



1. The Grand Coulee Dam is the signature dam of the Columbia Basin Project on the upper Columbia River and Reservation of the Colville Confederated Tribes in Washington State. (Photo by author, 2005)

Native American Sacred Places and the Language of Capitalism

How might attention to names and naming, powerful acts of assumption and ascription alike, provide one point of entry into the complexity of representing the pasts of indigenous peoples of North America and other regions of the world as native societies engaged with the Western imperial world?¹

To answer this question, one must begin by analyzing how the National Parks Service names Traditional Cultural Properties (TCPs), specifically, Native American sacred places. There is, as I will demonstrate, a correlation between the institutional definition of TCPs and the language of American capitalism. The act of naming sacred lands as “property” or as “cultural resources” compromises the religious rights of a minority for the economic benefit of the majority. The language of capitalism influences the representation of and access to the material past.

Industrial expansion and historic preservation share a common history. Initially, historic preservation planners sought to protect only the physical legacy of the built environment. By 1990, it was agreed that there exists a valuable type of material history whose historicity was partially cognitive and social. TCPs are one unique type of historic property that the federal government recognizes:

A Traditional Cultural Property [TCP] is a property or a place that is eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places because of its association with cultural practices and beliefs that are (1) rooted in the history of a community, and (2) are important to maintaining the continuity of that community’s traditional beliefs and practices.²

In Native America, all places named in a traditional language are potential TCPs. Examples include places ranging from origin storyscapes to gathering locations. TCPs are a conflation of the contemporary and historic, sacred and ecological, spiritual and physical.

Industry and Tourism in the Sacred Native American West

The modern American West³ is characterized by boom and bust economies, marginalized regionalism, expectant capitalism,

infrastructure construction, hydraulic utopianism, federal feudalism, and industrial manifest destiny. In the dry West, these activities distilled along rivers, places the tribes also favored as traditional landscapes. Western American capitalism locates, concentrates, transports, and retails raw resources. By the 1960s, environmental conservation and historic preservation reached the national consciousness, primarily because of the destruction caused by World War II industrialization and postwar suburbanization. The National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA, 1966) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA, 1969) emerged to counter the loss of valuable places that followed extractive industrialization. In the calculus of these acts, historic “properties” were termed “cultural resources.” Historic places were “registered,” listed like endangered species. Reproducing a colonial methodology to economize natural resource exploitation, hegemonies of archaeological science and bureaucracy systematically control the landscape of the Native American past.

The quintessential artifact of the twentieth-century American West is the dam. Developments such as Columbia Basin Project and the Colorado River Basin Project forced the relocation of farming people and destroyed more TCPs than any other construction tactic (Figure 1). Sacred places and their history were drowned by reservoirs and crosscut by high-tension wires delivering electricity to cities hundreds of miles away. Under the reservoir waters, no historical markers exist to identify place and history. In prehistoric times, populations along the lower Snake River in Washington State were close to 10,000 Nez Perce and Palus people. Today, there are four dams and a fraction of the population. The sentient quality of place has been eliminated.

In non-industrial locations, the sacred place can become a tourist destination. Here, the aesthetic qualities of sacred sites are geospatially located and repositioned as a nature reserve, wilderness study area, archaeological district, national getaway, or theme park. Native American sacred places like Mt. Shasta in California, Chaco Canyon and Rainbow Bridge in Arizona, and Mato Tipila and Medicine Wheel in Wyoming have become major sightseeing destinations. Permits, tickets, and promises to stay on the path give tourists access to these powerful places. To visitors, these TCPs are places to get lost, get found, and “go camp.” The National Park Service (NPS) gentrifies the areas with paved roads, porta-potties, and guided tours. Key chains depicting the sacred place are sold in kitschy gift stores. For example, Mato Tipila, or Lodge of the Bear, or Devil’s Tower, in Wyoming, the center of the cosmological world for several tribes, is a major rock-climbing destination (Figure 2).

