

Nature, Savage, Other

by

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“[T]he modern enframing of nature is inherently colonizing no matter where it takes place: coercive, invasive, appropriative in all its sites, it makes nature available for inspection, codification, calculation, and regulation” (Gregory 93).

“[A] central belief of our [Western] culture—if not *the* central belief—is that it is not only acceptable but desirable and necessary to bend others to our own will . . . So deeply inured are we that we no longer perceive when we are coercing or being coerced [Jensen’s emphasis]” (Jensen 242, 244).

The first national park, Yellowstone, was established in the western United States in 1872 (Gottlieb 60). The creation of Yellowstone marked a success for the fledgling conservation/preservation movement in the United States. Conservation has since made its way across the globe, to Eastern Africa and Brazil among other places (Igoe). The globalization of conservation and the consequential spread of national parks, nature preserves and wildlife refuges is generally heralded as an undisputed victory for both environmentalism and the Earth. Countless acres of land have been set aside for the protection of biodiversity, endangered species and as a storehouse of resources for humans in the future.

As in the case of Yellowstone National Park, which was created on land previously inhabited by Blackfoot, Shoshone, Bannock and Crow tribes (Gottlieb 61), conservation efforts around the world have also had the effect of displacing local peoples from their traditional lands and from the resources on which they depend for survival (Igoe 58). In Kenya and Tanzania the Maasai have been forcibly excluded from

traditional grazing lands for, what Jim Igoe refers to as “fortress conservation” (Igoe 69-102), that is, conservation-as-enclosure. In British Columbia the Native American First Nations are continually denied access to or control over forests in their native territories (Braun). Environmentalism and conservation are often discussed as discourses that compete with the hegemonic discourse of the nation state. However, given the tumultuous history, this essay seeks to problematize conservation as a colonial discourse that has been enlisted by the nation state in order to control, domesticate, civilize and commodify both nature and non-Western peoples. Conservation is one way in which colonization continues in the neocolonial age and its globalization is one face of a new type of Western (US) imperialism. I will highlight this view by examining social constructions of nature, constructions of indigenosity, and colonial discourses together with the discourse of conservation.

Nature is socially constructed (Braun; Cronon; Gregory; Igoe; Schlosser). In the words of William Cronon:

Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural. As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires. (Cronon 69, 70)

The Western worldview draws a sharp line between humans and nature and between nature and culture: humans are separate from and superior to the natural world; nature was created for human use and domination (*The Jerusalem Bible*, Genesis 1:26). In this dichotomy, humans are created as the “self” while nature is “othered.” Inclusive of everything nonhuman, nature is defined not by what it is, but by what it is not. This dichotomy also assumes that humans are inherently destructive to nature; the very

presence of humans is degrading to the point that the places they inhabit are no longer considered to be nature. Nature cannot coexist with humans (Igoe 14).

It is in this way that the human/nature dichotomy informs conservation. According to Igoe, conservation is less a scientific project than it is a reflection of Western social constructions of nature, indigenous peoples, and the relationship of humans to their environments (Igoe 68). Conservation assumes that humans will always degrade their environment and, therefore, wilderness can only exist in the absence of humans. Hence the need to section off parcels of land—national parks, nature preserves, wildlife refuges—from which human use is highly regulated or excluded. Wilderness is crucial to the conception of nature utilized in environmental and conservationist discourses. Specifically, this construction of nature hinges on an imagined “wilderness-as-pristine” ideal. In order for wilderness to be “pristine”, it must be free from humans and their inherently ravaging effects. Such an idea of “wilderness” is ironic, since *humans have constructed wilderness* in the same specific historical context from which conservation arose. Instead of being a pure, pristine reality, free from the contamination of cities, civilization and human beings, “it is a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made” (Cronon 69).

