

Reid Homer

Professor Sieter

HIST 3300

December 12, 2023

## History on Native Terms: A Discussion of Winter Counts

### Introduction and Background

Keeping track of time is an incredibly common component of human society. While many native tribes kept track of time and significant historical events solely through oral history, several great plains tribes adopted a different method. These were called winter counts or *Waniyetu Wowapy* meaning “winters they drew”.<sup>1</sup> Winter counts appear to be a regional phenomenon, concentrated amongst the first nations of the great plains. the Lakota, Kiowa, and Blackfoot have all been recorded using winter counts, with Lakota tribes being the most prolific.<sup>2</sup>

Amongst the Lakota, winter counts were used in *tiyošpayes* or kinship groups.<sup>3</sup> Winter counts generally depict several years, with a single pictograph depicting the most important event between winters. In the case of the Kiowa, two pictographs were used to depict their years, one for the winter and one for the summer.<sup>4</sup> Winter counts appear to be an extension of oral histories, as a way for history keepers to document important events. They are not replacements for oral histories, but instead components of them. Moreover, winter counts acted as a way to

---

<sup>1</sup> Thornton, Russell. “A Rosebud Reservation Winter Count, circa 1751-1752 to 1886-1887.” *Ethnohistory* 49, no. 4 (2002): 723–41. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-49-4-723>.

<sup>2</sup> TOVIAS, Blanca. “The Right to Possess Memory: Winter Counts of the Blackfoot, 1830–1937.” *Ethnohistory* 61, no. 1 (2014): 99–122. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-2376096>.

<sup>3</sup> Thornton, Russell. “A Rosebud Reservation Winter Count, circa 1751-1752 to 1886-1887.” *Ethnohistory* 49, no. 4 (2002): 723–41. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-49-4-723>.

<sup>4</sup> Bickford, Deanna, and Pammla Petrucka. “Re-Visioning the Winter Count.” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 9, no. 4 (2016): 407–22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26372220>.

pass down important lessons to future generations.<sup>5</sup> the choice of the pictograph was a communal process. Generally, it appears that there was one tribal historian who kept track of history. When snowfall began, he consulted the tribal elders on what event was significant enough to represent the previous year.<sup>6</sup> This is also why oral history likely remained an important component. Years were only depicted with a single pictograph, to fully understand what happened during that time would require someone to explain its significance.

Pictographs were wholly unique, there was not an established canon of what symbols meant what, as each pictograph represented a unique and important event. In some cases, pictographs are simple to understand and only require minimal cultural understanding. The Lakota Rosebud Winter Count for instance depicts when the Lakota and Dakota made peace by portraying two tribal leaders coming together.<sup>7</sup> In other cases, the pictographs are more ambiguous. For instance, a Kiowa pictograph depicts a man sitting down with a tree growing from his head. This pictograph was described as “summer sitting with legs crossed and extended” and is meant to depict a drought that occurred during the year.<sup>8</sup> To people who exist outside this tribal kinship group, that would not make sense. However internally it does. This is an important component of winter counts, they are wholly based on the kinship group and their understanding of history. What event was important to a group may differ from another and how they portray any given event would also differ.

---

<sup>5</sup> Bickford, Deanna, and Pammla Petrucka. “Re-Visioning the Winter Count.” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 9, no. 4 (2016): 407–22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26372220>.

<sup>6</sup> Gallo, Kevin, and Eric Wood. “Historical Drought Events of the Great Plains Recorded by Native Americans.” *Great Plains Research* 25, no. 2 (2015): 151–58. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44685205>.

<sup>7</sup> Thornton, Russell. “A Rosebud Reservation Winter Count, circa 1751-1752 to 1886-1887.” *Ethnohistory* 49, no. 4 (2002): 723–41. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-49-4-723>.

<sup>8</sup> Gallo, Kevin, and Eric Wood. “Historical Drought Events of the Great Plains Recorded by Native Americans.” *Great Plains Research* 25, no. 2 (2015): 151–58. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44685205>

In most cases, Winter counts used Bison skin. This is another reason why they are unique to Great Plains tribes. It demonstrates how central bison are to Plain's tribe's way of life. The Siksika, a Blackfoot tribe, used bison for their clothing, food, and houses. It makes sense that their fur would also be used more unconventionally, such as in a winter count. On the bison skin, markings would be made with ink, colored washes, and later pencil.<sup>9</sup> Many winter counts suggest an element of trade, as the resources used could only come from other tribes or Europeans. This will be expanded upon later. Ultimately winter counts are a way to understand native history, and not just through its pictorial representations. The social conditions and the materials used are also central to understanding the winter count and the role it served in these communities.

