

7-1-2016

Reclaiming the Land: Indigenous Articulations of Environmentalism at Bears Ears

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**RECLAIMING THE LAND: INDIGENOUS ARTICULATIONS
OF ENVIRONMENTALISM AT BEARS EARS**

BY

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THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Masters of Arts
American Studies**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

July 2016

**RECLAIMING THE LAND: INDIGENOUS ARTICULATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTALISM AT
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how an inter-tribal coalition in Southern Utah is strategically mobilizing environmental ethics in order to guarantee access to tribal homelands. Facing serious threat from Anglo communities in Utah who use race and religion to produce themselves as the authentic local population, the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition forges new kinds of alliances with environmental groups and appropriates conservation and preservation ethics in order to reclaim the land. Indigenous articulations of environmentalism at Bears Ears disrupt the colonial temporal and spatial logics that undergird dominant American imaginaries of wilderness and antiquity, reattaching Native peoples to the land by centering Native American relationships to the natural world as indispensable to the future of preservation and conservation in the U.S. I employ a critical indigenous studies lens to critique how tribal governments contending with settler colonial politics of recognition strategically engage environmentalist rhetoric and align with conservation groups to assert an authentic indigeneity and guarantee their access to the land.

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*For long generations, we did not know how to petition the government for redress of the wrongs committed against the land, our societies, our traditions, and our health. But now we do know how to bring our aspirations forward and take this opportunity to do so.*¹

Since the mid-nineteenth century, American Environmentalism has been central to the U.S. settler-colonial project of land accumulation and nation building.² As a settler formation of national belonging, environmentalism is responsible for massive Native land dispossession in the American West, severing Indigenous people's physical and political ties to the land through colonial, racist articulations of nature. This thesis explores how an inter-tribal coalition in Southern Utah is strategically mobilizing environmental ethics in order to guarantee access to their homelands. Facing serious threat from Anglo communities in Utah who use race and religion to produce themselves as the authentic local population, the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition forges strategic alliances with environmental groups and appropriates conservation and preservation ethics in order to reclaim the land. Indigenous articulations of environmentalism at Bears Ears disrupt the colonial temporal and spatial logics that undergird dominant American imaginaries of wilderness and antiquity, reattaching Native peoples to the land by centering Native American relationships to the natural world as indispensable to the future of preservation and conservation in the U.S.

In what follows, I trace a brief history of American Environmentalism in order to make legible the colonial, racist logics that structure land ethics in the U.S. This history brings to the light the ways in which the Inter-Tribal Coalition at Bears Ears is strategically re-articulating

¹ "Our Proposal," <http://www.bearscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Bears-Ears-Inter-Tribal-Coalition-Proposal-10-15-15.pdf>, 1.

² For more on settler colonialism as a structure of power see Patrick Wolfe's "Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native" and Jodi Byrd's *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*. For critiques of settler nativism see Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's "Decolonization is not a metaphor."

environmental imaginaries to re-center Native belonging. Then, I examine the history of Mormon settlement and religious meaning-making in Utah. I demonstrate how local Utahans make claims to the land by connecting Mormon sacred belonging to a white working class ethnic identity. Finally, I turn to the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition's proposal for a National Monument, offering an analysis of how a group of Indigenous peoples in southern Utah strategically navigate competing settler imaginaries of land to assert Native belonging, protect access to their homelands, and gain Tribal management of public lands. First, a brief introduction to Bears Ears is in order.

Bears Ears Background

In July 2015, leaders from the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Pueblo of Zuni and Ute Indian Tribe formed the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition.³ They are involved in an ongoing struggle to convince President Obama to designate 1.9 million acres of land in southern Utah a U.S. Presidential National Monument they call Bears Ears, named after the Bears Ears Buttes. National Monuments are protected public lands designated by U.S. Presidents using the Antiquities Act of 1906; they are typically managed by federal land management agencies, including the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, or the Bureau of Land Management.⁴ Importantly, the Inter-Tribal Coalition's proposal recommends an unprecedented management plan for public lands in which the U.S. government acts as a Trustee and the Tribes control the management of Bears Ears. Bears Ears National Monument would be the first public lands under tribal management not within a designated Indian reservation. Lands designated as National Monuments are protected against economic development from oil and gas, timber, and coal industries and severely limit motorized vehicle

³ "Who We Are," <http://www.bearssearscoalition.org/about-the-coalition/>

⁴ "How We Designate Monuments," <http://wilderness.org/article/how-we-designate-monuments>

recreation. The Inter-Tribal Coalition is allied in this ongoing struggle with the non-profit organization Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA). Founded in 1983, SUWA's sole mission is to protect "wilderness quality" land in Utah. SUWA is the most prominent environmentalist group working in Southern Utah today.⁵ Together, the Inter-Tribal Coalition and SUWA make up the movement to Protect Bears Ears.

The opposition to Protect Bears Ears is led by Congressman Rob Bishop, a Mormon who represents Utah's 1st Congressional District, whose Public Land Initiative (PLI) is the counter proposal to the Bears Ears National Monument. The PLI suggests parceling up the land in question for different purposes including recreation, economic development, and conservation, guaranteeing access for oil and gas exploration and motorized vehicle recreation. Much of the control of the land would go to local counties, limiting the role of the federal government to land parcels designated as National Conservation Areas. Importantly, the PLI bans any future president from using the Antiquities Act to designate protected public lands.⁶ Bishop calls the PLI a grand bargain rooted in the belief that conservation and economic development can coexist,⁷ but environmentalists have criticized the proposal for offering much of the land up to drilling and failing to offer meaningful environmental protection. SUWA calls the PLI an "un-wilderness bill" whose passage would be devastating for Utah wild lands.⁸ As of the time of this writing, the struggle over Bears Ears is ongoing.

Chapter 2: American Environmental Imaginaries

⁵ "About SUWA," <http://suwa.org/about-suwa/>

⁶ "Public Lands," <http://robbishop.house.gov/issues/issue/?IssueID=3623>

⁷ Roma Young, "Commission approves Public Lands recommendation" in *San Juan Record* (12 August 2015), http://www.sjrnews.com/view/full_story/26801289/article-Commission-approves-Public-Lands-recommendation?instance=home_news_1st_right

⁸ "Bishop's Grand Bargain is a Grand Bust," <http://suwa.org/bishops-grand-bargain-grand-bust-2/>

The history of environmentalism in the United States is in part a story of racialized violence and land theft against Native peoples. Since its emergence in the mid-nineteenth century, American environmentalism has expressed land ethics that alibi the settler colonial project of land accumulation, reproduce settler formations of national belonging, and fuel racist anxieties about brown bodies overtaking the nation. In what follows, I rely on the work of other scholars to chart a brief history of environmentalism in the U.S. First, I trace the mid-nineteenth century roots of the American imaginary of wilderness as a landscape devoid of human inhabitation. As an expression of the emergent ideology of Manifest Destiny, the effort to create wildernesses through the establishment of National Parks led to massive Indian removals in the west. Then, I examine the ideas of early twentieth century conservationists and preservationists who believed that safeguarding pure nature through the “science” of land management was vital to protecting the racial health of the nation. Finally, I show how the enduring colonial and racist logics that produced environmentalist thinking in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shaped anti-immigration environmental legislation at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Wilderness, National Parks, and Indian Removal