The creation of wilderness engages in a provoking erasure of history. In order to create and protect wilderness areas in the western United States, Native Americans were forcibly removed from their traditional lands. Subsequently, the newly created “wilderness” was cast as “pristine”—when in fact it was an anthropogenic landscape that had been inhabited by humans for thousands of years. The signification of “wilderness” not only had the effect of disregarding the fact that humans had been living on the land

(sustainably, although not without altering and managing the landscape) for thousands of years, but also erased the violent history of bloodshed and forced relocation that went into the creation of these national parks (Cronon 69). This erasure of history continues today in the discourse of the National Parks Service in the United States despite the fact that they have recently entered into partnerships with various Native American tribes (Igoe 136). In regards to the First Nations of British Columbia, Bruce Braun cites a similar suppression stating that, “[t]here is still a great reluctance on the part of non-Natives to *acknowledge, let alone address*, these histories of violent displacement [emphasis added]” (Braun 22).

This same suppression of history is present in the establishment of national parks in Eastern Africa. After the forced relocation of the Maasai, national parks in Africa were signified as “wilderness.” Inherent in this signification is the erasure of the Maasai and their history. The localized conservation model of the Maasai (Igoe 48-54) is abolished and replaced by a “system . . . based on knowledge that is general and universal” (Igoe 54) - the undisputed conservation model of Western science. The erasure of the Maasai is, therefore, part of the colonial endeavor that, in the words of Paul Carter, “replac[es] local difference with universal intelligibility” (Gregory 104). These examples also make it clear that there is more going on than just the production of nature and wilderness. It is also critical to unpack constructions of indigenesness.

In the Western mind, the notion of the “native” is informed by an imagining of the “noble savage,” who lives in harmony with nature. I place “native” in quotations because it is an artificial category that assumes that all “natives” must be, somehow, the same, when in fact “natives” represent diverse, unique cultures and individuals. Furthermore, as

Kirin Narayan points out, “[i]ndigenous’ is a misnomer, for we are all indigenous somewhere” (Narayan 678). Part of the imagined sameness of “natives” is the myth of the “noble savage” or the “primitive-as-ecologist” (Wilk 257). While discussing the Maasai, Igoe presents the hypothesis:

[T]hat non-Western people don’t so much live in harmony with their environment as they learn from their mistakes . . . the archaeological record indicates that herding systems of the Greater Rift Valley have crashed several times over the past 5,000 years. What seems to have emerged in the process, however, is a system of specialized herding that is especially suited to East Africa’s semi-arid grasslands. (Igoe 46)

However, counter to the “noble savage” is a more common preconception of what Igoe calls the “ignoble savage” (Igoe 79), the “savage” as “other.”

In “The Biopolitics of Security,” David Campbell discusses national identity as an “imagined community . . . render[ing] foreign policy as a boundary producing political performance in which the spatial domains of inside/outside, self/other, and domestic/foreign are constituted through the writing of threats as externalized dangers” (Campbell 947). He goes on to say that “[t]his construction of social space also involves an axiological dimension in which the delineation of an inside from an outside gives rise to a moral hierarchy that renders the domestic superior to the foreign inferior” (Campbell 948). Although Campbell’s discussion specifically focuses on *national* identity, this identity can be broadened to the production and maintenance of a Western identity. The self/other dialectic directly parallels the civilized/primitive dichotomy that serves as the foundation for colonialism (and neocolonialism, although in the neocolonial discourse it is more seductively referred to as developed/developing, First World/Third World, or core/periphery). In this dichotomy, “civilized,” white Westerners, the “we” or the “self”, are superior to the nonwhite “primitive” or “savage” “them” or “other” (in neocolonial

discourse more seductively referred to as “native” or “indigenous”). Like nature, non-Western, nonwhite peoples are “othered,” defined not by what they are, but by what they are not; on one hand we have the West, on the other, all the rest.

