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The Landscape of Experience: Photographing the National Park Tourist

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## Abstract

### The Landscape of Experience: Photographing the National Park Tourist

By James Crissman

Welcome to my honors thesis, my photographic exploration, and diary of experiences. I will try to understand concepts such as travel, nature, and experience through writing, photographing, and reflecting upon my own experiences. This is a thought experiment. Just as each experience is an experiment, my thoughts are an experimentation of understanding and criticizing the world of tourism. I have written each chapter within the context of my own story of exploration of national parks and photographing places. I focus on a particular road trip that I took with my Dad in the summer of 2014 that was the fuel for my research and photographic endeavors. Dad and I shared many experiences throughout the trip and I am now sharing them with you. This work is not finished. I will continue to experiment and add to my work as I reveal more about what it means to have a national park experience and I hope that my readers can continue to experiment and contribute as well. My words and photographs will be published on this website, a place where I can continually develop my experiment on experience, as well as have others contribute their own ideas and experiences. In other words, my thesis itself is a journey log of not only the encounter of national parks but of how we, including myself, understand and interpret lived experiences.

For the full body of work with images included please visit the website at <http://crissmanphotos.com/project/the-landscape-of-experience/>

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## Table of Contents

Method of Travel	1
Construct	7
Sacred	14
Landscape	22
Wilderness	33
Walking	42
Wanderlust	51
Distance	59
Grand Circle	67

## Method of Travel

Every individual experiences this world a little differently, coming from particular perspectives, personal histories, and identities. My perspective comes from my identity as a citizen of the United States, born in the West and raised in the East. Additionally, my experience is shaped as a young restless student of both the classroom and the open road, as an explorer of meaning in our cultural and natural world, and as a photographer who expresses thought through imagery, often better than in words. These and many other factors have contributed to my experiences as well as the message I will convey through this thesis on the experience of the national park tourist.

A national park experience is an existential one and involves the interaction of three factors: the tourist, the national park, and the context natural environment<sup>1</sup>. Throughout this thesis I will be exploring the interplay between these factors, telling my story and experience as the tourist, my interpretation of the current park experience, and my suggestion of what a national park experience should be. When a tourist leaves their home to travel to national parks they are not driving hundreds of miles to just look at nature, they desire to have an experience. The word “experience” shares its English origin with the word “experiment” and each time a tourist embarks on a trip they are partaking in an experiment, to make a discovery in the world. There are many kinds of experiences a tourist can discover, some unique, and

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<sup>1</sup> Dean MacCannell calls tourist attractions “cultural experiences” consisting of three parts: the model (the attraction), the influence (what is changed, created, or intensified), and the medium (the agency that connects the model and its influence). I have adapted these components for the national park experience here.

MacCannell, Dean. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999, (24)



some that are conventional, often predetermined by an institution or tourists before them. I have been experimenting my whole life. I have visited national parks from my early experience of my parents dragging me there to my current experience of dragging my friends there, and I have established a collection of experiences, each unique. All of these experiences have been documented by my camera. Whenever I am in a national park my shutter is constantly opening and closing, gathering light that bounces off mountains, canyons, waterfalls, and dry riverbeds.

Photography has become synonymous with national park tourism. Even my personal journey through national parks has been clearly illustrated through my own photographs. I wouldn't dream of visiting a national park without a camera, and most tourists would agree with me. The majority of tourists have a camera around their necks or in their pockets as they document their own experience of the parks through photography. A photograph is a means of capturing an experience by "mechanically repeat[ing] what could never be repeated existentially."<sup>2</sup> Tourists participate in photography when they travel because they are having life changing experiences and photography allows them to take their adventures home where they can relive their experiences through imagery. Photographs are not only a documentation of the experience, but also an expression, and in fact, an interpretation of the experience. Every photograph taken at a national park is an expression of an individual's experience: their journey through the natural landscape.

A journey must begin with motivation, or in a set facts, "not that these facts by themselves have the physical power to produce the journey, but insofar as they offer reasons

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<sup>2</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York, New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, (4).

for undertaking it.<sup>3</sup> However, my journey has its origin in a series of questions, though not fully articulated or even fully realized, that initiated my interest in national park tourism and photography.

Not too long ago I was reproducing some of my experiences of the places I have visited, encountering these national parks again through photographs glowing on a computer screen, when I started to realize a pattern. Most of my photographs looked the same, void of human figures and focused on the natural wonders that initially allure visitors to these national parks. I have revisited several places in my travels, and when I compared my photographs from one visit to the next I found that I had taken the same picture each time I visited. Maybe my experiences weren't as unique as I thought they were, and if I was taking the same picture over and over again then other tourists must have been doing the same. These were experiences that I remember as important times in my life that have shaped who I am today, but perhaps they are not as authentic as I thought they were. I began wondering what an authentic national parks experience looks like and if so, whether or not the tourist is even capable of having an authentic experience. And so, I packed my bags once more. I set out on an experiment, to try and find what an authentic national parks experience looks like by observing the national park landscape, the tourist, and myself. I traveled to stand at overlooks, gaze upon the natural landscape, and then turn the gaze back upon the tourist. The built infrastructure of national parks has brought the masses into America's pristine wilderness. Even though my photographs from my previous experiments were void of human figures, the tourist has become as much a

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<sup>3</sup> Ponty, Maurice, and Donald A. Landes. *Phenomenology of Perception*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

part of the landscape as the wilderness. I gave up on staging the authentic<sup>4</sup> and turned the camera back towards the tourist. By including the tourist in the landscape, I hoped to capture the national park experience, and through that capturing, I hoped to deconstruct my own experience, too.

I began to realize while I was packing for my trip that there is a certain amount of planning that goes into traveling. Where you go determines what you bring, and what you bring may determine where you go. I wanted to go to several different national parks and monuments to photograph tourists and observe how they interacted with the space through their actions and particularly through their cameras. I also wanted to spend some time away from the crowds, by myself. I have found that my most memorable national park experiences come when I am alone in a secluded part of the park where I can take in the environment without the distractions of others. I knew what I wanted to do, but not where I wanted to go, and I started to wonder where my three bags of camera gear and one bag of clothes was going to take me. West, for certain. I have always been drawn toward the western United States, the clear open skies, the topography that has no resemblance to home, the low population density. Thoreau said that when he would go on walks he would always find his feet pointing west: “The

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<sup>4</sup>This is a term Dean MacCannell uses to describe how tourist attractions influence the environment to create an aura and a heightened sense of authenticity.  
MacCannell, Dean. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999.

future lies that way to me, and the earth seems more unexhausted and richer on that side.<sup>5</sup>”

Many of my road trips do not have any more direction than that -- west.

I have an uncle (and I’m sure you do, too) who needs a little more specific direction than that. He will plan out a trip’s entire itinerary, accurate to within the hour, before walking out the front door. My uncle knows exactly what to expect along his journey, he’s decided what is worth seeing and what is worth driving past at 60 mph. He represents the structured tourist, the tourist traveling with a purpose to consume an experience, not in search of one. The structured tourist is performing an experiment with the intention of confirming their hypothesis. If there is only a week of vacation, a week set aside for leisure full of cramped cars, high speed highways, and luring attractions at the end of the road, one has to make the most of it. Thankfully I am not this kind of traveler because I have learned that inevitably, plans will change.

I tore my ACL in the beginning of the summer that I was planning to take my trip and was unable to walk on my own until July. As a result, I had to postpone my trip and reconsider how I would go about it. Backpacking alone in the wilderness wasn’t feasible anymore, even hiking the paved paths was questionable. I needed someone to come with me to be my spotter, my sherpa, and my dad was more than willing. I traded in the Jeep for the Toyota minivan, the tent for a pop-up camper, the energy bars for a gas stove, and the solitude for companionship.

On July 15, 2014, Dad and I began our journey west, not knowing what we would encounter along the way or when we would get there. Today I am beginning my journey of

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<sup>5</sup> Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*. Ed.

William John. Rossi. New York: W.W. Norton, 2008, (268).

writing this thesis. My thesis is an interactive travel engagement with thoughts being expressed through written language and imagery. It is not only the thesis at the end of the page that is important, it is the intellectual exploration and tourist engagement that I'll be doing along the way. To write my thesis as a journey is to write it in a way that conveys not only arguments, but also my own thought process and the multiple ways I am tackling the question of the touristic experience in national parks. I could write my thesis as my uncle travels, planning each paragraph, not deviating from my set path, but I believe that I will miss too much and be unable to convey important aspects of my thinking process and my travels. I will try to understand concepts such as travel, nature, and experience through writing, photographing, and reflecting upon my own experiences. This is a thought experiment. Just as each experience is an experiment, my thoughts are an experimentation of understanding and criticizing the world of tourism. As I probe into the world of tourism and national parks I will find some answers to the questions that I have raised, but I will also uncover some more questions, and perhaps even contradict myself. However, my thesis will not be completed once I turn in my final draft. Instead, it will be a fluid work, changing constantly as I, and my understanding, change. My words and photographs will be published on a website, a place where I can continually develop my experiment on experience, as well as have others contribute their own ideas and experiences. In other words, my thesis itself is a journey log of not only the encounter of national parks but of how we, including myself, understand and interpret lived experiences.

