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Michael W. Pesses

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Environmental Knowledge, American Indians, and John Muir's Trap

MICHAEL W. PESSES
Antelope Valley College

ABSTRACT

This paper is a genealogy of emergences within environmental thought of who belongs in nature. Such a project reveals that there are specific nodes of environmental knowledge. Specifically, I will introduce the trap of conservationist John Muir, in which his hostile attitudes towards American Indians have gone unexamined by geographers and preservationists. Muir's disgust for many of the Indians he encountered produced the need to remove specific humans from natural spaces, thus naturalizing the concept of true wilderness being free of indigenous use. I first show how Muir's work has influenced classic environmental studies and histories without being critically read. The paper ends with a survey of recent work that challenges the removal of indigenous people from natural spaces and in turn forces new conceptions of the spaces of nature. Perhaps by pivoting from given concepts of wilderness, nature, and the environment, new possibilities of preservation may emerge.

Keywords: John Muir, American Indians, political ecology, nature, genealogy

Introduction

"Nothing truly wild is unclean."

—John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*

"Nature is a dirty bitch."

—Slavoj Žižek, lecture given at Pomona College, February 28, 2017

"What is history? Is it a theory?"

—Jamaica Kincaid, "In History"

THE SPECTER OF JOHN MUIR haunts ecological geographies and environmental histories. He is held, often alongside Henry David Thoreau, as the initial savior of natural and wild spaces. Though Muir was Scottish by birth, it was his work in the United States that protected nature and placed him into

environmental history. He is a larger-than-life figure, especially in California. Muir's likeness even graced California's quarter in 2005 as part of the United States Mint's "50 State Quarters Program." Muir is holding a walking stick and is staring at a California condor flying between him and Half Dome in Yosemite National Park. Other historic figures represented in this quarter series include Abraham Lincoln, Helen Keller, and King Kamehameha I, illustrating Muir's high place in the pantheon of American legends.

Yet, Muir's work goes relatively unexamined; his books are assumed to represent a pure and true connection of humanity and nature (Cohen 1984; Fleck 1985; Sponsel 2012). I realized this recently when reading environmental histories. Historian after historian, ecologist after ecologist—scholars all recognize Muir as an important figure in ecology, but there is little engagement with the meanings of terms like "nature" or "wilderness" to question the conditions of possibility in which Muir wrote (Foucault 1977 [1971], 153). Occasionally, environmental historians have contrasted Muir's preservationist approach with the more industrialized conservationists: "Early wilderness advocates such as Muir defined wilderness as places free of mines, dams, livestock, and loggers" (Isenberg 2005, 177). Isenberg argues that Muir was not against people in the wilderness but rather industry (at least other than tourism). Others such as Char Miller see common ground between Muir and the conservationists (2007, 132). Yet, even those placing Muir in the context of his time do little to question Muir's own conceptions of wilderness and its proper use. Yes, preservationists and conservationists are pitted against one another, but the American Indian is noticeably absent from these ecological accounts. In what follows, I will work to show how Muir figuratively removed Indians from American wilderness and set his work alongside indigenous voices.

Take, for example, Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr.'s 1963 book *Man and Nature in America*, which was written to provide context for those concerned with environmental degradation in the United States. The book is an effort to reintroduce the connection between humans and their natural habitats through a brief history of the country's growth and evolution. "Man and nature is the basic fundamental fact of history. The relationship is mutual and necessary. Without man nature has no written history" (Ekirch 1963, 1, emphasis in original). I discovered this book in the library stacks of the Honnold Mudd library at the Claremont Colleges and was drawn to the fact that it was the oldest book on the shelves in the human ecology section. It was sandwiched in between a few paperbacks from the very end of the

twentieth century, but mainly amongst books from the twenty-first, which gave the sense of environmental concern being a new phenomenon. Reading Ekirch, as well as others (see Barton 2004; Glacken 1971; Grove 1995 for example), makes it clear that ecology is not a new philosophical study, nor a new applied practice.

In reading *Man and Nature in America*, it is obvious that Ekirch's "man" referenced in the title is white and of Western European descent. The American Indian, according to Ekirch, had no real relationship with nature, or at least not one that was still relevant in 1960s America. Since 1492, the natural environment of North America was well suited to revitalizing the European male; in its pristine state, America was a counter to Europe, a New World yet to be tainted by civilization. Further, the treatment of those already inhabiting this newly discovered land was problematic: if Indians lived in Eden, did that then mean that Indians had yet to fall from grace? The Noble Savage was a romantic construct, as Ekirch states, yet he also claims that anyone who encountered an Indian would never think that these tribes represented some ideal sense of being. The native North Americans were classified below Europeans in the social hierarchy, regardless of the restorative qualities this wilderness had on humanity. Further, despite the presence of indigenous groups, North American wilderness was virginal and waiting to be used by European men (Ekirch 1963, 10–11). Indians do get some attention in Ekirch's chapter on the rise of the romantic view of wilderness, and I do read this chapter as being sympathetic to the removal of Indian groups from their homes, yet the Indians soon vanish from the text just as the Romantics saw them vanishing from their present era.