The history of conservation in the United States, specifically, relies on the inside/outside dialectic in which the “civilized” settlers and colonizers of the western United States created “wilderness” from land that was previously inhabited by the “other.” They could do this because the “savage” was equated with a similarly “savage” nature. Achille Mbembe states:

In the eyes of the conqueror, *savage life* is just another form of *animal life*, a horrifying experience, something alien and beyond imagination or comprehension . . . what makes the savages different from other human beings is less the color of their skin than the fear that they behave like a part of nature, that they treat nature as their undisputed master . . . The savages are, as it were, “natural” human beings who lack the specifically human character, the specifically human reality . . . [Mbembe’s emphasis]. (Mbembe 24)

Therefore, to “civilize” the “savage” was not to make her/him a part of the Western identity, but instead to separate her/him from nature, a process made painfully obvious by conservation efforts. At the same time that Native Americans are erased from nature and history, they are “collapsed” into nature as a part of nature (Schlosser 5). Nature can then be cast as “pristine wilderness;” first, because the human presence had been removed and second, because the humans who had inhabited the “wilderness” were a part of that “wilderness” and therefore, not fully human. The “savage”-as-human is separated and forcibly removed from nature, while the “savage”-as-less-than-human is a part of nature and therefore, “wilderness” can be “pristine” despite its prior human inhabitation.

The treatment of “native” peoples in the case of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) further exemplifies the neocolonial discourse of environmentalism in

the form of conservation. There are (at least) two groups of Native American “stakeholders,” to use Kolson Schlosser’s term, present in the “national security” debate over ANWR, the Inupiat and the Gwich’in. Both groups are marginalized in the debate (Schlosser 8) and when their voices are heard (or, rather, when the voices of those who are *speaking for them* are heard), they are in effect being *used* to advance the claims of environmentalists. The Inupiat, who live in and own rights to portions of ANWR and are generally pro-drilling (Schlosser 8), are excluded from the discourse surrounding ANWR by conservationists who construct ANWR as “pristine wilderness” (Schlosser 14). This erasure “implicitly casts the Inupiat of Kaktovik as not part of what is referred to as ‘civilization,’ . . . because it is suggested that ANWR is *now* pristine, but would be spoiled *if* civilization were found there [Schlosser’s emphasis]” (Schlosser 14).

In stark contrast, conservationists *use* the Gwich’in very differently. The Gwich’in (literally meaning “Caribou People”) generally do not live in ANWR but rely on its caribou herds for their sustenance and life ways. Because of this, the Gwich’in are generally opposed to drilling (Schlosser 8), a fact that is exploited in the discourse of conservationists. In this case, environmentalists collapse the Gwich’in into nature; they are constructed as a part of nature. Both the exclusion of the Inupiat from ANWR and the collapse of the Gwich’in into ANWR imply that these peoples are “savages,” a part of nature, animal-like, and less-than-human. Neither is considered a part of civilization and neither speaks for themselves.

A further example of the colonialist discourse of conservation is the creation of Tarangire National Park in Eastern Africa. The situation is remarkably similar to the creation of parks in the western United States despite being halfway across the globe.

With the establishment of Tarangire, the Maasai and their cattle were (sometimes violently) forced off of their traditional lands and continue to be excluded (Igoe 58). Like “wilderness” in the United States, Tarangire is similarly imagined as a “pristine wilderness” teeming with wildlife and, of course, is one of a few similar parks where Westerners “go on safari.” It is interesting to note that because African “wilderness” is imagined as teeming with wildlife, National Parks in East Africa were established around permanent water holes (Igoe 54, 59). These water holes were generally part of the Maasai’s drought reserve pastures, from which they are now banned (Igoe 54). As exemplified by the Maasai’s exclusion, one of the brazen injustices of conservation enclosures is that they outlaw traditional and subsistence land uses such as firewood collection and grazing (Agrawal 5; Igoe 58).

The exclusion of local peoples is not the only commonality that ties Tarangire National Park to national parks in the western United States. In both cases, conservation is a discourse of the privileged (Cronon 76-78; Gottlieb 65). William Cronon argues that wilderness arose from a specific cultural and historical context in the United States (Cronon 69). This was a context in which the mythical American frontier was industrializing and expanding further westward. From the rugged individualism of the frontier myth arose the wilderness conservation/preservation movement, which created wilderness-as-spectacle, an aesthetic to be consumed for recreation by the masculine and elite (Cronon 76-78).