## Construct

The first stop on our trip was Mount Rushmore, a national monument that stands out from the rest on my list of parks to visit. The monument is the quintessential photo opportunity of the American identity, an iconic image that's been photographed millions of times, most of them indistinguishable. Everyone knows what the sculpture looks like, they have seen it a hundred times appearing right next to the Statue of Liberty superimposed on top of an American flag flowing in the breeze. An American tourist travels all the way to remote South Dakota to see the faces of the founding fathers of the United States government, photograph it, and buy a t-shirt. The atmosphere created by the attraction, the people, and the environment made Mount Rushmore a good jumping off point for my research, and a national park experience that was unlike any other that I would encounter.

Dad and I woke up early in the morning our first day in the Black Hills with the intention of getting to the monument before the crowds and begin watching them pour in. We chose to take the long route to the park, a road known as "Thunder Road" that is of particular attraction to motorcyclists because of its winding roads and magnificent views. At one point we pulled off at an overlook that purposed a view of the monument, our first glimpse at Mount Rushmore. When we walked up the short path and through a small opening in the trees we saw the white faces glittering in the morning sun. The foliage obscured everything else in the park and only revealed to us the sculpture, framed perfectly by nature and the landscape from which it was

carved out of. Further down the trail another opening in the trees framed the surrounding Black Hills, the sun reflecting off of the rocks piercing the gently rolling hills.

At this point I was excited. The morning was so peaceful and the landscape inviting. We jumped back into the car, the only one parked in the overlook's lot, and drove the rest of the way to the park. We were far from the first ones there, and after waiting in a long line of cars to pay the entrance fee we parked again, this time on the top level of a parking deck situated between dozens of cars, each with a license plate from a different state. From the parking deck we joined the crowds that we failed to precede in being herded towards the park entrance. Wide and shallow steps led to a row of concrete columns that framed what everyone had come to see, the monument. For the second time that morning Mount Rushmore was framed, but this time the frame was more revealing of the environment that makes up the park's experience. The trees and rolling Black Hills were now out of the picture and in its place rose a built environment constructed for the purpose of framing the monument, giving it an added significance and altering the environment. Unlike my previous national parks experiences, Mount Rushmore's environmental context is not the natural environment, but rather a constructed one.

As mentioned previously, there are three factors that contribute to the touristic experience: the tourist, the attraction, and the environment. And in the case of Mount Rushmore, this can be more easily be understood as an influence. Factors in an experience that are beyond the people and the main attraction are influences in the experience<sup>6</sup>. Influences can

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<sup>6</sup> MacCannell, *The Tourist*, (41).

be constructed by the institution, like gift shops, overlooks, and walkways, or they can be added by the tourist, like cameras, a child's stroller, or a family's matching t-shirts. At Mount Rushmore, anything that contributes to an experience apart from the sculpture, the main attraction that people come to see, is an added influence to the tourist experience.

The constructed influences of the park were put into place deliberately by the National Park Service (NPS) as a way of altering the way tourists interact with the environment. As I was sitting observing and photographing tourists moving through the park I noticed that people on average would only spend a little over an hour inside the park. The entrance to the park is built like a funnel, taking the tourist past several museums, gift shops, and cafes before reaching the "Grand View Terrace" where there is a huge concrete platform for viewing the sculpture. Though this was where most of the crowd was concentrated the number of tourists was constantly fluctuating, like waves of people crashing and receding on a concrete beach. I found that most tourists only spent twenty minutes or less looking or photographing the sculpture before moving on. There is only so long that one can look at the sculpture, there's only one photograph the tourist can really make of it, and after capturing that and their family in front of it there's not much else to do. If the NPS did not provide the tourist with all of the additional influences to keep them entertained the tourist would only spend half an hour inside the park. The "Sculptor's Studio and Bookstore", the "Avenue of Flags", and the "Cavers Cafe and Memorial Team Ice Cream Shop" are all additional influences that were constructed with the intention of entertaining the tourist beyond the main attraction.

More than other national parks or monuments, Mount Rushmore is a cultural experience, not a natural one. The amphitheaters, museums, and ice cream shops that make up



the constructed environment overtake the surrounding natural environment, rendering it almost invisible to the tourist who is preoccupied with the more attention grabbing attractions. National parks generally take geographic areas and render them into mythic landscapes, generating importance out of the natural environment<sup>7</sup>, but when Gutzon Borglum and his son, Lincoln carved United States presidents out of the granite mountain side they took a natural landscape and rendered it into a cultural icon. Iconography is used in the tourism industry as a way of expressing the essence of a place through imagery. Mount Rushmore stands as a symbol of American identity and this is what draws the crowds to visit. The image of presidents Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln carved into the side of the mountain has been reproduced over and over again with the intention of representing American places and ideals. Often when I look at a reproduction of Mount Rushmore I do not recognize it as a place as much as I see it as an icon that carries cultural and ideological weight. When a potential tourist sees an image of Mount Rushmore they perceive the essence of the place as that of cultural significance<sup>8</sup> and they will choose to visit in order to better understand or connect with the American identity.

When tourists come to an attraction they come to collect an experience and to collect images, both objective (material) and subjective (immaterial). The subjective imagery is made up of inspiration and memories, experienced by the tourist through the essence of the park, which in the case of Mount Rushmore is the American identity. The imagery of Mount Rushmore is reproduced constantly and so widely spread that the essence behind it is generally understood by the tourist before they even set foot inside the park. Once the tourist takes a

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<sup>7</sup> Popp, Richard K. *The Holiday Makers Magazines, Advertising, and Mass Tourism in Postwar America*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2012, (95).

<sup>8</sup> Popp, *The Holiday Makers*, (99).

photo of them kissing Lincoln's face they have effectively completed their subjective experience by photographing themselves and the monument, generating an infinitely tangible memory and possibly capturing the monument's essence through a photograph. A photograph captures the essence of a place when it contains what philosopher Roland Barthes calls a *punctum*, the aspect of a photo that grabs the viewers attention, the essence of the photograph's subject<sup>9</sup>. The *punctum* of a photograph, or whether or not a photograph even has a *punctum* is dependent on the viewer, and if a photograph of a tourist in front of Mount Rushmore generates a feeling of American identity within them, then that photograph has accomplished the subjective experience. The tourist will then turn to accomplish their objective and material experience, provided to them by the built infrastructure. Gift shops fulfill a tourist's material desires through the selling of souvenirs, things that the tourist can take home that materialize the trip's memories. Snapshots accommodate this desire as well by giving the tourist a materialization of memory through imagery. Snapshots are void of a *punctum* and are only constituted of a *studium*, or the informational aspect of a photograph<sup>10</sup>. If the tourist ever chooses to open up the file of the computer where they've stored all their photos from their vacation they can reproduce a memory indefinitely through snapshots that capture the physical aspects of a place.

The act of photography is so important to the tourist because of its ability to replicate a memory of an experience. "What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially<sup>11</sup>." The tourist will only experience the feeling of being at Mount Rushmore in that present moment

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<sup>9</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (25).

<sup>10</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (25).

<sup>11</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (4).

once, but with the powerful machine that is the camera, the photographer can produce an image event, a reproduction of an actual experience, that can be experienced through the image over and over again. A tourist goes on vacation to have experiences that are outside of the ordinary routine of life and the ability to reproduce that experience to any capacity is valuable, whether it be objective or subjective, material or immaterial.

By early afternoon I was exhausted. I had been walking around the park photographing tourists, the hot sun beating down and the heat reflecting off of the concrete had my shirt soaked. I found Dad sitting inside one of the cafes sitting by himself at a table. I sat down next to him and without him saying a word he pointed to the table next to us. A family of five was sitting there: a mother, father, two boys, and a grandmother. Just by looking at them, I could tell that they were worn out. They had probably spent all day in the park like us and had been baking in the sun. The older boy, around five years old, was tormenting his younger brother, around three years old, and making him cry. The rest of the family was either oblivious to the quarrel or too tired care. The father's face was drooping, not engaging with anyone, his eyes lost in his empty plate. Then the older boy knocked over the salt and spilled it on the floor. This seemed to be the final straw. The grandmother began scolding the boy, and the mother accused the father, "You're the adult here! He was behaving just fine until last night!" The father didn't even look up from his plate.

Dad and I were all too familiar with this situation. I have a younger sister and we were particularly reminiscing about a time when we visited Disney World and after spending a long day out in the sun bombarded by attractions and an intense environment we as a family sat

down to eat a meal. No surprise that my sister and I were worn out and decided to take out our fatigue on each other. I won't say that this was a unique occurrence during our family's trips, becoming tired and unable to control emotions. When we would visit places like Disney World we would be exhausted by the end of the day. The number of attractions at the park, the demanding material influences, and hot sun would take a lot out of not only us kids, but our parents too. Dad and I decided then that Mount Rushmore had a Disney World atmosphere to it. The built environment and sheer number of attractions is heavy handed in parks like these and can overwhelm the tourist and generate an intense atmosphere. This certainly can make for a thrilling experience by generating an excitement around Mount Rushmore, but it can be over stimulating and, at least for me and several other families I witnessed, can be exhausting. After watching the family's emotions settle Dad and I went to the car to retreat to our campsite nestled between some trees and far away from the frenetic atmosphere.