I want to explore the "problem" of the Indian in both the preservation and consumption of nature in the United States. I use *problem* in the philosophical sense, namely, how do environmental historians and ecologists incorporate or remove indigenous groups through the prevailing discourse of nature? Ekirch pays little attention to indigenous North Americans, and I want to explore how the relationship of (hu)man and nature has evolved in academic writing both leading up to and since the publication of *Man and Nature in America*. This historiography is an effort to grasp how the American Indian fits within the production of ecological spaces and places of recreation. While a complete history is beyond the scope of this paper, I will look for moments in which the key ideas in the discourse on indigenous use and their conceptions of the wilderness emerge (Foucault 1977 [1971]). In what follows, I will show how a specific writer and naturalist, John Muir,

has shaped American ideas on the pristine wilderness of North America, which in turn affected how American Indians were perceived. I will also counter these nineteenth-century ideas with recent academic work that can help geographers escape these troublesome notions of American wilderness.¹

In reading a book like Ekirch's, and works from more recent years, one can begin to trace certain emergences of thought, such as the recurring use of John Muir as a father of environmentalism (Anderson 2005, 108; Denevan 1992, 369–385; Ekirch 1963, 57–69; Spence 1999, 21–22). Muir is often not critically read, which is the purpose of this critique of John Muir's trap, that is, the belief that good wilderness must be untouched by (indigenous) humans. This is important, as Muir is a revered figure in conservation and he repeatedly wrote disparagingly toward Indians inhabiting the natural spaces he wanted to preserve. Even histories explicitly addressing this subject matter fail to critically engage Muir's thoughts (Fleck 1985). To escape Muir's trap is to work not only to incorporate indigenous conceptions of ecology into the scientific discourse, but to also reconfigure how the very spaces of ecology are constructed in order to question (hu)man and nature in America.

Pristine Wilderness

One major change in perceptions of the wilderness since Ekirch's era is the questioning of the claims of European colonizers that North America represented an untouched or "pristine" wilderness (Denevan 1992, 369). Geographer William Denevan has argued not only that natural landscapes in both North and South America were shaped by humans prior to European contact in 1492, but that human activity led to natural degradation as well as "periods of reversal and ecological rehabilitation as cultures collapse, populations decline, wars occur, and habitats are abandoned" (1992, 381). Denevan's article was well received in its initial publication, and according to Denevan himself, even merited coverage in popular media like the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* (Denevan 2011, 577). What is telling about Denevan's analysis is that he was not writing to argue for the validity of ecological practices of American Indians. Instead he was focused on dispelling the myth of North and South America as Eden. It is not that the Indians lived in harmony with nature; in fact, it would appear Indians were worse stewards of the environment than Europeans. "With Indian depopulation in the wake of Old World disease, the environment recovered in many areas. A good argument can be made that the human presence was less visible in 1750 than it was in 1492" (Denevan 1992, 369). In Denevan's 2011 response to the success and critique

of his article, he spends time discussing his choice of the term “pristine,” but little on the role of the Indians living within that wilderness. He does argue that he was only interested in change, not the destruction of wilderness, though his original article gives such change a negative connotation. The fact that environmental recovery is linked to the decline of Indian populations helps Denevan’s argument against the notion of an untouched wilderness, but it also works toward a need to remove humans from natural spaces to promote environmental health (1992, 377). The problem I find with this line of thought is that early European colonists clearly thought nature was pristine, whether it technically was or not. Despite the large indigenous presence, America’s version of nature was aesthetically pleasing for Europeans. If Indian populations were higher in the sixteenth century but nature was also viewed as healthier, does it not follow that something else must be at work? How did Americans arrive at the idea of a pristine wilderness that must be protected from human activity?

Mark David Spence’s *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of National Parks* provides some necessary explanation as to why American ecologists have been at odds with Indian uses of nature. Using Glacier, Yellowstone, and Yosemite National Parks, Spence traces how indigenous groups were removed from these places so that the American government could preserve what it saw as pristine wilderness. Spence’s book does provide a strong history of abuse committed by the United States government to both physically and, I would add, mentally, remove native populations from their homeland, but what is also of value is his study of American attitudes toward the consumption and preservation of nature. Spence begins with the premise of a socially constructed idea of wilderness:

In the past few years, a number of scholars have argued that wilderness is not an absolute condition of Nature but instead a fairly recent American invention. While I share the conviction that wilderness is both a historical and cultural construct, I believe that such a definition requires an examination of the events and processes that led to the creation of this particular artifact. (1999, 5)

While Denevan argues against the pristine myth, Spence is interested in how such a myth came to be. There is a genealogy to this preservationist idea, which is what Spence traces in the first two chapters. He begins with early nineteenth-century painter and author George Catlin who was one of the first to propose the notion of federal policy to protect the wild (Spence

1999, 9–20). Catlin's view of the wild included the native people as part of the wilderness, which Spence argues was a vision of “a monstrous combination of outdoor museum, human zoo, and wild animal park” (1999, 11). While Catlin's ideas reveal a dehumanizing of the Indians of the American West, what is unique to later visions of conservation was that Indians were a part of nature and their presence was seen as important to the complete preservation of the wilderness. His call to protect nature was the start of a generation of artists, novelists, and travelers who wanted to maintain the untamed wild as the country grew. Spence then contrasts this conservancy with the writing of Samuel Bowles, who in the latter half of the nineteenth century argued for an end to treaties and peace with indigenous groups in the West. While Catlin and Bowles were not that far removed from each other in American history, the two men “operated within two different worlds and interpreted two very different ‘Wests’” (Spence 1999, 28). Catlin saw the preservation of the entirety of the American Frontier as being important; Bowles wanted everything but the Indians. Both visions of preserving the wilderness were important to setting America apart from European civilizations; American identity was directly connected to the pre-contact landscape.