2. A sign at Mato Tipila asks rock climbers to respect Native American traditional spiritual practices. According to *Bear Lodge Multiple Use Association v. Babbitt*, the National Park Service can ask climbers to voluntarily refrain from climbing Mato Tipila during the holy month of July but cannot demand that they refrain from climbing. (Photo by author, 2005)



Southwestern Chacoan kivas and pueblos sacred to the Navajo and Hopi attract multimillion-dollar industries of tourism, black market antiquities trade, and wilderness adventure. Rainbow Bridge greets yachts of sunscreen-bedazzled tourists every day. Native peoples are hugely offended and have fought in courts for decades to minimize the impact of capitalism on these precious lands.⁴ Tourism transforms the power of place into the power of economy and absolves history from its duty to inform the present.

Pictograph Galleries and Landscape Archaeology: Examples from Sacred Native America

An example of how the term “property” works in historic preservation is seen in the assigning of TCP property boundaries that tell the transportation, hydroelectric, mineral, oil, gas, timber, nuclear, and steam power industries which places can be triaged. A State Historic Preservation Officer is quoted as saying, “boundaries have to be assigned. It may not be fair, and it may not be right, but.... This is bureaucracy.”⁵ Rigid property boundaries are resisted throughout Native America. The Badger-Two Medicine Roadless Area in Montana is sacred to the Blackfeet Tribe and is threatened by oil development. Buster Yellow Kidney of the Blackfeet Tribe declares:

All of the mountains of the Badger-Two Medicine are sacred and necessary to our religion. It is not possible to name certain peaks and designate them as sacred peaks. To do so would be like asking a Christian which part of his church was most sacred, and then bulldozing everything else.⁶

Petroglyph National Monument west of Albuquerque, New Mexico contains 17,000 petroglyphs (Figure 3). Each petroglyph, according to Native Americans, is a record of a spiritual journey. A local landowner plans to build a 19,000 home

3. A lizard or anthropomorphic petroglyphs clings to a black stone in Petroglyph National Monument as Albuquerque sprawls in the background. (Photo by author, 2005)



suburb nearby, requiring the extension of the Paseo Del Norte highway through the monument. For the time being, Native Americans have successfully convinced New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson to withhold 3.3 million dollars for the road development. Tribes claim that it is impossible to locate specific petroglyph panels that can be sacrificed to the suburb; the entire monument needs to be kept whole to retain its religious power.⁷

Nine Mile Canyon in Utah contains over 10,000 Fremont petroglyphs and constitutes one of the world's longest galleries of religious art.⁸ The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) approved two sets of operations to test the canyon for oil and gas reserves in 2004. In compliance with NEPA and NHPA and before issuing permits, the BLM individually evaluates the negative impacts of each testing operation and only on the most famous petroglyph panels, thereby doubly denying the holistic impact of both tests on the totality of the archaeological landscape or historic district. The National Trust for Historic Preservation recognized the near-sightedness of the BLM and the importance of this canyon by placing it on the 2004 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.⁹ The NEPA Environmental Impact Statement will be publicly available in spring 2005 and ideally would consider the canyon as an integrated landscape of traditional and archaeological places that extend outside the point and punctum of individual petroglyph panels (Figure 4).

The Medicine Lake Highlands, northeast of Mt. Shasta, are



4. This pictograph, often interpreted as depicting a bighorn sheep hunter and his shamanic doppelganger, is one of the famous Fremont petroglyphs that was spared the disturbance of testing for oil and gas reserves in Nine Mile Canyon. (Photo by author, 2005)

sacred to the Pit River, Modoc, Shasta, Karuk, and Wintu of northern California. A coalition of tribes successfully petitioned the National Register of Historic Places in 1999 to recognize the entire Medicine Lake Caldera as a Traditional Cultural District, a network of interwoven TCPs nestled in a sacred landscape. This holistic recognition caused two proposed geothermal projects to be rejected by federal agencies in 2000. However, in November 2002, the Bush Administration scrapped those protections and approved the construction of a \$120 million power plant one mile from Medicine Lake. This compromises the Traditional Cultural District and mocks the intent of NHPA.

Cultural resource management reports that satisfy the NHPA Section 106 process articulate TCPs as bound properties with rational significance and linear history. A reporting strategy such as this reduces the heteroglossia, multidimensionality, and diffuse quality of the Native American material past and trivializes non-scientific traditions. And yet, at the initial steps of Section 106 consultation, the agencies need not know discreet boundaries. Federal agencies can send the Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) a consultation letter outlining the area of potential effect of a federal industrial undertaking and the THPO can tell the agency if it negatively impacts a TCP. This can be done without a firm TCP property boundary.