Since the mid-late nineteenth century, the idea of wilderness as a primordial landscape devoid of human presence has conditioned the ways in which Indigenous people negotiate access their homelands in the American West. The establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 represents a shift in American thinking in the mid-nineteenth century towards the notion that true wilderness was devoid of human presence. Prior to this, wilderness was characterized by the presence of Indians. In fact, according to historian Mark David Spence, the idea for an Indian Wilderness preserve in the American West inspired the creation of the National Parks. In 1833,

the American Romantic painter George Catlin proposed the creation of a “nation’s park” in which tourists could view the Indian in his natural habitat.⁹ Catlin envisioned, “a “magnificent area” of land in all its “pristine beauty and wildness...where the world could see for ages to come the native Indian in his classic attire, galloping his horse...amid the fleeting herds of elks and buffaloes...a *nation’s* Park containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of nature’s beauty!”¹⁰ For Catlin and other Americans in the 1830s, Indians were a crucial part of what made wilderness authentic; rather than marring the pristine landscape, they represented a pure and timeless relationship between the Indian and wild nature.

The widely-held belief that the Indian Wilderness of the American West was in danger of extinction gave it an ephemeral quality, evoking feelings of nostalgia for an American landscape of the past. In the words of Catlin, “the desolating hands of cultivating man” and its inevitable movement west threatened these sublime landscapes and their Indian inhabitants.¹¹ Thus, the Indian who emerged from the American Romantic imagination of the late eighteenth and early-mid nineteenth centuries was characterized by his temporal and spatial connection to the past, reinforcing the notion that Indians – as inherently incompatible with civilization – were a race marked for death.¹²

Catlin’s vision for a Nation’s Park never came to fruition as ideas about the Indian’s physical relationship to pure nature radically shifted in the mid-nineteenth century. According to Spence, heightened Westward expansion into territory won in the Mexican-American War led to the emergence of Manifest Destiny, producing western landscapes anew as pure, unpeopled

⁹ Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹² See Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

wildernesses predestined to be discovered and settled by Americans.¹³ Such myth-making, Spence argues, effectively “erased the human history of western North America and replaced it with an atemporal *natural* history that somehow prefigured American conquests of these lands.”¹⁴ This atemporal natural history imagined primordial Indians as part the untouched natural landscape, their bones and cultural artifacts buried deep under the earth alongside the remains of other mythical beasts belonging to an ancient time. The unpeopled wildernesses of National Parks created “the facts on the ground”¹⁵ for the Manifest Destiny myth by preserving the landscape as it was imagined to look at the moment America discovered it. The presence of actual Indigenous peoples living in these landscapes was no longer romantic; instead, they marred the experience of pure nature and disrupted the myth of manifest destiny. Living Indians were not only ideologically disruptive to the National Park wilderness, they were perceived as a physical menace to both tourists and the land: in the early years of Yellowstone, park officials worried that Indians still living near the park and using its lands for subsistence scared away tourists, while their campfires and hunting practices posed serious threats to wilderness and game.¹⁶

With the creation of National Parks, colonial bureaucracy, lawmaking, and U.S. military power flourished. U.S. military and state militias carried out the Indian Removals that accompanied the creation of the National parks and policed park territory. Native peoples who were not forced to relocate to reservations were economically strangled as newly enforced laws severely limited their access to land and resources. In California, for example, Indian removals from Yosemite were one of a series of “violent, racially-driven dispossessions... massacres, and

¹³ Spence, *Dispossessing Wilderness*, 25-30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

impoverishments that...reduced the Native population...from 250,000 to 16,000 within half a century.”¹⁷ Despite this, Indigenous peoples continued to use the land for ceremonial and subsistence purposes, fought for access to the land in state and federal courts, and took part in the new Park economies by performing for tourists and selling crafts and food to Park visitors.¹⁸

Spence highlights in particular detail the legal resistance of the Blackfeet in Montana to the anti-Indian policies of Glacier National Park. Facing in intense starvation and economic strangulation, the Blackfeet sold this land to the U.S. Government in 1895 for \$1.5 million with the stipulation that they would have free access to continue to use the land for subsistence hunting and fishing, and collecting timber. When park officials tried to bar the Blackfeet from Glacier in violation of the sale agreement, the tribe fought for their right to use the land through the colonial judicial system, taking their land claims case to the U.S. District Court in Montana and the U.S. Court of Claims.¹⁹ Spence argues that opposition to the park “became a fundamental expression of Blackfeet national identity” as Blackfeet people refused to accept colonial imaginaries of wilderness that denied them their right to their homelands.²⁰

In the early days of Glacier, Yosemite, and Yellowstone National Parks, Indigenous peoples were hired to play Indian for tourists, recalling the Indian Wilderness proposed by George Caitlin fifty years prior. While the colonial authority attempted to cleanse the interior of the parks of any Indian presence, park peripheries –entrances, hotels, and railroad depots – became liminal spaces in which Indigenous actors performed settler imaginaries of Indian life. At Glacier National Park, the Great Northern Railroad ran a national advertising campaign for the park that

¹⁷ Jake Kosek, *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 156.

¹⁸ Spence, *Dispossessing Wilderness*, 47, 103.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 56-71.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

turned the Blackfeet into the “Glacier Indians.”²¹ In 1899 there was a proposal to build a “living Indian exhibit” on Dot Island in Yellowstone Lake in which Indigenous people would be paid to “act out” traditional Indian life for tourists.²² And at Yosemite in the early twentieth century, the National Park Service paid the Awahneechee to dress up as Plains Indians to take part in the annual staging of “Indian Field Days” in which they competed in Indian skills contests like equestrianism and basket making.²³ In these peripheral spaces, settler nostalgia for the Indian Wilderness of the western frontier collided with new desires for the unblemished, pure wilderness of Manifest Destiny myth.

Imaginations of wilderness shaped by American environmentalism contain conflicting spatial, temporal, and ontological productions of the Indian. Within these imaginations, Indians are simultaneously absorbed into the primordial natural history of the nation as bones buried deep underground, violently excluded from wilderness as racialized menaces to nature, and consumed as romantic representations by settler audiences nostalgic for the American frontier. These confusing and contradictory imaginations help shape the slippery representational and symbolic terrain of the Indian that must be navigated by Indigenous peoples within the larger plane of U.S. politics of recognition.

Pure Nature and Racial Purity

When John Muir ventured into Yosemite National Park in the first decades of the twentieth century, he imagined himself walking in the untouched, primordial landscapes of God’s creation.²⁴ Muir’s fantastical belief that he was traveling in a landscape where no foot had trod before mere decades after the U.S. military forcibly removed the Awahneechee demonstrates

²¹ Ibid., 85.

²² Ibid., 68-70.

²³ Ibid., 53.

