Long before Christopher Columbus famously set foot in North America in 1492, before Europeans flocked to the ‘New World,’ before the United States of America became one under “We the People”, Native Americans had already been living on the continent for as long as 13,000-40,000 years, flourishing (Wells). With the arrival of colonists, Native Americans were forced into slavery and siphoned off onto small tracts of land called reservations. Motivated by God, gold, and glory, European colonists set out to convert Native Americans, amass great amounts of wealth, and augment their respective legacies and nations. Colonialism was and is a practice centered on assimilation and superiority. Colonialism of old, however, did not die with ‘New World’ explorers; it lived on in new forms, a dark, ever-present shadow. Colonialism focuses on the colonists rather than those colonized; it is a practice predicated solely upon the benefit of the ‘conquerors’. Those being colonized are seen as often sub-human or inferior to the ‘superior’ colonists. The supremacy of colonists is an underlying warrant in all colonialist acts. European Christian colonists arrived in the Americas clinging to bigoted prejudices, Native Americans, ‘savages’ and the Europeans, ‘saintlike’. This dichotomy, encapsulating one’s worth in terms of morality, socioeconomic status, and justified inferiority, formed the core of the colonialist mentality.
dichotomous, extreme understanding bolstered imperialism's moral grounding and justified the actions of the colonists. Due to these Christians' perception of their own superiority over the Native Americans, evangelists converted large populations of indigenous people often at gunpoint or against their will. Later, conversion and Christianization policies became so established in the United States that the underlying warrant of colonialism became law, physically and ideologically, even when colonialism was no longer viewed positively. Mission trips are based on the premise of Christian love and service to one another — they are not inherently assimilatory. However, when language that depicts a religiocentric hierarchy is used, it distorts the aim, method, and goal of the mission. These kinds of short-term mission trips rely on the warrant of Christian supremacy to advertise for trips and to refer to, classify, and describe Native Americans. Modern evangelism and conversion-based short term mission trips on Native American reservations extend and maintain the practice of colonialism.

The advertisement of short-term mission trips to reservations perpetuates colonialis mentalities in their romanticized descriptions of landscape and people. Next Step Ministries, a nonprofit Christian organization, describes Pine Ridge, South Dakota, as “a beautiful stretch of rolling hills and endless skies” (Pine). In the very first sentence of its description of the reservation, Next Step Ministries emphasizes the physical beauty of the land within the stereotypical framework normally used to describe western America. This advertisement refers to an idealized view of the Great Plains to immediately hook and entice potential missionaries. By introducing the mission with an idyllic physical description, the reservation becomes a vacation-like destination. This approach to volunteerism, commonly called voluntourism, reorients trips with the focus on the missionaries or Christians themselves rather than those affected by the service. These mission trips appeal to Christians on a superficial, aesthetics-driven level, with no mention of actual mission in the entire first line. Experience Mission, another nonprofit Christian organization, tells potential missionaries that “your team will have a truly unique, cross-cultural experience” in the first paragraph of its description of the mission trip to the Navajo Reservation (Christian Mission Trips). The constant use of the second-person pronoun ‘you’ highlights the Christians’ personal role and experience. Resembling a vacation description, recreational time of the ‘vacationer’ is emphasized. Additionally, the advertising of a ‘cross-cultural experience’ objectifies and tokenizes the Navajo culture; it is a desired commodity and novelty for Christians to seek out (Christian Mission Trips). The description goes on to explain that “you’ll work hard but also have the time to slow down, sit around the fire, and build relationships on this Native American mission trip” (Christian Mission Trips). Focusing almost exclusively on the experience of the Christians, the ‘hard work’ on the reservation is secondary to the value of trip for the potential missionaries. Through glamorized, vacation-like descriptions of Native American reservations, modern Christian missionaries preserve colonialis sentiments of superiority.

The packaging of advertisements for Evangelical Christian short term mission trips mirrors ‘New World’ colonial discourse. The final sentence of the Experience Mission description asks “will you boldly go to little-known corners of the desert to share the love of Jesus?” (Christian Mission Trips). Rhetorically, the epithet, ‘little-known’ mimics the language of colonists; Columbus ‘discovered’ America, despite the approximately fifty million people already inhabiting the area (Taylor). Inherently, if there are people living in an area, that location is not ‘little-known.’ That area may be ‘little-known’ to the Christians who have never been to that place, but their experience does not define the location. This description negates the experiences of the native Navajo in favor of the foreign Christians.