## History

When Exactly winter begin to be used commonly is unknown. The earliest winter counts appeared during the mid-eighteenth century. Beforehand, history was passed down orally though there is some evidence of histories recorded through cave paintings.<sup>10</sup> During the late 1600s, Lakota tribes understood history through major historical events such as the death of important tribe members, climatic events, and treaties with other tribes.<sup>11</sup> Winter counts develop out of this tradition. The significant events remembered through oral traditions are now depicted on winter counts. The period winter counts represent can be quite long, over a hundred years in several cases. This process requires multiple keepers and instills ritual practices into familial groups. During the 1700s, winter counts usually depicted pictographs swirling out from one central point. This would change as natives got increasingly involved with Europeans

---

<sup>9</sup> Thornton, Russell. "A Rosebud Reservation Winter Count, circa 1751-1752 to 1886-1887." *Ethnohistory* 49, no. 4 (2002): 723–41. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-49-4-723>.

<sup>10</sup> "Waniyetu Wowapi (Winter Count)," South Dakota Public Broadcasting, accessed December 12, 2023

<sup>11</sup> Gallo, Kevin, and Eric Wood. "Historical Drought Events of the Great Plains Recorded by Native Americans." *Great Plains Research* 25, no. 2 (2015): 151. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44685205>.

Winter counts have only appeared post-European colonization. They often demonstrated how relationships with Europeans developed, and not only through pictographs. For instance, the Lakota Rosebud Reservation winter count, one of the earliest known winter counts, depicts the years 1751-1886. While most of the pictographs are drawn using ink, later ones are drawn using pencil, a resource only Europeans had access to.<sup>12</sup> This shift in materials suggests a new trading relationship with Europeans. It was not just the Rosebud Winter count, by the 1800s, many winter count keepers adopted commercial pigments, watercolors, pencils, colored pencils, and paper when creating winter count.<sup>13</sup> How winter counts looked also shifted. Some, such as the Battiste Good Winter count, portrayed history going from left to right and in neat lines. While pictographs were still used, European dates were paired with them.<sup>14</sup> Battiste created his winter count in 1880, around the time that winter counts began to die out. What is also interesting about his work is that his count goes back to 900, portraying significant mythological events in the history of the Dakota people. Battiste's winter count is not just a tool to document historical events but also a way to physically represent the culture of the Dakota people. Considering that by the 1880s, Anglo Americans were increasingly pushing into the Dakotas, destroying native way of life along the way, preserving these myths physically is important. After the 1880s, winter counts appeared less. Bison populations had been decimated, and in many cases such as with the Siksika, the only way to survive was to adapt to Anglo-American ways of life.<sup>15</sup> this meant that winter counts disappeared.

---

<sup>12</sup> Thornton, Russell. "A Rosebud Reservation Winter Count, circa 1751-1752 to 1886-1887." *Ethnohistory* 49, no. 4 (2002): 723-41. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-49-4-723>.

<sup>13</sup> Pearlstein, Ellen, Lynn Brostoff, and Karen Trentelman. "A Technical Study of the Rosebud Winter Count." *Plains Anthropologist* 54, no. 209 (2009): 3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25671031>.

<sup>14</sup> Battiste Good "Winter Count," 1880, The Smithsonian. <https://www.si.edu/object/archives/components/sova-naa-ms2372-ref1137>

<sup>15</sup> TOVIAS, Blanca. "The Right to Possess Memory: Winter Counts of the Blackfoot, 1830-1937." *Ethnohistory* 61, no. 1 (2014): 99-122. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-2376096>.