²⁴ Kosek, *Understories*, 155-157.

how quickly the fantasy of wilderness as pure, unblemished nature had taken hold of the American imagination. Muir belonged to a group of conservationists and preservationists who advocated for the scientific management of nature, mapping new racial meanings onto wilderness at the turn of the twentieth century that further alienated Native peoples from the land. These men crafted a new scientific language that linked Eugenics to conservation science in which the correct management of nature was expressed through biological metaphors of health and illness. For Muir and his counterparts, heathy wilderness as denoted by pure, untrammelled nature contained the anecdote to a national crisis of race: nature served as a kind of racial “purification machine” against the influx of non-white immigrants who threatened to poison the white racial character of nation.²⁵ The white men who ventured into nature ill from exposure to the diseased immigrants bodies in the nation’s urban spaces, returned from their wilderness sojourns racially refreshed.

The purification of these men’s racial character depended upon the purity of nature. In the new racist scientific language of conservation, the health of the wilderness pivoted on keeping diseased (non-white) bodies out. As a racialized minority group, Indians were one of the many types of brown bodies that threatened the health of the wilderness, and thus the racial health of the nation. John Muir wrote disparagingly about “Digger Indians,” the “Chinaman,” and Hispanos, all of which he felt were out of place in his “mountain cathedral.”²⁶ Along with being “filthy,” “lazy,” and “wretched,” they interrupted the “solemn calm” of his experience in pure nature.²⁷ The wilderness movement’s production of nature as purification machine for white men whose racially cleansing sojourns into wilderness ensured the overall racial health of the nation further alienated living Indigenous peoples from wilderness spaces both physically and

²⁵ Ibid., 154.

²⁶ Kosek, *Understories*, 155-156.

²⁷ Ibid.

ideologically by strengthening the notion that they posed an inherent racialized threat to wild nature. Of the “digger Indians” in Yosemite, Muir wrote they were “mostly ugly” and “had no right place in the landscape.”²⁸ He applauded the U.S. Army for keeping Indians out of the wilderness: “Every pine tree is waving its arms for joy!” Muir exclaimed of the massive Indian Removals in California.²⁹ Here, Mark Rifkin’s theorization of a U.S. “biopolitics of race”³⁰ is helpful in understanding how ideas about wilderness queered Indians as racially unfit for national belonging: if true wilderness was untrammelled by man, then the Indian’s tendency towards establishing permanent residence in wilderness was a sign of their inherent racial aberrance.

Environmental Legislation and Anti-Immigrant Sentiment

White supremacist sentiment did not disappear with early nineteenth century conservationists; the obsession with keeping nature pure and the perceived threat posed by immigration were at the forefront of multiple environmentalist debates at the turn of the twenty-first century. In 1998, a considerable number of well-known environmentalists supported a measure by the Sierra Club to endorse California’s Proposition 187 that would have publicly defined the Sierra Club as anti-immigrant.³¹ The measure eventually lost, but the amount of mainstream environmental support it garnered was telling of how little the racist logics of conservationism had changed in one hundred years. In Sierra Club debates over the issue, supporters of the measure most-often quoted Edward Abbey, the mid-twentieth century “renegade hero” of vigilante environmentalism, who wrote “I certainly do not wish to live in a society dominated by blacks or Mexicans, or Orientals...we must militarize our borders against

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 156.

³⁰ See Mark Rifkin, *When Did Indians Become Straight? Kinship, the History of Sexuality and Native Sovereignty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 38, 48, 58, 71,

³¹ Kosek, *Understories*, 161.

illegal immigration.”³² Abbey’s anti-immigrant sentiments were shaped by the scientific writings of Garrett Hardin, a “neo-Malthusian” biologist who came up with the theory of the tragedy of the commons: like “an overcrowded lifeboat in a sea of drowning bodies” that takes on too many passengers, the U.S. was in danger of being swamped by immigrants that would ultimately sink it.³³

In *The Slums of Aspen*, sociologists Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David Naguib Pellow document how in 1999, the city of Aspen, Colorado passed a unanimous resolution to petition the federal government to increase restrictions on immigration in order to save the environment. Using the same scientific language of population control Edward Abbey mobilized in the 1960’s to advocate for militarized borders, the Aspen City Council expressed concerns that the nation was becoming overpopulated with immigrants who did not have proper land ethics. Employing a hundred year old logic that produced immigration as “the major cause of...ecological crisis,”³⁴ the resolution “reflects the longstanding link between nativism and environmentalism in the United States.”³⁵

Environmental logics, from manifest destiny’s undiscovered landscapes to twenty-first century fears over immigrants causing an ecological crisis, queered permanent human residence in the land as racially aberrant and produced non-white bodies as environmental contagions. Through the colonial logics of the settler state that transformed separate, sovereign groups of Indigenous peoples into one homogenous, racialized entity, Indians became one of many racialized minorities that threatened the nation’s ecology and racial character. It is against these still operational imaginaries of ecologically and racially pure landscapes that Native peoples at

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David N. Pellow, *The Slums of Aspen: Immigrants vs. the Environment America’s Eden* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 8.

³⁵ Ibid., 10.

Bears must negotiate their claims to the land, navigating a century and a half of environmentalist meaning-making work that employed colonial, racist logics to sever Indigenous peoples' physical and political ties to the land.

Chapter 3: Local Utahan Belongings: Mormon Settlement and White Working Class

Ethnicity

Given how American imaginaries of wilderness operated to sever Native peoples' physical and political ties to the land, accumulate land for the nation, and strengthen settler belonging, one could raise the question, why don't Tribes at Bears Ears ally with the PLI against environmentalists and the federal government? On a surface level, it seems likely that Indigenous groups fighting for access to their land would ally themselves with a group like the PLI that is against federal control of the land, guarantees human use, and makes a case for local entities to have greater sovereignty in managing the landscape. Why, then, do Indigenous stake-holders at Bears Ears view a relationship with SUWA as a more strategic and productive alliance than a partnership with the PLI? The answer lies in both the historical context of Mormon settlement in Utah as a history of Native dispossession and religious place-making, and in the ways in which religiously motivated, white working class communities in the west express their right to the land. The PLI's conceptual mapping of Southern Utah as local, Utahan land reinscribes a colonial history of Mormon settlement and Native displacement, and calls upon contemporary class and race politics that center whiteness as a prerequisite for national belonging. Charting PLI claims to southern Utah as an expression of entwined Mormon and American white working class identities gives insight into why Indigenous stakeholders at Bears Ears ally with environmentalists and articulate their claims to the land through environmentalist ethics.

Mormon Settlement in Utah and the Mapping of New Holy Land

In an April 2015 Op-Ed in the *Salt Lake Tribune* entitled “Descendants of settlers also hold southeaster Utah sites sacred,” Nathan Nielson identifies himself as part of “the local Anglo communities who work out their living and raise families in the land they call their spiritual home,” made up of hard-working descendants of Mormon immigrants who “forged a strong identity and sense of place from a hard-scrabble existence.” The author writes in support of PLI, as he feels the perspective of local Anglos is missing from conservationist proposals to turn Bears Ears into a National Monument. Nielson begins his piece by imploring readers of the *Tribune* to “remember that everyone has a sacred geography.” For Nielson, the sacred geography of Utah is produced out of both the “sacred marks” made by Mormon and the archaeological ruins left behind by ancestral Puebloans. These ruins “of a lost people” give the writer a “greater affection for the human race and its greatness,” adding to the “spirit” that “saturates the land.” For Nielson, the “intermingling” and “overlapping” of “sacred spaces” is a natural part of history; indeed, he writes that “history shows how holy lands stack upon other holy lands.” Nielson’s conceptualization of Utah as sacred land of overlapping holy lands – a Mormon holy landscape overlaying a “lost” Indian one – is given new meaning in light of how Mormons in the nineteenth century remapped Utah, radically altering how the topography was perceived and creating a new sacred geography that relied an imagined “Indian” belonging to place.