Nature as a spectacle for the elite has deep roots in the Western worldview that goes back much farther than the first conservationists of the western United States. Western elite assumptions have long held that wealthy and educated classes alone can

appreciate the aesthetic beauty of the natural world. This is exemplified by the English enclosure movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Igoe 79-84; Shiva 23-25), which held that the aesthetic appreciation of nature was a mark of aristocracy (Igoe 82), although the roots of this phenomenon likely go back much further. Despite laws protecting the commons, private property replaced land held in common because “the poor and common property systems were seen as obstacles to national progress, obstacles that could only be overcome through *the subjugation of nature by more rational systems* [emphasis added]” (Igoe 81). This had the effect of destroying commoners’ self-sufficiency and making them largely dependent upon monetary income in a “subjugation [that] had close parallels to European expansion and colonization . . . an idea that would be repeated by colonists in North America and East Africa” (Igoe 81). Thus the “Tragedy of the Commons” (Hardin), which asserts that all humans are essentially selfish “rational maximizers” (Igoe 55), can better be described as the “tragedy of privatization” (Shiva 55). “The Tragedy of the Commons” was imposed upon English commoners and was later imposed upon the Maasai.

The establishment of conservation in Africa set aside national parks as “landscapes of consumption . . . ‘ruled by recreation and contemplation’” (Igoe 81) as distinctively separate from privatized lands that were produced as “landscapes of production . . . ‘ruled by rationality and profit’” (Igoe 81). Today’s consumers of Africa’s national parks are (largely) Western eco-tourists who can afford to “go on safari.” National parks in Africa are “wilderness-as-spectacle” for the privileged; those who can afford to buy access to the parks. According to Derek Gregory the “ideology of nature” or “culture of nature” in which nature is separate from and outside of culture “is so indelibly

marked by class that it can be described as a bourgeois imaginary [such that m]odern colonialism has often been described as a bourgeois project” (Gregory 88). Although conservation creates a “public” space, it does not create a common space. Instead, its boundaries are actively policed to exclude certain types and classes of people as well as certain activities.

Western imaginations of Africa—“pristine wilderness” teeming with wildlife and “primitive” Africans, each kept carefully segregated from the other—have become a reality that has been imposed upon Eastern African peoples and landscapes. To see Maasai herders within the bounds of a national park such as Tarangire would oppose the Western fantasy of what constitutes wilderness, as wilderness does not include humans. Igoe claims that the “virtual realities” that a consumer expects from national parks become “actual reality” that is imposed upon the “real world” in national parks. He refers to this fantasy-turned-reality as “Disneyfication” (Igoe 15-18). Of particular relevance are the African Safari ride at Disney World and Disney’s *The Lion King*: “[t]he types of fantasies produced by the ‘Disney dream machine’ make their way back to Africa where they are repackaged and sold to Western tourists” (Igoe 17). Thus “going on safari” presents the eco-tourist with a “reality” that is both foreign and, at the same time, recognizable.

The image of a “pristine” nature in East African national parks raises an important question: What about the Maasai? Where do they live? The human side of the fantasy-become-reality can be seen in “cultural villages.” These “traditional” Maasai communities “are exactly the type of controlled experience that Western tourists pay for when they purchase a luxury safari . . . they can see how the Maasai ‘really live’” (Igoe

17). This “artificial reality” presented to fulfill the imagination of the ecocultural tourist is in stark contrast to the destitute poverty that grips people who were displaced by the national parks themselves (Igoe 18). Thus, nature *and* culture in Eastern Africa have been commodified by a global machine of capital that holds that everything is and should be for sale.

