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Decolonizing National Parks: A Conversation about Repatriation and Shared Authority

National parks are unique as public history sites. They are not merely human constructs, documenting human interaction with the world through the interpretation of historical events – they are events in and of themselves, laying out natural history and human history alike for visitors to wonder at and historians to interpret. Over the past century, the Parks have served as a way for Americans to engage in the wilderness by choice; they represent a significant achievement in the human struggle of man versus nature. Yet within this framework there has been a selective narrative of the parks' values – one that favors the recreational pursuits of mostly white Americans over the cultural history of the land itself. Park visitor demographics demonstrate a drastic failure of the NPS to appeal to broader audiences. This can be ascribed, at least in part, to the NPS' role in the national abstraction of native histories. The majority of NPS interpretations focus on land and naturalist education, perpetuate a mythology of “gifted land,” and have neglected cultural imprints as an integral element of the land's history.

National parks are the cradle of American civilization, bearing the histories of the American people dating back tens of thousands of years. The rich histories of the peoples that have occupied these lands over time provide an opportunity for the NPS that few museums possess: to present an American history that is deeply interwoven with the natural landscape, and recalls events back farther than any constructed museums can possibly venture. National parks have an obligation to present historical narratives that strengthen the stories of the landscapes' indigenous populations. It should be obvious that this cannot be done through federal interpretation alone. Rather, we must necessarily examine national parks within the public history conversation surrounding repatriation.

When national parks are established on land bearing deep indigenous footprints, they should necessarily be administered or co-administered by native representatives. In response to the theft of the archaeological wonderland at Mesa Verde, the indigenous Ute population established their own natural and cultural heritage site, Ute Mountain Tribal Park, which is managed, interpreted, and docented by natives.¹ It is altogether possible – and necessary – that native peoples are at the helm of park management in spaces where native stories are (or should be) told. The continued management and interpretation by non-native federal officials represents, at least, a lack of shared authority, and at most, a continued appropriation of native legacies for recreational entertainment. In a time where the field of public history is coming to terms with repatriation not only as an ethical imperative but an opportunity for expanded interpretations, native administration of certain national parks should be at the forefront of the conversation.

Colonization of the Wilderness: Early NPS Cultural Views

This analysis of colonization in the national parks would be incomplete without at least a brief mention of the Antiquities Act. Signed into law by Theodore Roosevelt in 1906, this piece of law gives the President power to seize land for federal management and protection, in the name of cultural preservation. The National Park Service purports that “The Act created the basis for the federal government’s efforts to protect archaeological sites from looting and vandalism,”² particularly at a time when native cultural sites were at risk of destruction due to

¹ Isaac Kantor, "Ethnic Cleansing and America's Creation of National Parks." *Public Land and Resources Law Review* 28 (2007): 54. Accessed via The Scholarly Forum @ Montana Law.

² "American Antiquities Act of 1906." National Parks Service. Accessed November 25, 2018. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/legal/american-antiquities-act-of-1906.htm>.

westward expansion. The Antiquities Act provided a solution to this risk by way of dispossession – the first two native sites to fall into federal hands through the legal pathway of the Act were the Sioux’s Devil’s Tower and the Navajo’s El Morro.³ Lands that were previously contested due to treaty stipulations became sites of preservation where native rights of access and use were limited or removed altogether. This piece of legislation set a precedent for preservation that defined cultural value within an archaeological framework. Native culture was seen as valuable to the federal government, and indeed worthy of preservation, but only as a relic of the past. Sacred cultural sites were objects to be protected and appreciated, but the living tribe members to whom they belonged were not bestowed the same deference. As the National Parks system expanded through conquest of native lands, “wilderness preservation went hand in hand with native dispossession.”⁴

Although the National Park Service was formally signed into law by Woodrow Wilson in 1916, the conservation engine was in motion prior to his tenure. Famously conservation oriented, Theodore Roosevelt instituted five national parks under the purview of the United States Forest Service and invigorated the park conservation movement with the establishment of Crater Lake, Wind Cave, Mesa Verde, Sullys Hill, and Platt National Parks (of which only the first three remain designated national parks today). He imprinted on the developing conservation movement his ethic of manliness relative to wilderness and insecurity about the decline of white manhood. The privilege of his birth afforded him a casual and deliberate

³ Philip Burnham, *Indian Country, God’s Country – Native Americans and the National Parks* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2000): 48.