## Sacred

After spending three days in the Black Hills area, Dad and I needed a break from the crowds that surrounded Mount Rushmore. We were barely a week into the trip and were already getting tired. Before we started packing we pulled out the road atlas and scanned it to see what our next destination may be. The words “Devils Tower” stood out to me on the page, and immediately an image of an ominous jagged rock throne popped into my head. I had seen photos of this place before and they never quite looked real; I had my doubts that this place even existed. I even remember seeing the rock tower in *Close Encounters of a Third Kind*, and if it’s a crazy enough place to make a movie director use it as a space alien prop then I must see it person. Just a quick Google image search was all it took to convince Dad to start packing up the camper and drive to the north east corner of Wyoming.

The road atlas that I use on my road trips and had prompted us to visit Devils Tower highlights national parks and monuments on the map, often through descriptions or enlargements of the area. The makers of the atlas emphasized Devils Tower so it grabbed my attention as a place worthwhile. The road atlas is just one of several factors that generate importance in a place, that make me, the tourist, want to go visit. Tourists travel with the intent of seeing something rewarding, and if they are going to devote their valuable vacation time going to a place they must know before hand if it will be worthwhile. Ultimately it is up to the tourist to decide if a park is attractive enough to visit, but their decision is influenced by a process that has created their prestige and given them a place on the tourist’s road map.

Places become tourist attractions not because they are inherently attractive, but because institutions and communities elevate the place's importance from the rest of the surrounding landscape. In his book, *Ethics of Sightseeing*, Dean MacCannell, Professor of Environmental Design at University of California, Davis, describes the process for "sight sacralization" in three stages<sup>12</sup>. First, a sight must be deemed important by the community, society, or some institutional force. In the case of Devils Tower, and all other national parks and monuments, the United States Government is the institutional force. In June of 1906 the Antiquities Act was passed, giving President Theodore Roosevelt the executive power to regard a place on American soil important enough for preservation and to establish a national monument. Within four months of the act being passed, Devils Tower became America's first national monument, a place marked off by the government as worthy. Community members and often photographers are the driving force behind bringing the sight to the government's attention and are the first step in determining a sight's importance. George Goshen was one of the first photographers to capture the scenery of Bryce Canyon and his photographs and films of the to be national park were sent to Washington DC to convince the NPS to invest in protecting the area. Photography plays a role in the sacralization of national parks from beginning to end, from spreading the word of a place's importance, to exaggerating that importance through mechanical reproduction.

The second stage of sight sacralization is framing and elevation. If the sight is deemed sufficiently important, those in charge, in this case the NPS, need to put it on display. The tourist already knows the place is important, but once they arrive they need to know where to

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<sup>12</sup> MacCannell, *The Tourist*, (44).

look for the importance. Devils Tower is an obvious example. There's only one 1,200 foot igneous intrusion in the area to the left past the gift shop, so one cannot miss it. But the NPS does its part to frame the monument through the influence, the constructed experience manufactured through infrastructure. The visitor's center introducing, the roads leading to, and the hiking trails surrounding the monument all set the stage and frame the sight to make the tourist revere the place. As was obvious at Mount Rushmore, this infrastructure also serves to elevate the importance of the sight. In contrast, my neighborhood doesn't have signs reciting the history of the area, or gift shops selling stuffed toy versions of my neighbors, or an amphitheater overlooking the playground by the community center. As a result, you won't see any tourists there. All of these elements are a part of the built environment that serve to frame and elevate a particular sight, including the commercialization of the sight that serves to appease the material desires of the tourist. Souvenirs bought at national parks instantaneously elevate the sight but unfortunately depreciate the value of the sight itself through the commodification and objectification of the park.

On the other hand, there are times when framing can be taken to an extreme where the sight is deemed so sacred that the tourist isn't allowed anywhere close to it because they are not worthy (i.e. their greasy fingers are too curious). Like a sacred shrine encased in glass and surrounded by guards, heightened framing distances the tourist from the sight while simultaneously making it all the more alluring. Except for cases of intensive preservation, national parks do not excessively frame sights. Many consider national parks as the most sacred places in America, including Theodore Roosevelt after liking Yosemite to a cathedral "far vaster

and more beautiful than any built by the hand of man.<sup>13</sup>" However, they are not so sacred as to keep the tourist from engaging. There are many ways to break the frame and engage without being sequestered from the sight, including hiking beyond the landscape view from an overlook. Devils Tower is a particular destination for rock climbing tourists, people who engage with the sight by scaling the terrifyingly steep sides in order to sit on top of the throne -- these tourists are quite literally engaged with nature.

The third stage to making a sight sacred and stand out on a road map is mechanical reproduction. Theodore Roosevelt may have held Devils Tower in high enough esteem to make it a national monument and the NPS may have put infrastructure in place to set it apart from the rest of the world. However, neither of these two elements in particular drew me to visit. I knew of Devils Tower and wanted to see it because I had watched a science fiction movie about aliens. National parks enter into the public consciousness through imagery and stay there because of the constant reproduction of said imagery. Devils Tower was first deemed important enough to be marked off and then framed, and then it was captured by filmmakers who reproduced it and then, in turn, shared its importance with the masses. The filmmakers were drawn to Devils Tower because of its striking features. Once they reproduced their own encounter of Devils Tower, they conveyed their dramatic interpretation to the viewers.

Photography spreads the word of the beauty and wonder of national parks while also generating and dramatizing that same beauty and wonder. Video, photography and other mechanical reproductions serve as a value system -- if an artist photographs a sight and thus considers it worth reproducing, then the sight has visual value. Photography also shapes the

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<sup>13</sup> United States. National Park Service. "Theodore Roosevelt Quotes." National Parks Service. U.S. Department of the Interior, 11 March 2015. Accessed 15 March 2015.



importance of parks by cultivating the aura that surrounds the sight and affects the tourist's perception. An artist's photograph is infused with a pathos that conveys a the artist's sentiment and feeling towards a place which then can shape and influence the tourist's impression. Landscapes entice the tourist by not only documenting certain facts about the land (what it looks like) but also by communicating an emotional essence of the place (what it feels like). This aspect of a photograph that carries a passionate weight is known as the *punctum*<sup>14</sup> and is the driving force of sight sacralization in mechanical reproductions. The reproductions that inspired my impressions of Devils Tower, including *Close Encounters of a Third Kind*, drew me to the place not as a sight of inspiration or beauty, but as an odd sight, a geographic phenomenon that I would have to see to believe.

It is important to acknowledge and remember that along with every national park there is a history that has shaped the places before they were governed and transformed into tourist attractions. As noted above, I illustrated the sacralization process that led to the words "Devils Tower" appearing on my road atlas, but the place was sacred long before Theodore Roosevelt's executive action in 1906. The Black Hills of modern day Wyoming and South Dakota were home to dozens of Native American<sup>15</sup> tribes, several of which identified with what we know today as Devils Tower. To the Crow Nation, the place is known as *Daxpicheeasáao*, or "Home of Bears" and is sacred not as a tourist, but as a pilgrimage site<sup>16</sup>. The process of sacralization that named

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<sup>14</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (21).

<sup>15</sup> Within academia, there are numerous debates regarding the correct terminology of indigenous tribes. Historical and political correctness is of the utmost important, and terms used to describe these populations include "American Indian," "Indigenous groups," "Native American," and many more. For the sake of consistency and accuracy, I will use "Native American" to identify and refer to the indigenous people of North America, and when applicable I will refer to groups of Native Americans by their proper tribe names.

<sup>16</sup> United States. National Park Service. "Devil's Tower History." National Parks Service. U.S. Department of the Interior. Accessed 15 March 2015.

and claimed the land as a national monument erased the sacredness and identity that was already present in the place. Devils Tower is not unique: renaming, reclaiming, reproduction, and engagement by tourists in national parks often overshadows the cultural and natural history that has formed the landscape<sup>17</sup>. Acknowledgement of a place's cultural importance happens at national parks and monuments, but often they are void of respect. Creating souvenirs out of cultural artifacts and diminishing cultural practices to an exotic experience is a form of cultural fetishization and commodification. Native Americans and their land, in recent history as well as for decades passed, have not been respected under the tourist's wallet or in front of their cameras. As a result, the demarcation between an attraction and human beings can become blurred through a tourist's actions.

The infrastructure and practices put into place at national parks often condones a social unconsciousness of the values that form an understanding of a particular place. A landscape is not only a view of the natural world, influenced by natural forces, but includes a cultural history that has impacted the way the world appears. Even though the tourist's collective memory may have forgotten about the people to which national park land once belonged, the landscape cannot be separated from its rich and relevant cultural relations. Every landscape contains memory, and every step the tourist takes is taken upon ground that is a sedimentation of people and nature that has been built on and built over<sup>18</sup>. Historical markers provide small steps forward in acknowledging the cultural landscape of national parks and serve to curtail the social unconsciousness of the tourist. However, "acknowledgement of painful events does not

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<sup>17</sup> MacCannell, Dean. *The Ethics of Sightseeing*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2011, (130).

