

Marginal Voices in “Wild” America: Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and “Nature” in *The National Parks*

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Introduction

The preservation of land as national parks has been arguably the most successful feature of a nationwide increase in environmental awareness, referred to as the “greening” of America. The many and varied units in the national park system provide collective reassurance that, despite environmental excesses in other areas, the people of the nation understand the value of nature in its purportedly pure and wild form. At the same time the parks are viewed as both repositories and expressions of cultural ideals that illustrate U.S. Americans to be a unified people: as one nation, under God as expressed in the spectacular majesty of American landscapes, and defined by democracy in the form of public ownership and collective wisdom. Americans have for generations

drawn upon these values to promote cherished cultural mythologies of uniqueness and exceptionalism. This connection between nature and core American values is expertly presented in *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*, produced by renowned documentarian Ken Burns and presented nationwide on public television in 2009. The twelve-hour-long series, divided into six episodes, provides a rich and detailed chronology of the emergence and development of the park system from its precursors in the mid-nineteenth century through the extensive Alaska additions to the system achieved by 1980.

Two key themes run throughout the series and structure its narrative. First, while the national park system comprises a variety of holdings that represent both natural and cultural/historical values, the major emphasis in *The National Parks* is on pristine and sublime landscapes and the

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cultural meanings generated by their preservation. As such, the portrayal is grounded in what cultural studies scholars Ziser and Sze call “environmental nationalism,” tapping into what they refer to as “a longstanding American cultural celebration of pristine and wild environments” (390). The second theme expresses that the national parks are created for and are available to *all* of the people of the U.S., asserting an explicitly multicultural image of park creation, management, and visitation. Borrowing historian Wallace Stegner’s remark that the creation of the national parks is America’s best idea, Burns goes to great lengths to remind viewers that America comprises a social and cultural mosaic of multiple races and ethnicities that all made important contributions.

Burns appears to want to shake viewers out of common preconceptions that only elite, white men acted to create parks, or that it was almost exclusively white, middle- and upper-class families that desired the pilgrimages to spectacular national park sites like Yellowstone or Yosemite. To this end, *The National Parks* presents the “untold stories” of women and men alike from Native-American, African-American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian backgrounds that contributed to park histories. These stories from the margins are woven into a broader narrative that tells more familiar tales of better known characters like John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt. According to the film’s narrative, this multihued collection of rich, poor, and middle-classes produced the national park system that U.S. Americans have come to appreciate, celebrating diversity while unifying America through the parks’ connections of God, country, and family.

Despite its compelling portrayal, however, the two themes in *The National Parks*, of sublime nature and of multiculturalism, are meshed together in a manner that sidesteps a more challenging engagement with race and ethnicity (see also Jacoby). The prominent placement of these issues in the series begs several questions that are left unaddressed. For instance: Why are these stories marginal to national parks history in the first place, or put another way, why are national parks viewed as the realm of the white, middle- and

upper-classes? How does one explain persistent patterns of relatively low visitation by racial and ethnic minorities to the national parks and other wildland spaces? And also, how does the ideology of preservationism, with its emphasis on pristine and wild landscapes, contribute to these patterns of marginalization and limited minority visitation?

Such inquiries would likely press harder on race issues than an American mass audience is willing to accept; that is, without inviting complaints about bringing needless divisiveness into a story of national unity. Burns seems to understand this potential reaction and proceeds in a manner that more safely and simply enlists a diverse range of voices to tell a more expected tale: that of American pride in its collective choice to preserve nature’s grandeur. While his is a winning strategy that helped bring the wide acclaim that *The National Parks* series clearly deserves, it also leaves hidden from view some features of nature preservation and parks in the U.S. that are more fraught.

The Irresistible Force of “Nature”

It is clear by now that Ken Burns knows how to enroll an audience. *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea* is another in a long line of his successful historical documentaries. His accounts tend to be highly acclaimed and considered definitive of their subjects, and his portrayal of the national parks in America represents the best of the contemporary popular imagination on ideas about preserved landscapes in the U.S. His great success in this series comes in part from his ability to tap into a deeply held and carefully nurtured understanding among U.S. Americans that the spectacular ruggedness of the nation’s “wild” landscapes, in contrast with the refinements of European cultures and landscapes, forms the basis of the American independent spirit. Famously embraced in American mythologies, this depiction of a rugged and wild America finds easy acceptance among

American viewers who readily endorse his claim that creating the national parks truly was the country's best idea. Cohering with the documentary's tendency toward visual spectacle, the narrative provides a rhetorical vehicle that is simply too easily driven and too effective for Burns to ignore.

