

The Displacement of Native Americans and the Creation of a “Natural” Wilderness

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HUM 104

May 13th, 2020

For hundreds of years, the Native American population in the United States has been mistreated and displaced. Native Americans have been forced out of their environment and put into specific areas designated solely based on their race. With this context in mind, my definition of “environment” became a representation of all the constructed beauty on Earth. We have developed our environment to fit our needs as societies, therefore the term “environment” does not necessarily include every natural living space in the world. Besides the pure injustice Native Americans faced for their race, there is also environmental injustice in their displacement. In order for the United States to create national parks and a “natural” wilderness, the government felt the need to remove those who had been living in harmony with their environment. The language of American environmental history has been dominated by the ideologies of white colonial identity. Within this paper, I will transform this colonial centered definition of environmentalism to a more inclusive, honest portrayal of the history of American environment.

Jamaica Kincaid’s “In History,” discusses the idea of how, through colonization, the invaders destroy and rebuild them to fit their exploitative needs.¹ Throughout Kincaid’s writing, she describes the process by which the invaders of the “New World” created a “blank slate” of an environment to mold into their own desires.² In the eyes of the invaders, the “New World” was a paradise, one which could fulfill any ambition to further their development.³ Kincaid writes, “Paradise is the thing just met when all the troublesome details have been vanquished, overcome.”⁴ These “troublesome details” included the indigenous people who had lived in the “New World” for thousands of years in a perfect equilibrium with their environment. However, in order to create this “paradise,” the invaders needed to eliminate those who stood in their way. The colonization

¹ Jamaica Kincaid, “In History,” *Callaloo* 24, no. 2 (2001): 620–26

² “In History.” Kincaid, Jamaica. (pg.624)

³ “In History.” Kincaid, Jamaica. (pg.625)

⁴ “In History.” Kincaid, Jamaica. (pg.626)

operation included the steps of empty, erasure, reframing/naming, ownership, construction of paradise, and finally the construction of a Western narrative. Invaders believed in their destiny of civilizing the “New World” and the idea that “the person who really can name the thing gives it life.”⁵ Unfortunately, by completing this process, the original environment that existed was permanently altered. The environment was destroyed and redeveloped. Kincaid’s definition of “environment” emphasizes the concept that our environment is not the true beauty it once was. Over the centuries, our environment was constantly forced through the colonization process to become our new, necessary “paradise.”

The need to have a “paradise” was one of the driving forces behind the discrimination of the Native American people in the United States. When envisioning their new land, the European colonizers did not picture the land involving a new race. They viewed the Native American people as savages and uncivilized. Therefore, when creating their perfect “paradise,” Native Americans did not fit into the picture. For example, the Cherokee Nation suffered greatly from the Trail of Tears.⁶ The Trail of Tears was the forced removal of the Cherokee Nation from their homeland in order for the United States to expand.⁷ Thousands of Cherokee Nation members died on their trek further West into unfamiliar land.⁸ With each United States expansion west, more Native American tribes were displaced until they were eventually put into specific reservations. Native Americans had to relearn their existence within these reservations as they were used to coexisting with their land and not being confined.

⁵ “In History.” Kincaid, Jamaica. (pg.624)

⁶ John Ehle. “The End of the Cherokee, Trail of Tears, The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation.” *Anchor Press*. (1998)

⁷ “The End of the Cherokee, Trail of Tears, The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation.” Ehle, John.

⁸ “The End of the Cherokee, Trail of Tears, The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation.” Ehle, John.