Detached descriptions of Native American culture and behavior by Christians in modern and colonial times dehumanize indigenous people. In a 1997 article, Pastor Mike Calvin explained that “the Natives [are] very sociable and they enjoy fellowship with one another” (Calvin) and in 1736 Philipp Georg Friedrich von Reck said that, “they are very courteous, friendly, and hospitable towards strangers… their table is open to everyone, and one can sit at it uninvited” (Hvidt 47). Almost identical in meaning, this narrative illustrates a linguistic and ideological continuity throughout time and contexts in reference to Native Americans. The use of the third person, plural, exclusive pronoun ‘they’ distances the two parties, Christian and indigenous. ‘They’ are independent of each other. Additionally, sociability is a common, shared human quality, yet the detached description of it strips Native Americans of their humanity. If their humanity has to be described and included, then the logical assumption is that it was not taken for granted. Furthermore, its not just the phrasing that weds these quotes, but the innate meaning. Separated by 261 years and supposed ‘progress’, they reveal a true lack of societal development.

The labelling of Native Americans as ‘lost souls’ supports a Christian religiocentric world view in accordance with that
of the colonists. In the 2006 article *Evangelizing the Navajo*, Bobby Ross Jr. characterizes the Navajo as “250,000 lost souls in need of Jesus” (Ross). Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘lost’ as meaning “(of the soul) damned” (lost). The identification of Native Americans as ‘lost’ implies a moral hierarchy with Christians at the top; non-Christian Native Americans, by virtue of not being Christians, are damned. In accordance with colonialist values, non-Christians need to be fixed. Religiocentrism has a bifactorial structure, with positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes (Anthony). In-grouping and out-grouping can basically be simplified down to inclusion, the in-group, and exclusion, the out-group, and a heightened identity that conforms to the characteristics of the in-group. Religious ingroup out-grouping is not new; in 1728, William Byrd called the Native Americans “poor heathens” (Byrd 375).

Semantically, ‘heathen’ and ‘lost’ both affirm religious in-grouping and out-grouping. Both suggest that those who do not identify as Christian are ‘damned’ (lost) or “unenlightened” (heathen); they are members of the outgroup.

Labelling one group as inherently insufficient without Christianity increases the difficulty of transcending these arbitrary social divisions. Splintering into isolated faction, the implicit humanity in both groups is lost, along with the ability to empathize beyond differences. This is evident in colonial perspectives on indigenous peoples; Jonas Michaëlius, in 1628, called Native Americans “entirely savage and wild” (Michaëlius 92). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘savage’ refers to an ‘untamed animal,’ effectively removing all human qualities from these people and replacing them with the farthest thing from humanity, animality (savage). Perspectives towards Native Americans have not changed substantially over time if ideologically the terms used to describe them have not changed.

Colonialist perspectives on indigenous people remain: reliocentrism psychologically removes the ingroup, Christians, from the outgroup, Native Americans, and leads to dehumanization.

The dichotomy of ‘saved’ versus ‘unsaved’ in evangelist vocabulary enables Christian superiority and validates the need for Christian intervention and colonialism. Referring to the Native Americans as “the unsaved native people” immediately places the ‘saved’ missionaries in a position of power and privilege (Calvin). Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘saved’ as “to preserve (a person, a soul, etc.) from damnation; to redeem from sin, bring salvation to” (saved). If Christian missionaries ‘redeem’ the sins of Native Americans, they hold immense, almost god-like power. “The White Man’s Burden” by Rudyard Kipling, in 1898, encapsulates colonial feelings of parental obligation to “half-devil and half-child” native people (The White Man’s Burden). Kipling calls for his audience to “take up the White Man’s Burden- send forth the best of ye breed- go bind your sons to exile/ to serve your captives’ needs.” He sets apart white people as a superior race, with ‘breed’ suggesting scientific truth as it is often used in biology with a taxonomic, animal basis (The White Man’s Burden). He charges his readers with “[serving] your captives’ needs;” his use of imperatives, ‘take’ and ‘go’ empower white people and authorize their superiority over the ‘captives’ (The White Man’s Burden). The legitimization of superiority in Rudyard’s 1898 poem is not unlike the implications of the modern usage of ‘saved’ in evangelism. Both modern conversion-based Christianity and ‘The White Man’s Burden’ separate people into categories associated with power and inherent dominance. Both place Christians or white people in an ultimate position at the top of a strict social strata. Both obligate the individuals at the top to ‘save’ or ‘serve’ those at the perceived bottom of the ladder. Both suggest that being positioned at the top of this ladder gives enough authority to ‘save’ those at the bottom. The use of the word ‘save’ in modern evangelist vocabulary mirrors the assumption of superiority in the imperative-driven, stratifying language of “The White Man’s Burden,” a clear extension of colonialism.