The narrative emphasis on spectacular and monumental scenery is expressed partly in ubiquitous references to their "sublime" character, linking God to nature and America. These connections begin with the awe-inspiring photograph of Yosemite National Park on the DVD box cover; they are evident in the titles of the six episodes, which include "The Scripture of Nature," "Great Nature," and "The Morning of Creation"; and they are carried throughout the series by the scenic images and evocative narration by various commentators. The prelude to episode one, "The Scripture of Nature," opens the series by displaying nature's primal power, presenting images of actual "Creation," so to speak; that is, of land-in-production by the active lava flows at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.

From there, Burns turns viewers' attention to the awesome spectacles of Yosemite, Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, Denali National Parks and other examples of what are referred to by the narrator as "nature's superlatives," comparing park visitation to religious experience. The spectacular images are accompanied by a recited passage on "the morning of creation" from preservationist icon John Muir, who calls the national parks "nature's sublime wonderlands," as places for Americans to rejuvenate and reconnect with the Divine. Furthermore, these images are devoid of any human presence in their fields of vision, promoting the idea that the national parks are first and foremost the repositories of the purest examples of unsullied nature (see Ingram).

Historian William Cronon, who is enlisted as a commentator in various segments of *The National Parks*, refers to "sublime" landscapes in his widely read critique of wilderness preservation ideology. He describes them as "those rare places on earth where one had more chance than elsewhere to glimpse the face of God... where one could not help feeling insignificant and being reminded of

one's own mortality" (73). While acknowledging the special attraction of the sublime, Cronon's critique points to the trouble that comes with fixating too closely on this image of a Divinely pure and wild nature, construed as privileged in opposition to a "contaminating" human influence. As he states, "If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall" (Cronon 80–81). By disallowing a productive place for humans within nature, "save perhaps as contemplative sojourners enjoying their leisurely reverie in God's natural cathedral—then also by definition it can offer no solution to the environmental and other problems that confront us" (Cronon 81).

Cronon's appearance in the series is welcome but also "incongruous," as Jacoby (22) puts it, given the exclusion of his important and influential criticism of the very perspective that *The National Parks* seems to promote. Ignoring Cronon's caveats, *The National Parks* goes to great lengths to promote this idea of God's presence in American landscapes, romanticizing the divine foundations of America's values that are enshrined in such protected spaces. With these inspiring messages and breathtaking images as a backdrop, historian and series commentator Clay Jenkinson ties landscape to American principles of democracy, echoing a longstanding American truism that connects its majestic scenery to its greatness as a nation. He speculates that Thomas Jefferson might have opined, "American Nature is the guarantor of American Constitutional freedom. That if you don't have a genuine link to nature in a serious, even profound way, you can't be an American."

While this nationalist narrative is structured on the theme of preserving a separate and pure nature, as places that humans can only visit temporarily without destroying, Burns's portrayal of park spaces as the series unfolds is in fact more complex. Viewers learn about struggles over park creation, of tensions between preservationist ideals and the desire to increase visitation and develop facilities, such as roads and visitor centers, and the expansion of criteria for including units that do not adhere to the nature ideal, such as urban-area

parks and historical and cultural sites. *The National Parks* never strays far, however, from its core message that these park spaces are the nation's best examples of monumental, unconstructed nature, created by God and preserved through the shared wisdom of all Americans.

This representation of natural, sublime grandeur draws closely upon a dualistic view of nature and society that has guided modern thinking for centuries. The presumption of this separation has guided both the human transformation of landscapes, as well as their protection from further human encroachment and degradation. In the latter sense, the idealization of pristine and wild landscapes has fueled preservationist impulses since the nineteenth century and has persisted as a core principle in contemporary environmentalism.