What made these two Wests so different in just a handful of decades? Spence argues that the wealth of both mineral and aesthetic resources found in these wild areas was too enticing to allow native groups to continue to waste. The nation was also growing and now stretched to the Pacific Ocean. The tectonic landscapes of California added to the natural setting of the United States. There was a definite shift in the practice of consuming the West; nature was a thing to be used by the nation. This use was not without problems, as devastating industries like hydraulic mining scarred the California landscape. Such use required legal preservation policy to maintain what was helping to set young America apart from European civilization:

Vast primeval forests and picturesque Indians might once have distinguished American landscapes from those of Europe, but Americans could now boast of towering mountains, giant trees, and stupendous waterfalls that surpassed everything else in the known world. Moreover, the fact that such natural wonders lay two and three thousand miles from the eastern seaboard, yet within the boundaries of one nation, exemplified the continental scope and power of the United States. (Spence 1999, 33)

The native populations were no longer necessary to define America's ancient history and right to a unique civilization; these eternal geologic wonders could compete with Europe's claim to a powerful culture and history.

Thus, not only was the preservation of such monuments important, but native use of these lands appeared to be doing more harm than good. This attitude was prevalent despite the fact that elk populations were actually increasing in the latter half of the nineteenth century while local Indian hunters continued to use the land (Spence 1999, 33). America began to define "the value of wilderness in terms of animals and trees" as opposed to ecological balance, which "led advocates of preservation to view Indians as inherently incapable of appreciating the natural world" (Spence 1999, 62). The prevailing notion of "outdoor enthusiasts" at the time was that "it seemed a wonder that any forests or animals remained in North America since Indians practically based their entire existence on the destruction of wilderness" (Spence 1999, 62). With the creation of Yellowstone National Park, the preservationist ideals of untouched wilderness were made into law, which in turn made any traditional practice of using nature to maintain a healthy ecosystem not only false, but federally illegal.

Muir's Trap

John Muir spent many years in what would eventually become Yosemite National Park. Muir, the founder of the Sierra Club and a man known for his dedication to conserving natural spaces, is held up in many ecological works as an important figure in preservation history. At times, Muir is utilized as a primary source to depict how natural spaces were seen in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In his book *Where There Are Mountains: An Environmental History of the Southern Appalachians*, sociologist Donald Edward Davis uses Muir's writings as part of his etymological tracings of the region to illustrate the use of the name "Allegheny" over "Appalachian" in 1867 (2005, 5–6). Muir is invoked precisely because of who he was, which gives credibility and importance to the name Allegheny.

However, Muir is more than a writer who was simply *there* in history. He represents a way of existing with and in natural spaces (often in a religious or spiritual way). Ekirch invokes Muir's passion for preservation through his invitation to Ralph Waldo Emerson to visit Yosemite: "join me in a month's worship with Nature in the high temples of the great Sierra Crown beyond our holy Yosemite. It will cost you nothing save the time and very little of

that for you will be mostly in Eternity” (1963, 83). For Muir, nature was a holy space and thus preservation was a sacred duty. Anthropologist Leslie E. Sponsel's book, *Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet Revolution*, dedicates a chapter to Muir, connecting Muir's Christian upbringing to his dedication to nature. Yet before he argues such a connection, Sponsel shows just how important Muir was to preserving natural America:

Muir was a lifelong pacifist, worldwide vagabond, roving mountaineer, astute naturalist, recognized botanist, inspiring nature writer, crusading environmentalist, and, without any doubt, underlying all of that, a profound nature mystic. He lived and communed with nature in Yosemite almost continuously from 1869 to 1873. Theodore Roosevelt, U.S. President from 1901 to 1909, requested in 1903 that Muir guide him in Yosemite... This three-day camping experience inspired Roosevelt to launch various conservation policies with far-reaching consequences. The 'naturalist president' set aside no less than 230 million acres of wild America for posterity. (Sponsel 2012, 57)

It is worth noting that Ekirch, who acknowledges Muir as an important conservation figure, credits the politically shrewd forester Gifford Pinchot with inspiring Roosevelt to conserve American lands (1963, 90–92). Still, Sponsel clearly sees Muir's passion for nature as a major factor in the legal preservation of American wilderness. Further, Muir is so well known that this brief biography is more about highlighting his accomplishments than introducing him to readers, while the reader needs to be told that Theodore Roosevelt was president from 1901 to 1909. Muir needs no introduction to those interested in environmental history and human ecology. And it is this fact that I see as being the trap of John Muir. For whatever reason, his work is held up as the pinnacle of conservation writing and yet is not read critically, thus keeping conservation attitudes preserved in a nineteenth-century setting. To not critique Muir is to continue the dissociation of natural spaces and humans, or at least, as I will show below, a specific group of humans. To continue with my problematizing of Indians and the preservation of natural spaces, I want to ask what possibilities for the transformation of human/nature relationships occur when we escape John Muir?

