This proves fatal for her. Riding in her gingham dress, she is shot in the liver with manure coated arrow. Her father decides they will ride as far as they can before she nears death and they stop in Montana.

There, the Crow people care for them and try to heal Elsa but she has developed sepsis. The chief is kind and non violent. He directs James along the river towards the Paradise Valley and tells him: " You may live on your land for seven generations and then, our people will rise up and take it from you." James responds, "– In 7 generations, you can have it back." But it doesn't go that way at all. In flashbacks from the current series, we do see James aiding the starving Crow tribe by giving them the freedom to hunt on his land (or, you could say, their land) and they form a peaceful coexistence.

Forty years later, we re-meet the Duttons in the second Yellowstone Origin story, entitled, "1923." The Dutton empire is an established and enormous cattle ranch. James' brother Jacob and his wife Cara have long been in charge of the ranch after the death of James and Margaret.

So far in this series (and we're only 4 episodes in), the ranch's battle is with sheep farmers and gilded age tycoons who want the land for mineral rights, not with Native people. We will see what transpires. Yet, there is a spirited and brave character named Teona Rainwater. She is a

teenaged girl who is being held against her will at a reeducation school run by Catholic missionaries. She suffers relentless beatings for not complying until she has her moment and suffocates the mother superior. As she does this, she says in her Native language – “I am the land. It is the land that has killed you.”

And she runs off into the night. The presiding Priest instructs his minions to go after her...God only knows why. Just let her go and be her true self. This is how terrorizing these schools were for decades for Native American youth, kidnapped from their reservations. Cora Maxx-Phillips, who will be speaking with us today, shared her own traumatizing experience with these school when she participated in our service called Being a Good Relative last year. I'm rooting for Teona.

The current series, focuses on the modern-day Duttons and sure enough, true to the prophecy, the Broken Rock reservation (a fictional stand in for the Crow reservation) is led by Teona's descendent Chairman Thomas Rainwater, who is a Harvard educated casino mogul who is determined to take back the Dutton land at any cost. One of the Dutton sons is married to a Native woman and she is understandably torn between her reservation community and her husband's family. The modern day Duttons are also in a battle with a powerful development company to keep them from acquiring land to build a massive resort and an airport. There's a spit fire of an environmental activist thrown into the mix for good measure.

If we live anywhere in America, we are living on haunted Native Land and the storyline of the Yellowstone saga is not far-fetched. Here in Flagstaff, we are living it today, on haunted land, especially as it pertains to the environmental battle over the Peaks, development, native sovereignty, and the reparations due to Native People on the reservations that surround us.

This morning, we are privileged to be in conversation with Cora Maxx-Phillips, Darrell Marks, and Robert Breunig, members of the Indigenous Circle of Flagstaff As Unitarian Universalists, as people of conscience, and especially in light of our adoption of the 8th principle, we are here to listen and to learn how we, can become true pro-active allies and partners with the Indigenous Circle of Flagstaff and the people they represent.

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