This dualism, which presents true nature as places separated from human presence (except as visitors), provides Burns with a convenient, effective, and even commonsensical basis for his narrative. In being driven down this relatively smooth road toward the pure and wild, however, he avoids a more challenging pathway toward addressing race, gender, and ethnicity; one that would bring into view problems associated with the nature/society dualism. Foremost among these problems is that the same dualism also structures the multicultural theme, but in ways that that potentially conflict with *The National Parks* cheerful message. More specifically, the nature/society divide that separates pristine from fouled landscapes is the same dualistic hierarchy that separates and privileges self-proclaimed "civilized" white males from their "primitive" and otherwise "inferior" Others.

"Nature," Race, Gender, and Ethnicity

This idea of a nature separated from society remains a durable presumption despite decades of scrutiny from various scholars that have questioned its conceptualization and impacts (e.g.,

Haraway; Latour). Structuring modern thought for centuries, the dualism justified the subjugation of landscapes and peoples presumed to be "wild" by the so-called superior forces of "civilization." Its contemporary reversal in environmental discourse, reflected in *The National Parks*, seeks to praise and protect "the wild" from the civilization's excess. In either case, the nature/culture duality privileges maleness and whiteness—the purported sources of civilization—in relation to their nature-associated, and hence marginalized, Others (Cosgrove).

The marginalizing effects of the nature/society dualism in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender has been effectively criticized most notably from perspectives in the "environmental justice" literature (e.g., Bryant and Mohai; Bullard; Newton). Rather than a structure that unites perspectives across race, class, and gender lines, as presented in *The National Parks*, the nature/society dualism is viewed from these alternative perspectives as the device that helps define the preservation of "nature" (and environmentalism more broadly) as a pursuit of the white, middle- and upper-classes. The race and class-rooted tendency among environmentalists to privilege protection of the pure and wild has been critiqued by Cronon as well as by scholars, such as Dorceta Taylor (*American Environmentalism*), Carolyn Merchant, and Robert Gottlieb. They and other authors have widened the frame of American environmental history and activism to include women and racial and ethnic minorities, along with a range of urban and industrial issues once deemed "not environmental," into the scope of environmental history. Extending these concerns to the realm of parks, Byrne, and Wolch point out that "parks are not ideologically neutral spaces" (745), particularly in relation to race and ethnicity, but rather "exist for specific ecological, social, political, and economic reasons—reasons that shape how people perceive and use parks" (745).

Seeking to express that all share equally in the American experience with nature, *The National Parks* takes pains to promote the hidden histories of racial minorities and women in the United

States who played roles in park creation and management. To present this message, Burns includes African-American, Native American, and Hispanic/Latino park staff as commentators throughout the series. He informs viewers that the history of Yosemite National Park includes the hidden fact that the famed, African-American "Buffalo Soldiers" once patrolled its grounds. He describes the tenacity of Japanese immigrant and photographer George Masa, whose tireless efforts and stunning photos helped establish Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Viewers also learn about Japanese-born painter Chiura Obata, who was a frequent visitor to Yosemite, but who also was forcibly detained in an internment camp during World War II. Expressed in his highly acclaimed paintings of the park, his work is presented in the documentary as a reminder that nature's call is heard across lines of race and culture. We also hear the untold story of Lancelot Jones, an African-American key lime farmer who lived on land that would become part of Biscayne National Park. He had refused to sell his land to developers, opting instead for its preservation as federally owned, national park land. These and other such stories effectively seek to insert these marginalized voices into a narrative of nature protection. To give these stories added prominence, Burns goes so far as to create a special episode devoted to multiculturalism called "The National Parks: This is America" (available on the film's PBS Web site), which compiles the various "untold stories" segments from the entire series into a coherent, single package.

This explicit inclusion by Burns of race and ethnicity is effective, but it stops short of addressing why those stories had been untold in the first place. In addition, the portrayals decline to address any of the critiques of preservationism that more recently have made multicultural portrayals more prominent regarding environmental topics. While the national parks may be sources of inspiration that cut across racial and ethnic lines, the portrayal overstates the sense of unanimity in perception and sameness in access and experience. It ignores the origins of preservationist ideas that were explicitly race and class-based and often

exclusionary; a fact that has left a clear legacy of differentiated national park and wildland visitation patterns (see Byrne and Wolch). Reflecting American history more broadly, parks emerged as racialized spaces, marked by economic barriers to access, by expressed and perceived animosities toward the presence of minorities, and even exclusion of nonwhites (Cosgrove).