One answer comes with a careful read of Muir's attitudes toward the different Indian groups he encounters in his travels. While Muir spends pages extolling the virtues of natural settings, he quickly dismisses indigenous groups: “In the wild gold years of 1849 and '50, the Indian tribes along the western Sierra foothills became alarmed at the sudden invasion of their

acorn orchard and their game fields by miners, and soon began to make war upon them, in their usual murdering, plundering style” (Muir 1962 [1912]), 173). Not only do groups such as the Yosemite and Miwok have a “usual” murdering and plundering style that highlights Muir’s distaste for an entire group of people, but his description of their spaces is telling. Prior to this passage, Muir has carefully described how these same foothills appeared to him as he traveled to the Yosemite Valley; it was the most beautiful site he had ever seen, which is high praise considering his extensive travels. For Muir, the western Sierra Foothills are a place of unrivaled beauty; for the Indians, they are a utilitarian space for acorn gathering. Muir cannot understand why the Indians would use violence when trying to keep non-Indians out of the very same area he describes as sublime. Muir subtly reveals his thoughts in his writing, but he can also be very explicit in his feelings about California Indians:

Perhaps if I knew them better I should like them better. The worst thing about them is their uncleanness. Nothing truly wild is unclean. Down on the shore of Mono Lake I saw a number of their flimsy huts on the banks of streams that dash swiftly into that dead sea, —mere brush tents where they lie and eat at their ease. Some of the men were feasting on buffalo berries, lying beneath the tall bushes now red with fruit. The berries are rather insipid, but they must needs be wholesome, since for days and weeks the Indians, it is said, eat nothing else. (Muir 1911, n.p.)

Huts are flimsy, berries are insipid, and the natives are filthy; therefore, these Indians do not belong in nature. To say that “nothing truly wild is unclean” is an odd statement to come from anyone who has spent time in wild settings and suggests a distaste for this specific group of people rather than a discussion of the term “wild” and its meaning. What is most interesting about this passage and the other writings that show Muir’s anti-Indian sentiment is that his feelings are revealed in his published works, not personal correspondence or private journals. Muir was not trying to hide his disgust of Indians, nor did he seem to see anything wrong with his thoughts.

There is also evidence of Muir comparing and ranking indigenous groups. As historian David Arnold points out when citing Muir’s *Travels in Alaska*, “The famous naturalist John Muir, who visited southeastern Alaska in 1879, remarked: ‘It was easy to see that [Alaska Indians] differed greatly from the typical American Indian of the interior of this continent.’ Especially, he noted, ‘in [their] being willing to work’” (Arnold 2008, 71). Clearly it

was not just California Indians who disappointed Muir; the entire lower 48 seemed to be lazy in his eyes. Arnold quickly leaves Muir to explore other Euro-American conceptions of indigenous Alaskans, but a more thorough read of Muir's book shows how special he thought the "Thlinkit" (Tlingit) tribes were (Muir 1993 [1915]; Muir also refers to the Tlingit as the "Stickeen tribe" throughout *Travels in Alaska*). He dedicates an entire chapter to them, first noting physical differences: "It was easy to see that they differed greatly from the typical American Indian of the interior of this continent. They were doubtless derived from the Mongol stock" (Muir 1993 [1915], 149). Muir's interest in the racial characteristics must be couched in the fact that the scientific inquiries into race were commonplace in the late nineteenth century. Yet, his interest also shows that the classification of humans was on his mind, and that it was possible for biology and culture to be linked. Following Muir's racial classification, he makes the above statement about the Tlingit being hard workers.

What I find most fascinating, though, is that Muir spends the majority of the chapter praising the Tlingit for being receptive to Christianity. According to Muir, the Tlingit believe in "atonement." He recounts a story he was told in which a chief sacrificed himself for the good of his people; Muir and the missionaries with which he is travelling do not miss the possible connection (Muir 1993 [1915], 150–151). Muir appears to be most taken by the fact that the Tlingit not only accepted Christianity, but seemingly did so with little hesitation. He even states that Chief Shakes, having heard the missionaries' description of Christianity, encouraged his people to convert at once because white men were intellectually superior to Indians. The chief resigns himself to the fact that he must remain a non-believer and go to Hell to be with the other Tlingit who will be there since they died before they could convert. Yet again, a sacrifice (Muir 1993 [1915], 152).