Nielson’s op-ed is chock full of important clues to how Mormons conceptualize Utah. To Mormons, Utah is home in both a practical sense – it is where many Mormons live and have lived for generations –and in a deeply religious sense as a Zion. In his study of how Mormons remade the Great Basin as their spiritual homeland, historian Jared Farmer reveals the strange ways in which Utah Mormons “unmade” Indigenous geographies by mapping new religious

belongings onto the landscape.³⁶ Farmer shows how Mormons transferred “Indian meaning” from the Great Salt Lake onto Mount Timpanogos, a previously “worthless line of cliffs” in the Wasatch Mountain Range by shrouding “Timp” in Indian legends they conjured up. Mapping “Indian meaning” onto Mount Timpanogos linked Mormons to the land through a religious connection to Indians: because the Book of Mormon identified American Indians as descendants of ancient Israelites who would play a leading role in building the New Jerusalem, bestowing “Timp” with imagined ancient Indian lore strengthened Mormon belonging while working to unsettle and erase actual Ute meanings from the landscape. Transferring Indian meaning away from the Great Salt Lake – a central landmark in Ute geography – and onto Timp, Mormons opened the Lake up for new spiritual meaning-making and economic development. The “desertification” of the Utah landscape remade the Great Basin into the spiritual homeland of Deseret, a desert landscape whose topography mirrored that of Palestine, or the promised land of Canaan.³⁷ Within this biblical desert-scape, the Lake became a parallel body of water to the Dead Sea. Once control of the Lake and surrounding Utah Valley had been violently wrested from the Utes, Mormon settlers developed it as a tourist destination.³⁸

Mormons deepened their own sense of belonging to the land by imagining themselves as establishing a homeland with “an endemic spiritual geography.”³⁹ Farmer writes of human geographies like Mormon Utah, “a perceptual landscape overlaps a physical one,” and in the grafting together of material and ideological landscapes, physical landmarks act as “fastening-points”.⁴⁰ As the most important fastening-point holding together the physical landscape of the

³⁶ Jared Farmer, *On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 11.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 108-117.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

Great Basin and the Mormon's perceptual landscape of Zion, the perceptual creation of Mount Timpanogos was key to how Mormon settlers remade themselves as "neonatives" to Utah.⁴¹ The Mormon mapping of Mount Timpanogos is reflective the greater settler colonial project of place-making that erases Native geographies and remaps the land as settler homeland. This process of geographical erasure and remapping is a central mechanism of making settlers indigenous to the space of the nation.⁴² The story of Mormons mapping Utah as Zion is a familiar story of a religiously motivated group of group of settlers who made themselves indigenous to place in ways that enacted ideological and physical violence towards Native peoples; however, it also a unique story of American settlers who purposefully distanced themselves politically, religiously, and culturally from the nation, producing new forms of settler indigeneity and attachments to the land that deeply affect social, spatial, and political dynamics in the American west.

Mormons' perceive of their spiritual settlement in Utah as an act of tenacity and faith; however, Mormon settlement in the Great Basin was also a violent wresting of land and resources away from Indigenous peoples. Returning briefly to Nathan Nielson's op-ed, the writer ends his piece with a memory of his great-great-grandfather who was part of a group of Mormon pioneers who settled Bluff, Utah. After a grueling journey west, Nielson tells us, the pioneers' final obstacle was to ascend San Juan Hill, during which his great-great-grandfather whipped his oxen to death to get his wagon up and over the rocky ridge. For Nielson, the Mormon settlement Utah is a story of "hard-scrabble pioneers" whose will to reach the new Zion helped them overcome great obstacles. These pioneers were on a sacred journey west to reach a holy land, made even greater by sacred landscape left behind by a "lost people." The act of settling attaches these Anglo communities to the land, absorbing Indigenous geographies into their remapping of

⁴¹ Ibid., 16.

⁴² Farmer's "neonatives" are Byrd's settlers who have claimed indigeneity. For more, see Byrd, *Transit*, xx-xxiv.

the landscape as overlapping holy lands. By fashioning ancestral Puebloan presence in the land as a key part of what makes the land sacred, settler Mormon logics of belonging sever the unique claims living Native peoples have to the land; if everyone has a sacred landscape, and those sacred landscapes are free to be claimed by anyone, then Native people have no special political right or spiritual belonging to Bears Ears. Indeed, Nielson writes that an image of the Bears Ears twin butte landmark is etched on his grandmother's grave, a visual reminder that she and her ancestors belong to the land even in death.

Nielson's account is a Mormon version of what Indigenous historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz calls "unconscious Manifest Destiny," or the common sense notion embedded in American minds that U.S. control and power over the land was destined to happen, leading to the denial of settler colonialism despite an ample historical record.⁴³ For Mormons, unconscious Manifest Destiny interweaves with religious faith, producing a sacred origin story for Utah that denies the material colonial violence engendered by their arrival to Utah Valley in the late 1840s. Far from an empty desert promised land, the Great Basin Region in the mid nineteenth century was a fully humanized landscape populated by Ute, Paiute, and Shoshone peoples with complex political and economic relationships with each other and with the environments that supported them. It is vital, then, to situate Mormon settlement in a larger story of U.S. colonial expansion and empire building, as it secured U.S. political and economic power over the land that eventually became the state of Utah. Western Shoshone historian Ned Blackhawk tells the story of Mormon settlement in the Great Basin Region in the second half of the nineteenth century as a severe loss

⁴³ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 1-2.

of resources for Great Basin Indian groups. The economic desperation this resource strangulation brought on provoked violence that ultimately led to extensive Ute land dispossession.⁴⁴

According to Blackhawk, Mormon settlers used military tactics and the spread of disease to establish political rule in Utah Territory. A particularly violent campaign against Timpanogos Utes in the winter of 1850 earned the Mormon settlers lavish praise from the American military officer John W. Gunnison, who led an 1853 railway scouting expedition across the central Rockies and into Mormon territory.⁴⁵ The “violent-swiftness” of the Mormon’s “subjugation” of Utah Indians impressed Gunnison. Comparing it to the federal government’s long and expensive wars with the Seminole, he understood Mormon’s use of force against resident Indian populations as “a legitimate and necessary act of state formation.”⁴⁶ In addition to the violence caused by military campaigns, Mormon presence in the region shattered the wetland and valley ecologies that sustained Native life and their disapproval of the Ute’s raiding and slave trade economies disrupted and threatened Ute economic survival. Mormon practice of buying Paiute children from Ute slave traders in order to rescue the children from enslavement led to increased torture of Paiute slaves. Blackhawk writes, “Utes...camped outside settlements, where they tortured children with knives and hot metals to induce settlers to come to their slave markets.”⁴⁷ Accounts of Utes executing Paiute slaves to punish reluctant Mormon buyers were common.⁴⁸ The Paiute children bought by Mormons often became domestic and manual laborers, a key part of the “labor-intensive infrastructure” of the frontier settlements.⁴⁹ Growing economic and political tensions led to Ute attacks on Mormon settlements as well as forceful efforts by the Utes

⁴⁴ Ned Blackhawk, *Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 231.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 232-233.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

to consolidate their power in the region among other Indian groups against the settlements.⁵⁰ In 1861, a mere fourteen years after Brigham Young's band of Mormon settlers arrived, the Timpanogos Utes were forcefully displaced out of the Utah Valley by the U.S. military to a newly formed reservation in Uintah Basin that Young had helped "procure" for his "red children."⁵¹

Recounting the history of Mormon settlement in the Great Basin adds further insight into contemporary tensions between Mormons and Tribes in Utah over both perceptions and management of the land. The reality of settler colonial violence – the theft of not only land and resources but also of indigeneity – continues to shape how settlers and Native peoples in Utah understand their relationship to the land and to each other.