We agree with Karl Jacoby, who argues that acknowledging these facets of park history does not mean rejecting the national park idea, but more simply acknowledges its complexity. Not wanting to present any hint of cloudiness in a sunny portrayal, *The National Parks* acknowledges racial and ethnic discord in U.S. history, but only that which was external to the history and activities of the park system itself. In fact, sites such as the Manzanar internment camp for Japanese-Americans during World War II and Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, have by now been enshrined as historic sites in the national park system. The narrative suggests the Park Service to be the uncomplicated champion of justice; it has wisely preserved memories of such unfortunate events, but is never itself implicated in any past wrongs.

Racialized and Gendered Preservationism

In his critique of the wilderness concept, Cronon points out that the idea of pure nature is a cultural construct that emerged under particular historical circumstances in the U.S. While "wilderness" was generally feared by earlier generations of (white) Americans, its emerging embrace was grounded in late nineteenth-century concerns about the closing American frontier and urbanization trends, including increased immigration to cities (Cosgrove; Nash). Without the struggle against wilderness to maintain American strength, the urbanizing nation was perceived as in danger of becoming "soft" and thus "feminized." This gendered desire to protect the wild spaces that remained, expressed most vigorously by middle-

and upper-class white males, was presented as a means of avoiding physical and racial decay (Cosgrove).

Theodore Roosevelt, for instance, expressed concern that the carefully developed, American ruggedness that was born on the frontier in a struggle against harsh landscapes and resistant natives was in danger of giving way to a feminized America of comfort and complacency. He among others strongly believed that preserving the nation's hard-won, rugged character in postfrontier times, to maintain vigor and manliness, required the preservation of wild spaces to provide respite from the dangers of "over-civilization" and feminization (Gerstle). Meanwhile, immigration from marginalized parts of Europe and also Asia was changing the racial and ethnic character of American cities. An emerging Nativist trend among whites fueled Romantic images of vast Western spaces that "were as far removed geographically, culturally, and experientially from the crowded immigrant cities of New York, Philadelphia, or Chicago as they could be" (Cosgrove 35).

The image of preservationism and environmentalism as a class-identified, white enterprise has been a persistent legacy. As Cronon puts it, "Ever since the nineteenth century, celebrating wilderness has been an activity mainly for well-to-do city folks...elite urban tourists and wealthy sportsmen projected their leisure-time frontier fantasies onto the American landscape and so created wilderness in their own image" (78–79). Rural people who worked the land, white or otherwise, and the Native cultures that did not perceive a separation between nature and society, were less likely to perceive the exclusions of preservationism quite as positively.

Native Americans in the western U.S. might be viewed as the first casualties of the notion that nature needed protection from human presence, as their hunting and other resource extraction activities were increasingly viewed by preservationists as a danger to nature's purity (Spence; Keller and Turek). In fact, perhaps the most surprising and significant omission from *The National Parks* are the histories of Indian land dispossession in key parks in the West. For

instance, in *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, Mark Spence details the exclusion of Native populations from the boundaries of Yellowstone, Glacier, and Yosemite National Parks as a few examples that have become well-known among historians (see Jacoby for an elaboration on this omission in *The National Parks*).

The closest the series comes to the dispossession topic is a brief reference to the removal of Indians during the founding of Yellowstone National Park. A reference is made to the removal of Indians from Yosemite Valley by whites, although it refers to an event that took place in 1851, significantly prior to its establishment as a park. The segment on Glacier National Park points to the Great Northern Railway's exploitation of Blackfoot Indians as visual attractions for park tourists, but it fails to note the Park Service's role in fostering decades-long tension with the Blackfeet over park boundaries and resource access (Spence). A final reference was to the allowance in Alaskan national parks of Native access to ancestral lands and resources within park boundaries, only hinting, without accounting for longstanding tensions, that Indian relations with the national parks had generally improved over the years (see Keller and Turek; Spence).