Muir also describes a potlatch ceremony he attended after being adopted by this tribe and given an Indian name, *Ancoutahan*, meaning "adopted chief" (Muir 1993 [1915], 28). He describes the native dances, songs, and "excellent imitations... of the gait, gestures, and behavior of several animals under different circumstances—walking, hunting, capturing, and devouring their prey, etc." (Muir 1993 [1915], 28–29). Muir seemed to be enjoying all of this, but his prose suggests he was most taken by the "serious speeches" that followed the performances, in which the Indians renounced their traditional ways of life and were now committed to being good Christians (Muir 1993 [1915], 29). The potlatch concludes with gifts of the ceremonial

clothing and ornamentation being given to Muir and other white attendees, since the Tlingit will have no further need for these relics of the past. In reading Muir's descriptions of these events, I cannot help wondering how much poetic license is being taken, or perhaps how much of Muir's Christian identity is shaping his perception of these events. The giving of impressive gifts makes sense if he was attending a potlatch, but the earnest willingness to give up material and spiritual culture is too unbelievable. Yet, Muir clearly appreciates these Indians more than others he has met because of their Christian values.

Currently, many of Muir's writings are freely available through the Sierra Club's website, so that comments stating that Indians are unclean, lazy, and even the berries they eat are "insipid" are digitally preserved. Anyone with an Internet connection can read how Muir prized Christian Indians above all others. Yet somehow Muir's feelings, at best ethnocentric and at worst racist, are overlooked by the many scholars praising his works as "the most famous environmental conservationist of the nineteenth century" (Sponsel 2012, 57). Muir's romantic and religious depictions of nature went far in promoting the type of conservation devoid of humans that Spence attributes to Samuel Bowles (1999, 28). To his credit, Spence does not gloss over Muir's negative attitudes toward Indians, despite the fact that Muir is not his primary interest in his history of removing Indians from national park lands (1999, 109). What has yet to be questioned, however, is how did Muir's conception of Indian worth influence his thoughts on wilderness? I contend that Muir's feelings toward Indian groups must bring into question his socially constructed wilderness. Rather than hold Muir as a savior of natural spaces, geographers—and, frankly, anyone else with an interest in the continuation of natural spaces in North America—should end the dissociation of indigenous people and the land in which they lived.

Incorporating Traditional Knowledge

To open possibilities for escaping John Muir's trap is to incorporate humans back into the wilderness, specifically to view Indians and the environment as existing in tension rather than as discretely separate entities. Some scholars have begun this work, most notably M. Kat Anderson and Fikret Berkes. Both ecologists are interested in the preservation and management of natural spaces, but they see the incorporation of traditional ecological knowledge as a fundamental step toward achieving such goals.

Fikret Berkes' text *Sacred Ecology* is an effort to bridge the gap between traditional and modern conceptions of how nature should be used. Berkes sees that caring for natural spaces, or what would be called natural-resource management in scientific discourse, is a highly Western (which he uses synonymously with scientific) field of study and practice. Rather than treating nature solely as an object of scientific study, Berkes argues that we must complement resource management with traditional knowledges, thus working "toward a 'sacred ecology' that addresses human-environment relationships in a holistic and humanistic way" (2012, 19). Berkes is not interested in simply providing anthropological accounts of indigenous knowledge; such knowledge needs to be "understood" in order for it to work with scientific theories and hypotheses in the holistic manner for which he calls (2012, 19). Berkes' text incorporates a variety of case studies in an effort to make the book comprehensive, though he focuses mainly on the Cree of James Bay, his career-long focus of research. At times, Berkes tries to make indigenous groups too different from the other cultures inhabiting the same spaces. For example, Berkes claims that "among many North American aboriginal groups, hunting is not merely the mechanical use of the local knowledge of animals and the environment to obtain food, it is a religious activity" (2012, 32). Could not the same be said of modern U.S. and Canadian hunters? Must hunting as a practice be utilitarian for one group and religious for another? Despite occasional false distinctions between cultural and ethnic groups, Berkes brings up important questions that should be asked within the fields of wilderness preservation and resource management. Specifically, to prompt real thought in his readers, Berkes asks "are [indigenous groups] natural conservationists or not?", which he quickly conditions by stating, "The question itself is part of the problem; one should ask: What kind of conservation?" (2012, 246). When Muir calls for the conservation of natural spaces, he is working within a specific concept of conservation. For Muir, human use in ways other than recreation and leisure is often shown to destroy nature, or at least taint it, and is at odds with its preservation. Though he does not invoke Muir, Berkes questions the very foundation that we have come to hold as true.

M. Kat Anderson takes up these questions in her book *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources*. Anderson argues from the beginning that:

The New World is in fact a very old world. The mountain forests, broad inland valleys, oak-studded hills, and deserts of the region now called California were thoroughly known, celebrated in story and song, named in great detail, and inhabited long before European explorers sailed along the west coast of North America for the first time. Every day of every year for millennia, the indigenous people of California interacted with the native plants and animals that surrounded them. They transformed roots, berries, shoots, bones, shells, and feathers into medicines, meals, bows, and baskets and achieved an intimacy with nature unmatched by the modern-day wilderness guide, trained field botanist, or applied ecologist. (Anderson 2005, 1)

Anderson sees the natives as being just as knowledgeable of California's natural spaces as those scientifically trained to understand them. Further, Anderson argues that indigenous Californians were active agents in transforming the plants, animals, and overall biogeography of California through genetic modification by selective harvesting, dispersal of plant species, and deliberate habitat modification to increase desired species (2005, 159). Not only did Indians have the detailed knowledge of natural spaces that is normally attributed to modern science, they were working as resource managers millennia prior to the discipline's emergence. This brings us back to Denevan and provides a counterargument that environmental degradation is not the result of too many humans in a natural space, but rather the result of fewer people who were acting as stewards of the land.