The PLI and White Working Class Belonging in Utah

Local Utahans who support the PLI express vehement anti-federal government, states'-rights sentiments. Many footnote their support for Representative Bishop's land bill with an expressed desire for no government control of land whatsoever. In an August 12, 2015 report of a San Juan County Commission meeting published in the *San Juan Record*, local rancher Monte Wells is recorded as having expressed during public comment that the PLI proposal is "a compromise." Although it is better than the "the alternative" (a National Monument), Wells "would ideally like to see the state exercise its rights and take the land back from the federal government." He urged the country to "say no to the process and have no land bills whatsoever." At the same meeting, San Juan County Commission Chairman Phil Lyman, who had just spent 10 days in jail for leading an ATV ride through Recapture Canyon to protest bans on motorized recreation, expressed a desire for "more local control for counties...that are predominantly federally

⁵⁰ Ibid., 241-244.

⁵¹ Ibid., 244.

managed.” Lyman voiced concern over the PLI proposal for even gesturing toward wilderness: “It has some potential to some really harmful things to the area,” he said, “I don’t trust the players on the other side. I don’t think they have our best interests in mind.” The perceived threat to local economies posed by conservationists largely shapes what these local Utahans understand to be in their best interest. In particular, these communities express over and over again how limits on oil and gas exploration, the loss of coal mines, and restrictions on timber harvesting have deeply affected their ability to earn a living. Greg Allen, a City Councilman in Escalante, Utah, told the Council that the 1996 designation of the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument has strangled the economy of his home town. The limits National Monuments put on land use chased away the industries (oil and gas, coal, and timber) most people in the area depended on for jobs, creating a local dependency on tourism. Though the community is busy during the tourist season, Allen reports, jobs disappear when the tourists go away.

This narrative of the strangulation of the white working class by elite, liberal interests is a familiar one. Wendy Bottero argues that multicultural framings of the white working class as an ethnic group defined by race shifts attention away from the larger capitalist structures that produce class inequality, focusing instead on culture as the explanation for class disadvantage.⁵² This collapsing of class inequality into racial difference pits white working class people against other racial minorities, producing a myth that working class whites are victims of racism. In this victimization myth, whites lose while immigrants, people of color, and liberal elites win.⁵³ Reading class inequality through a lens of cultural difference not only dismisses the real suffering and disadvantages poor whites face as a result of class inequality, it also upholds white

⁵² Wendy Bottero, “Class in the 21st Century” in *Who Cares About the White Working Class?*, ed. Kjartan Páll Sveinsson (Runnymede Trust, 2009), 8.

⁵³ Jamelle Bouie, “How Trump Happened: White voters hope trump will restore the racial hierarchy upended by Barack Obama,” *Slate*, March 13, 2016, www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/cover_story/

supremacy. As the white working class is absorbed into the multicultural landscape of ethnic difference as a racialized group marked by class inequality, they position their claims above other minority groups based on racial supremacy. This white racial supremacy is ultimately a claim of racial indigeneity to the nation that entitles them to resources and opportunity, and dismisses other racial groups as either foreign, lazy (dependent on the government), or dangerous to America.⁵⁴ These white working class expressions of racial supremacy mobilize the same racial anxieties that turn of the century conservationists called upon in their production of wilderness as a racial purification machine: the racial character of the nation is inherently white and non-white bodies threaten to poison it.

In land claim disputes in the west, white working class ethnic expression is embodied by what some journalists have called the “county supremacy movement.”⁵⁵ Although this movement broadly encompasses any effort by conservative state-rights advocates in rural areas in the west where the land is predominantly managed by the federal government to put control of the land back in the hands of local counties, it has come to be defined by the radical anti-federal government acts of fringe faith-based groups with strong ties to Mormonism. In particular, the 2014 armed occupation of BLM land in Nevada led by Cliven Bundy and the armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon organized by his sons Ammon and Ryan in 2016. The Bundy’s and their followers defended their actions in both occupations as faith-based missions from God, using rhetoric that mixes LDS symbolism with libertarian political rhetoric.⁵⁶ God “inspired me to have the sheriffs across the United states take away these weapons, disarm these bureaucracies,” Cliven Bundy told reporters in Nevada, “he also gave me

⁵⁴ Boterro, “Class,” 10.

⁵⁵ Benjamin E. Park, “Ammon Bundy and the Paradoxes of Mormon Political Theologies,” *Religion and Politics*, January 11, 2016, <http://religionandpolitics.org/2016/01/11/ammon-bundy-and-the-paradoxes-of-mormon-political-theologies/>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

a little inspiration on what would happen if they didn't do that." At the wildlife refuge in Oregon, one armed occupier compared himself to "Captain Moroni, the military stud muffin of Mormon scripture" who "faces off against an unfeeling government" in the Book Mormon.⁵⁷ At a political event in August 2014, Cliven Bundy reportedly addressed a crowd of supporters comparing the U.S. Constitution to Mormon scriptures: "If our Constitution is an inspired document by our Lord Jesus Christ, then isn't it scripture? Isn't it the same as the Book of Mormon and the Bible?"⁵⁸ Bundy's mobilization of the widely-held Mormon belief that the U.S. Constitution is a holy scripture produced by God for the express purpose of creating a nation in which Joseph Smith had the religious freedom to grow Mormonism harkens back to a deeper history of strife with federal government over the interpretation of religious freedom in the Constitution.

