Dev Report #7

The Native Land app identifies that Lincoln, NE covers land that once belonged to both the Otoe and Pawnee tribes (“Native Lands” 2018). UNL, where the crux our COVID-19 work has taken place so far, is specifically on the Pawnee portion of this land. Though UNL likes to tout its long history as a university, the land has a deeper history than that.

According to NebraskaStudies.org, the Pawnee tribe was one of the earliest recorded tribes on European historical record. They lived in earth lodge villages and roamed the state to hunt (“The Pawnee and the Lakota Sioux” 2020, para 1). Although they remained the most populous tribe in Nebraska for many years, in the 1800s their fortunes changed due to spread of diseases and raids from the Lakota Sioux tribes. As such, the Pawnee, Lakota, and Otoe tribes had similar histories and paths when it came to their land, especially when it came to losing their land (“The Pawnee and the Lakota Sioux” 2020, para 9).

Tribal Connections notes that the land where UNL currently resides, now a mishmash of Pawnee, Otoe, and Lakota Sioux lands, was relinquished during Cession 314 (“U.S. Forest Service, Federal and Indian Lands and Lands Cession Viewer” 2020). While cession implies a kind of treaty, the hundreds of cessions were actually “a pattern of Indian displacement and land appropriation that continued until the twentieth century” (“Treaty Boundaries and Cessions” 2020). By the 1860s, the Pawnee Tribe was officially relocated to an Indian Territory that eventually became Oklahoma (“The Pawnee and the Lakota Sioux” 2020, para 9).

After this, the history gets familiar. The University of Nebraska was founded in 1869, covering just four blocks of space. The first buildings were all built within a few years. All of them eventually fell victim to the harsh conditions of the open plains, with only the library (now, the College of Architecture) being the only building to survive the original campus. In 1909, the campus expanded beyond its original four blocks, with a slew of new buildings. This pattern followed for the for the next decade (“History: 1869- Present” 2020). Andrews Hall, where most of my pictures for the first portion of this project were taken, was built in 1928, as a combination hall for studies in Dentistry, Foreign Languages, and English (“Andrews Hall” 2020). Today, it belongs only to the English Department.

Of course, this does not capture the full history of the land, as to do that would be a herculean task. Right now, Andrews Hall is filled with empty rooms and signs about wearing masks, washing your hands, and staying six feet apart. I’m sure that idea of these COVID19 markers will surely become impossible to imagine for future peoples just as much it’s impossible for me to imagine the dentistry clinic with “42 chairs” on the third floor in the 1920s (“Andrews Hall” 2020). But as Risam (2020) argues, we need to ask ourselves about the material conditions of the land where our work is produced, about the histories that made today possible. Andrews Halls and UNL were once empty space, ready for a sprawling university to be built on. Before that, it was home to the Pawnee peoples and all their traditions. And before that, a history this essay hasn’t covered, some non-human thing emerging on the land, saying, ‘I am here.’

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