Anderson also critiques Muir's concept of a pristine California wilderness, arguing instead that human intervention is precisely what produced these seemingly natural landscapes. To return to Muir's enchantment with the western Sierra foothills, Anderson writes:

Staring in awe at the lengthy vistas of his beloved Yosemite Valley, or the extensive beds of golden and purple flowers in the Central Valley, Muir was eyeing what were really the fertile seed, bulb, and greens gathering grounds of the Miwok and Yokuts Indians, kept open and productive by centuries of carefully planned indigenous burning, harvesting, and seed scattering. (2005, 3)

This sublime landscape, according to Anderson, was actually cultivated in a way antithetical to Muir's style of conservation. The very beauty Muir wanted to preserve was in fact deliberately shaped by human use of the resources, and California was anything but a pristine wilderness.

Anderson presents an exhaustive study of Indian land use in *Tending the Wild*, and the recurring theme is the stewardship—not preservation—of resources. The natural spaces of California at the time of European colonization looked the way they did because of human use of these spaces, not because of centuries of being left alone. Anderson calls for a continuation of this stewardship. She sees the need for incorporating Indian practice into modern resource management not only to produce healthy ecosystems, but to work toward the very relationship between (hu)man and nature Ekirch called for decades earlier. The method to preserve the spaces Muir loved is actually restoration of these indigenous spaces:

Restoring plants, animals, and the ancient cultural practices of native peoples to landscapes can be a way to honor our human predecessors and to make history highly relevant to present and future generations. Restoration is also a discipline of the present: it fulfills people's inherent needs to experience and heal nature, regardless of race, ethnic background, class, or gender. And last it is a visionary field, offering a hopeful future in which it is possible to mend relationships with native people and create a world where humans can coexist with all of nature's denizens. It will accomplish these goals by offering a wider area of choices for human-nature interactions than just destructive land uses *or* preservation of nature without humans. (Anderson 2005, 356, *her emphasis*)

It would seem that Anderson has solved our problem. By embracing native use, there is a possibility of preserving nature while still using it for social and economic needs. While Anderson exemplifies the tremendous evolution of thought since nineteenth-century conservation writing, I still do not feel we have escaped from Muir's trap. Anderson provides evidence for indigenous stewardship, but at the same time she is trapped in a nineteenth-century conception of the place of California as well as the natural and social spaces within its borders. That is, she never questions the exact meaning of California, or if it even exists today in the minds of its indigenous inhabitants. Another possible answer to escaping from Muir lies in our conceptions of space.

Multiplicities of Space

While I commend those bringing indigenous uses of natural spaces to the practice of conservation and resource management, there is more work to be done. Denevan started the project by arguing against the "Pristine Myth", Berkes continues by demonstrating indigenous fishing and caribou hunting

methods, and Anderson complements with indigenous use of fire in California landscapes. Indigenous knowledge can and should be incorporated into the management and preservation of natural spaces; these spaces were shaped well before European empires spread to North and South America. Yet, these very spaces of study are produced by American, Canadian, or European forces. We cannot escape Muir's trap of nature being removed from human use unless we synchronously escape purely Western notions of geography; we must attempt to incorporate indigenous conceptions of space.

To go further in escaping Muir's trap, we first need to listen. In Malcolm D. Benally's book *Bitter Water: Diné Oral Histories of the Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute*, four Diné (Navajo) women are given the opportunity to speak in their own language, and the interviews are also translated into English. The resulting book is a powerful collection of indigenous views on modern political, economic, and ecological issues, that works toward shaking American ideas about the environment. For example, Mae Tso, a fifty-eight-year-old Diné woman, explains why water flows through this part of the American Southwest:

Our grandfathers planted water.

The water was far away; the people traveled on foot to bring back the water here. Barrels did not exist then. A buffalo urine sack was used to carry the water that was then planted here.

The water still flows today. (in Benally 2011, 18)

Clearly, the planting of water is what seems most at odds with a scientific understanding of the hydrosphere, but there is more at work in this story. Water's presence in Mosquito Springs, Arizona, is explained as human work being done to the natural landscape; water was an improvement to the land that resulted from human action. Further, there is a pragmatism to the recounting of how water arrived. Barrels clearly did not exist in the time of Mae Tso's ancestors, but the bladder of a buffalo would have been an impermeable container with which to transport water. Rather than focus on the possibility of planting water, we should hear this story as a precedent for humans using/altering/improving natural spaces long before European settlement. It does not matter if the Diné did or did not plant water; it matters that the possibility for changing nature in a nondestructive way existed for the Diné. Indigenous groups did not see their natural spaces as pristine, nor, it would seem, did they feel the need to do so. Both the idea of plant-

ing water and the normalcy of indigenous groups altering their homeland begin to chip away at the validity that both Indian and non-Indian cultures perceive of natural spaces in the same way.

