Race and Environment:
Rhetoric of the Early American Environmental Movement

Elizabeth Papa | Honors Thesis Spring 2023
Advisors: Professor Pampinella & Professor Sullivan
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Racial Discourses in Environmentalism

The mobilization of Western, Christian rhetoric in the early environmental movement enabled white settlers to exclude indigenous nations’ histories and actors from foundational conservation and preservation efforts, and to elevate white actors’ interests.

This Eurocentric discourse illegitimates indigenous individuals’ sovereignty and agency. It erases indigenous culture, knowledge, and experiences from the environmental history of the United States.
Existing Debates on Race & Environment

- Civilization and Race
  - Eurocentric frameworks
- Climate Impacts
  - Scientific racism
- Religion & Environment
  - Romantic conceptions of nature

- National Park Creation
  - White dominance of national parks, John Muir as a key actor
- American Environmental Movement & Theodore Roosevelt
  - The myth of the frontier & offensive racism
Poststructuralism & Postcolonialism

Poststructuralism
- Foucault, Jackson, & Neumann
- Discourse constitutes structures, structures constitute discourse
- Importance of rhetoric & symbols
- Exclusion of actors/knowledge

Postcolonialism
- Said
- Civilizational boundaries
Main Actors
John Muir
Theodore Roosevelt
U.S. Congressional Record
Yosemite Nation
Society of American Indians

Main Events
Yosemite National Park
Mesa Verde National Park
Hetch Hetchy Dam
Discourse Analysis

John Muir

- Utilizes religious connotations of nature; Edenic, “virgin” landscapes
- Excludes indigenous actors from beauty of the landscape
- *Picturesque California, 1888, The Wild Parks and the Forest Reservations of the West, 1901, Letter to Roosevelt, 1907, Sierra Club Bulletin, 1908*

Theodore Roosevelt

- Separates indigenous actors from ideals of civilization and progress
- Generates racial hierarchies and civilizational boundaries
- 1902 State of the Union Address, Flagstaff Speech, 1903, “Conservation as a National Duty” Speech, 1908
Discourse Analysis

Congress

- Uses religious connotations, appeals to progress and civilization
- John Muir's petition
- Congressional Record (1890, 1901, 1913)

Indigenous Actors

- Challenge the subjugation of indigenous agency, sovereignty, and humanity
- Confronts the inequities and the racism of U.S. policy initiatives
- Yosemite Petition to Congress 1890, Society of American Indians's Quarterly Journal, 1913-1914
or even philosophical, none of the statements they have made descriptive of Hetty Hetchy deemed or considered are true, but they all show forth the proud and considerable of conditions that usually comes with a good word substantial irreducible ignorance.

For example, the capitalist, Dr. James J. Thelin, says there are thousands in the Sierra equally sure as Hetty Hetchy, it is inaccessible only nine months of the year, and is an inaccessible place the other three months because of necessity. On the contrary there is no distinct of how the place in the all the part excepting, it is accessible all the part, and it is not even mentioned in the book of the Sierra.

K.C. Bacon also says that the Sierra is “a largely isolated area” “in common minor feature” “a so-called natural curiosity or wonder” and that the mountain is “to greatly enhance the beauty of the Sierra.” And so the fight goes on.

Ever since the park was established it has called for defense, and however much it may be loved or its boundaries shored while a single mountain or tree or naturalist is left the poor store of a park would still need protection. The first forest reserve was in 1860 and though its boundaries were drawn by the Lord, and angels set not to ear it, even that most moderate reservation was attached.

I pray therefore that the people of California be granted time to be heard before this reservation question is decided: for I believe that as soon as sight is cast upon it, sites select or more or even the citizen of the Sierre would be opposed to it. And when the public opinion of the world would be may be passed by the hands of the weeping people.

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<th>EXHIBIT A</th>
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<td>The Condition of the Pueblo—By Frederick W. Henry</td>
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<td>A School of Race Development—By Mary E. Loing</td>
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<td>SHERMAN COOLEDGE, B.D.</td>
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<td>JOHN M. O'BRIEN, M.A.</td>
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Contemporary Connections

* Infuse indigenous actors, knowledge, perspectives, and history into preservation and conservation efforts

- Indigenous actors in positions of leadership: Deb Haaland, Chuck Sams
- Return indigenous tribes' collective jurisdiction of the existing national parks, with federal aid
- Utilize public land trust systems to return tribal ownership to certain national parks
- Biden's Executive Order, Office of Environmental Justice


Online Archive of California. “Letter from John Muir to Theodore Roosevelt, 1907 Sep. 9.” 1907. [https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt0x0nd9tp?order=2&brand=oac4](https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt0x0nd9tp?order=2&brand=oac4).


*Sundry Civil Appropriation Bill.* H.R. 14018. 56th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 34 pt. 4: 3263-3322.