However, during the twentieth century, Siksika and other native tribes sought to revitalize their traditions, including the winter count.<sup>16</sup> In this moment winter count primarily served as a way to maintain native identity in the face of Anglo-American oppression. In particular, the deeds of their great warriors were documented, perhaps as a form of protest demonstrating they are always willing to fight. Nonetheless, many European elements were combined into these new winter counts, including written language. This movement would also be furthered by academic institutions seeking to preserve natives as they believed they were all dying off. While this narrative is not true and quite harmful, it still led to positive outcomes for the Siksika and the preservation of their history. Ethnographers traveled to these groups to preserve winter counts through photography.<sup>17</sup> The only reason the Rosebud winter count can be studied is because an ethnographer took photographed it.<sup>18</sup> after this point, winter shifted to emphasize cultural history and identity. The Siksika and other tribes incorporated written language to preserve oral histories that could not be represented through pictographs. Another example of maintaining cultural history is the Carnegie Winter Count, which was created in the 1990s, and depicts the past 125 years of Lakota history.<sup>19</sup>

As time went on, winter counts continued to be a cultural and sentimental component of modern tribes. Lakota Tribal elders recently gave Hehakapa Mahto or Elk bear the position of history keeper. Obviously, in the twenty-first century, there are plenty of ways of preserving history more rigorously than winter counts. However, counts are culturally significant and allow

---

<sup>16</sup> TOVIAS, Blanca. "The Right to Possess Memory: Winter Counts of the Blackfoot, 1830–1937." *Ethnohistory* 61, no. 1 (2014): 99–122. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-2376096>.

<sup>17</sup> TOVIAS, Blanca. "The Right to Possess Memory: Winter Counts of the Blackfoot, 1830–1937." *Ethnohistory* 61, no. 1 (2014): 99–122. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-2376096>.

<sup>18</sup> Thornton, Russell. "A Rosebud Reservation Winter Count, circa 1751-1752 to 1886-1887." *Ethnohistory* 49, no. 4 (2002): 723–41. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-49-4-723>.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Red Owl Haukaas, M.D. *Sicangu (Brulé) Lakota/Creole*, 1995  
Brain-tanned deer (*Odocoileus* sp.) hide, ink, commercial paint, nylon sinew; L 123.0 x W 95.7 cm

native groups to maintain their hold on the historical narrative. Not through Anglo-American means, but through their own. Hehakapa Mahto discusses how winter counts are but one way the Lakota hold on to their past. Powwows are another, where young and old gather together to discuss the history of their people. combined with winter counts, the Lakota and other tribes can tell their history on their own terms.<sup>20</sup> Winter counts went from a way to simply record history to a way to maintain identity in the face of European colonization. As native groups seek out traditions, it is likely other practices such as winter counts will become increasingly common.

### **Analysis**

For this section of the project, I will analyze a winter count. While it can be difficult to correctly interpret a winter count without oral tradition, I will draw upon other winter counts that have been analyzed to fill in the gap. Considering that winter counts can span upwards of a hundred years, I will not be analyzing every pictograph. Instead, I will be focusing on ten. I will be analyzing a winter count from the Lakota tribe created during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

---

<sup>20</sup> Delwin Fiddler, *Winter counts then and now*. Native Hope, 2021. <https://blog.nativehope.org/winter-count-then-and-now>



*Figure 1*<sup>21</sup>

Figuring out the exact years these pictographs are meant to represent is difficult. According to the Smithsonian, this was created from 1798-1906, though how accurate that is difficult to ascertain. Moreover, exactly how this is supposed to be read is also difficult to determine. I will be reading left to right top to bottom, a characteristic later winter counts will adopt. However, it is possible this is not the correct way to read it, but this exercise is more interested in discussing the pictographs and what they mean as opposed to discussing the broader history represented in the winter count.



This is the first pictograph. This object is a calumet or ceremonial pipe. It appears amongst other plain tribes such as the Dakota. On one of their winter counts, this object represents a ceremonial dance before a war.<sup>22</sup> This object also appears on the

<sup>21</sup> "Lakota Winter Count." The Smithsonian

<sup>22</sup> Henderson, Millicent. "A Comparison of the Winter Count of Charging Thunder with Recorded Winter Counts." Order No. EP22378, University of Wyoming, 1952.  
<http://proxy.libraries.smu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/comparison-winter-count-charging-thunder-with/docview/302036395/se-2>.

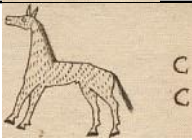
Lone dog winter count, one of the most reproduced winter counts.<sup>23</sup> As this is the same object, it likely served a similar purpose. This may represent that during this year, the Lakota went to war.