<sup>18</sup> MacCannell, *The Ethics of Sightseeing*, (136).

guarantee that the most crucial or telling facts will be included in official narratives.<sup>19</sup> That narrative includes the commercialization of the sight and its history. The sale of artifacts of cultural importance as souvenirs is a larger step backwards and works to degrade the people who have shaped the landscape before the tourist. Photography can unwillingly perpetuate social unconsciousness by reproducing a landscape that is steeped in cultural undertones, but concealing that information from the viewer. A photograph can hide information from the viewer just as easily as it can reveal, for a photographer can make a conscious choice to exclude aspects of the landscape from the photograph in order to create a more appealing or mythic *punctum*. People “consume [photographs] aesthetically, not politically,<sup>20</sup>” resulting in a surface level reading of an image and reducing a landscape to a pretty picture. The viewer of a photograph may only see the natural landscape, blind to the people and culture whose history was woven into the fabric of the land and vice versa. Tourism and photography can serve to perpetuate the beauty and awe of the American landscape, but it can just as easily perpetuate the erasing of important cultural identity. Consumers of photography should be more aware of the political nature of photographs and combat social unconsciousness with a better understanding of the complexity of images when dealing with the natural and cultural landscapes of national parks.

As we were driving away from Devils Tower, I looked behind us and again was in awe by how alien the formation looked, a harsh column of rock jutting out of a smooth and gentle landscape. I imagined what it would be like, not to drive towards the park and have it appear

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<sup>19</sup> MacCannell, *The Ethics of Sightseeing*, (169).

<sup>20</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (36).

before me in a flash through my windshield, but instead to walk towards the sight in pilgrimage and see the formation rise slowly out of the horizon. The built environment of the park is integral to the national monument's sacralization and makes the sight more accessible, but it still takes away the beauty of the path, the journey. This reminded me of the flooding of Glenn Canyon and environmental advocate Edward Abbey's opinions on the accessibility infrastructure will bring to the sight Rainbow Bridge:

The new dam, of course, will improve things. If ever filled it will back water to within sight of the Bridge, transforming what was formerly an adventure into a routine motorboat excursion. Those who see it then will not understand that half the beauty of Rainbow Bridge lay in its remoteness, its relative difficulty of access, and in the wilderness surrounding it, of which it was an integral part. When these aspects are removed the Bridge will be no more than an isolated geological oddity, an extension of the museum-like diorama to which industrial tourism tends to reduce the natural world<sup>21</sup>.

The process of sacralization that national parks go through makes the sight available for millions -- any willing member of the bourgeoisie can visit the large network of national parks. But by opening the park to the eyes and cameras of many individuals, the NPS is diminishing the personal beauty and connection that select few have with a sight, to whom the sight was sacred. Devils Tower was a sacred sight that had spiritual meaning, but once it became public and mechanical reproduction made its image common place the sight lost its sacredness and became only a geological oddity. The filmmakers of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* were not drawn to Devils Tower because of its sacredness, but because of its oddity, and so was I.

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<sup>21</sup> Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire*. Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1988.

## Landscape

Dad and I drove through Wyoming, skipped northern Utah, and headed straight for Bryce Canyon National Park. Bryce is 8,000 feet above sea level, and, at its highest point, is 2,500 feet higher than the highest point on the east coast. The park is known for its clean and crisp air that makes the canyon rim the perfect place to sit and look at a landscape that stretches for a hundred miles. Due to these reasons, Bryce Canyon is one of my favorite national parks, and this was the third time that I had visited the park. I've previously spent hours looking at the layers upon layers of earth that have been revealed over millenniums and the strange colors that the sun reflects. Bryce Canyon is an amazing place to experience and photograph a unique landscape, and Dad and I planned on staying in the park for over a week so we could do just that.

As we neared closer to the park, we began to see billboards advertising tourist attractions around the park, all of which utilized landscape images of the canyon to promote the area. There are only a few roads that lead to the park, and any tourist driving this way will be exposed to photographs of the Bryce Canyon landscape glowing in the setting sun or covered in a light dusting of snow. These depictions of the landscape are mystifying, and the essence of the photograph, the *punctum*, is a fantasy that looks as if it is right out of a fairytale. The billboards advertise natural beauty and emphasize the tourist's experience of becoming closer to nature by visiting Bryce Canyon. These images of the landscapes are not just selling Bryce Canyon, they are also selling an experience.

David Ogilvy, often referred to as the “Father of Advertising,” worked with tourism agencies in the 1930s and 40s to advertise for tourist attractions. He found that “in choosing a vacation sight, [tourists] set out to physically inhabit the places that had been backdrops for earlier daydreams and fantasies. Luring Tourists was a matter of cultivating imaginative desires to the point where consumers felt compelled to act on them.<sup>22</sup>” Ogilvy preached that photographs were the key to instilling these fantasies into the potential tourist because photographs contain a *punctum* that is able to communicate an essence of a place while simultaneously gripping the tourist to generate a response. When a potential tourist views a photograph of a place like Bryce Canyon, they do not just see the place, they experience themselves as being there, or wishing that they were.<sup>23</sup> Landscape photographs, though they may seemingly consist of only natural scenery, are not neutral; instead, they are a representation that is controlled by the creator and editors of the image. The photographer, editor, and the person who designs the billboards have an influence on the image and communicate their intentions through photographs. The impact of manipulating and altering a photograph’s meaning “enters the consciousness of tourists as their subjective experience.<sup>24</sup>”

When the tourist is preexposed to the Bryce Canyon landscape by these billboards and is already day dreaming about what it will be like to stand on the canyon’s ledge and look out, they are doing so under the pretenses of the photographers and editors that came before the image. How the tourist will view the park is at the mercy of the photographs, or the reproductions, that they will see before they ever actually experience the park. If a national

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<sup>22</sup> Popp, *The Holiday Makers*, (116).

<sup>23</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (47).

<sup>24</sup> MacCannell, *The Ethics of Sightseeing*, (119).

park experience is controlled by the imagery preceding the tourist's actual visual encounter with the park, then an untainted and authentic experience may not be possible.

We arrived at Bryce Canyon in the late evening and all of the campsites inside the park were full, so we had to settle for an RV park a mile down the road. On the way to Bryce Canyon, we saw a billboard for the RV park, a sleek RV floating over the sunbaked hoodoos of the canyon. The next morning we joined the line of cars in front of the entrance, waiting to hand the ranger \$25 for the day and receive a map in return. All of the cars in front of us immediately turned into the visitors center which is located to the right of the park entrance, becoming the first thing the tourist sees once they enter the park. We decided to follow the crowd and maybe even buy a better map than the one provided. The visitors center was packed. Even though the building consisted of a natural history museum, an auditorium, and a library, the masses were in the gift shop. People were squeezed in between aisles of mugs, "Utah Rocks!" t-shirts, stuffed prairie dogs, books on how to survive in the desert, chapstick, DVDs, and of course, postcards.

Dad dove into the crowd to try and find a hat, and I walked over to the information desk where an older park ranger was standing looking bored. I asked the ranger where the most popular photo spots were in the park, and in response to my question, his face shifted from boredom to exasperation. He looked down at a laminated park map on the desk and as if it were for the hundredth time that morning began reciting, "If you want to photograph the sunrise, you should go to Bryce Point, for the sunset go to Sunset Point." He glanced at me above his glasses. "Otherwise the best views are from Sunrise Point and Inspiration Point, or

anywhere along the Rim Trail.” Not only had the ranger failed to answer my question, but he only gave me information that I could have gleaned from the park map. I bought another map that claimed to have “added natural and historical information” and “detailed park and trail descriptions.” This map offered the reader suggestions on where to best photograph the park, and sure enough on the map there were little camera icons by Bryce Point, Sunset Point, Sunrise Point, Inspiration Point, and a few other points, or overlooks.

One can find viewpoints, overlooks, or vistas at any national park because they provide the tourist with their namesake, a grand view of the park’s landscape. Overlooks are constructed areas of parks that demark an area with concrete, railings, and signage that inform the tourist that here they can find the best view and the best summary of what the park has to offer. Where these overlooks are built is intentional, and the location often has its roots in photography. In 1934, famous photographer Ansel Adams photographed Yosemite Valley looking east over El Capitan, Bridalveil Falls, and Half Dome, capturing what is possibly the most iconic photograph of Yosemite. Today, exactly where Adams stood to take this photograph, there stands an overlook called Tunnel View, one of the most popular overlooks in the park. During the summer it is estimated that five to seven thousand people visit the overlook per day<sup>25</sup>. Adams’ photograph generated this particular view’s popularity, and now tourists flock to the overlook not only to see the spectacular vista, but also to photograph it, effectively replicating Adams’ photograph.

Overlooks are consistently built where famous photographs were once taken because of the photographer’s aesthetic authority and the popularity of a sight that their photographs can

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<sup>25</sup> United States. National Park Service. "Tunnel View Overlook Rehabilitation." National Parks Service. U.S. Department of the Interior. Accessed 17 March 2015.



create. Yellowstone, at what is now known as “Lookout Point,” several photographers and painters had reproduced the view from this vantage point. As a result of encountering these aesthetic reproductions, tourists sought out the very same spot, and the foot traffic became so dense that the park superintendent decided to build a formal overlook in this location<sup>26</sup>.

Because of the ease and popularity of overlooks the tourist’s eye is concentrated at only a few vantage points, resulting in the reproducing of the same photograph over and over again. As I came to realize when I went back through my photographs of Bryce Canyon I, too, was victim of this monotonous photographic experience that has become common in national parks. The majority of photographs are taken at overlooks where the tourist is directed to in order to take a photograph that resembles both historic and fellow touristic shots.