Beyond the examples of Indian banishment from national park lands, other minorities and new immigrants during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were typically not in a social or economic position to visit the national parks. While economic constraints limited visitation to the financially better-off, concerns about protecting white society from the influx of both freed blacks and "undesirable" immigrants were rampant during the nadir of U.S. racism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and parks did not escape their effects. Minority visitors were often unwelcome guests in American parks, even if their presence was not officially excluded. Collective memories of denial have helped to shape minority visitation patterns even as overt discrimination has faded (Taylor, *Blacks and the Environment*).

Whether in parks, beaches, or swimming pools, Taylor suggests that racial incidents in recreation

were "pervasive" in the 1930s and 1940s, and points out that "blacks were confronted, harassed, and barred if they tried to participate in some forms of recreation on an equal footing with whites" (*Blacks and the Environment* 188). Prior to the 1930s in the national parks, Terrence Young identifies "an unpublicized policy of discouraging visits by African-Americans" (652). The South under Jim Crow witnessed the more explicit and direct exclusion of minorities from park spaces. From their founding in the early decades of the twentieth century through the middle of the 1960s, Southern state parks routinely excluded African-American visitors, while only a handful of these parks provided even segregated access (O'Brien). In the South's national parks, Young points to the extension in the 1930s of Jim Crow segregation to the facilities at Great Smoky Mountains and Shenandoah National Parks. Accommodating "local custom" on federal lands, these policies remained in place until ended by the National Park Service in 1942. The series notes this ending of the segregation policy, highlighting this positive action, but it fails to discuss or even mention the acceptance and maintenance of segregation by the Park Service during the preceding decade (see Young).

The notion that early preservationism aimed to protect racial as well as landscape integrity is evident in a 1925 speech by W. A. Stinchcomb, a park advocate from Cleveland, Ohio. Stinchcomb's speech is included in a volume called *A State Park Anthology*, edited by Herbert Evison (who would later rise through the administrative ranks of the National Park Service), and argued that parks existed to provide specifically racialized opportunities for reinvigoration and personal fitness. Expressed in the eugenics language of the time and arguing for increased park use, he presented white America with a choice: If idle time is spent building moral, mental, and physical strength, then "America is safe, but if this idle time is frittered away to pursuits tending to break down the moral fiber, to weaken the mentality, and to soften and weaken the physical fiber of our people, then America will go the way of other races and civilizations which

have decayed" (55). Implying that America is a nation of and for whites, Stinchcomb clearly indicates for whom these park spaces were being created.

Today, the notion that Americans need to preserve nature for the sake of preserving whiteness and masculinity is no longer overtly stated, and ideas about preservationism have by now settled into a more benign form of nostalgia for an imagined idyllic past. Echoes of this nostalgia can be found, for instance, in writer Dayton Duncan's comments in the prelude to the first episode of *The National Parks*:

I think that deep in our DNA is this embedded memory of when we were, not separated from the rest of the natural world, that we were part of it. The Bible talks about the Garden of Eden as that experience that we had at the beginnings of the dimmest memories as a species. And so when we enter a park, we are entering a place that has been, at least the attempt has been made to keep it like it once was. And we cross that boundary and suddenly we're no longer masters of the natural world; we're part of it. And in that sense it's like, we're 'going home.' It doesn't matter where we're from. We've come back to a place that is where we came from.

His sentiment is explicitly structured on the presumption that contemporary humans have indeed become separated from nature, and that a return to these preserved spaces provides a link to regain something of our true selves. While speaking for all with his collective "we," it is not difficult to demonstrate that he is actually speaking more directly for those of similar race/class backgrounds. Observers from backgrounds different from his may express quite divergent views. This cultural difference in perceptions of (a separate) nature is evident, for instance, even in the different histories of the two authors of this article. One author closely fits the image presented in *The National Parks*. A male member of America's white, suburban middle-class, and seemingly disconnected from nature, he inherited precisely the notion that going to such spaces was like "going home." His childhood summers were filled with family travel to national parks and other camping destinations, he hiked along small segments of the Appalachian Trail during his adolescence and young adulthood, and he took to heart Henry

David Thoreau's famous declaration, "In wildness is the preservation of the world."