⁴ Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness – Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 3.

relationship to nature – one that modern Americans emulate with each pilgrimage into the wilderness. From an early age, he was interested in books and tales that depicted the West as “a stage on which the white scientist or hunter performed his mastery of nature, a mastery that could be achieved only through violence.”⁵ Hunting, to the civilized class and Roosevelt himself, was deemed a sport; if used for subsistence and survival, it was deemed primitive and uncivilized. The exercise of control over federally claimed lands was to be managed likewise – for recreation and not subsistence, for enjoyment and development of a manly ruggedness rather than for cultural and spiritual practices. Subsequently, “the strengthening of state power over the uses of wildlife defined the way that immigrants, rural folk, and Native Americans hunted as crimes.”⁶ This framework has endured as an element of the conservation movement and the National Park Service’s policy and practice over the past century.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, there was little distinction in the West of the natives from their land; consequently, “the earliest national park advocates hoped to protect ‘wild’ landscapes and the people who called these places home.” And yet “preservationist efforts did not succeed until the latter half of the nineteenth century...when outdoor enthusiasts viewed wilderness as an uninhabited Eden that should be set aside for the benefit and pleasure of vacationing Americans.”⁷ Environmental historian William Cronon argues that the American fascination with “wilderness” in actuality represents “nostalgia for a passing frontier way of life,”⁸ but early park visitors, much like *Westworld* guests, wanted to experience

⁵ Monica Rico, *Nature’s Noblemen: Transatlantic Masculinities and the Nineteenth-Century American West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 171.

⁶ *Ibid*, 173.

⁷ Spence, 4.

⁸ William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” *Environmental History*, 1, No. 1 (Jan., 1996), 14.

a sanitized pioneering adventure, utterly devoid of any Indian threat.⁹ Restricted park access for native groups therefore became not only a function of the Park Service's conservation ethic, but appeasement of racist fears as well. Management of the early parks reflected this goal. At Yellowstone, wildlife management became a function of the US Army, which also "removed 'primitive' native peoples, who had long been associated with wilderness lands by whites, in order to preserve a 'wilderness' for today's Americans."¹⁰

As the focus shifted from preservation to recreation, so did the image of the natives from rightful land dwellers to an obstacle demanding removal for the sake of a conservation aesthetic – lands devoid of inhabitants, set aside purely for temporary enjoyment. Native access to park lands falls far down the list of NPS priorities, and factors little within the agency's preservation efforts, despite the wealth of cultural resources inherent in native ties to the land.

Culture, Identity, and Place

Place identity, like race and heritage, is a social construct.¹¹ It is created through the propagation of memory-made meaning, and becomes more powerful generation by generation. G. J. Ashworth argues that place identity can be used both as a form of nationalism as well as a form of resistance – the latter particularly by "minority groups to hegemonic representations of ethnonationalism."¹² In the United States, these manifestations can be seen in the duality of place identity at indigenous sites now portrayed as national parks.

⁹ Kathy Mason, *Natural Museums: US National Parks, 1872-1916* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2004): 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 28.

¹¹ G. J. Ashworth, Brian Graham, and J. E. Tunbridge, *Pluralising Pasts: Heritage, Identity and Place in Multicultural Societies* (Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2007): 54.

¹² *Ibid*, 54.

