

SOUNDING WESTERN
Frontier Aurality, Tourism, and Heritage Production in South Dakota's Black Hills
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This dissertation explores how heritage experiences are made and managed through sound in one of the most sacred, contested, and popular tourist regions in the United States. Located in western South Dakota, the Black Hills are home to Mount Rushmore and Crazy Horse Memorials, the town of Deadwood, the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, and the site of Wounded Knee, an enduring symbol of cultural genocide. Tourism is big business in South Dakota, and like elsewhere in the American West, it relies upon producing experiences that draw heavily from frontier histories and mythologies. Based on a production-centered sound ethnography conducted over four summers and drawing on the approaches of sound studies, media and affect theory, and historical and cultural analysis, this dissertation argues that the aural modes used to produce frontier experience in the region are the most crucial and under theorized aspects of tourist production.

The dissertation traces frontier and tourist myths to a shared belief in the material emplacement of future transformation, arguing that tourism is an extractive industry built upon the methods and infrastructures of earlier resource-based industries. It outlines a conceptual frame for understanding how sound, noise, and silence are used to produce frontier experience and showing how aural relations between silent nature, noisy technology, and sounded culture are naturalized. It investigates the forms of hearing, listening, and sound making that work to solidify the region as an experiential artifact of the originary conquest of the American West. Finally, it explores how regional Lakota and non-Lakota producers negotiate frontier aural productions and politics. Ultimately, this dissertation articulates how audibility is constructed along racial lines as a form of heritage. Through the aural stances enacted at tourist venues in the Black Hills, Lakota peoples and lands are consistently exploited and colonized. They are protected as valuable, spiritual silences and made inaudible by the noise and sound of technological processes. These processes, in turn, shape non-natives as active participants in sounded culture. This dissertation thus argues that frontier aural productions have profound consequences for the future cultural, political, and economic sovereignty of Lakota peoples.