The other author, also an American (by way of immigration), grew up in rural Kenya in a culture that did not perceive a boundary between nature and society. Her everyday activities involved long walks to draw water from a river for drinking and washing, cooking over an open fire with wood collected from the surrounding environs, with no electricity or plumbing, and raising food directly from her family farm's soil, subject to weather conditions. For her, a camping or hiking excursion was not unlike everyday life. Nevertheless, for a time she desired to become a member of the Girl Guides—a colonial, preservationist import that sought (like the Girl Scouts) to teach girls to appreciate nature and the outdoors. Reflecting upon the themes of this article, she recalls her mother's skeptical reaction to a request for money for membership dues and to attend a Girl Guide excursion—after all, why not just save money and have a similar experience at home? In contrast with Duncan's universalized assertion that crossing the boundary into "nature" is like "going home," this author's experience in rural Kenya suggests that nature is not everywhere viewed as a place apart.

Difference and Park Visitation

Beyond these personal stories, Duncan's emphasis on the collective "we" masks the more exclusive history of preservationism, which has left a legacy of differentiated perceptions of excursions into nature as a comforting return to one's true home. In *The National Parks*, all Americans are represented as equal in their access to the parks and in their feelings of being welcome and included in this shared experience. Given the history of racial animosity and presumptions of "who counts" as Americans (and thus who warrants park access), one would only expect to see legacies regarding how national parks and other wildland spaces are differently perceived and utilized among racial and ethnic

minorities. Indeed, there is a significant academic literature that addresses this very issue (for reviews, see Byrne and Wolch; Taylor *Blacks and the Environment*).

The narrative emphasis on unity in *The National Parks* thus misses the opportunity to address key differences regarding race and ethnicity in the history of parks and wildland spaces. While the policies of exclusion, official or colloquial, may have been changed generations ago, the handed-down memories of discrimination and/or learned avoidances of such spaces produce a legacy that continues to shape patterns of park usage or nonuse (Taylor *Blacks and the Environment*; West). It has been well-established that nonwhites and ethnic minorities tend to visit the national parks and wildland areas in proportionally smaller numbers than do white Americans (e.g., Byrne and Wolch; Johnson et al.; Tierney et al.; Taylor et al.; Washburne; West), and a host of factors help to explain the differentiated pattern.

Speaking broadly, Byrne and Wolch suggest that ethnic and racial differences in park use emerge "from the interplay of historically and culturally contingent contexts of park provision; characteristics of park users; physical and ecological characteristics of park spaces; and how both users and nonusers perceive those spaces" (745). Such perceptions include concerns about perceived discrimination, expectations of discrimination, and even violence that may potentially be encountered at such sites.

A study by Johnson et al. of minority recreation participation on federal forest land in the rural South suggests that both cultural preference and income help explain lower wildland visitation among African-Americans. However, informal interviewing suggested "racial antagonism" as another explanation. The respondents pointed to unofficial racial demarcations in the nearby national forest, suggesting that "blacks and whites are aware of certain tacit rules that make the forest, in effect, not 'free' or neutral territory but racially and socially defined places" (116). Among concerns inhibiting use by African-Americans were the potential for harassment by whites while

camping coupled with the fact that no security would be present in the isolated areas (116).

Far beyond the South, in Los Angeles County, California, a different study suggests that perceived discrimination is one among four factors that explain lower visitation to such sites among nonwhite survey respondents (other decisive variables were ethnic group preferences, education, and financial ability) (Tierney et al.). Although not perceived as a strong barrier to visiting wildland areas, minority respondents displayed significant divergence from white perceptions, which "limits their desire and/or ability to visit undeveloped natural areas, compared to European Americans" (276).

Assessing African-American visitation to Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP), Erickson et al. suggest that cultural preference is a significant factor—that "many African-Americans in the area were not raised to travel to RMNP" (541). They argue that such a tendency is conditioned by history and is not a product of simple choice. While reasons for nonvisitation might include financial constraints or real/perceived discrimination, "this cultural group created their own recreational practices in locations they deemed as safe and enjoyable. Knowledge of how and where to recreate was learned and passed down through multiple generations" (541). The authors set these preferences in historical context stating, "These natural areas have traditionally been spaces where Whites have recreated, and this practice of segregation of recreation continues even though the lines are not visible to the casual observer" (543).