This pictograph depicts a European or Anglo American. When winter counts depicted Europeans, they usually did it by portraying them in traditional European clothing. In particular, the hat appears many times such as in The Lone Dog Winter Count. What exactly this means is ambiguous, just that some relationship was established between this Lakota group and Europeans. It could mean trade, or it could be that a European lived among them like a similar pictograph on the aforementioned Dakota winter count<sup>24</sup>



This pictograph depicts an indigenous woman carrying a bucket. This one is a bit more ambiguous, often when Winter Counts depicted a single figure, it was an important person in their history as opposed to an important event. Despite women not being history keepers they did appear on winter counts, such as one made among the Kiowa.<sup>25</sup>



This pictograph depicts a horse with two horseshoes next to it. A similar image is seen on the Lone Dog winter count.<sup>26</sup> This may represent a successful raid on a nearby tribe, and the amount of horseshoes represents the amount of horses stolen. This is the case on a Dakota winter count.<sup>27</sup> How the horse's fur is drawn may also signify what tribe it was stolen from

this pictograph depicts eight men bleeding from their necks. This may symbolize the amount of men lost in a war. This was a common depiction on winter counts, as remembering those who were lost was important, though it would usually be done through tally marks<sup>28</sup>



This depicts a native man with two heads above his. Another ambiguous image, it is likely this represents an important figure in the community and something they did. It could also represent a birth or a marriage, however, similar images do not appear on many winter counts

this depicts two men fighting one another. Depicting quarrels and brawls on winter counts was very common. The Dakota Winter Count depicts several brawls and those who died in them<sup>29</sup>. this is likely occupying a similar function. The families or men who participated would be remembered through oral tradition. This is likely not symbolizing a war as that was usually through the depictions of the dead, pictures of men with bows, or the calumet

This pictograph depicts a horse. Usually, when horses were depicted they symbolized a horse raid. However sometimes when an animal was depicted it represented a specific person such as in the Carnegie winter count which uses a bear to represent a tribal leader named Swift Bear.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Lone Dog, "Lone Dog Winter Count", the Smithsonian

<sup>24</sup> Henderson, Millicent. "A Comparison of the Winter Count of Charging Thunder with Recorded Winter Counts." Order No. EP22378, University of Wyoming, 1952. 30

<sup>25</sup> "Kiowa Winter Count", the Smithsonian

<https://lammuseum.wfu.edu/2022/01/plains-indian-tribes-create-a-winter-count/>

<sup>26</sup> Lone Dog, "Lone Dog Winter Count", the Smithsonian

<sup>27</sup> Henderson, Millicent. "A Comparison of the Winter Count of Charging Thunder with Recorded Winter Counts." Order No. EP22378, University of Wyoming, 1952. 33

<sup>28</sup> Henderson, Millicent. "A Comparison of the Winter Count of Charging Thunder with Recorded Winter Counts." Order No. EP22378, University of Wyoming, 1952.

<sup>29</sup> Henderson, Millicent. "A Comparison of the Winter Count of Charging Thunder with Recorded Winter Counts." Order No. EP22378, University of Wyoming, 1952.

<sup>30</sup> Red Owl Haukaas, M.D. Sicangu (Brulé) Lakota/Creole, 1995 Brain-tanned deer (*Odocoileus* sp.) hide, ink, commercial paint, nylon sinew; L 123.0 x W 95.7 cm



This depicts a native man covered in spots. This was a very common depiction on winter counts. The Lone Dog, Dakota, and Battiste Good winter Count all depict events like this. It is meant to symbolize a disease that swept through the tribe <sup>31</sup>
--

This picture depicts a teepee with a bird on it. this could mean an attack occurred on their people as is seen in the Dakota winter count. <sup>32</sup> It could also mean that land was taken from them by other tribes or the US government, as a similar pictograph symbolizes this on the Carnegie winter count. <sup>33</sup>
---

The analysis of this winter count reveals how pictographs can be used to remember history. But more important is how oral traditions remain a necessary component of this study. I have made educated guesses on what each of these pictographs means based on the study of other winter counts. However, as familial groups differed they may have used symbols differently. Though many tribes do share similar images. The calumet for instance is prevalent amongst many Dakota tribes and its symbolic meaning is shared.