I should note that I cannot claim to be the first to push for a radical reimagining of indigenous spaces. One of the most deliberate efforts comes from Joshua L. Reid, in his book *The Sea is My Country: The Maritime World of the Makahs*. At one level, Reid's book can be read as a history of an indigenous group, the Makah, being enveloped by colonial forces and working to maintain a sense of identity despite incorporation into colonial society and a capitalist economy. Yet Reid's work is exciting because it departs from this all-too-familiar history and forces the reader to question the very setting of Makah history. Reid adopts a methodology of borderland studies, that is, a space "shared and contested by distinct peoples" (Reid 2015, 14). This specific region, which he calls *ča•di•* (pronounced "cha-dee") borderland, is a departure from traditional uses of the borderland concept in that Reid rejects the assumption that only European forces produce borderlands, through colonialism and imperialism. Rather, through the borderland, Reid can "examine the complex interactions of local peoples—both Native and non-Native—with one another, with regional spaces broader than nations, and with sociocultural networks engaging capital, trade, kinship, and identity" (Reid 2015, 13–14). By focusing on the border between the United States and Canada, the spaces of interaction for the Makah and other indigenous groups of the Pacific Northwest are forced into an imperial space that does not correspond with their own sense of the physical and human geographies of the region. Reid is interested in how the locals experienced the landscape rather than how it was drafted on official maps. Additionally, Reid argues that while Euro-American governments viewed terrestrial land as the space of true property, the Makah extended their territories out into the water, not seeing coastlines as natural barriers to geography (Reid 2015, 12–13). Using Henri Lefebvre's tripartite framework of the "production of space," Reid attempts to demonstrate how the Makah produced the spaces they inhabited, or in other words how the Makah gave social meaning to the material world through which they passed, be it on land or sea (Reid 2015, 14; Lefebvre 1991 [1974]). This social space is demonstrated through the fact that even today, the Makah and other indigenous groups in the region use the marine environment as a place for material resources, but also, and more importantly to Reid's point, as a space that shapes cultural identity and a sense of sovereignty (Reid 2015, 271–272). At times, Reid's attempt

to introduce the social construction of space into indigenous studies can feel awkward; the word *space* is often added to nouns or verbs without explanation as to why such a space is different from others. Regardless, Reid rightly draws our attention to the fact that geography is much more than mere background in historical accounts. Space both shapes and is shaped by societies in culturally specific ways.

Charlotte Coté has also examined the indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest. In her book *Spirits of our Whaling Ancestors: Revitalizing Makah and Nuuchah-nulth Traditions*, Coté explores both the Makah and her own group, the Nuuchah-nulth. While she covers much of the same territory that Reid addresses in *The Sea is My Country* (for example, both books discuss the controversial 1999 Makah whale hunt), Coté spends more time on the social identity of these groups than the material spatiality. To accomplish this social history, Coté not only uses her own insider perspective as a member of the Nuuchah-nulth people to use traditional oral stories, but also injects her own recollections and family history. However, Coté also uses academic and historic sources in her book; non-Indians and Indians must be included in any history of indigenous people (2010, 10). The result is a seamless switching between oral history and scientific accounts, which gives her book the holistic feel that Berkes calls for in *Sacred Ecology*.

What Coté accomplishes with her variety of sources is to produce an account of how the Makah and Nuuchah-nulth people are socially and culturally connected to the marine geographies around them. Through this social history, she provides evidence for Reid's claim that Indian spaces are socially distinct entities from the Euro-American spaces occupying the same locations. Using the controversy surrounding the 1999 whale hunt by the Makah as a point of departure, Coté employs archaeological evidence to demonstrate that whaling has been a part of the subsistence strategy for these people for at least four thousand years (2010, 20). This timeframe gives a sense of precedence for the practice of whaling, though the 1999 hunt was met with protest and disgust by some non-Indians. While whaling was once part of Makah and Nuuchah-nulth material culture, the hunting of whales had not been practiced since the early twentieth century, leading many opponents to argue that whaling was no longer relevant to the culture (Coté 2010, 5). Food could be obtained in other ways and did not need to be had at the expense of a mammal just taken off the endangered species list. Coté argues that attacks on indigenous conceptions of food is not only cultural but "culinary imperialism," and that this hunt and others like it are