Arguably, the church's longest standing beef with the federal government is its encroachment on the freedom of religious groups to articulate their own political, moral and social agenda, even when that agenda directly clashed with U.S. religious, social and political formations. The fight over polygamy in the 1850s is emblematic Mormon's disdain for interpretations of the constitution that allow for wide-reaching federal government control and limit states' rights.⁵⁹

The Bundy's and their followers mobilize Mormon doctrine and history to fashion a faith-based Anglo indigeneity to the nation in which their constitutional citizenship (ordained by God) and white working class relationship to the land (a *use* of land defined by particular forms of working-class labor, in this case ranching) trumps all other claims to national space. In Bundy-formations of national belonging, the federal government, environmentalists, and Indigenous

⁵⁷ Michelle Boorstein, "Arrested in Oregon, Ammon Bundy and others in standoff cited their Mormon faith as inspiration," *The Washington Post*, January 4, 2016), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/01/04/why-the-oregon-militia-is-citing-the-book-of-mormons-military-stud-muffin/>

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ For more on this, see Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

peoples – all of whom asserted counter claims to the Malheur Wildlife Refuge in Oregon – are illegitimate stakeholders on the basis of religion, race, land use, and constitutional interpretation. Mainstream Mormons, such as the PLI’s Congressman Bishop, and the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints have condemned the acts of Bundy and his ilk as dangerous extremism and not representative of the Church’s opinions. However: although the PLI employs mainstream political methods rather than vigilante extremism, its proposal makes demands and articulates its right to the land in ways that are ideologically parallel to the Bundys’ claims in Nevada and Oregon. The PLI proposal advocates local county control of land, promotes oil and gas development, protects rancher’s access to land, guarantees freedom for motorized recreation, and, importantly, bans the federal government’s use of the Antiquities Act to establish public lands on the grounds that the Act discriminates against non-Native ethnic groups who have a sacred connection to the land (read Mormons). Thus, the PLI uses anti-government rhetoric, protects white working class ethnic interests, and dismisses Native people’s sacred landscapes in ways that reflect larger race/class dynamics in the country as a whole and recall how Mormon settlers in Utah Valley made themselves indigenous to the land by grafting a new sacred landscape over Indigenous geographies.

Chapter 4: Indigenous Articulations of Environmentalism at Bears Ears

The homepage of the Inter-Tribal Coalition’s website declares that Bear Ears is “America’s most significant unprotected cultural landscape,” known throughout the world for “the integrity and abundance of cultural and archaeological resources.”⁶⁰ It is also a natural landscape that preserves the raw beauty of the nature: “Perhaps nowhere in the United States,” the website tells us, “are so many well-preserved cultural resources found within such a striking

⁶⁰ “Homepage,” <http://www.bearscoalition.org/>

and relatively undeveloped natural landscape”⁶¹ By producing Bears Ears as a “culturally significant and ecologically imperiled” landscape, the Inter-Tribal Coalition presents it to the U.S. government as a place worth protecting. In their proposal to President Obama to designate Bears Ears a National Monument, the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition mobilizes colonial imaginaries of wilderness and antiquity to protect their land against Mormon-Anglo-Utahan claims to it. In their strategic alliance with environmental groups and negotiations with the federal government, the Inter-Tribal Coalition lays claim to the land by rearticulating settler formations of wilderness and antiquity in ways that disrupt colonial spatial and temporal imaginaries and challenge a century and a half of racist knowledge production by American environmentalists. By rhetorically mapping Bears Ears through environmental imaginaries, the Inter-Tribal Coalition guarantees itself not only the legal protection of the federal government, but also the support of many Americans who are deeply invested in the images, feelings, and ideas that wilderness and culture conjure up. In the face of competing claims to the land that remap Bears Ears as an Indigenous Utahan landscape, the Inter-Tribal Coalition puts American environmental attachments to work shielding their homelands.

(Re)Mapping Antiquity

Tribal Peoples at Bears Ears use the 1906 Antiquities Act to make the case that Bears Ears should be designated a National Monument. As a colonial formation of early twentieth century America (the time period in which Muir was tromping about Yosemite), the Antiquities Act wrote into law federal ownership and management of Indigenous historical and sacred sites, mobilizing the same racist logics that environmentalists used to argue for U.S. government control over wilderness. Protecting against the “looting of aboriginal objects” that “robs the

⁶¹ “Cultural & Archaeological Significance,” <http://www.bearscoalition.org/proposal-overview/archaeological-significance/>

public of its cultural heritage,”⁶² the Act preserved cultural landscapes for the good of the nation and western scientific advancement. The Antiquities Act is reflective of a larger settler-colonial discourse that neutralizes the abundant physical evidence that the land was neither empty nor untouched when settlers arrived and recasts it as part of the benign “atemporal natural history”⁶³ of the nation. This atemporal natural history produces the land and the cultural artifacts it contains as outside the human laws of space in time, laying in wait for the inevitable emergence of the U.S. Thus, the physical evidence that an Indigenous humanized landscape existed before the U.S. is absorbed securely into the national imaginary through this atemporal natural history as part of the rich cultural heritage of the nation.

In her study of Chaco Canyon, American Studies scholar Berenika Byszewski describes how colonial cartographies mapped antiquity onto the landscape in ways that still dominate how Chaco is managed today. Antiquity – as a colonial formation denoting a temporality and spatiality before U.S. settlement – shapes how the ruins at Chaco are maintained “to evoke the moment of ‘discovery.’”⁶⁴ Byszewski argues that mapping antiquity onto the Chacoan landscape “elides the history, politics, and cycles of Native removal that went into the making of Chaco,” limiting the kinds of claims that can be made to it by Indigenous peoples in the present.⁶⁵ In the case of Bears Ears, however, the temporal and spatial limits antiquity creates work in paradoxical ways to protect Tribal indigeneity and sacred landscapes from competing claims of Mormon-Utahan-White belonging. Tribal peoples at Bears Ears appropriate colonial imaginaries of antiquity to position the Native cultural landscape as the only authentic sacred geography.

⁶² Richard West Sellars, “A Very Large Array: Early Federal Historic Preservation – The Antiquities Act, Mesa Verde, and the National Park Service Act,” vol. 47 of *Natural Resources Journal* (2007), 283.

⁶³ Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, 29.

⁶⁴ Berenika Byszewski, “Colonizing Chaco Canyon: Mapping Antiquity in the Territorial Southwest” in *Formations of United States Colonialism*, ed. Alyosha Goldstein (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) 58.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Binding this ancient cultural landscape to local Tribal peoples' continued use of Bears Ears for traditional purposes, the Inter-Tribal Coalition then re-articulates antiquity in ways that disrupt colonial temporal and spatial imaginaries. Within this newly-formulated Indigenous imaginary of antiquity, the Inter-Tribal Council mobilizes the Antiquity Act (and with it, the full weight of the U.S. government) in radically new ways: if Bears Ears becomes a National Monument, the Antiquity Act would be used to not only protect an ancient cultural landscape for the good of the nation, it would also be used to defend living Native people's relationship to the land.