Another issue is that few winter counts have been thoroughly dissected and published. The Dakota winter count has been, and the hundred or so symbols on it have been analyzed. The same goes for the Carnegie winter count. However, in most cases, a thorough analysis of individual winter counts has not been published opening this area up for more academic discussion.

### **Personal Project**

For this component of the project, I made my own winter count. I decided that the best thing to focus on was the last 20 years of native American history. A lot of people are under the impression that native people have disappeared, but that is not true. Native history in the past twenty years has been unexplored, and I struggled to find significant events from each year to

---

<sup>31</sup> Henderson, Millicent. "A Comparison of the Winter Count of Charging Thunder with Recorded Winter Counts." Order No. EP22378, University of Wyoming, 1952. 18

<sup>32</sup> Henderson, Millicent. "A Comparison of the Winter Count of Charging Thunder with Recorded Winter Counts." Order No. EP22378, University of Wyoming, 1952. 18

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Red Owl Haukaas, M.D. *Sicangu (Brulé) Lakota/Creole*, 1995  
Brain-tanned deer (*Odocoileus* sp.) hide, ink, commercial paint, nylon sinew; L 123.0 x W 95.7 cm

depict. I also focused on the entirety of the native American experience and not just an individual tribe. This flattens the diversity of native Americans, but I felt like it would be inappropriate for me to focus on one tribe and use this sacred record-keeping technique to discuss their history. I think keeping it as broad as possible was the best way to go. I also made sure to draw upon other native pictographs when I created my own, though some events had no pictographic reference point. This piece also spirals out like the Lone Dog Winter count. It begins in the year 1999 and goes to 2019.

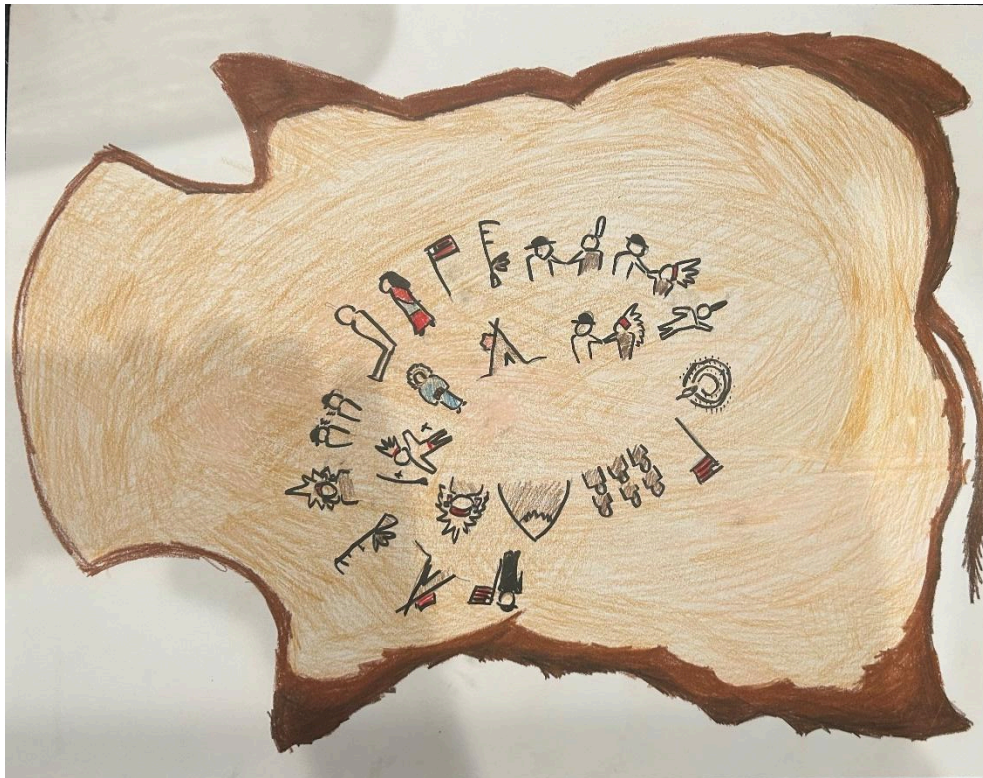


Figure 2

-1999- Europeans shake hands with a native chief: Bill Clinton visits Pine Ridge reservation – draws upon other depictions of natives and Europeans coming to an agreement

-2000 – teepee surrounded by land: US government returns 84,000 acres to the Ute tribe. In many cases, a teepee symbolizes the removal of land or an attack on a native community. I wanted to reverse it in this case

-2001-Inuit figure: Alaskan tribes are recognized. This was a bit more difficult to depict, so I just focused on drawing the distinct outfits of the Inuit people. Oftentimes times winter counts had signifiers of tribes that people would recognize.