only superficially about morality (2010, 204). "The public discourse over the acceptability of killing and eating whales is couched in moral and legal terms, but the larger issue is one of power: the power to determine what we eat. Indigenous nations continue to have people outside our cultures impose their own symbolic and aesthetic food values on our societies" (Coté 2010, 205–206). Coté demonstrates throughout her book that to be Makah or Nuu-chah-nulth was in part connected to the foods consumed as well as the social customs connected to those foods. Euro-American settlers brought new foods with them, but whale meat and oil remained important to native diets throughout the nineteenth century (Coté 2010, 65). In part, this importance was because whale products were connected to social status. "Killing a whale was considered the highest glory: the more whales a chief caught, the more prestige, respect and physical wealth he received, thus serving to elevate his status and position inside and outside his village or social group" (Coté 2010, 23). Potlatch ceremonies like the one attended by John Muir in 1879 allowed a chief to redistribute wealth while producing a stronger social position within the village and neighboring groups, but the Canadian government outlawed such ceremonies in 1884 (Coté 2010, 53). With the end of the potlatch and other transformations of Indian culture, "change began to take place at such a rapid pace that social, political, and economic dislocation began to occur" (Coté 2010, 68). The term *dislocation* is a spatial one, which I believe Coté uses to suggest the connection to social spaces. She states that imperial changes forced "a disconnect with the material aspects" of Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth culture, which in turn threatened its spiritual aspects, though these were often surreptitiously maintained through artistic and religious means (Coté 2010, 68). The material side of indigenous culture was connected to the physical spaces of the Pacific Northwest, so when whale populations diminished due to overhunting, these groups lost the spatial practice that produced the relational spaces of Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth culture (Lefebvre 1991 [1974], 33). From a Lefebvrian framework, it could be argued that these indigenous spaces were and are still entirely different geographies from those of the Euro-American groups also in the Pacific Northwest. This geography is precisely the reason why Coté argues for the need for indigenous whaling in contemporary North America despite the environmental concerns of non-Indian groups. Natural spaces are produced by practices in such a way that to preserve them in the modern/Western sense would actually destroy them.

Coté's insider perspective raises questions of Muir's accounts of Pacific Northwest groups being such willing Christian converts. Though Coté is not explicitly speaking for the Tlingit of Southeast Alaska, her work reveals how ingrained cultural beliefs can be in both daily practices and the indigenous geographies. Arnold's history of the Haida and Tlingit, in which Muir's appreciation of Alaskan Indians was noted above, also argues that these groups were incorrectly seen as being Christian and capitalist, but were in fact adapting to imperial practices in order to preserve their own traditions (2008, 71–72). Not only does Arnold's account bring imperialist perceptions into question, but it also balances works like Coté and Reid's in that he demonstrates that one cannot assume indigenous groups occupy spaces that are totally distinct from imperial spaces. Like Coté and Reid, he stresses the importance of social geographies in how the different groups in this region used "the salmon fishery, arranging it to conform to understandable patterns of social organization and endowing it with cultural meaning" (Arnold 2008, 9). He even spends time focusing on how the salmon themselves moved through these spaces (Arnold, 2008, 77). Arnold adds two other important facets to the study of indigenous geographies. First, he stresses the "hybrid nature" of indigenous acculturation within imperial spaces, in that native groups can use modern technologies and knowledges while still maintaining ties to traditions (Arnold 2008, 153). The spaces produced in this way are no more nor less Indian; they are simply new social spaces, which allows for indigenous groups to be both modern and traditional at the same time. Second, Arnold makes a point of demonstrating how synchronous events occurring at different points on the globe can have a major influence on these imperial and indigenous spaces. For example, the advent of farm-raised salmon in Canada, Chile, Ireland, Scandinavia, and Scotland forced both native and Euro-American groups in Alaska to reconsider their positions within the local fishery (Arnold 2008, 181). The economic efficiency of salmon farming caused prices to drop, thus making it harder for both Indian and non-Indian groups to make a living catching wild salmon. Salmon fishing in the twentieth century was still a means for indigenous people to engage with the marine geographies of their cultures while participating in modern economic markets. Suddenly, farms on the other side of the world were changing how the native fishermen produced their hybrid ecological spaces of "new traditions" (Arnold 2008, 180).

Conclusions

In her essay "In History," Jamaica Kincaid questions the very foundations of history. "What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me?" she begins. "Should I call it history?" (Kincaid 2011, 18). She questions the ontological nature of history, and I cannot help wondering if we should go further and question ecology and geography as well. North American environmental histories and geographies have shown improvement in the incorporation of indigenous sources, practices, and beliefs since John Muir's travels and Arthur Ekirch, Jr.'s call for (white) man to reconnect to nature. Yet the literature shows that non-indigenous academics are trapped in Euro-American framings of how space is defined, which is to say it is simply something we pass through or that it begins and ends at the continent's edge. Just as Kincaid questions the naming of places, it is time for scholars to question the production of natural spaces. Rather than lament the absence of "facts" in current political discourse over the protection of nature, we must play with the idea that cultural traditions, social interactions, and political forces shape space so that different groups occupying the same locations actually see different places. Muir produced his nature, and Ekirch constructed a relationship between man and nature. These men were writing of the same locations that were used by indigenous groups, yet they were completely different spaces. Further, traditional knowledge, like space itself, is being continuously contested and altered by external forces.

History changes. Space changes. Nature changes. Is it not then possible that our work must change?

What is geography? Is it a theory?

Note

1 I use *American* to designate non-Indians living in the United States, as well as to reinforce the concept of Indian sovereignty. Further, I use *Indian* instead of *Native American* out of respect to the personal preferences of Miwok, Maidu, and Chumash individuals with whom I have worked.

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