To a Native American, the structural problem is the definition of the sacred as “property” or as a “resource” that can be divided and sold as opposed to a holistic semantic category that includes environmental, ambient, metaphysical, and

cognitive attributes. Without a more inclusive word choice, TCPs are divided, compromising Native Americans' First Amendment right to freedom of religion. The protocols that encode places as properties marginalize those who lack property, who are not dedicated to the ideology of private property, and who do not experience place as a resource but as something contiguous, eminent, and beyond commodification.¹⁰

The Language of Capitalism and Native American Philology in Historic Preservation

The guide to TCPs states that the first step in identifying a TCP is to “ensure that the entity under consideration is a property.”¹¹ One author of NPS *Bulletin 38* recently stated that he did not intend to reproduce capitalism: “We were simply trying to relate to the statutory definition of ‘historic property’ in NHPA.”¹² The Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places notes that the term “property” was used in the Historic Sites Act of 1935 and the National Register “red book” of listings in 1969.¹³ When the economic language of historic properties is applied to anthropological places, it categorizes in order to assign value. While anthropological places do not exclude the market space, the production of mercantile zones eliminates many facets of what makes Native American TCPs important.

The language of property is unable to capture the totality of the traditional life-world. It subdivides by reducing the bond between people and place to abstract categories that mean little. The term “property” forces onto the past the language of capitalism. Archaeologists Chris Tilley and Michael Shanks claim that in this logic, “the past is objectified as property.”¹⁴ Tilley later elaborated that historical sites are “treated as a commodity. Like any other commodity, sites become abstract equivalents for one another; each has a price tag.”¹⁵ The ideology of the market, according to archaeologist Thomas Patterson, drives the past towards “equilibrium, stability, homeostasis, social control, self-regulation, [and] efficiency.”¹⁶ A TCP, a fluid entity, is discussed within a paradigm that translates unfixed, semantically open, and economically viable (cultural) resources into *Property for Sale*.

The language of capitalism is so highly specialized that it is divorced from Native American philology. This is so because, as a tribal TCP anthropologist says, “Native Americans have a holistic view of their world. Breaking up of TCPs into units compromises the spirituality and cosmology of the TCP.”¹⁷ Capitalism itemizes nature as alien while tribal people experience nature as integral.¹⁸ The making of property boundaries is a method of analysis as opposed to synthesis; it is divisive, not uniting. This abstracts and isolates Native American sacred places.¹⁹

5. Medicine Wheel in Wyoming has been a sacred vision-questing location for as many as ten Native American tribes. The astronomical observatory and prayer flags are visible in the background. (Photo by author, 2005)



No two people experience or describe a place identically because place resists reductive language. The interaction between places and people, and vice versa, is a communication in which both place and person are created, modified, and affirmed, materially and symbolically.²⁰ Cultures and individuals change through time in their interactions with places and things. The object of traditional cultural preservation should not be static preservation but plural intelligibility with access for the constitutionally protected religious rights of minorities.²¹ A language needs to be written that makes places available to the most intimate and ancient shareholders.

Problems exist when history is equated with profit. Troubles are amplified when applied to sublime and fragile historic places, TCPs. As an historic property typology that strives to integrate the social with the tactile, TCPs are one optimistic avenue for the future of historic preservation. As historic preservationists wrestle to describe these eminent places, a new language that includes Native American philological and cognitive categories would be a positive beginning in a world in which Native Americans and future micro-communities are equal shareholders in TCPs. The Spokane/Coeur d'Alene poet, Sherman Alexie, asks:

How can we imagine a new language when the language of the enemy keeps our dismembered tongues tied to his belt? How can we image a new alphabet when the old jumps off billboards down onto our stomachs? How do we image a new life when a pocketful of quarters weighs our possibilities down?²²

Constructive dialogue between federal land managers and traditional Native American spiritual practitioners can lead to the integral protection of sacred lands. The Medicine Wheel in Wyoming is an eighty-foot wide circle of stones on the peak of