Beyond these and other empirical park visitation studies, Mei Mei Evans draws a compelling conceptual connection between the nature concept and relative racial exclusiveness, connecting the latter to the fear of violence among members of various marginalized groups. She suggests, "U.S. Nature or wildness as culturally constructed locations have been foreclosed to women, people of color, and gays and lesbians. This foreclosure has had material consequences for those belonging to these social identities" (183). Those who are not of the privileged group "are viewed as intruders

or otherwise out of place when they venture into or attempt to inhabit Nature" (183). In other words, while the idea of visiting a "natural" site may provide for many a feeling of comfort and security, not everyone reacts in such a way. She points to the story of Evelyn White, an African-American woman, who expresses that her internalized fear of getting "closer-to-nature" is linked to a history of violence against her ancestors that encountered whites in rural wooded areas, away from the eyes of potential witnesses. As already noted, from the late nineteenth and through most of the twentieth century, African-Americans often encountered, as Evans puts it, an "historic foreclosure of natural locations in the U.S. to blacks" (186).

Equally telling is Evans's recounting of Eddy Harris's attempt to document a canoe trip down the Mississippi River as a modern-day Huck Finn. An African-American man, Harris at first denied any racial component to his experience of venturing into nature. And yet he found that "there are some subtle rules being worked" (188) regarding his cultural entry into these natural places. He encountered the rules that so often make "nature" the province of white males in the U.S., such as when "shotgun-toting 'rednecks'" appeared at his riverside campsite in the state of Mississippi (189). As Evans notes, "What began for him as something 'innocent' and uncomplicated—an enactment of masculine endeavor in the out of doors—has now become inflected with racial overtones that may be life-threatening" (189). The experience of Eddy Harris on the Mississippi River points to unwritten rules of who gets access to U.S. nature, evident in the responses of white observers who asked, "what is *he* doing out here?" (188).

Identifying nature in America as a racialized and masculinized space, as a place where, "young and old U.S. American [white, heterosexual] men continue to enact the ritual encounter with Wild Nature in order to claim or reclaim their manhood" (183), Evans sums up the potential fear with startling directness: "Whereas straight white men look to nature to offer up something—the 'elements' or large animals with big teeth—against

which they can prove themselves; women, people of color, and gays and lesbians go into nature in fear of encountering straight white men” (191).

Conclusion

Not all of the preceding examples are directly related to America’s national parks, and surely those “subtle rules” are not normally enforced in terrifying ways. However, the examples all point to the tensions that exist in a historical account that juxtaposes a dualistic presumption of “true nature’s” purity with a social emphasis on race and ethnicity. *The National Parks* is compelling and inspirational, and certainly benefits greatly from its multicultural emphasis. However, in opting to maintain an upbeat message, the series dodges opportunities to show how the difficult racial history of the United States is reflected in the stories of park spaces.

After a similar winning effort with Burns’ 1990 series, *The Civil War*, historian Leon Litwack made an observation that also applies to *The National Parks*. He pointed out that filmmakers on historical issues tend to avoid difficult topics, aiming instead for uplifting themes and unifying messages: “...it is usually safe, risk-free, inoffensive, upbeat, reassuring, comforting, optimistic history, more often than not an exercise in self-congratulation and a celebration of consensus” (126). Stung by the academic criticisms of *The Civil War*, which also emphasized the representation of race, Burns asked of the accusing historians: “Had they forgotten the difference between literary scholarship and the demands of a popular medium?” (173).

One way to answer is to say “perhaps;” scholars of varying persuasions have their particular axes to grind, and one cannot expect a filmmaker to please everyone. We do know that Burns can effectively address issues of race in America. His extraordinary 2005 documentary, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, presents a moving portrayal of the African-American boxer’s defiant and unapologetic approach to life

during the depths of American racism in the early twentieth century. *The National Parks*, however, is a different kind of story; one that captures and expresses popular and unifying nationalist values of God, country, and family, and which seems to demand a “feel good” narrative. It is difficult to fault Burns for complying. At the same time, there are multiple ways to address a popular audience, and Burns might have followed a more challenging pathway for presenting his multicultural story of the national parks.

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