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“Ours to Displace, Ours to Protect”: The Borderlands of American Indian Histories, Whiteness, and the Wilderness Ideal

Tori Lewis

When wilderness is mentioned, most White Americans¹ would be hard-pressed to think about landscape histories and human histories as one. We are fed ideas of “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (*Wilderness Act 1964*). Yet painfully few of these lands have always been places where humans do not remain. Histories of the landscape are fundamentally linked to human life, and the creation of wilderness space almost always necessitates the disempowerment, displacement, or disappearance of the indigenous² people who held, and continue to hold, deep connections to those places. National parks, broader landscapes of focused conservation, the presence of wilderness at the heart of what is American; these all were carefully and violently constructed within a broader dialogue of place and place-making, and the borders of these spaces hold histories of land seizure, hegemonic identity politics, cultural erasure, and physical violence.

The question here, then, is: in what ways has the connection between wilderness construction and systems of power been hidden from those who buy into the wilderness ideal, and in what ways can we use borders and border-making to recognize these connections and their histories again? Borders, whether physical, cultural, or intellectual, often define what we can and

cannot see; thus, they provide an excellent way to begin to explore the interplay between the wilderness ideal and systems of power. Even more specifically, borders and border-making inform the ways in which we create, observe, and perpetuate the linkage of wilderness creation and human violence. This essay explores the ways in which border-making in the American West was, and continues to be, a settler-colonialist project based in physical and epistemic violence against indigenous peoples. Ultimately, then, understanding these processes of border-making is critical to understanding borderlands politics of location and identity as well as the violence inherent in the creation of a White national identity.

Violence of Space

Spatial and physical violence was pervasive throughout the American West in the 1800s, as anti-indigenous sentiment coursed through the doctrines of Manifest Destiny and the frontier. Samuel Bowles, an advocate for the “preservation” of Yosemite Valley and areas of Colorado, summarized contemporary sentiments about American Indians: “We know they are not our equals; we know that our right to the soil, as a race capable of its superior improvement, is above theirs; and let us act openly and directly our faith [sic]... Let us say to him, you are our ward, our child, the victim of our destiny, ours to displace, ours also to protect” (Bowles 145-146). White Americans used this patronizing and dehumanizing position to justify shameless land grabs, utter disregard for treaties, and all-out warfare in the name of racial superiority. As White historian Mark David Spence points out in *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, while White political figures recognized the ways in which these policies were unjust, they rationalized them by arguing that indigenous groups were “doomed to ‘vanish’” and that the government was helpless to ensure their survival in any regard (Spence 27).

¹ I use “White” and “White American” instead of “Euro-American” as settler-colonialism and dispossession have as a whole been informed by an investment in the construction of Whiteness rather than in the actual ethnic origin of those colonizing and dispossessing. Whiteness here thus directly speaks to the systems of power at play.

² As a White settler I do not have the authority to make definitive choices about labeling indigenous groups. Wherever possible, I have used names of nations or tribes. When referring to larger histories of settler-colonialism, I use “indigenous” and “American Indian” in an attempt to underscore indigenous sovereignty and continuing right to land and challenge White notions of Americanness.

The fact that government policies assumed the cultural and physical death of American Indian nations means that immense violence cannot come as a surprise. Indeed, immense violence was central to the construction of national park boundaries and in the parallel construction of American Indian reservations. Black Elk, an Oglala Lakota holy man, stated that “the Wasichus³ came, and they have made little islands for us and other little islands for the four-leggeds, and always these islands are becoming smaller, for around them surges the gnawing flood of the Wasichu” (9). Here, as Spence points out, “Black Elk understood all too well that wilderness preservation went hand in hand with native dispossession” (3).

Yellowstone, widely regarded as the first national park in the world, in many ways set the precedent for violent takeovers of American Indian land. Before the park’s creation, the area was widely used by the Crow, Shoshone, Bannock, and Sheep Eater nations as hunting and gathering grounds. However, this use was ignored by White settlers, who believed that “Yellowstone held no real significance for the surrounding native communities” (59). Park boundaries were created to protect the land and game from private interests, with little to no say given to the indigenous nations of the area. Originally, each of the nations was relegated to a reservation, but maintained rights to hunt outside of the reservation, including inside the Yellowstone boundaries. However, Whites quickly began to view American Indians who used these rights in the park as “ungrateful interlopers, who, instead of appreciating the tireless efforts of reservation agents and Christian missionaries, chose to take advantage of peaceful tourists and the government’s unprotected game animals” (60) because they did not fit neatly into a White supremacist framework of Yellowstone’s space and purpose. In order to cater to this White ideal of “peaceful tourists,” the United States government

attempted to transform porous and arbitrary park boundaries into zones of policed racial identity. This took place through increasing militarization of the park; by 1879, Superintendent Philetus Norris stated that the goal of park officials was to convince “all the surrounding tribes... that they can visit the park [only] at the peril of a conflict with... the civil and military officers of the government” (quoted in Spence 57).