The classification of Native Americans as an ‘unreached peoples group’ generalizes religious minorities and calls for the assimilation of these subjugated groups into a Christian European society. By labelling Native Americans as “unreached” (Everett) or “forgotten peoples” (Lennox), missionaries unrightfully generalize diverse and independent groups of people. ‘Unreached’ denotes a quantifiable degree of ‘reachedness,’ fundamentally contrary to its vague definition. Within missionary communities, there is confusion over whether ‘reached’ means simply exposed to Christianity, thoroughly converted, or actively converting others (Lennox). Without a set, universal definition, the exact degree of ‘reachedness’ can never be quantified. According to the Joshua Project, a widely-cited Christian organization dedicated to compiling ‘data’ on ‘unreached peoples groups,’ “numbers [on their website] should be considered a ‘ballpark’” (Data Sources). In this side note, Joshua Project admits that data cannot be calculated for appraising the ‘reachedness’ of group. However, it creates interactive maps of the world with different colored dots representing degrees of ‘reachedness,’ red being ‘unreached’ and green being ‘significantly reached’ (see Appendix A) (Google Maps). This black-and-white, concrete categorization, without legitimate data, does not provide fidelity of practice. Additionally, there is once again an imperative placed upon Christians to ‘reach’ the ‘unreached;’ the
thoughtful connections with locals, the purpose of the mission steers away from service. For a trip to be purposeful, regardless of the duration of the mission trip, training must be appropriate. Therefore, without careful training and cultural sensitivity training, these missionaries lack the ability to truly resonate with the population they aim to help.

solutions and meaningful learning experiences” according to some critics (Ver Beek 478). Without proper, extensive local language, are culturally inappropriate and insensitive, and focus on short-term fixes rather than long-term solutions. Of course, this is dependent on individual trips, but the core presumption remains. Once on reservations, lodging and missionary campsites cost more; Experience Mission’s Western Navajo Reservation trip costs $430–$437 per person (Christian Mission Trips), Next Step Ministry’s Pine Ridge Reservation trip costs $419 per person (Pine), and these trips simply exemplify the high average costs of short-term mission trips. Logistically, there is a cut-off for those who can participate; therefore low-income people cannot afford mission trips without considerable aid to presumably help other low-income people. On the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, the poverty rate was at a staggering 43% in 2014, while the national average was, in the same year, at 15% (Krogstad). If colonialism is predicated on an imbalance of power, and the rich often consolidate the power in an American capitalist society, then middle-class to upper-class Christians helping some of the poorest groups in the United States indicates a clear imbalance of power. For North-American Christians, this disparity comes with guilt and with guilt, the need to placate and lessen this sentiment (Ver Beek 478). Furthermore, this socioeconomic difference can lead to a deliberate exploitation so that North Americans can feel “thankful” for their elevated station (Ver Beek 486). Poverty tourism, likevoltourism, realigns the focuses of altruistic mission trips. Poverty tourism is based off the systematic exploitation of underdeveloped regions for the entertainment of upper class individuals. Purpose is essential in this situation; a significant amount of missionaries go to reservations for themselves. Their mission is widely internal: to feel less guilty, to work on their own faith, to feel better about their own socioeconomic standing.

