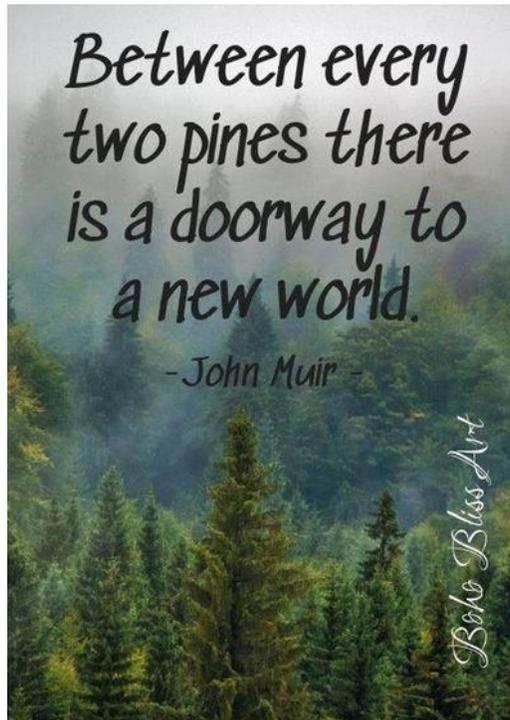


THE 'TAMING' OF THE WILD: ELITISM'S IMPACT ON ENVIRONMENTALISM BY KELLE BYARD

“Between every two a new world.” John are oft-repeated by the outdoors. magnitude of that impalpable without world,” as so many settlers have labeled particularly the States now ahistorical name. ‘new’ about it. continuing their fortune, coined this glorify their quests. colonials poured supposedly untapped land, eager to lay claim to territory that, in their view, was more bounty to be harvested and commodified.



There was nothing Europeans, quest for fame and romanticized term to These European unabashedly into this

Yet, the land these colonizers sought to claim was not empty and free for the taking. In fact, populations of Native Americans had resided on these lands for thousands of years. Regardless, Europeans violently conquered wherever their boots landed, reshaping the landscapes. Not only were these places geographically altered, but they were recast and reformed according to the mindsets and ideologies of a few men. These elites of Europe and the Americas were profoundly influential in how lands were set aside, conserved, utilized, and protected. Elites driven by aesthetics, racial hierarchies, and capitalism imposed their vision and will on the lands of the United States as they saw fit.

Thus, all these many years later, their impact continues to reverberate through the environmental movement we know today. Unfortunately, their legacy has left us with unequal protection and use of land and disregard for environments that large populations of people call home. To fully understand the forces

working within the environmental movement, one must understand who the elites were and how their beliefs came to be so powerfully influential on the land and the people that inhabit it.

The elite are omnipresent in the shaping of human and natural environments. Environmental imaginations were the vehicle in which the elite conquered and used America's landscapes. The elite normally consisted of white men who had the ability to own property and exert disproportionate control over regions. Not all elites were necessarily white men; however, this is the group that in history are consistently the agents of the environmental imaginations. In Jedediah Purdy's introduction to his book *After Nature*, he outlines four environmental imaginations: providential, Romantic, utilitarian, and ecological.

The providential enabled frontier elitism, the process in which white settlers cleared the land of native populations through ethnic cleansing and parceled the land based on a Biblical idea that "[t]he world was a potential garden that existed to serve human needs, but only if people developed it with labor and settlement" (Purdy 23). The providential imagination stakes its claim in the word of God, and the religiosity of this imagination guided the spirituality of Romanticism.