The earliest national parks were founded as part of a deliberate and orchestrated effort to create a national identity and “social memory” for Americans. Within this framework, the federal government separated historic sites from “prehistoric” native sites.¹³ While Ashworth argues in favor of a plurality of place identity, the National Parks Service determined early on that place identity would be dualistic by creating a dichotomy between a recreational space for white Americans, with native groups excluded and their place identities relegated to reservation spaces. Place identity is used in national parks to convey a certain degree of “Americanness,” rusticism, patriotism, or physical fortitude. Although it is true – particularly in a nationalistic sense – that “an excessive focus on bounded sites of memory risks fetishising place and space too much and obscures the wider production of social memory throughout society,”¹⁴ for native peoples, sites like Mesa Verde, Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks, Chaco Canyon, and Glacier National Park contain tangible memories. For native peoples, place identity is often one cultural structure that remains visible after colonization stripped away land, rights, and tradition. David Craig maintains that “For many Native Americans, park landscapes reflect a fundamental cultural identity, and while native cultures are dynamic, they are often inextricably linked to an extended history of engagement with particular places.”¹⁵

In her research on identity and place at Little Bighorn, anthropologist Debra Buchholtz explores how identities are shaped as histories are constructed within the context of place. The Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, administered by the National Park Service,

¹³ Denise Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks – Toward a new Genealogy of Public History* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012): 139.

¹⁴ Ashworth et al, 56.

¹⁵ David Craig, Laurie Yung, William Borie, “Blackfeet Belong to the Mountains’: Hope, Loss, and Blackfeet Claims to Glacier National Park, Montana,” *Conservation & Society*, 10, No. 3 (2012): 233.

tackles the difficult cultural history of “Custer’s last stand” against the Lakota, the Northern Cheyenne, and the Arapaho. Buchholtz notes that inherent in the reconstitution of a battlefield is the commodification of place.¹⁶ The same is done at non-battlefield NPS sites. Battlefields are perhaps unique from the other national parks discussed here in that the histories they present are generally isolated to a specific period – the duration of the battle, and shortly before and after. Parks, on the other hand, bear the weight of all human and natural history in the soil; the identities conveyed at these sites stretch not over days or weeks, but over centuries and millennia. Regardless of these differences, however, the formation of historical identities surrounding “public” spaces are a difficult and complex process with generational impacts. Buchholtz notes of the identities shaped through interpretation at Little Bighorn that:

Throughout this research I have assumed, first, that group interests and identities coalesce around particular places, events, and issues and, then, that the most significant contexts in which groups and individuals assert their identities are public and marked by observable, albeit perhaps symbolic, struggle. That struggle, conceptualized here as a dialogue, is **not just for control of symbols and their meanings but also for power and control of resources.**¹⁷ [emphasis added]

While mainstream white American identity is often rooted in the celebration of these iconic wilderness spaces, their essence of ruggedness and adventure is necessarily separate from daily life, which is part of what makes these spaces special. They are places of pilgrimage. For indigenous groups, however, these spaces are not a celebration of a nature separate from civilization. They are civil spaces, where tradition, culture, ritual, and daily life engaged. Part of these cultural traditions are rooted in survival, and involve a very basic subsistence—accessing

¹⁶ Debra Buchholtz, “Telling Stories: Making History, Place, and Identity on the Little Bighorn,” *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 67, No. 3 (Fall 2011), 438.

¹⁷ Buchholtz, 442.

resources that are rooted in the land, which the NPS pledges to preserve as an integral element of its mission.¹⁸ These practices are elemental to the cultural and spiritual essence of many native groups.

When we confront the national park as both present and historic spaces, we must understand the complexity of identity that is carried within them. The identity projected by the National Park Service, despite its arrowhead logo, is not that of the native peoples who inhabited these spaces until recently. The imagined identity of this new nation was rooted in racism and colonization, and these ideas were perpetuated through the creation of the national park service as “place identity” was stripped from native peoples and given to the adventure seeking tourist in the form of “nature’s playground.”¹⁹ This subscribed identity is not only unethical, but devalues the potential of park spaces as well.

Case Study: Mesa Verde

The federal acquisition of the land that is now called Mesa Verde National Park represents a negotiation that in any other circumstance would be deemed unlawful or even criminal. Like many other National Park lands, Mesa Verde was acquired by threat of starvation via withheld rations.²⁰ As federal pressure to acquire the archaeological ruins of the Ute people heightened, and the Utes resisted, the Mesa Verde National Park bill was passed through Congress, covering the first 217,000 acres which formed the park. Against further protestations

¹⁸ Craig et al, 234.