Conversion-driven theology, not isolated to a single denomination, pervades the theology of the greater Christian body in its centrality, affirming the religious drive behind colonialism. An overwhelming majority of mission camps advertised on Native American reservations are interdenominational, meaning they do not identify theologically with one denomination, or a sect within Christianity. The lack of specificity denomination-wise opens mission camps on reservations to a wide array of Christians with different theological beliefs. Advertising that “we bring hope to the Native American nation!” religiocentric sentiments invoke a superior-group mentality, inclusive of all Christians in their ability to ‘help’ all Native Americans (Native Ministry). In the case of Next Step Ministries, the interdenominationalism of its camp leads to “[partnerships] with hundreds of churches from all different denominations on our mission trips,” illustrating the prevalence of this theology (Pine). Conversion- driven mission is not limited to a single denomination, and due to this, it becomes a trait of Christianity in general. While some denominations may reject it, Christian religiocentrism, when applied to modern conversion of Native Americans, is a large component of interdenominational camps.

The fundamental design of short-term mission trips for teenagers fails to impact communities in a sustainable fashion, with the focus oriented on the experience of Christian teenagers participating. Many mission trips to reservations last a week or two and are set up for teenagers to participate in group-building activities. On short-term mission trips, “North American short-term missionaries often lack necessary training… [participants] do not speak the local language, are culturally inappropriate and insensitive, and focus on short-term fixes rather than long-term solutions and meaningful learning experiences” according to some critics (Ver Beek 478). Without proper, extensive cultural sensitivity training, these missionaries lack the ability to truly resonate with the population they aim to help. Regardless of the duration of the mission trip, training must be appropriate. Therefore, without careful training and thoughtful connections with locals, the purpose of the mission steers away from service. For a trip to be purposeful
and effective, participants must appreciate culture and foster relationships between the missionaries and locals. If missionaries do not train to interact with native populations in meaningful ways, their drive is, in fact, not service-based or religiously motivated. Culture-wise, insensitive, young Christian teens approaching reservations with stereotypes and biases perpetuate cycles of injustice.

Christian missionaries on short term mission trips focused on converting Native Americans perpetuate systems of colonialism. With the arrival of European colonists, indigenous culture was methodically erased and replaced with European values and beliefs. Colonists approached Native Americans as inherently inferior, calling them ‘savages’ simply because they did not believe in the Christian god. Conversion was industrial and innately dependent on the superiority of European ways and beliefs. Current evangelism asserts this same supremacy through hierarchical language that places Christians above non-Christians and legitimizes assimilation. Mission trips are centered around the quality of time and spirituality of the missionaries rather than those affected by mission. Modern proselytising on Native American reservations, when driven by a need to convert, mirrors the assumptions of superiority held by colonists 300 years ago. The implications of this stagnant mindset result in the widespread desecration of indigenous culture and religion. Mission trips may not be inherently bad or colonialist, but the attitude some Christians adopt is destructive. For future mission trips, Native American culture, beliefs, and identity must be recognized and understood, unequivocally. The ‘mission’ driving the trip must not be one fixated on meeting a quota for ‘souls converted’, rather centered around the offer of practical help and the formation of positive relationships between equals.

Appendix A

Figure 1: People Groups on Google Maps from the Joshua Project

Red dots: Unreached People Groups

Orange dots: Minimally Reached People Groups

Yellow dots: Superficially Reached People Groups

Light Green dots: Partially Reached People Groups

Dark Green dots: Significantly Reached People Groups

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Native American tribal nations resisted colonization, but eventually, many were forced to surrender their lands. In the regions of present-day southern Canada, the United States, and southern South America, survivors were gathered up and involuntarily moved to specific areas, called reservations. In Mexico, Central America, and northern South America, the native people were forced to live as peasants and laborers, under Spanish rule. In the last few decades, developments in transportation and earth-moving machinery have made it profitable for outsiders to colonize the tropical lowland forests. Free Essay: Native Americans before contact with Europeans were set in their ways and were fairly advanced people. There is evidence to suggest that people The Native Americans have had a tumultuous history in the united states. They have had their land stolen away from them and their identities almost vanish from history or their culture identity be reduced almost to a headdress that one might see around Halloween. The Native American people as a whole have suffered so much but have almost been reduced to early colonial history. The Native
Americans have been reduced to mere history books instead of an actual group of people still living. Read More.