Medicine Mountain (Figure 5). It is sacred to at least ten tribes and is an essential destination for vision questing. In 1988, the U.S. Forest Service planned a suite of “improvements” including a high-rise aluminum platform to view and increase tourism at Medicine Wheel. Tribal organizations, the Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and others NGOs successfully implemented a Historic Preservation Plan that includes protection of not only the Medicine Wheel but also an 18,000 acre “Area of Consultation.”²³

To present in this short article a universal alternative to the term “property” could stifle as opposed to stimulate the spiritual experience and protection of sacred places. It is the responsibility of each federal agency to work with regional THPOs to develop a programmatic agreement and cultural resources management plan that is respectful of traditional language and compliant with federal regulations. Agencies must be ready to compromise or dissolve their language of capitalism, as historically entrenched as it may be, if it does not correlate with the tribal view of place. This collaboration between different tribes and agencies will inspire culturally-specific terminology.

As the management of federal lands shifts from agencies to tribes, cultural resource management moves closer towards the protocol of TCPs, and away from the strictly-defined property boundaries that dominated twentieth-century preservation efforts. If this progress towards indigenous holistic “resource” management is to productively continue, a language that reflects this simultaneously new and ancient vision needs to develop to direct how we discuss and manage Native American sacred places.²⁴

Author biography

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Endnotes

¹ James Brooks, “Life Proceeds From Names: Indigenous Peoples and the Predicament of Hybridity,” in *Clearing a Path: Theorizing the Past in Native American Studies* (London: Routledge, 2002), 182.

² National Register of Historic Places, *Bulletin 38: Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1990), 1–5.

³ The Modern American West begins with the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1804 and ends with the construction of the last river-wide dam, the Lower Granite Dam on the Snake River, in 1975. Adam Fish, “Phenomenologies of the Prehistoric, Modern, and Supermodern Periods along the Lower Snake River” presented at the 58th Annual Northwest Anthropological Association Conference, Spokane, WA. March 19, 2005.

⁴ Sacred Land Film Project, <http://www.sacredland.org>; electronic document accessed on August 14, 2004.

⁵ King, 157.

⁶ Sacred Land Film Project, http://www.sacredland.org/endangered_sites_pages/badger_two_medicine.html

⁷ Sacred Land Film Project, http://www.sacredland.org/endangered_sites_pages/petroglyph.html

⁸ Adam Fish, *Fremont Figurines: Corporeality and Communication* (University of Idaho, Master's Thesis, 2002).

⁹ National Trust for Historic Preservation, Nine Mile Canyon, http://www.national-trust.org/11most/2004/nine_mile_canyon.html

¹⁰ R. H. Winthrop, "Conflicting Perceptions: Tribal and Regulatory Views of Nature, Risk, and Change." *Practicing Anthropology*, 1994, 16(3).

¹¹ Ibid., National Register of Historic Places, 9.

¹² T. King, *Places that Count: Traditional Cultural Properties in Cultural Resource Management* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2003), 165-166.

¹³ Carol D. Shull, Keeper of the National Register, and Tom King, author, personal communication by author, March 3, 2005.

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¹⁶ T. Patterson, *Towards a Social History of Archaeology in the United States* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1995), 112.

¹⁷ D. Shannon, personal communication. July 15, 2004.

¹⁸ Winthrop, "Conflicting Perceptions," 1994, 28.

¹⁹ J.C. Bard, "Ethnographic/Contact Period of the Hanford Site, Washington," in *National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form—Historic, Archaeological and Traditional Cultural Properties of the Hanford Site, Washington* (Richland, WA: Prepared by CH2M Hill for the United States Department of the Energy, 1997).

²⁰ A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 207.

²¹ R. H. Winthrop, "Tradition, Authenticity, and Dislocation: Some Dilemmas of Traditional Cultural Properties Studies," *Practicing Anthropology* 1998, 20(3), 27.

²² S. Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 152.

²³ Sacred Land Film Project, http://www.sacredland.org/historical_sites_pages/medicine_wheel.html

²⁴ Adam Fish, personal communication to Tom King, author, and Carol D. Shull, Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places, personal communication by author, March 22, 2005.