The Romantic imagination clearly outlines an upper class of nature devotees who in turn outlined certain areas of sublime, awesome land to be preserved. The most beautiful areas, the wilderness, were outlined by the most privileged men who were able to explore and advocate for these landscapes that filled them with wonder. They decided which landscapes were worthy of governmental protection without the consultation. Wilderness was a concept that started in gardens and art from famous English landscape architects like William Kent and French painter Claude Lorraine. More wild sceneries became a "mark of gentility" according to Rebecca Solnit in her book *Savage Dreams*. The construct of wilderness had become an ideal vision for the elite, who sought to impress this European aesthetic onto the landscapes of the United States. Purdy said that "...there is no equality among American landscapes: some are treated as sacred, some guided into many generations of habitation and use, and others sacrificed in just a few years" (26), which exemplifies how elites could designate what lands were worth saving or exploiting based on their demands.

Much of this ideology is also demonstrated by Henry David Thoreau, who is a prime example of elitism at work in the environmental movement. He was a white male surveyor who believed in a select class of “walkers” -- those who are born with an understanding of how nature is integral to humanity. He said, “Wilderness is the preservation of the world” (Thoreau 10), but he also drew property lines for his livelihood, and in doing so he contributed to the separation of humans and nature and further defined who has control over nature. So, even though wilderness seems like an innate and naturalized concept, it was socially conceived and perpetuated onto the soil of America.

The utilitarian imagination consisted of elites holding leadership positions in governments and being the scientists that designated what of nature could be utilized. The main proponents of conservation, such as Theodore Roosevelt, did not believe in the democratic management of land and resources, and “took its standards not from popular will, but from expert knowledge” (Purdy 38). People who were not deemed experts on certain matters, such as forest management, had no say in the utilization of the resources in their environments but were subjugated to the will of an elite class of experts. Efficient administration was cited as the utmost way to govern landscapes for the benefit of the people, according to Purdy, but many of these administrations were composed of imperialists or eugenicists people who imposed hierarchies on others for power. These people were elites. Somewhat similarly, the ecological imagination also had experts who understood ecology and natural resources, as well as politicians who oversaw landscapes. The lack of democratic decision-making in regard to resource use and conservation concentrated power into the hands of the elite.

After engaging with each imagination and the role of elitism in each, it can be better understood how elitism has persisted into modern environmental movements and the way Americans have conceptualized their landscapes and the people residing in them. The dissension between the preservation of wilderness and any other form of environmentalism has been the result of elitism. Often times in modern environmentalism through groups like the Sierra Club (founded by Muir himself), we see a desire to preserve large tracts of “wilderness” and pristine landscapes to set aside land solely for organisms besides humans and permit the continual existence of landscapes separate from human involvement. William Cronon in *The Trouble With Wilderness* argues that “idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape that for better or worse we call home” (21).

The issue is that elites are privileged enough to have all of their basic environmental needs met and can worry more about places they wish to escape to, similar to Thoreau's idea of walking in nature. Elites, by ignoring the environment surrounding their home, also ignore other environmental problems like:

occupational health and safety in industrial settings, problems of toxic waste exposure on "unnatural" urban and agricultural sites, problems of poor children poisoned by lead exposure in the inner city, problems of famine and poverty and human suffering in the "overpopulated" places of the earth—problems, in short, of environmental justice. If we set too high a stock on wilderness, too many other corners of the earth become less than natural and too many other people become less than human, thereby giving us permission not to care much about their suffering or their fate. (21)

The actions of elites in environmentalism can breed complacency – the environmental issues affecting humans, even in the most urban settings, are as important as those affecting the socially constructed “wilderness.” Today, we can see this demonstrated in the lack of aid given to environmental movements like ones for the Flint Water Crisis and other urban areas affected by contaminated water. Often, these are not seen as environmental issues by those in power because they do not occur in the wilderness upheld by elite environmentalism.