From the visitor’s center, Dad and I drove to Sunset Point, one of the most popular destinations in the park because of its nearly 360 degree view of the canyon. When we pulled into the parking lot, we were shocked by the number of cars, rental vans, RVs, charter buses, and motorcycles that were there. About three quarters of the way around the loop, we saw two spots open beside each other. We slipped into one while another minivan that was closely following us pulled into the other. Within seconds of putting the van into park, a man stepped out of the driver seat and firmly shut the door. Without waiting for the rest of his family, he began his walk down the sidewalk towards the edge of the canyon. The mom in the passenger

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<sup>26</sup> Greenwald, Emily. 2007. *On the History of Photography and Site/Sight Seeing at*

*Yellowstone*. Environmental History 12, no. 3: 654-660. America: History & Life,

EBSCOhost. Accessed February 21.

seat and the two daughters in the back seats got out of the car and silently followed behind him. Once the family reached the overlook, they gathered together and pulled out their camera. They each took turns posing in front of the camera. There's a picture of the kids, the parents, the kids and dad. Perhaps presumptuous, but I could tell that this was their routine which had been repeated at every stop they made. As soon as the picture was taken, the camera switched hands, and the smiles returned. They glanced at the scenery occasionally, but generally their backs were towards the canyon. After about six minutes at the overlook, the dad looked at the family and said, "Ok, lets go." In a single file line, they walked back to the parking lot, got into the car and pulled away. No sooner had the minivan left, the vacant parking space was filled by another family van.

This family most likely continued this trend and drove to the next overlook to photograph what landscape was to be presented to them and possibly snap a few more pictures of the family. They were having a national park experience that was strictly dictated by viewing and photographing landscapes. This is not a unique experience and is in fact the norm. One survey of Bryce Canyon visitors reported that 71% of tourists surveyed participated in photography and 70% of tourists only view the park from the scenic drive and overlooks<sup>27</sup>. The infrastructural design of parks encourages this kind of experience by constructing roads and parking lots that lead directly to overlooks or attractions. The vast amount of tourists coming to Bryce Canyon only get out of their cars in order to see and photograph the landscape presented to them by overlooks. They participate in this kind of experience because it is the quickest and

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<sup>27</sup> United States. National Park Service. Rocky Mountain Regional Office. *General Management Plan, Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah*. Denver: National Park Service, US Dept of the Interior, 1987.

easiest way to experience a national park, but it is also an experience that is solely mediated by photography.

If a tourist only experiences a national park by viewing it from overlooks, then they are only seeing the park as if it were a photograph. By remaining in the parts of the park that are influenced by previous photographers “the visitor’s view is mediated by photographs and photography, even when she or he is not looking through a camera.<sup>28</sup>” There is always some kind of interaction between the tourist and the attraction, but sometimes symbolism can stand in between the two<sup>29</sup>. For example, a landscape through photography becomes a symbol of nature. The tourist standing at an overlook is distanced from nature, and instead of directly interacting with the nature that makes up the national park, they are looking at a landscape as if it were a photograph, something that is incapable of interaction and only an object of observation. When national parks solely become objects to observe, the experience of the tourist is not authentic, for they do not enjoy or engage with all that exists outside of the preconstructed sights and views. Tourists travel hundreds of miles, spend their savings, and dedicate their leisure time to come to national parks in order to experience and become closer to nature, just like the billboards promised. However, when they get there they never truly interact with nature. The tourist will settle for a symbol of nature, an image that is a summary of the whole. Philosopher and cultural critic, Walter Benjamin claims that not only tourists but the general masses are in search of an aura. According to Benjamin, an aura sought by a tourist or others is “the desire... to ‘get closer’ to things, and their equally passionate concern for

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<sup>28</sup> Greenwald, *On the History of Photography and Site/Sight Seeing at Yellowstone*.

<sup>29</sup> MacCannell, *The Ethics of Sightseeing*, (119).

overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction.<sup>30</sup> The national park tourist desires to "get closer" to nature. Once tourists arrive at an overlook that provides them with an image of the totality of the park's nature, they assimilate it by photographing the landscape. The tourist may have desired to "get closer," but in reality they have only viewed and photographed an image of nature. According to the Bryce Canyon survey, 70% of tourists are content with only photographing the landscape. In other words, they have found their aura by capturing the essence of the park.

The first couple of days that Dad and I spent in Bryce, we had been focusing our efforts on observing and photographing tourists, therefore spending most of our time in the crowded areas of the park. Over a dinner of ramen noodles, we were reflecting on how much we enjoyed the park, but we were still missing some aspect to our own lived experiences. What I enjoy most when I am in national parks is when I am able to escape the crowds and find a secluded and picturesque place where I can spend some time in external and internal reflection and observation. We had not had a chance to do this. Dad and I left the busy part of the park to retreat to the almost extreme southern end of the park at Rainbow Point and spent some time there. At Rainbow Point, there is a grove of bristlecone pines, an incredible tree that can live to be thousands of years old. The bristlecones in the southwestern United States are some of the oldest living organisms on Earth, the oldest tree being 4,765 years old. The trees themselves barely look alive. Parts of the tree will die while the rest continues to grow slowly and because of the arid environment the wood turns into gnarly twisted extremities instead of rotting. There

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<sup>30</sup> Benjamin, Walter, and Michael William Jennings. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, (23).

was a bench near the edge of the canyon that looked north onto the canyon with several bristlecone pines visible along the perimeter.

Initially, I was thinking highly of myself for spending over a week in Bryce Canyon, devoting sufficient time to understand the place and get a deeper and more fuller experience than the average tourist who may only spend a day inside the park. However, my ambitions were dwarfed by the bristlecones. They had been standing, rooted in this one spot for thousands of years studying the same landscape and watching it slowly morph into what I am looking at today. Interestingly, I found solace in this realization. I spent over an hour sitting and walking around this small part of the park, a minor place according to the park map, having an experience that was of personal importance to me, an experience which would end up making a major contribution to my national park experience as a whole.

National parks are enormous. Bryce Canyon covers 36,000 acres, and to try and have a full understanding of the park by seeing all of it is unattainable. A national park tourist may find more meaning in sections of the park that have their own special features. When these special features are encountered, they are combined with other experiences and can create a synthesis that is unique and beyond the typical experience of overlooks. Famous 20th century photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson believes that by photographing parts of an environment, the photographer can find the essence of the totality of the scene. By experiencing a collection of “the little things one sees a sort of synthesis builds itself, possibly superficial but with truth and fragrance<sup>31</sup>.” National park tourists travel to parks with the intention of experiencing the park as a whole. They long for a totality. However, they can achieve totality by finding and

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<sup>31</sup> Popp, *The Holiday Makers*, (101).

experiencing these fragments, places within a place, that can come together to form a unique, personal, and authentic experience. National parks even highlight these places within a place as they are the attractions within the landscape. The Bryce Canyon map highlights certain attractions such as Thors Hammer, Natural Bridge, The Wall of Windows, and Hat Shop. These are all spectacular sights in their own right and can garner a more nuanced experience for the tourist.

However, the tourist's desire for the totality can overpower their will to seek out these fragments. In order to reach Thors Hammer, The Wall of Windows, or any number of named (and therefore significant) natural attractions, the tourist must leave the comfort of parking lots and overlooks to get out and hike. To find, encounter, and synthesize "the little things" into a collective experience takes effort and intentionality on the part of the tourist. In contrast, the built infrastructure provides a much simpler way to experience the seeming totality of the park through the landscape. A landscape is holistic, and the whole park is encompassed in its imagery. Furthermore, it is easily accessible. Overlooks have laid out the essence of the park in a predetermined image for the tourist to experience and then photograph in order to experience it over and over again in the comfort of their homes. This kind of national park experience has become the norm, a quick and standard experience that can be homogenous and impersonal. Tourists desire to seek out the geographic essence, or totality, of a place. However, once they are predisposed to the landscape imagery that already claims a totality of the experience, they believe they will find it again by experiencing the landscape in person.

The place where we sat near Rainbow Point, with the view of the canyon and the bristlecone pines, was not easily accessible. We were far enough away from the road and any crowded overlook so we could not hear anything other than the wind. While we were sitting there, we heard some footsteps coming up behind us from the trail. The trail is a strenuous one as this fragment, place within a place, is near the highest peak of the park at 9,105 feet. Hiking at 9,000 feet is not easy and along with the footsteps approaching we could hear a man straining to catch his breath. He appeared out of the bushes and joined us in the little opening with the view. After recuperating from the hike and taking in the view he exclaimed, "Wow, that was worth it." There is a wide range of effort that the tourist can put into having an experience at a national park, but as the man hiking near Rainbow Point found, whatever effort one puts into the experience, it will be worth it. Landscapes are a beautiful way to experience the totality of a national park, but alone they do not fulfill a significant or unique experience, especially if they take place at overlooks where the landscape is a predetermined imagery that is experienced and reproduced by many. In order to have a total experience the tourist must interact with the landscape, be in dialogue with it, because it has something to offer that cannot be accessed from an image. Each tourist will experience a national park differently, but in order to come closer to a total understanding of the natural environment that makes up national parks, one must gather experiences of the little things in order to put together a personal understanding of the whole.