Within Cronon's "The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," the author discusses the idea of how the environment is inherently unnatural because every part of the environment has been impacted by humans.⁹ Cronon describes the idea of "wilderness" and what it stands for. Initially, the idea of the wilderness is unnerving and violent. However, Cronon quickly dismisses this idea and writes "wilderness came to embody the national frontier myth, standing for the wild freedom of America's past and seeming to represent a highly attractive natural alternative to the ugly artificiality of modern civilization."¹⁰ Therefore, the American wilderness itself is unnatural because it has been invented and constructed for recreational purposes. The wilderness was created because of the importance of the American frontier in the creation of our nation. Our nation felt we then "must save its last remnants as monuments to the American past – and as an insurance policy to protect its future."¹¹ Cronon ties wilderness to the overall environment by mentioning that the creation of the "natural" wilderness actually harms the environment. Cronon claims that wilderness is a way to ignore the problem of our environment; "wilderness poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism at the end of the twentieth century."¹² We believe we are helping the environment by having these areas of designated wilderness, but in reality it leads us to forget even that this wilderness is unnatural. We as a society have affected our entire environment, even the "natural" wilderness we created to feel as though the environment is healthy and prosperous.

Understanding that the current "wilderness" is not natural and is not what originally existed in the United States allows the discrimination against Native Americans to be more evident. Native

⁹ William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 7.

¹⁰"The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." Cronon, William. (pg.7)

¹¹ "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." Cronon, William. (pg.7)

¹² "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." Cronon, William. (pg.7)

Americans were part of the original wilderness and maintained the sense of wilderness by coexisting with the environment rather than manipulating it. This coexistence with nature is what allowed the land in the United States to have the “undeveloped” impression when settlers first arrived. However, by engaging in conservation efforts that manipulate the environment, including National Parks, Native Americans have suffered the most.

In her book “Indian Country, God’s Country: Native Americans and the National Parks,” Weisiger discusses the disputes that occurred between Native Americans and the National Park Service.¹³ Throughout Weisiger’s writing, she discusses the deprivation Native Americans faced by having their land ripped away from them and being forced to adapt to the rules the National Park Services enforced. She mentions that the treaty rights given to Native Americans quickly became nonexistent, forcing them away from their traditional hunting grounds and removing them from their homeland.¹⁴ Weisiger states that Native American dancers and imagery actually help to promote the parks and entertain the tourists but that the real Native American population is nowhere to be found in the parks themselves.¹⁵ These Native Americans live in rural slums on the outside of the National Parks, hidden away from the tourists. Native Americans had economic and spiritual connections to the lands that makeup the National Parks, but those connections were taken away from them in an instant to create “artificial wilderness.”¹⁶ Weisiger references Cronon in her writing, furthering the concept that National Parks are far from the “wilderness” we believe them to be.

¹³ Marsha L. Weisiger, “Indian Country, God’s Country: Native Americans and the National Parks.” *Environmental History*. (2001)

¹⁴ “Indian Country, God’s Country: Native Americans and the National Parks.” Weisiger, Marsha L.

¹⁵ “Indian Country, God’s Country: Native Americans and the National Parks.” Weisiger, Marsha L.

¹⁶ “Indian Country, God’s Country: Native Americans and the National Parks.” Weisiger, Marsha L.

The Cherokee Nation originally lived on land that has been used to create the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. After being pushed out by the Trail of Tears, the Cherokee Nation was eventually allowed back into their original area.¹⁷ In order to promote the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Cherokee historical sites have been set up throughout the National Park. Also, some members of the Cherokee Nation work for the National Park, providing historical information about their ancestors.¹⁸ Native Americans lived in the wilderness and are associated with the land before it became artificially manifested. By bringing back Native Americans into these National Parks, a false sense of wilderness is restored.

Within Yonk, Mosley, and Husby's "Human Influences on the Northern Yellowstone Range," the history of the land that is now Yellowstone National Park is discussed in reference to the shift between Native Americans and the United States.¹⁹ Yonk, Mosley, and Husby mention how before the creation of Yellowstone National Park, Native Americans used the fundamental components of hunting and burning to maintain the ecological processes that naturally occurred in the area.²⁰ However, after their forced removal by the National Park Service, the environment began to suffer from lack of proper maintenance that the Native Americans provided. Therefore, the National Park Service is now mimicking the controlled burning and hunting that the Natives had been providing to the land for hundreds of years before their removal.²¹ Native Americans had coexisted with their environment before National Parks were created, but because they were not seen as a crucial part of the "wilderness," the environment surrounding the Parks is suffering.