¹⁹ A name commonly given to Yellowstone National Park. As far as I can tell, the original use of this term was from James Fitzpatrick’s 1936 *TravelTalk, Yellowstone Park, Nature’s Playground*.

²⁰ Burnham, 9.

from the Utes, the federal government confiscated more than 20,000 additional acres through coercion and force.²¹

This history is not one the visitor encounters at Mesa Verde, and yet – like many of the federal “indiscretions” regarding native treaties and lands – it is indisputable and traceable through agency archival records. The problem, of course, is that confronting this very real history compromises the moral agenda of the NPS to enhance citizen well-being through the preservation of natural spaces. Instead, the NPS deals with its own unsavory histories by de-peopling the land’s record – or, commonly, relegating the cultural stories to a distant past:

The power of the Mesa Verde interpretive program lies in its ability to direct park visitors to identify with a culture vastly different from their own, while simultaneously discouraging them from identifying with it to the point where they are moved to engage in political critique of U.S. culture and/or its governmental policies dealing with Native Americans and public lands.²²

Fine further writes that Mesa Verde takes on an interpretive stance that showcases the “politics of remembrance,” whereby “it has devoted itself to conjuring up an image and appreciation of a people who no longer inhabit the ruins, and whose descendants have been systematically deprived of their ‘patrimony’ by the ancestors of tourists seeking their own.”²³

I would further Fine’s argument in that it is not only the ancestors of the tourists, but tourists themselves – and their elected officials – that are continually and actively depriving the descendants of these lands through policies designed to isolate, rob, and disfranchise. The NPS essentially appropriates native stories as part of a distant past in order to avoid confronting the

²¹ Kantor, 54.

²² Kathleen Fine, “The Politics of ‘Interpretation’ at Mesa Verde National Park.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (October 1988): 177. Accessed via JSTOR.

²³ *Ibid*, 178.

image of the indigenous as a real and living peoples. The use of the arrowhead as the NPS emblem is a visual representation of this appropriation: the stories of the indigenous have been co-opted to fit within a precise narrative of the federal government that dispossessed them of their homeland in the first place. Moreover, the NPS' cultural interpretation at Mesa Verde neglects to highlight the stories of the Utes, "on whose former reservation lands the park sits," instead focusing on the Navajo, Anasazi, and Pueblos in its cultural interpretation.²⁴

Over time, the interpretation of Mesa Verde has evolved along the lines of conservation education through the visceral act of visiting native cultural sites – and moreover, that the silver lining to the loss of living cultural heritage is the federal government's success in creating a pure and naturally ornate sanctuary for the consumption of park visitors: "It is clear...that the dominant interpretive thread has always been one of ecological/environmental awareness coupled with a not-so-subtle message that the park service is to be congratulated for its role in preserving the historical and natural environment."²⁵ The relevance of native peoples to this aim is, at most, secondary. There is an insidious implication to this narrative: that the native peoples were – and are – unable to take on the challenge of preserving their own lands, and without the federal government's interference, these spaces would not be here for the public's enjoyment.

The irony of this idea is that the popular narrative surrounding native peoples is one of a homogenous earth-loving and sustainable proto-civilization. Therefore, the idea that tribal

²⁴ Kantor, 57.

²⁵ Fine, 179.

groups are incapable of ecological management of natural resources and that their lands have been stripped from them because of this is at direct odds with an identity that has been created and foisted upon them. Moreover, the current active role that native groups have taken in combating land exploitation (such as the Dakota Access Pipeline) should be further evidence of the ability of native populations to advocate for their land. The problem inherent is not a lack of will, but a misappropriation of power.