At first glance, the Inter-Tribal Coalition's description of Bears Ears on their website writes a familiar colonial imaginary of antiquity onto the landscape: "Aboriginal objects" dot an ancient landscape of cliff dwellings, petroglyphs, and pottery shards, and a wealth of yet undiscovered cultural objects left behind by ancestral Puebloan people lay in wait for scientific experts to interpret their meanings.⁶⁶ However, the Inter-Tribal Coalition's assertion that these artifacts are the "facts on the ground" of an *ongoing* and *unbroken* history of Native presence at Bears Ears, it shifts temporal and spatial imaginaries of antiquity out of the static realm of the primordial into the present. According to Philip Vicenti, a Zuni man quoted in the Proposal, "the importance of Bears Ears for our people is through our ancestral sites that were left behind eons ago by our ancestors...When we visit Bears Ears, we connect with our migration history immediately without doubt. With that, we must preserve, manage and educate our future generations."⁶⁷ Alfred Lomaquahu (Hopi) expresses that "Cedar Mesa is a part of our footprints, a path that tells a story. History is crucial to man because it tells us of who we are. Those who lived before us have never left. Their voices are part of the rhythm or heartbeat of the universe

⁶⁶ "Cultural & Archaeological Significance," <http://www.bearscoalition.org/proposal-overview/archaeological-significance/>

⁶⁷ "Our Proposal," <http://www.bearscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Bears-Ears-Inter-Tribal-Coalition-Proposal-10-15-15.pdf>, 10.

and will echo through eternity.”⁶⁸ The timelessness of Bear Ears as a cultural landscape no longer signals an atemporal natural history of the nation, rather it hails a continuous native presence in the land – unbroken and eternal. Lifting Bears Ears out of the spatial and temporal plane imposed on it by settler imaginaries in which settler presence (discovering, settling, interpreting, protecting) define its meanings and value, the Coalition redeploys antiquity to produce Bears Ears as an eternal spiritual landscape in which ancient relics and ruins signal a Native presence that is inextricable from the natural world: “...The most profound aspect of Bear Ears is the Native presence that has blended into every cliff and corner. This spirit is the beating heart of Bears Ears.”⁶⁹

If Native presence is “the beating heart of Bears Ears –” what gives it both material (scientific discovery) and ideological (spiritual) value – then protecting living Native peoples access to the landscape ensures that it’s special qualities will be preserved for “future generations of Americans.”⁷⁰ The Coalition appropriates settler enchantment with Indians – in particular, a fascination with solving the “mystery” of ancestral Puebloan life (why did they disappear? Where did they go?) – to position Bears Ears as a priceless landscape worth protecting for the benefit of the entire nation. In the Inter-Tribal Coalition’s estimation, appreciating Native “life ways” is a universal value:

We have been here the longest, but the appreciation of the life ways of our ancestors is universal. Parents from other cultures cannot receive a greater reward than to watch their boisterous girls and boys go silent and reflective as they come upon an ancient stone village with panels of petroglyphs nearby. It both calms and challenges them. They ask their parents question after question. How long ago was this done? How many people lived here? Did they have friends down the canyon in the village we saw this morning? You say they probably hunted and grew crops up on the mesa above. But how could they possibly have climbed up those sheer canyon walls? How did they get water? And, of

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁰ “Cultural and Archaeological Significance.”

course, the parents are calmed and challenged themselves. For these places call out to all people, young and old, from this continent and every other, Native and non-Native.⁷¹

The Inter-Tribal Coalition strengthens its claims to antiquity by tracing a long history of desecration by local non-Natives with unfettered access to Bears Ears, tying this “gruesome” history to ongoing violence to Tribal people’s bodies, land, and property by local Utahans. “The need for protecting the Bears Ears landscape has been broad and heartfelt for well over a century,” the Proposal insists. “The rampant looting and destruction of the villages, structures, rock markings, and gravesites...saddened and sickened our ancestors, and that sense of loss and outrage continues today.”⁷² The Proposal reports, “Over the past generation, the atmosphere has lightened, but the tensions have not gone away. Some hogans, corrals, and sweat lodges have been burned. The insult of “go back to the reservation” is still heard. At a recent gathering of this Coalition, a local rancher tore down the signs for the meeting.”⁷³

By articulating non-Native local presence (read local white Mormons) as a threat to the landscape, the Inter-Tribal Coalition reclaims ancestral Puebloan artifacts as belonging to a uniquely Native sacred landscape and signaling an authentic “local” presence. Recall, for a moment, Nathan Nielson’s op-ed piece in the *Salt Lake Tribune* in which ancestral Puebloan cliff dwellings and artifacts make up a “lost” holy land layered beneath a sacred Mormon landscape; in this Mormon cartography, Native cultural artifacts lose their power to connect living Native people to the land through as they are absorbed as the holy relics of a “lost people” into a new sacred geography of the now. Importantly, this mapping of a Mormon holy land is also the geopolitical mapping of the state of Utah and the racialized mapping of whiteness, producing a temporal and spatial claim to being “local” NOW that is at once religious, political, and racial.

⁷¹ “Our Proposal,” 10.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 12.

Against this three-pronged articulation of belonging that denies Native peoples “local-ness” in the present day, the Inter-Tribal Coalition calls upon antiquity to authenticate Native presence at Bears Ears and to discredit Utahan claims to a sacred Mormon landscape. Quoting Navajo local Eric Descheenie, the Proposal asserts: “Some people say that we haven’t been at Bears Ears in recent times. Others say that some of us aren’t from Utah and don’t belong here. All of that is so definitely wrong. We were there before any states and live nearby. We don’t see Bears Ears in terms of State lines.”⁷⁴ The “some people” and “others” that Descheenie is referring to here are local Utahans who articulate their claims to Bears Ears through states’ rights. Descheenie refuses the notion that Bears Ears is a geography defined by or belonging to Utah, reclaiming “local” belonging and asserting a Native presence that precedes the existence of any U.S. state. In this Native sacred cultural landscape, the signs of Mormon settlement are no longer the “sacred marks” of a new holy land; rather, they signal modern encroachment and a threat to the environment that necessitates the U.S. government pass protective legislation. As an eternal, sacred landscape outside the temporal and spatial boundaries of the nation and whose value lies in and depends upon Native presence, Bears Ears is (re)grafted onto the local Utahan landscape.

(Re)Mapping Wilderness

The Inter-Tribal Coalition writes wilderness onto Bears Ears by calling upon multiple imaginaries of the American West including ideas of it as an undiscovered primordial landscape, a lonely frontier wilderness, and a “mountain cathedral” in which to restore the soul. The proposal describes the Bears Ears landscape as “the most ecologically intact region in the Lower 48 states, making it difficult for most Americans to reach and know.”⁷⁵ And later, quoting

⁷⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 4.

Wallace Stegner⁷⁶, it says of the landscape: “Speaking of the wild west side of the Bears Ears, Wallace Stegner wrote that “to start a trip at Mexican Hat, Utah, is to start off into empty space from the end of the world...[Stegner] added that there is good reason to go there, for a trip into the redrock expanses of Bears Ears country will ‘fill up the eye and overflow the soul.’”⁷⁷ The proposal also maps wilderness onto Bears Ears by characterizing it as a natural geography under threat, making the case to the federal government for its protection. While mapping wilderness onto Bears Ears mobilizes the support of the U.S. government and environmentally-minded Americans against competing Utahan claims, it also signals a violent history of Native land dispossession and puts particular set of colonial, racist logics into motion. I trace how the Inter-Tribal Coalition navigates the binds of recognition these logics create by articulating Native relationships to the landscape as indispensable to the future of land conservation and preservation. Appropriating the scientific language of environmentalism, the Coalition deploys “Traditional Knowledge” as the cutting-edge land management practice of the future.