Thus, despite the continuation of legal hunting rights for American Indians, the military force at Yellowstone carried through with the settler-colonialist project by coercing indigenous groups to forgo these rights and forcing them onto reservation land. When groups dared to exercise their rights despite the military’s threats, they risked paying high prices. In one heinous yet unsurprising moment, a Bannock camp found on the land was stripped of their rights, property, and even lives:

Constable Manning decided that only a large and well-armed posse could effectively check the movements of native hunters. On July 10, 1895, he deputized twenty-six men and then set out to find a large group of Indians he had encountered a few weeks earlier. Three days later, they surprised a camp of twenty-six Bannock; confiscated their property, which included nine tepees, twenty saddles, twenty blankets, seven rifles, one horse, and nine packs of elk meat; and arrested all for violating the game laws of Wyoming. Disarmed, tormented, and forced to march at gunpoint since early dawn, the Bannock grew weary and afraid for their lives when night began to fall. As they were approaching a thick stand of timber, Constable Manning ordered his deputies to load their weapons. The women and children who made up the rear of the procession saw this and cried out in fear, which caused the nine Bannock men in front to bolt for the woods. According to Ben

³ A somewhat derogatory term referring to non-indigenous people, here specifically to White people.

Senowin and other survivors, the posse immediately opened fire, and an old man named Se-wa-a-gat was shot in the back four times and killed. Another was injured, and two children were lost. (66)

When Bannock tribal members took the case to the United States Supreme Court in 1896 in *Ward v. Race Horse*, they were ultimately told that, despite explicit treaty rights for the Bannock, the White military had done nothing wrong. The treaty was seen by the court as a temporary, not lasting, agreement due to White American political assumptions and ambitions at the time of its creation; thus the justices and the military were able to entirely ignore that it existed in the first place (67). In essence, this decision made it possible for the United States government to ignore any boundaries set in previous treaties with American Indian nations, and to set their own without regard for native communities.

This self-righteous expulsion of American Indians was not unique to Yellowstone. The creation of Yosemite National Park shared a similarly violent history. Spence writes that White settlers and miners were exploiting the landscape of Northern California, causing a series of conflicts between themselves and Sierra Miwoks and Paiutes. Because of this, multiple military campaigns were launched to try to forcibly evict American Indians from their land, and “the ‘discovery’ of Yosemite Valley in 1851 occurred during a military campaign to subdue the peoples of the central Sierra Nevada and relocate them to the San Joaquin Valley” (102). White military members saw no ethical problems in relocation and even took pleasure in this endeavor: Major James Savage claimed, “I intend to be a bigger devil in this Indian paradise than old Satan ever was” (Dowie 3).

Despite facing violence from the United States military, the Ahwahneechee (a smaller band of Miwok, also called the Yosemite, who had lived in the valley for thousands of years) refused to recognize the borders created by Whites, resisting

eviction through simply and skillfully avoiding areas with White settlers and, increasingly, White upper-class tourism (10). However, this soon proved impossible to maintain. In the late 1880s, a group of leaders from various nations in the Yosemite Valley sent a petition to the United States Congress:

...[T]hey complained of being “poorly-clad paupers and unwelcome guests, silently the objects of curiosity or contemptuous pity to the throngs of strangers who yearly gather in this our own land and heritage.” They further noted that cattle and horses in the valley destroyed “all of the tender roots, berries and the few nuts that formed the[ir] sustenance... The destruction of every means of support for ourselves and our families by the rapacious acts of whites,” they continued, “will shortly result in the total exclusion of the remaining remnants of our tribes from this our beloved valley.” (Spence 110)

The plea received no answer from Congress. Instead, in an attempt to gain even more control over the Ahwahneechee population while also exploiting them as tourist attractions and sources of inexpensive park labor, government (and eventually park) officials built an “Indian Village” and confined the Ahwahneechee to the area. Once the Ahwahneechee were contained in the village, they were subjected to a variety of discriminatory and patronizing practices, such as receiving more intense punishment than Whites for offenses determined by park and federal officials (for instance, drinking or gambling within the park) and having wages from work inside the park withheld by White park officials as under-the-table forced insurance policies (118-119).