The imposition of Western fantasies upon foreign landscapes is an imperial act of neocolonial dominance. In the western United States and in Eastern Africa, the imagined reality of the Western worldview was imposed upon a landscape that was perceived as “savage” and upon people who were perceived as “savage.” According to Gregory, “One of the preoccupations of *colonial* discourse is the production of imaginative geographies that construct and calibrate distance [and difference] between colonizing and colonized societies [Gregory’s emphasis]” (Gregory 86). This distance and difference is imagined both in terms of the people and the landscape that are being colonized. While colonized people are “othered” from (white) Westerners, colonized nature (tropical) is “othered” not only from humans, but also from the dominated, domesticated European (temperate) landscape (Gregory 106). In Western discourse, European nature is feminized as a nurturing mother, while the “other” nature is feminized as a wild temptress in need of domestication (Gregory 89, 90). Not only does the production of imaginative geographies engage in a “double othering” (nature, first, “othered” from humans; foreign nature, again, “othered” from European nature) of foreign nature, but this “double othering” also produces foreign nature as “unnatural nature,” such that colonized peoples and colonized landscapes are both viewed as deviants (Gregory 106). While foreign nature is a wild temptress, “natives” are similarly feminized as sexually immoral (Gregory 100).

Imaginative geographies, like those produced by the “Disney dream machine,” become reality through the production of space (Gregory 87) as masculine reason is imposed upon feminized nature. This occurs first, through the imaginative production of nature and second, through the building of enclosures and architecture, both of which render the “other” nature as more orderly and recognizable to the colonizer (Gregory 90). Just as foreign nature and foreign people are feminized, so is localized and traditional knowledge, like the resource conservation models of the Maasai. The penetration of masculine reason upon feminized nature is mirrored in the process by which localized and feminized knowledge is replaced by masculine, rational and universal science. Thus, enclosures in the form of national parks, wildlife refuges and nature preserves allow conservation to function as a perpetuation of colonial discourse and domination over inferior foreign landscapes and inferior foreign ways of understanding and conceptualizing the world.

There is a frustrating lack of indigenous discourse present in both the academic and environmental dialogue regarding social nature and conservation. This, of course, points to the coloniality of the discourses at hand, both of which, at least in part, lay claim to the authority of science. The “native” does not speak for her/himself, but instead the colonizer or the Westerner speaks for her/him. When the “native” does speak, it is through the framing, voice, and language of the colonizing culture. The unique positioning and experience of the “native” is, if not silenced, then certainly muffled and contorted. In this sense, my own writing is unavoidably colonial. Here, I represent what is happening to “them,” just as Bruce Braun represents the First Nations and Jim Igoe represents the Maasai and conservationists represent the Inupiat and the Gwich’in.

This monopoly on discourse and claim to authority must be challenged. It is imperative that the “native” speak for her/himself or for her/his own people. As Trinh Minh-ha demonstrates, the language of white, male, colonizers, hierarchy and domination are writ in the English language itself (Minh-ha 47-54). Like the ordering and domestication of nature, and the civilizing and displacement of people, the production of a foreign experience into English can be a violent affair. Translation to English is an act that takes a situated, contextualized experience and submits it to a white, male, colonial understanding of the world. In effect, translation can be a silencing act. Because of this, it is also imperative that the “native” have a venue in which he or she can speak in his or her own language.

Resisting colonial domination also requires us to be more active and more self-consciously reflective. If equality and social justice are to be taken seriously every person must envision and fight for a world free from domination and hierarchy of all kinds. If there is no solution, there is at least a way to combat the silencing effects of the hegemonic discourse: every person must make his or her own, unique, subjective, positioned voices heard. In doing so, the range of human discourses will be broadened. Essentially, the myth of objectivity must be exposed as just that: *a myth*. Instead, knowledge must be fragmented and decentralized so that one person’s perspective is never any more or less valid than that of another. If we all make our own voices heard, we can at least threaten the monopoly of an epistemology that claims to be universal.