Case Study: Glacier National Park

The Blackfoot Confederacy, established by treaty in 1855, is made up of four nations currently residing throughout Montana, Alberta, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan. Before colonization, these Algonquin tribes roamed the Great Plains as bison hunters, subsisting on the wealth of the land they inhabited. The fortunes of the Blackfeet changed drastically over the latter half of the nineteenth century as epidemics, war, staggering loss of bison in the region, and the federal government's failure to follow through on treaty-guaranteed rations resulted in staggering loss of life.²⁶ Facing the loss of over a quarter of their population and the prospect of continuing starvation, the Blackfeet were forced to sell their land to purchase food. The 1895 sale of 800,000 acres – subsistence funds for the Blackfeet – was an extremely profitable purchase for the federal government. The Blackfeet asked for \$3 Million but were only offered half of that, owing to the imbalanced nature of negotiations. Regardless of the terms of sale,

²⁶ Craig et al, 235.

President Taft created Glacier National Park with the same lands fifteen years later, designating the land that once supported the now poverty-stricken Blackfeet a “public pleasure ground.”²⁷

Once the former Blackfeet land became a national park, the rights guaranteed in the 1895 trade – specifically, subsistence rights such as hunting, fishing, and use of lumber – were nullified in court in the name of conservation.²⁸ Early forest rangers in Glacier were encouraged to “look for fires, timber thieves, squatters, and game violators.”²⁹ The only tribal right that appears to have survived the establishment of Glacier National Park is free entry – a privilege from the early NPS point of view, considering it was quickly turning into the new tourist trap, complete with the Glacier Park Hotel (established in 1913), and catering to tourists far and wide. Management of the park’s resources was a tandem activity, carried out alongside development for tourist consumption. Members of the Blackfeet Confederacy have appeared in court throughout the twentieth century to contest the confiscation of rights promised in the original agreement, made without any notion of what a future Park Service would entail.

Native Americans suffer the highest poverty rates of any other demographic in the United States, conservatively estimated at 26% (the national average is 14%).³⁰ The poverty rate on the Blackfeet Reservation is even higher, at 38.6% as of 2015.³¹ Hunting, fishing, and lumbering therefore do not merely constitute traditional subsistence practices for tribe

²⁷ Jennifer Bottomly-O’Looney, Deirdre Shaw, “Glacier National Park: People, A Playground, and a Park.” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, 60, No. 2 (2010), 42. Accessed via JSTOR.

²⁸ Craig et al, 235.

²⁹ Bottomly-O’Looney, 46.

³⁰ US Census Bureau. "American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month: November 2017." Census Bureau QuickFacts. October 06, 2017. Accessed November 25, 2018. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2017/aian-month.html>.

³¹ "Blackfeet Reservation." Montana Poverty Report Card. August 2017. Accessed November 25, 2018. <http://www.montana.edu/extensionecon/countydata/Blackfeet.pdf>.

members – these activities prevent starvation and exposure, mitigating the effects of generational poverty. And subsistence activity rights are not the Blackfeet’s only loss within the park: Tribe members report being interrupted or otherwise prevented from conducting spiritual activities such as “praying, fasting for visions, and trying to obtain spiritual guidance.”³² Older members feel alienated from their traditional spiritual practices, and younger generations are unable to even experience the place-based rituals of their ancestors.

Research done with members of the Blackfeet tribe has revealed the following beliefs and explanations regarding the contested nature of Glacier National Park: “1) the tribe did not willingly sell the land; 2) the Blackfeet retained subsistence rights in the 1895 Agreement; 3) federal jurisdiction ended with the expiration of a lease; and 4) the current park boundary is inaccurate.”³³ There is at least a foundation of evidence supporting each of these claims, particularly the argument that the land was leased and not sold.³⁴ These narratives are, of course, disputed by the federal government (and certainly not incorporated into Park interpretations), further antagonizing relations with the Confederacy. Early efforts by tribe members to gain influence in the park service often resulted in underemployment in janitorial and other non-culturally specific or low-skilled positions. “Visiting” tribe members say that they feel surveilled on park lands, treated like “outsiders rather than the original inhabitants,” and as if they “are going to hunt the animals to extinction.”³⁵ There is continued controversy over whether the 1994 Tribal Self-Governance Act, which “provides a mechanism for transferring

³² Craig et al, 237.