Here, Dorceta Taylor complicates the role of elitism in urban environmentalism versus wilderness environmentalism that Cronon commences. When cities in the 19th century began to see a massive increase in mortality due to illness homogeneously across the rich and poor, elites were fearful of contracting diseases and bearing the economic burden of others' contractions. Therefore, in this century, “rich urbanites undertake or push for reforms to reduce illness or mortality” (Taylor 2016, from Taylor 2009). The elites banded with the poorer classes in their cities to decrease the effect of diseases. However, the only way environmental reforms were taken seriously was through the will of elites. “By the mid-nineteenth century, the outward movement of wealthy residents from city centers was commonplace” (Taylor 43). Once these elites could no longer handle the pollution of cities, they pursued cleaner spaces and aristocratic exclusivity. Once they left, so too did the bargaining power they had within cities. The only environmental issues that elites engaged in were those that affected them directly, whether it be the sublime landscapes they were enamored with (highlighted by Cronin) or the

pollution of the neighborhoods they resided in. Elites only cared about “home” when environmental degradation affected elites where they lived.

When the elites of society were conquering the virgin land of the United States during frontierism, fleeing from cities to create suburban environments, or designating certain pristine areas for tourism, the lands they infiltrated were violently depopulated and repopulated with either elites seeking solace from the city, or immigrating people of color whose labor went on to support the elites. Once Europeans had spread completely westwards and parceled the land of the United States, certain parcels became the “gardens” that the European aristocracy was endeared to, as dictated by Solnit. But gardens are not free or wild, and Solnit exemplifies this when she describes Yosemite as “a suburb without walls rather than a wilderness with amenities” (Spectators 1) due to the many tourists doing their usual business in this so-called “pristine” park. Further, the urge for tourism in places like Yosemite can be traced to feelings of emasculation in the most privileged of men who sought to “escape [civilization’s] debilitating effects” (Cronon 15).

Yet, “wilderness came to reflect the very civilization its devotees sought to escape,” according to Cronon (16) because elites brought with them urban ideas of recreation. Inhabiting the “uninhabited” wilderness for pleasure was an urban elitist ideal and simultaneously removed the history of the land these tourists visited; the national parks were once the homes of Native Americans. The ahistoricity that elitism employs in its environmentalism is racist and dangerous because it neglects and erases the ethnic cleansing of indigenous people. In Yosemite, there would have been no national park if the Mariposa Battalion had not removed the indigenous people in the mid-nineteenth century (Spectators 3) and paved the way for tourists. The vastness and emptiness of Yosemite, documented through photographs and paintings, was a false narrative that purposefully removed the people from the land they had called home.

The lands outside of these “gardens”, however, were free for exploitation, and the land inside the gardens was subjected to the removal of native populations. Environments surrounding cities, called the hinterlands, were exploited to support a core urban area through labor and natural resources. There is certainly a correlation between elites’ thirst for the wilderness and their escape from the city happening at nearly the same time, as evidenced by Solnit and Cronon, and it could only be quenched if the Native Americans in the way were removed. Taylor in *Key Concepts in Early Conservation*

Thought talks about internal colonialism, and how the hinterlands that include indigenous or culturally distinct people were often discriminated against by the people of the core region, usually cities. In many cases in internal colonialism, reservations were “fixed territories for indigenous peoples by invading groups” (Key Concepts 20) and were located in the periphery, similar to the hinterlands. In both cases, elites were able to exploit the land for their own benefit and at the expense of people of color.

The effects of past and present elitism are still profoundly present and influential in the modern environmental movement. Currently, it is a movement meant to encompass the needs of all environments for all people, yet the elites of yesterday and today continue to influence environmentalism. Whether it is for tourism, for development, or for resources, the elites have maneuvered and managed lands largely regardless of the needs of other classes. So, consider this the next time you visit a national park and hike up a trail to the summit of that picture-perfect peak. Yes, they are places of wonder and beauty, but what factors led to the creation of this park? How was this park chosen for your enjoyment? What ruins of past civilizations do you stand on? Unfortunately, the elites of previous generations’ longstanding exploitation complicates and challenges the current environmental movement. Thus, today, we must acknowledge and understand past and present repercussions and strive to always be cognizant of the privileges we have as we work within this movement to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.