Likewise, if ecological and environmental threats facing the Earth and all of its inhabitants are to be taken seriously, Western constructions of nature and the relationship to Earth that these constructions, worldviews and ideologies foster must be drastically

reworked. Included in this reworking must be the overhaul of what is now understood to be conservation. Wilderness, the concept on which conservation rests, only further entrenches the dichotomization of humans from nature. At the present, Western societies are *unsustainable*, which is, according to Micheal Pollan, “a word that’s been so abused we’re apt to forget what it very specifically means: *Sooner or later it must collapse* [Pollan’s emphasis]” (Pollan 183). Human societies must attain sustainability. This means that humans must learn *to live with nature*, not as separate from nature. To alter the landscape is not an inherently destructive act. The key is to do so in a sustainable manner.

The destructive relationship that Western societies, specifically the United States, have toward the Earth—a relationship of profit-driven production and hyper-consumption—cannot be addressed by policies and programs alone, but only through a radical shift in the way the non-human world is thought about, talked about and acted upon. This must be accompanied by a radical shift in priorities; a shift from monetary, short-term profit, to a more holistic notion of profit, one that prioritizes the social and ecological wellbeing of everyone equally. No longer can competition, greed and self-interest be encouraged. Rather, community, solidarity, equality and intimacy must be nurtured and allowed to grow and flourish.

That being said, I would like to conclude with an example of how conservation efforts can work *with* “native” peoples instead of against “them,” allowing for a sustainable model in which people co-exist *with* nature, not as separated from nature. This is exemplified by Arun Agrawal’s presentation of the Chipko movement in Kumaon, India. The Chipko movement is a collective, grassroots movement to preserve

forests through direct action (Agrawal 1). In the 1860s the colonial government of India began to enforce a top-down approach not only by regulating forests, but also by the discursive creation of the “forest-as-a-forest.” Almost eighty percent of Kumaon forests were enclosed in reserves to which locals had little or no access (Agrawal 3). This enclosure “and [its] enforcement had criminalized everyday behavior by making illegal a range of what might be called customary uses of forests” (Agrawal 5). Essentially, resources on which the locals relied for their survival and for the maintenance of their life ways were now off limits.

The response of the Kumaonis to the colonial regulations was explosive: In several separate revolutionary acts of resistance, locals set the forest ablaze burning almost 200,000 acres over a five year period and ten years later proceeded to burn even larger wooded areas. These infernos were accompanied by a show of local solidarity; colonial officials were unable to apprehend the torchers due to the fact that villagers would not identify those responsible for the blaze. This refusal to cooperate with the colonial state made for a collective resistance” (Agrawal 3-5).

Instead of responding with increased regulation, enforcement, or warfare as might be expected, the colonial government handed over control of the forests to localized, decentralized community control (Agrawal 5). For Agrawal, what is most intriguing was the paradigm shift that occurred within the Kumaon. Prior to the establishment of local control, the majority of villagers were either apathetic to or resentful of the aims of forest protection; forest protection posed a threat to their livelihood. However, the effect of giving the Kumaonis localized control was empowering, creating the local people as “environmental subjects” (Agrawal 7). With a stake in the health and protection of the

forests, there are now more than 3,000 local forest councils that, under a generalized set of mandates from the central government, effectively regulate forest usage more satisfactorily than a centralized agency could have ever hoped to accomplish (Agrawal 5, 8).

In this essay, I have sought to problematize conservation as a neocolonial formulation by analyzing writings on social nature, constructions of indigeness, colonial discourse, and case studies of conservation and its globalization. In many ways, this case of the Kumaon is ideal. Instead of the traditional model of conservation, in which the human use of “wilderness” for resources is forbidden and the locals are excluded, villagers have access to the resources of the forest. Simultaneous to their access to forest resources, the villagers have also been made stakeholders in the preservation of the forests. It is to their benefit to protect the forests for themselves and future generations. Furthermore, the Kumaonis have been given agency to make their own choices and to control their own destinies—they have been given a venue in which their voices can be heard. Not only can this example be viewed as a successful model of conservation, it can also be viewed as a model for Westerners to emulate. We must seek to live *with* the “natural,” not as separate from the “natural.” Only when the strict human/nature divide so thoroughly entrenched in conservationist tropes is bridged can ecological and social justice proceed hand in hand.

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