³³ Craig et al, 238.

³⁴ Spence, 99.

³⁵ Craig et al, 238.

authority over federal programs, including the management of federal lands, to Indian tribes,” necessarily includes national parks.³⁶ In Glacier National Park, where the Blackfeet have not conceded treaty rights, tribe members have been arrested and prosecuted for trespassing and hunting on so-called federal land. Where the conservation mission of the NPS intersects with native treaty rights, court precedent favors the former.

The Blackfeet proposed joint management of Glacier National Park’s eastern half in 1975. Both the NPS and the Blackfeet “recognize how their interests have overlapped significantly in the past few years.”³⁷ Since then, tribe members have been divided on how best to move ahead, with some advocating full repatriation, some co-management, and some simply a greater influence in park affairs.³⁸ Given the difficult history between the two parties, however, it is difficult to imagine how a vague consultant-based role would impact Glacier’s narrative moving forward, particularly if Blackfeet advisement was at odds with the official NPS position or party line. Restoration of original treaty-ordained access and subsistence rights are the first step toward repairing this fraught relationship. An official and pecuniary federal role in advancing Blackfeet cultural, educational, and developmental goals to prepare them for a larger place in the management of Glacier would further communicate good will and an eagerness to amend federal violations of sovereignty and treaty terms.

Despite very real ongoing disputes and contests over rights of access and historical narrative, the Blackfeet report relief that their lands have, for the most part, escaped

³⁶ Ibid, 233.

³⁷ Spence, 139.

³⁸ Craig et al, 239.

development. While the land remains, in essence, recognizable to the Blackfeet, it is possible that they could reclaim their cultural heritage. One elder conveyed a sense of optimism in that: “The buffalo are gone. Our way of life is gone. But maybe there’s hope because those mountains are still there.”³⁹ Through the loss of people, traditions, and spaces, place identity remains.

Conclusion: Looking Ahead

The argument here is not that national parks cannot or should not be enjoyed or conserved. That conclusion would be just as radical as the one currently in operation, which sacrifices native identity and subsistence culture on the altar of outdoor conservation recreation. Advances in cooperation between park officials and native groups have far from settled deeply imbedded issues stemming from centuries of deception and dispossession. Moreover, sharing administrative control does not solve the problem of political sovereignty that lingers over contested lands. At Glacier National Park, for example, “Cultural agreements between the park service and various native groups will probably lead to the acknowledgement of past wrongs, but nothing of lasting import will take place until there is some resolution of the issue of native rights on public lands.”⁴⁰ Administrative cooperation does, however, represent a first and crucial step toward reimagining the national parks within mainstream cultural consciousness as lands of people, curated within the last 100 years to represent a new-age wilderness for public consumption. Native management—or, at the very least, co-

³⁹ Craig et al, 238.

⁴⁰ Spence, 139.

management—of national parks ensures that the stories of our parks are not twisted into tales of prehistoric abandonment, with federal agencies and rugged white men selflessly and heroically claiming forgotten land for preservation.

Our national mythology and curated identity places great value on public lands. These landscapes, America’s “best idea,” are collectively heralded as beacons of American beauty and oneness, places to appreciate what is good and to make sure that it remains for generations to come. Spaces like the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, and Sequoia are icons of great significance to American identity. When these places once again become homelands for native groups committed to their sustainability, they will be reimagined in American memory as cultural spaces—peopled spaces whose native belonging is not past, but present. Within this framework, native use “would further tribal efforts to reclaim their traditions and, in the process, strengthen their ability to remain politically and cultural distinct nations.”⁴¹ The value of this administrative, cultural, and political repatriation would have effects far beyond national parks themselves. The reinstatement of native sovereignty over traditionally tribal lands would have profound effects on the essence of what it means to be American – a new and holistic conception of wilderness, recreation, sustainability, power, and perhaps a new national identity that reframes the duality of belonging.

⁴¹ Spence, 139.

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