¹⁷ "Great Smoky Mountains: Great Smoky Mountains National Park, North Carolina and Tennessee" *National Park Service U.S. Dept. of the Interior*, (1981).

¹⁸ "Great Smoky Mountains: Great Smoky Mountains National Park, North Carolina and Tennessee" *National Park Service U.S. Dept. of the Interior*, (1981).

¹⁹ Ryan M. Yonk, Jeffery C. Mosley, and Peter O. Husby. "Human Influences on the Northern Yellowstone Range." *Elsevier Enhanced Reader*. (2018). 1-12.

²⁰ "Human Influences on the Northern Yellowstone Range." Yonk, Mosley, Husby. (pg. 7)

²¹ "Human Influences on the Northern Yellowstone Range." Yonk, Mosley, Husby. (pg. 11)

When we interact with our environment in an unnatural way, the environment suffers. Native Americans were removed from their homelands in order for settlers to expand and create an “artificial” wilderness. However, the environment began to suffer because settlers did not know how to interact with the environment in the same coexisting way as the Native Americans. Ironically, many National Parks and places of “natural” wilderness are being maintained by using Native American practices. Instead of allowing Native Americans to live peacefully in their homeland, settlers forced them away but ended up needing their help when attempting to restore the environmental damage they had caused.

Within Lingis’ “The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common,” he discusses the differences between the rational community and the community of those who have nothing in common.²² Lingis describes a rational community as one that is natural and logical in how it came about. He writes “actions determined by the dicta of ancestors or divinities can well enlist, in communal works or monuments, all those who trace their birth and their place to them, but such works elaborate the distinctness of a progeny or a chosen race.”²³ Allowing for individuals to remain in their own communities, in which there has been history and development, encourages individuality. Lingis describes a community of those who have nothing in common as one that is manipulated, forcing people to come together. He states “rationalists perceive the reality of being members of a community in the reality of works undertaken and realized; we perceive the community itself as a work.”²⁴ When we try to alter a natural system, whether that be a community or our environment, it becomes work. Lingis continues his discussion by mentioning how

²² Alphonso, Lingis. “The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common.” *Indiana University Press*. (1994) 1-13.

²³ “The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common.” Lingis, Alphonso. (pg. 4)

²⁴ “The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common.” Lingis, Alphonso. (pg. 5)

unnatural a community of those who have nothing in common is and the inhibition of individuality it creates.

Native Americans in the United States were forced from their rational community into a community of those who have nothing in common. The loss of individuality was extensive due to the forced sense of conformity that was placed upon the Native Americans. Native Americans adapted to the community that Westerners placed on them in order to survive. However, by conforming to this new normal, Native Americans lost the ability to speak with their own unique and individual voice. Native Americans were discriminated against by their race, without even considering their way of life.

Our environment has never been naturally created. From the moment the colonizers came to their “paradise” to when America decided to preserve land to create an artificial “wilderness,” any truly natural environment was destroyed. I believed the environment was defined by being natural, but the truth is that the environment has been manipulated by humans for centuries. There is the potential of restoring our environment to its natural beauty, but that would require people to understand that how we treat the environment is not what it was created for. Respecting the environment and what it offers is what I believe would help to create a genuine, unmanipulated environment again. Native Americans were successful with respecting and understanding their environment. However, Native Americans became a target in racial discrimination when settlers came to the United States and faced persecution for centuries.

Before I engaged with this material I thought of the environment as encompassing everything outside. After reading and learning from these various sources, however, I realized that my definition of the environment was uninformed and based on privileged assumptions. The experience of Native Americans and their forced displacement from their homelands emphasized

the artificiality of my concept of wilderness and environment. Now, viewing wilderness and the environment through the lens of the Native American experience, I altered my definition of these terms to be more inclusive of the environment's true history in America.

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