## Wilderness

Nature is terrifying. It is especially so if only a few feet from where you're standing the ground suddenly drops hundreds of feet onto an array of oddly shaped rocks. I can imagine that being a parent and having several rambunctious kids running around a canyon rim with only a slim railing standing between them and a terrifying fall can be a little nerve racking. Considering this, I wonder if the parents of the Bryce Canyon tourists enjoyed themselves as they were visiting since I saw quite a few who may have never taken their eyes off their kids in order to look at the landscape. One mother barely paused to have her picture taken at an overlook, and while she did, the kids immediately began playing in their newly found freedom. The daughter, bored, ran past the son and touched him, initiating a game of tag. When both of them whizzed past the mother, she gasped loudly and immediately began scolding them. "Don't do that! That scares me!" She then rounded the two up and squatted beside them, "This is not a playground. You do not play here, it's dangerous. If you don't behave we won't go to play putt-putt later." The kids shuffled their feet around the overlook for a few more minutes and then forced a smile for a family portrait before leaving.

The mother was right, nature isn't a playground, and it can be dangerous. Humans afraid of nature is nothing new. In fact, what is new is humans being inspired and seeking out nature as a source of beauty. Humans, with the exception of modern history, have always been involved and competing with nature to survive. American environmental history is one long story about humans attempting to overcome nature, to survive harsh winters and unfavorable environments, and to avoid diseases, storms, and dangerous animals. It is only in recent history



that humans have successfully distanced themselves from the dangers of nature. Today we stay inside and gaze out of our locked windows upon a nature that in reality is a “poor apology for a Nature and Art, which I call my front-yard.<sup>32</sup>” Humans view nature as an exteriority, and even refer to it as “outside.” According to Walter Benjamin, the masses desire to get closer to that which is distanced<sup>33</sup>, the other, and so humans are now going in search for wilderness for fun and leisure in the form of nature tourism. As humans have invented and revolutionized technology, nature has transformed from an interior part of life to an exterior, from an opposition to a vacation.

Modernity has simultaneously safeguarded humans from the dangers of nature and has put nature in danger of overproduction and industrialization. Since 1872, National parks have served the greater community by preserving and protecting select areas of exceptional natural beauty. The NPS’ mission statement states:

The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world<sup>34</sup>.

Within their mission statement, the NPS has created a paradox: “to preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources ... for the enjoyment ... of this and future generations.”

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<sup>32</sup> Thoreau himself was a tourist in nature, living by Walden Pond temporarily in hopes of reconnecting with his “part and parcel of Nature.” Thoreau’s touristic experience is a great example of what a unique and fulfilling experience might look like. While away from his home Thoreau was fully engaged and present in the environment, completely immersing himself.

Thoreau, Henry David. “Walden.” *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*. Ed. William John. Rossi. New York: W.W. Norton, 2008, (275).

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, (23).

<sup>34</sup> United States. National Park Service. *Frequently Asked Questions*. National Parks Service. March 9, 2015. Accessed March 15, 2015.

National parks attempt to preserve the pristine corners of American wilderness while, at the same time, making it accessible to the masses. If only Woodrow Wilson knew when he signed the Act creating the NPS that by 2014 there would be 292,800,082 people stomping their feet, spinning their tires, plucking flowers for souvenirs, and throwing their trash in the places the NPS is trying to preserve<sup>35</sup>. It didn't take long for the crowds to make an impact on the national park wilderness. By 1926, for example, several newly accessible geysers in Yellowstone National Park had been damaged or destroyed by tourists throwing rocks or trash into their openings<sup>36</sup>. What was once a problem in 1926 is now becoming an escalated problem of proportions through the popularity and accessibility of national parks vis-a-vis automobiles.

In places like Yosemite Valley, automobile traffic has caused major problems such as congestion and pollution that have degraded the natural environment as well as the tourist's experience. Roads and other constructed influences in national parks are all a part of what Edward Abbey would call "industrial tourism." The construction of roads and other built influences have a negative effect on the environments that national parks are trying to protect, but they also take their toll on the touristic experience:

Industrial tourism is a threat to the national parks. But the chief victims of the system are the motorized tourists. They are being robbed and robbing themselves. So long as they are unwilling to crawl out of their cars they will not discover the treasures of the national parks and will never escape the stress and turmoil of the urban-suburban complexes which they had hoped, presumably, to leave behind for a while<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> National Park Service, *Frequently Asked Questions*.

<sup>36</sup> Whelan, Tensie, and Dennis Glick. "Tourism in Greater Yellowstone: Maximizing the Good, Minimizing the Bad, Eliminating the Ugly." In *Nature Tourism: Managing for the Environment*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1991, (67).

<sup>37</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, (59).

Once tourists arrive at national parks that are often in some of the most remote corners of the United States they often remain distanced from the nature that they sought out by remaining in their cars. The majority of Bryce Canyon visitors only participate in a scenic drive through the park<sup>38</sup>. The same is also true for many parks, especially ones with major highways constructed through them. Parks, such as Badlands National Park, have roads constructed in a loop so that the tourist can drive through the park, to encounter what seems like a total experience, the loop, however, leading them back on the road to the comfort of their prepaid hotel reservation.

It is hard to experience natural wonders from inside a moving box with only a few glass rectangles to witness the outside world. On our visits to the parks, I would ask Dad to drive, and he would always drive at least ten miles per hour slower than the posted speed limit. Even at this slower speed, the scenery still passed by too quickly to fully experience. I would occasionally stick my head out of the window in order to get an unobstructed view, which I'm sure looked strange to the growing line of cars behind us. Experiencing a national park from the confines of an automobile is limiting compared to a walking tourist who "will see more, feel more, enjoy more in one mile than the motorized tourist can in a hundred miles." In contrast, by walking a park instead of driving, a tourist will "multiply the area of our national parks tenfold, or a hundredfold."<sup>39</sup>

What some saw as a problem of preservation, Stephen Mather, the first director of the NPS, saw as an opportunity. Mather embraced the national park paradox, believing that in

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<sup>38</sup> General Management Plan

<sup>39</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, (63).

order to keep and preserve the parks, the NPS must bring the people there<sup>40</sup>. Mather fully embodied the mission to make the national parks more accessible to this and future generations by taking advantage of the growing automobile culture in the United States in the early 20th century. He instituted a plan that would have at least one highway constructed through each national park, allowing visitors the ease of driving to and through the national parks. Under this plan, the Zion-Mount Carmel Road was designed and implemented, bringing the public into the once inaccessible and treacherous Zion Canyon. Mather's plan was an ambitious one as the terrain of the greater Zion area is anything but amenable to human construction. In order to reach the main attraction of Zion Canyon, workers had to blast, drill, and bore their way through ancient sand dunes, canyon walls, and mountainsides. After three years of construction, the Zion-Mount Carmel Road was completed including a mile long tunnel carved through the canyon wall and another mile of switchbacks that dissected the once pristine landscape<sup>41</sup>. Once completed, automobile traffic inside the canyon increased rapidly. Tour buses were quickly replaced by private automobiles which created so much traffic during the summer that the park became a virtual parking lot. Until the NPS implemented a shuttle system and restricted vehicle traffic to many parts of the park, pollution was a serious problem. The canyon walls retained the exhaust from vehicles and along with the stifling summer heat created a hot and muggy atmosphere that had an impact on the environment as well as the tourist experience.

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<sup>40</sup> *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*. United States: PBS Distribution, 2009. Film.

<sup>41</sup> United States. National Park Service. "Zion-Mt. Carmel Highway and Tunnel." National Parks Service. U.S. Department of the Interior. Accessed March 15, 2015.

The Zion-Mount Carmel Road was part of a greater scheme to bring Zion, Bryce Canyon, and Grand Canyon National Parks together in what is called the “Grand Circle” by connecting them with a series of highways. As envisioned by Mather, this allowed tourists to easily see multiple national parks. Though engaging in what I am criticizing, Dad and I decided to take advantage of this one morning while we were camping at Bryce Canyon. We left the camper and our gear behind and within an hour we were approaching Zion along the Zion-Mount Carmel Road. Once again, Dad drove as we got closer to the park, and as we did, the landscape became more and more dramatic. I was constantly pointing out features, such as rock formations, telling Dad to look as he tried to navigate a sharp, banked curve. However, by the time he could look, the formation was already out of view. Unfortunately, even driving at this slower pace I had not accomplished looking at the passing views either and around each turn there was a new landscape to observe. We came to the entrance of the mile long tunnel and as we sat waiting in a long line of cars for our turn to enter the canyon wall, we noticed a trail head to the right of the road. We agreed that going on a short hike would be better than sitting in traffic and would give time for the congestion to clear, so Dad worked the car off the road into a small parking lot.

The hike took us up the side of a cliff, and eventually we were looking down on the line of cars where we were only minutes before. The trail took a turn in a few more yards, and the road disappeared. The further we walked, the hum of the car engines became more distant and eventually silent. As a result, we became immersed in nature. We had to duck under cliff hangings where the air was cold and damp. We climbed over tree roots that stretched at least 20 feet away from the trunk of the tree, soaking up any water within its grand reach. There was

a family of big horn sheep climbing the adjacent cliff to where we hiked, a few of them jumping from ledge to ledge and some gnawing on the thin leaves of desert shrubs. When we reached the trail's pinnacle, the narrow walls opened up into a grand view of Zion Canyon.