Despite relative tolerance for this racist treatment, the Ahwahneechee still were not safe from total dispossession; by the 1930s, a call to “preserve Yosemite as a representation of ‘original American wilderness’” by White preservationists

pushed them into an even more liminal status (125). In order to create this wilderness space, the United States government used new blood quantum laws to argue that the majority of the Ahwahneechee did not have a pure enough bloodline to be considered legitimate members of the tribe, and thus to have rights to live within the park (129).

Park officials thus determined that Yosemite natives could remain in the valley only as long as they held long-term employment in the park (the majority of work available was seasonal) and paid rent on the village shacks to the park service. Housing for only sixty-six people was kept, and as people were forced out of their homes, their previous housing was destroyed (126). As Spence relates, “[b]y 1969, only a few structures remained, and the last residents were relocated to a government housing area for park employees. Abandoned and dilapidated, the Indian village soon vanished in the flames of a firefighting practice session” (130).

Violence of Place and Epistemology

Violence is most noticeable when it manifests itself across physical borders, either through bodily harm or through displacement. However, just as important to recognize is the violence that occurs with regards to cultural, intellectual, and spiritual boundaries of place and self. Border-making happens in these spaces too, and for many American Indians, this process looks vastly different from the Western process. As influential Dakota theologian and American Indian activist and leader Vine Deloria, Jr., aptly points out, Western philosophy tends to “force natural experience and knowledge into predetermined categories” (4). This both explains the United States government’s need for strict spatial boundaries and also grounds its process of border-making. Westerners constructed a division between man and nature; this physically manifested itself in the separation of spaces for wilderness preservation and American Indian life. From this standpoint, one can understand why

White Americans focused on policing the boundaries between parkland and reservations. However, this division runs counter to American Indian thought, as Deloria writes:

The best description of Indian metaphysics was the realization that the world, and all its possible experiences, constituted a social reality, a fabric of life in which everything had the possibility of intimate knowing relationships because, ultimately, everything was related. (2)

According to this structure, border-making was violent not only in how it was carried out but also in its very existence: it fragmented American Indian identity through refusing to see the multiple dimensions of place that inherently cannot be divided according to indigenous metaphysics.

This does not mean that American Indians had no borders; on the contrary, as historian Juliana Barr points out, a complex geography of place and space existed throughout North America far before Westerners began colonization. Indeed, with regards to usufruct rights⁴, “Indians could tell Europeans exactly where their lands ended and others’ began” (16). However, “those spaces may not always easily correlate with lines drawn across a landscape... In other words we cannot seek to recognize and read native borders by simply redrawing a North American map with a different set of lines; we must still seek the ideas, attitudes, and practices that gave meaning to diverse territorial claims” (10). This means that it is crucial to see “‘the native landscape as both a cultural and moral space, a place where mythical beings, ancestral spirits, daily life, and geopolitical concerns coexisted and interplayed.’ As such the spatial dimension of Indian assertions of power has not yet been wholly recognized” by White culture (8). This lack of recognition of indigenous borders

⁴ Usufruct rights here mean the right to use of land short of its destruction – essentially, land held communally but managed individually.

on the part of Whites as a whole and the United States government in particular thus stems at least in part from an inability (or refusal) to see borders beyond discrete lines in the sand.

It is important to note, however, that violence surrounding border-making was not wholly based in a lack of border legibility to Whites. Many of the areas subject to conservation-based boundary redrawing already had borders defined by a system of public and private land ownership that was incredibly legible to Whites. For instance, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo:

...obligated the American government to legally respect all existing land grants and their attendant rights within this territory. Despite that commitment, the U.S. Surveyor General's Office and the Court of Private Land Claims often dismissed such preexisting claims, citing as a justification the "inexactitude" of Spanish and Mexican records and the resulting legal "ambiguity." This convenient ambiguity was exploited by large, well-capitalized companies and individuals who purchased the "legal" titles to large grants... and then turned around and sold them at a profit... And although more Hispano land grants were validated in northern New Mexico than elsewhere in the state, much of what had been communal land found its way into the hands of the Forest Service. (Kosek 9)

Additionally, borders drawn in treaties between American Indian nations and the United States government were later ignored by the very same government, as in *Ward v. Race Horse*. Thus, White violence toward the racial "other" surrounding border drawing and erasure happened both deliberately and unknowingly.