The 1964 Wilderness Act defines wilderness “in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape...where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”⁷⁸ The Inter-Tribal Council strategically appropriates this notion that human presence is incompatible in the wilderness; however, by calling upon colonial imaginaries of the Indian as outside the spatial and temporal boundaries of civilization, it differentiates between threatening human presence and Native presence. Threatening human presence is embodied by non-Native interactions with land. An interactive map on the Protect Bears Ears website identifies four different threats to the

⁷⁶ For an indigenous critique of Wallace Stegner see Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s “Why I Can’t Read Wallace Stegner.” Reading this essay complicates the Proposal’s use of Stegner to characterize the land as a wilderness.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ “The Wilderness Act,” <http://www.wilderness.net/nwps/legisact>

landscape. Charting these threats geographically, this map highlights the cultural and ecological areas most affected by each activity. The four threats the website identifies are: ongoing looting, vandalism, and robbery of sacred sites in Cedar Mesa; resource extraction including uranium, oil and gas, and newly proposed energy development zones; illegal “motorized impact” from off-road vehicle use; and unmanaged overuse by outdoor recreationists.⁷⁹ These threats, not coincidentally, mirror the guarantees made by the PLI for economic development and motorized recreation. The Inter-Tribal Coalition, then, takes advantage of inherent spatial and temporal tensions in settler logics that produce the Indian as both present and absent (spatial) and ancient and modern (temporal).⁸⁰ In the case of the Bear Ears wilderness, Native people’s association the primordial landscape help position their relationship with the land outside the modern threat of civilization. Thus, wilderness and Native presence can coexist in a new formation of wilderness in which Native “Traditional Knowledge”⁸¹ works to protect the fragile landscape from civilization.

The Inter-Tribal Coalition’s proposal suggests a Collaborative Management strategy in which the Tribes as “sovereign governments [who] possess solid land management capabilities”⁸² would manage the land under the trusteeship of the federal government. The Proposal’s articulation of indigeneity through its description of Collaborative Management remaps Bears Ears as a cutting-edge scientific landscape in which traditional Native relationships to land are retooled as pioneering land management technologies. Challenging racist wilderness narratives in which the ability to treat nature correctly is linked to whiteness, this new map of Bears Ears, what I am calling a “modern cultural landscape,” requires the on-the-ground

⁷⁹ “Threats,” <http://www.bearscoalition.org/threats/>

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 49.

⁸¹ “Our Proposal,” 1.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 2.

management of the Tribes, as, paradoxically, it is timeless Native knowledge – a “multifaceted relationship between Native American people and this landscape that has developed over the course of eons”⁸³ – that make Bears Ears an innovative and modern landscape. By asserting that native peoples’ traditional relationships to land offer innovative methods of scientific land management, the proposal implies that Western epistemologies and American management practices have been insufficient in protecting and preserving the natural and cultural landscape: “Native peoples always have, and do now, conceive of and relate to the natural world in a different way...elaborate information held by Native Americans, commonly referred to as Traditional Knowledge, is drawing considerable interest among scientists, land managers, and the general public.”⁸⁴ The “elaborate information” about the land held by Native peoples creates “outstanding opportunities for scientific, historical, and philosophical research by both Native and non-Native scholars and experts.”⁸⁵ The proposal calls for “the creation of a world-class institute on systems of land management that accounts for both western science and Traditional Knowledge”⁸⁶ located at the Monument, which would honor Native worldviews while offering a pioneering approach to land management. Developing this kind of institute would require the active participation and leadership of Native peoples as Native American traditional knowledge becomes a conduit for innovations in science and technology, as well as an acknowledgement by the U.S. government and the general public of the value of Native American traditions and lifeways.

While the Inter-Tribal Coalition’s proposal strategically navigates and rearticulates Western categories of wilderness and antiquity in order to re-center indigenous relationships to

⁸³ Ibid., 5.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 3.

the land, there should be a strong interrogation into what is at stake for indigenous communities – especially female-bodied and queer indigenous peoples – in appealing to the federal government and embracing environmentalism. Along with Western ideas about nation, nature, conservation, and preservation come Western forms of patriarchy, homophobia, colonialism, and racism. In her essay “Chairmen, Presidents, and Princesses: The Navajo Nation, Gender, and the Politics of Tradition,” Dine historian Jennifer Denetdale argues that the links the Navajo Nation draws between a traditional Navajo political system and the modern forms of government reinscribe Western categories of knowing including patriarchal ideas about women’s roles – or lack thereof – in formal governing. Denetdale demonstrates how “the imposition of Western democratic principals” in tribal governments, which recast these colonial categories as in line with Indigenous political epistemologies and ontologies, oppress Native women in new ways “in the name of custom and tradition.”⁸⁷ Denetdale writes that despite its efforts to cast tribal government as “traditional,” the Navajo Nation faces continued criticism from many tribal members who regard their government as merely a wing of the U.S. federal government, not an autonomous government acting on the behalf of Indigenous sovereignty.⁸⁸

A deeper investigation of the Bears Ears Proposal should ask what is at stake in the Intertribal Coalition’s embrace of environmentalism as a land ethic and its appeal to the U.S. federal government as the ultimate and natural authority over the land. Given the homophobic, patriarchal, and racist history of environmentalism, categories of indigeneity, tradition, custom, and spirituality imagined through environmental ethics reproduce colonial categories and values within Native communities. This could result in limiting which kinds of Native relationships to

⁸⁷ Jennifer Denetdale, “Chairmen, Presidents, and Princesses: The Navajo Nation, Gender, and the Politics of Tradition” *Wicazo Sa Review* 21 (2006): 10.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

the land are understood as tradition or custom, ultimately disciplining how some native people express their connection to place.

Conclusion

This paper explores how some indigenous peoples in Southern Utah seeking access and control over their homelands mobilize environmental ethics, language, and ideas to position indigenous knowledge as central to public land management in the United States. The ongoing struggle to designate Indigenous homelands in southern Utah a national monument holds significant potential for future scholarship. A future project could use Bears Ears as a case study for examining how environmental groups, like SUWA, mobilize American imaginaries of Indians' timeless relationship to nature in their efforts to protect land. This project would pay close attention to how strategic partnerships with Indigenous peoples help environmentalists shed their racist, colonial past in a contemporary multicultural climate in which traditional environmentalist ethics are increasingly perceived as too narrow to reach a diverse audience. Another project could examine the role of the sacred in competing imaginaries of the landscape at Bears Ears, tracing a religious history of American perceptions of wilderness. This project would analyze how Tribal peoples activate and redeploy American ideas about the sacred to authenticate Native belonging, and investigate the ways in which Native peoples use religious freedom laws to make land claims. Yet another project could examine Bears Ears alongside examples of anti-government, militarized occupations of land by Native peoples, such as Wounded Knee. Comparing these occupations to religiously-motivated, Anglo land seizures like the ones led by the Bundys' in Nevada and Oregon would offer valuable insight into how colonialism shapes public perception of who and what poses a threat to nation. Placing Bears Ears within a longer history of Native efforts to reclaim their home lands would add to

understandings of how Indigenous peoples in the U.S. continue to come up with new, creative strategies for destabilizing settler hegemony.

Whatever possibilities the future holds for scholarship on Bears Ears, it is vital for scholars interested in critical geography, settler colonialism, and Indigenous sovereignty to take Bears Ears seriously as a site of critical investigation. The fight to control how the land is managed and perceived at Bears Ears reveals key race, class, and religious dynamics that animate contemporary politics over land in the west. The ways in which Native peoples at Bears Ears navigate competing claims to the land offer important insights into how Indigenous people in the U.S. navigate settler belongings and state recognition politics in strategic ways to reclaim their homelands.

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