To the left, we could see the road winding down the canyon wall, tiny cars slowly pacing back and forth. The road was miniscule within the enormous canyon, only a sliver of construction in the vastness of wilderness. From this view the extent of the park was incredible even though we were looking onto only a small portion of the park, the part actually accessible to tourists. Zion National Park consists of 146,597 acres, and in 2009 President Obama employed the Wilderness Act to designate 124,406 of those acres as Wilderness. The Wilderness Act of 1964 claims that such a place "in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."<sup>42</sup> This means that 85% of Zion's natural landscape is untouched by human intervention and is only accessible by foot. The infrastructure that makes up the tourist's built experience is confined to only a small fraction of the park, leaving the rest untouched.

Mather dealt with the national parks paradox by making the parks accessible through building infrastructure, but limiting human influence to only a small part of the park, preserving the rest and leaving it in pristine condition. Modern citizens still desire to reconnect with nature, nature that is furthest from the norm, immaculate, and unfamiliar. National parks effectively serve the function of allowing tourists the means to experience this nature while keeping the environment intact and safe for the next generation of tourists who will

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<sup>42</sup> United States. National Park Service. "Zion Wilderness." National Parks Service. U.S. Department of the Interior. Accessed March 15, 2015.

undoubtedly be even further distanced from nature. To truly experience and appreciate the nature that tourists travel so far to witness, they must leave the comforts of modernity brought along with them, put their feet on the ground, expand their field of view, and make a conscious effort to interact with the beauty that surrounds them. While tourists interact with nature along side roads and down paved paths, national parks must leave the rest unimpaired and allow for wilderness to grow and flourish without human intervention. National parks are cursed with the paradox of allowing tourists the means to experience this nature while keeping the environment intact and safe for the next generation of tourists who will undoubtedly be even further distanced from nature. However, Mather's grand plan effectively provided tourists the means to experience nature and in addition to the use of the Wilderness Act much of the parks are preserved and free of human intervention. National parks solve the paradox by compromising, making a small portion of the park accessible to the public while allowing the rest of the wilderness to flourish without human interaction. Human immersion in nature is not a bad thing and is even important for humans to reconnect with an important part of who they are, however, intervention in the form of infrastructure must be kept to a minimal. Tourists hope to enjoy nature, but they must respect the parts of nature that are void of humans, the wilderness. Even with human intervention, nature will continue to be the dangerous and destructive force that civilization works to overcome.

The next day back at Bryce Canyon, I joined a predominantly older crowd who was sitting on benches listening to a park ranger recite a "geology talk." Most of the people weren't listening but rather just needed a place to sit and rest. However, the ranger's story grabbed my

attention. He spoke of a small peaceful river that flows just west of Bryce Canyon called East Fork Sevier River. The river has no current effect on the canyon, and in fact the scenery does not remotely resemble the canyon that is only a few hundred yards away. Bryce Canyon is continuously eroding, inching further and further west every year towards the river. One day the canyon rim will reach the river's flow and the water will begin to cascade into the depths of the canyon. The erosion process will eventually be expedited and what took millions of years to be formed will be destroyed in a matter of years. As a result of the erosion, the beautiful landscape of Bryce Canyon will have disappeared. No intervention can stop this process. Humans can build infrastructure to make nature accessible and to share it for other's "enjoyment, education, and inspiration,"<sup>43</sup> however, national parks must be careful not to manipulate the natural landscape for the sake of the tourist. National parks facilitate the tourist's ability to immerse themselves within nature by building infrastructure and creating areas in which people observe and experience; however, they must ensure that parts of the national park remain untouched in order to respect the natural environment humans belong to. Experience within intervention is not harmful if it allows nature to continue to flow, like the East Fork Sevier River. Nature is dangerous, even to itself. The erosion of Bryce Canyon is simply an exercise of nature's destructive force that even humans cannot overcome.

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<sup>43</sup> National Parks Service, *Frequently Asked Questions*



## Walking

Tourists come to national parks in order to collect an experience, and for each person it takes a certain kind of action to catalog an experience. For many, that action is photography. If the tourist can walk away from a park with photographic evidence that they were there, then they can say that they have experienced that park. For me, I have to engage with the park more, leave the confines of my car, and actually put my feet on the ground and go hiking. I long to engage with the landscape instead of simply gazing upon it and capturing it mechanically. Near Bryce Canyon is Canyonlands National park, a thin stretch of land east of Bryce Canyon that one of the few highways of southern Utah passes through. On our way east, heading back home, we drove through Canyonlands. It was a rainy day and we passed through the park without stepping out of the car. We saw a lot of features and fragments of the park from the car window, but I would not say that I have been to Canyonlands National Park because I do not believe that I have truly experienced it. If I had taken the time to go on a hike and witness the park, not as an image or a passing scene, but as a subjective landscape to be experienced interactively, then perhaps I could come closer to having experienced the park. Part of that interaction is the action of walking. After reading Henry David Thoreau, I sought to recreate the kind of walk in which Thoreau partakes throughout Walden and advocates for in his essay, *Walking*, in hopes of better understanding why walking is important in order to catalog my national parks experience. I absolutely enjoy walking through the southern Utah desert where the, “pure air and solitude compensate for want of moisture and fertility,” but I had to settle for

walking around the area near my neighborhood in Atlanta<sup>44</sup>. Instead of walking as a tourist through a national park I set out on an experiment to discover why the act of walking is so important to my experience. On my walk I brought only a notebook, camera, and my cellphone (a burden which I would regret bringing). I would stop occasionally to make a photograph or write down some of my thoughts, otherwise I was continuously walking until I ended up back at my doorstep. In my experiment I would find that what is so effective in my experiences of walking in national parks is the ability for me to forget about the outside world, to completely immerse myself in the environment, to abandon my worries of my normal lifestyle and be completely focused on the present moment.

Before I set out on my walk, I considered what a Thoreau-like walk would resemble. He first describes the act of walking as *sauntering*, a word for which Thoreau provides a short etymology for the reader. Thoreau suggests that saunter comes from “*sans terre*” which means “without land or a home, which, ... will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere.” Either origin uses the word *terre*, meaning Earth. Walking, for Thoreau, is a way of reconnecting with the Earth. He claims that people are “a part and a parcel of Nature,” and the act of walking is how we can escape the society that we are immersed in and embrace the Nature that we are still a part of<sup>45</sup>. When I consider myself a national park tourist I must recognize myself as “a part and a parcel of Nature,” a citizen of a society that I am trying to escape for a while, but just as much a citizen of the earth.

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<sup>44</sup> Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, (275).

<sup>45</sup> Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, (270).

Civilization pulls us away from Nature and monopolizes our interactions with humans and human constructions. Thoreau calls this, “a sort of breeding in and in, which produces at most... a civilization destined to have a speedy limit.<sup>46</sup>” Without interactions with Nature, we are limiting ourselves to the small cohort of genius already known to humans, creating inbreeding that is not sustainable. There is a wild side to humans, that part and parcel of Nature, that needs to be tapped into and can be accomplished through walking. In order to live the most fulfilling of lives, humans need to embrace their wild side, for “the most alive is the wildest.<sup>47</sup>” The wild side of ourselves is what draws tourists to national parks, a place set aside for interactions with Nature. Tourists want to be able to escape civilization, and national parks provide an expanse of wilderness to explore. To be able to escape society and exercise the senses dulled by the monotony of civilized life is paramount for Thoreau. In Nature, where the most important aspects of life reside, “there is the strength, the marrow of Nature,” and you suck the marrow out through the act of walking out of civilization and into the wilderness<sup>48</sup>.

The first challenge in my walk was going to be where to find some kind of wilderness in the midst of Atlanta. I needed to escape the village somehow and when a tourist would normally pack their bags and drive to a national park, I was limited as I had class the next morning. When I left my neighborhood, I walked along North Decatur Road, the street that is perpendicular to my own. It was 5:00 p.m. and rush hour was in full swing. I was far from wilderness and decided to cross the street and walk through the neighborhood opposite of mine. The neighborhood did not resemble Nature, either, as everything within sight was domesticated: mowed lawns, non-native trees, and trimmed bushes. What I saw here was the

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<sup>46</sup> Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, (281).

<sup>47</sup> Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, (274).

<sup>48</sup> Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, (275).

quintessential picture of the American Dream -- pictures far different that what I've witnessed from Nature. The street on which I was walking ended up being a loop, placing me back on North Decatur Road. Further down the road, I found a path leading off of the sidewalk with a sign demarking the entrance. I turned down the path and found myself walking alongside train tracks. North Decatur Road could be seen to the left, and to the right, the sun was setting and the tracks, wedged between two walls of trees, receded into the horizon.

I chose to walk away from the road, West, and towards the setting sun. For Thoreau, West is synonymous with wilderness and the unknown. In 1862, when *Walking* was published, the American West was still being explored and settled by Europeans. West was where the unknown lay for any European, from settling the Americas to the expansion of the Western frontier. Thoreau, when he would walk, would tend towards the West for he said, "I believe that the forest which I see in the western horizon stretches uninterruptedly towards the setting sun, and that there are no towns nor cities in it of enough consequence to disturb me."<sup>49</sup> And so I hoped that walking along the tracks west I would find no towns but instead some kind wilderness within the sprawling city landscape of Atlanta. I convinced myself that the train tracks would be a close enough substitute for wilderness in the midst of the city. "The village is the place to which roads tend... the place to and from which things are carried" and if I was to escape the village I should find the place in between the village<sup>50</sup>.