In a similar fashion, the hard border in Western thought between man and nature was not just inherently created by Western metaphysics but instead was also deliberately constructed in order to justify the creation of an exclusionary national

identity in the United States based in Whiteness. As Turner argued, American exceptionalism was born out of the "frontier," a borderlands where man fought against and ultimately conquered wilderness. The division between man and nature was critical to the success of this narrative. However, Turner's view of "man" was almost exclusively white, while American Indians were seen as just as wild as their surroundings:

The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe... Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion... Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs, any more than the first phenomenon was a case of reversion to the Germanic mark. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American. (Turner 39)

In this way, then, Turner appropriates American Indian histories, twists them to fit into his own view of Indianness, and then uses a colonization of both Indianness and "wilderness" to redraw the boundaries of American Whiteness. In a similar vein, White settlers usurped American Indian names and nationalities: militiaman Lafayette Bunnell proposed to name the Yosemite Valley after "the tribe of Indians which we met leaving their homes in this valley, perhaps never to return... [The name was] suggestive, euphonious and certainly American" (quoted in Dowie 4).

As White settlers began to run out of "wild" space to colonize, preservation became a way to maintain this sense of White Americanness. As environmental historian William Cronon states, "[t]he frontier might be gone, but the frontier experience could still be had if only wilderness were preserved" (481). Thus, with the growth of

preservation and the wilderness ideal, romanticizing American Indians as central to the White American narrative depended upon a view of American Indians as people of the past and thus as not a threat to Whiteness or to “untrammeled land.” This posed a problem, as American Indians living in “wilderness areas” were both clearly alive and on the border between past Indianness (or at least, Indianness as White Americans imagined it) and present Whiteness due to cultural assimilation. In order to make romanticization possible for White Americans, American Indians were forced to perform their identities in ways that conformed within the borders of what White Americans deemed “Indian” and also drew boundaries between the present and what anthropologist Ana María Alonso terms the “epic past”: a deliberately constructed and romanticized memory of a collective past (232) that in this case was used to limit visibility of American Indians in the present.

The Ahwahneechee living in Yosemite in the late 1800s and early 1900s were familiar with this performance. As Spence points out, their lives showed “close links between tourism and the presentation of past-tense Indian culture” (112). “Indian” villages constructed by park officials were long viewed by Whites as tourist destinations and windows to the past. This vision of the past was often entirely constructed in order to fit racial and cultural boundaries of Indianness drawn by Whites. For instance, a festival called Indian Field Days was established by park officials to “revive and maintain [the] interest of Indians in their own games and industries, particularly basketry and bead work” (quoted in Spence 117). For this event, Ahwahneechee men and women were paid for donning traditional clothing of Great Plains nations (Spence 117) - groups with which they shared little in common. This practice thus drew borders around American Indian communities such as the Ahwahneechee that erased their national identities and assigned them to a place separate from the White modern world, a process that was finally completed in Yosemite when the final

Ahwahneechee people were evicted from the park in 1969.

Concluding Thoughts

The histories of American Indians in the creation of “wilderness” spaces are constantly erased by White supremacy but impossible to deny. Indeed, the borders created through “othering” are inherently tied to the border-making processes of the “wild” areas of the American West. As Jake Kosek astutely states:

Nature and difference are held together by common social histories: nature’s repression, management, and improvement form well-worn paths that have defined the savage against the saved, the wild against the civilized, and the pure against the contaminated. These common histories create possibilities for couplings that animate contemporary debates about colonial legacies in troubling ways. Moreover, they do so with such regularity that these couplings and dichotomies come to be understood as common sense. (Kosek xiv)

This tie is important for several reasons. First, decolonization of American Indians and land held by the United States cannot occur without understanding the complexities of colonization processes. In the United States, this means understanding the historical ties between preservation and White physical and cultural violence toward American Indians, and the ways in which these ties defined – and were defined by – physical borders in the landscape as well as intellectual borderlands. Second, this is a process that continues to this day. The White environmental movement in the United States was born out of preservationist and conservationist schools of thought, and we cannot use these uncritically without perpetuating violence against American Indians. Additionally, the United States conception of preservation and wilderness has been and

continues to be exported to developing countries, where we can view the same general processes of brutality, displacement, and epistemic violence at play⁵. It is not too late to critically examine models made to increase environmental health using a framework of environmental justice that honors indigenous voices and power. Through doing this, we can at least begin to challenge histories and realities of colonization and imagine a truly decolonized world.

⁵ For more on this subject, see Dowie, Ramachandra Guha’s “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third-World Critique” (1989), David Harmon’s “Cultural Diversity, Human Subsistence, and the National Park Ideal” (1987), and Michael Lewis’ *Inventing Global Ecology* (2004).

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