-2002 – Chickasaw man among the stars: Herrington John Bennet of the Chickasaw nation goes to space. This is another one that there is no reference for, though stars are seen in many winter counts so I felt like it was appropriate

-2003 – native chief: famous native actor Traynor Ora Halftown dies. The death of significant people is often marked on winter counts, so I wanted to make sure I incorporated them into this piece.

-2004 – mountain peak: protect the peaks movement. Considering that native peoples are at the forefront of environmental activism I wanted to include that into this piece. Winter counts also often use symbols to represent broader ideas, so I felt like a mountain was appropriate

-2005 – several native people: recorded increase in native population. Many winter counts depict the death of their people, but I wanted to include something about how in recent years the amount of native people has been increasing

-2006 – American flag: Esther Martinez Native American Language Preservation Act is passed. In many cases, US legislation that affects natives is depicted through an American flag. This is seen on the Carnegie winter count. Usually, this is a bad thing, but in recent years, legislation towards native people has been positive.

-2007 – concentric circles with dots around a feather: UN rights to indigenous people. this one is meant to represent the UN Council and their declaration in favor of indigenous rights. Many winter counts depict a gathering of people in large concentric circles as seen in the Lone dog winter count.

-2008 – native figure waving: Native American Heritage Day is declared. Another event that is difficult to depict but I wanted to focus on the people element of the declaration.

-2009 – European shaking hands with native: Obama signs Native American apology resolution. Similar principle to the 1999 pictograph

-2010 - European shaking hands with native: Obama signs the Claim Resolution Act.

-2011 – Calumet: keystone pipeline begins construction at the expense of native people. this is meant to symbolize how natives are making war with private companies seeking to exploit their land.

-2012 – American flag: Piscataway Conoy and the Piscataway Indian nation are the first tribes recognized by Maryland

-2013 – native woman: Obama signs Vawa empowering tribes to protect native women. Considering that the disappearance of native women is an issue, I wanted to depict some of the ways we made progress in resolving it. Nonetheless, we still have a long way to go when resolving this issue.

-2014 – native figure sitting down: native peoples still struggling in poverty. While many had recovered from the recent economic collapse, a report was released showing natives were hit the

hardest and struggled to recover. This is meant to draw upon similar images to the sitting man in the Kiowa count that represented a drought.

-2015- two Europeans shouting at each other: broad discussions of native history. This is meant to show when discussions of native history appeared, and how native people were often left out

-2016 – native chieftain: Joe Medicine Crow, an important Crow activist passes away.

-2017 – Calumet: opposition and activism in the face of the Dakota access pipeline

-2018 – Teepee surrounded by land – ancestral land is returned to the Ponca nation

-2019 – European in all black by a flag – Trump declares that November is no longer native heritage month and instead national American Founders Month.

This part of the project was a lot of fun and taught me a lot about recent native history that I knew little about. It also demonstrated how little resources there are to know more about native history from a native perspective.

### **Conclusion and Thoughts**

Native history has been told by Europeans for Europeans for a long time. Winter counts are one of the ways that natives can tell their history on their terms. It forces us to engage with their culture and traditions. It lets us learn what is important to them and demonstrates how tribes have changed over time. However thorough dissection of these winter counts is still lacking. Most of the resources regarding them are middle school art projects. Considering the amount of academic rigor required to engage with them, it makes sense that more studies have not been conducted. I know this area is ripe for further discussion

In regards to me and how I feel, this was a very interesting project to engage with. One of the biggest questions I had going in was about specifically pictographs, how they changed over time, and cross-cultural influence. I struggled to answer this adequately, as what I found is that winter counts are deeply personal to familial groups. While some pictographs are shared between tribes, how exactly they manifest and what their meanings are differs. This is an area of study

that requires discussion with tribes. I would especially be interested in learning what modern winter counts look like, and what tribal groups choose to depict.