The train tracks resemble a kind of liminal space within the city, for the roads are inhabited by people, but the train tracks only by the transportation machine. No humans seek out the train tracks and the only life I would encounter along my walk would be that of Nature,

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<sup>49</sup> Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, (275).

<sup>50</sup> Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, (265).

plants, and animals. I wouldn't see a train pass on my walk, and the wall of trees on either side of the tracks served as a curtain from the village. And so I walked West.

By walking into the wild, and embodying the wild, there must be a leaving behind of the civilized. Thoreau, similar to American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, alludes to Jesus telling his disciples to leave behind their friends and family to follow him, as well as leaving behind all other worldly obligations - settling all affairs and paying all debts. To be wild is to be free, and one cannot be free during a walk if they are tied down by societal obligations. This is where I failed to replicate Thoreau's walking. The phone in my pocket was heavy and I found myself tempted to take it out and engage with the village I was trying to leave behind. I had not settled all my affairs before walking. I needed to write a paper, I had some reading to do before my class the next day, and I hadn't called Mom yet this week.

I tried to, at least temporarily, suppress my academic and extracurricular tasks, and instead focus on the present moment, the present movement, watching as my feet glazed over crinkled leaves and moist dirt. Thoreau suggests "you must walk like a camel, which is said to be the only beast which ruminates when walking."<sup>51</sup> As I walked I needed to be immersed in my thoughts, ruminating over what was important. However, I found my mind wandering. As I walked West, I concentrated on my surroundings, photographing the tracks, the changing leaves. I had difficulty walking, the wooden slabs of the tracks ran counter to my stride, I would have to step either too far or short to place my foot squarely on a slab. I was thinking about my societal obligations and wondered about where I would end up at the end of the tracks.

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<sup>51</sup> Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, (263).

According to Thoreau, “every walk is a sort of crusade,” and I was concerned with what I was to conquer, what conclusion I would find at the end of my walk<sup>52</sup>.

When I turned a corner in the tracks, I came across a bridge with graffiti drawn on it by previous passengers. At the bridge, I realized that I had reached Scott Boulevard, another busy street during rush hour. I had returned to the village. The sun was almost completely set by this point, and I sat down by the side of the bridge. I pulled out my phone and read the attempts of the outside world to reach me. As I was looking at my phone it rang. I answered it. A friend was distressed; they didn’t get to the second round of their job interview. I wanted to console them, but I couldn’t. My mind wasn’t prepared to give advice having been absorbed in my walk, and I was disappointed in myself at the conclusion of my walk at the bridge. I hung up and started the walk back.

I was wrong to think that the bridge was the conclusion, or the destiny, of my walk. “Half the walk is but retracing our steps,” and it was on the walk back that I realized what to walk like Thoreau means. The sun had completely set by this point, and the tracks were difficult to see. My eyes were still adjusting to the darkness so that I had to strain to see the wooden slabs of the tracks and avoid tripping on them. My eyes focused on my footing, and my mind focused inward. I found myself thinking about the journey I was creating. Before I had concentrated on the horizon, anticipating what was around the corner, and found myself disappointed when I arrived. Having to focus on the tracks to keep from tripping, I was focused on the immediate. “We cannot afford not to live in the present,” and so I did as I began focusing on each step that I took. The train tracks represented two eternities in each direction,

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<sup>52</sup> Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, (260).

and each wooden slab the line between the two eternities<sup>53</sup>. It took the darkness and the isolation of myself from the outside world for me to realize this. At this point in the evening it had become too dark to photograph and I began to realize that my camera was just another machine of distraction from my experience. Just like my phone, my camera hanging around my neck was a way for me to distance myself from the present as I was often to concerned with documenting my experience than actually participating in it. Thoreau similarly spoke to the power of darkness when he said, “when I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable” in order to be isolated and truly lost<sup>54</sup>.

It is when I was taken out of the context of my environment that I was able to be lost in Nature. For it is “not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.<sup>55</sup>” While walking West, I was ruminating on my relations, but not finding my place within them. Walking East, in the darkness, I was able to find myself in my thoughts and come to conclusions about my place in Nature. The stars had come out at this point, but when I looked up at them I tripped on a wooden slab. I realized that I needed to focus on the present in my crusade to become wild. In the village I was concerned with the future: what my grades would be, what I would do after I graduated. During my walk, reconnecting with my part and parcel of Nature, I focused on the present so that I did not trip and fall.

When I stepped back into the lights of Atlanta traffic, I called my friend back and told them that it’s okay that they didn’t get the job; there will be more opportunities further down the tracks, in the meantime focus on being the best in the present moment.

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<sup>53</sup> Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, (14).

<sup>54</sup> Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, (275).

<sup>55</sup> Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings*, (118).

I realized after this walk what the importance of hiking is for me in national parks: I am able to isolate myself from the outside world and fully immerse myself in a world unknown. When I hike I am not attached to my phone, I am not thinking about what is coming next; instead, I am focused on the immediate experience, what is right in front of me. However, through this experiment I became aware of a new outside machine that I am often guilty of distracting myself with: the camera. Photographing national parks is an important activity in order to record and catalog an experience, but often the photographer is in danger of removing themselves from the present experience by concerning themselves solely with the reproduction for future enjoyment. Within my particular experience of walking I have to find a balance between viewing the world through my camera's lens, and my own. Often my camera helps me to focus on parts of the visual world that I might normally overlook, but if I am not careful it can also distract from the greater experience. I have learned to take the time to put down my camera, or sometimes even leave it behind, and focus on the present experience.

This is how I can best connect with nature, by leaving behind the civilization of home, the infrastructure of the built influences of the park like visitor centers and overlooks, and even the distracting machines I bring along with me, like my phone or my camera. National parks exist for the purpose of reuniting the tourist with Nature. Humans are citizens of both society and Nature, and for the tourist there is considerable danger of bringing along the former while trying to engage with the latter. To walk like Thoreau is to relocate a part of Nature that may have been lost while immersed in society. For me, that part of Nature was living in the present. It took isolation from the village for me to realize that I was too concerned with where



the tracks would end, and instead I needed to focus on the now. Experiences like this one is why I enjoy hiking and believe it is an important part of the national park experience. If tourists are coming to parks to reconnect with Nature, they will not find their connection from paved parking lots and built overlooks, or in the LCD screens of their phones or cameras.

## Wanderlust

Today is March 21st, the first day of spring and it is beautiful outside. This time of year is always bad news for me considering I am extremely susceptible to spring fever. Since I woke up this morning I should have been catching up on work, writing or reading, but instead I have been staring out of the open window day dreaming about mobilizing, going somewhere, anywhere but the area around campus that has become so mundane. This morning, I made the mistake of opening the file of photos from last summer and spent a good hour reminiscing and longing to experience those memories again. The warm weather has provoked my sense of wanderlust, a beast that has been hibernating and chooses to wake at the most inopportune times, like a week before my thesis is due.

I am not the only one that houses a wanderlust beast. Magazines, super bowl commercials, and *New York Times* articles tell us that wanderlust is a common trait shared by all Americans. Wanderlust is an ideology imposed on the American public to encourage people to work hard and then play hard, all within a capitalist framework. Manifest destiny lives on in American souls in the form of touristic travel through the expansion of our “have been there” souvenir collection and the settlement of attractions and gift shops. Now that the frontier has reached the Pacific Ocean and beyond, Americans have turned their attention to conquering the natural world all masked under the guise of leisure and fun. A *New York Times* article in 1946 claimed that “travel is in [the American citizen’s] blood, in their national heritage.<sup>56</sup>”

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<sup>56</sup> Popp, *The Holiday Makers*, (3).

However, this is an ideology formulated and perpetuated by capitalist institutions like tourism agencies and the United States government. Although this ideology benefits many, it still alienates much of the population. Wanderlust and the luxury to drop everything and travel to national parks to feed the beast is not accessible to a large portion of the American population.

Touristic travel was an activity only enjoyed by the wealthiest Americans, those who did not have to work until the mid-20th century when paid vacation leave became a widespread practice. Vacation and travel quickly became a ritualistic activity, a celebration of the American freedom to mobilize and have fun, all while engaging and perpetuating a lifestyle dependent on excessive spending and mass consumption. The introduction of paid vacation was sold as a chance for workers to get away for a while, rejuvenate their physical and mental lives, and break out of the everyday practice of work. Employers believed their businesses benefited from paid vacation because their employees were more productive workers when they returned from vacation. Furthermore, the American economy benefited from this spending as vacationers constantly consumed across the nation, which, in turn, stimulated the economy<sup>57</sup>. Tourism agencies would encourage potential tourists through advertisements to save money for their vacations. As a result, instead of working for the weekend, people began working for the vacation. Employees would work and save money for 50 weeks of a year to pay for a two week vacation that would rejuvenate their personal and work lives. Travel became known as a therapeutic activity needed in order to survive sitting in a closed office space with no windows for the remainder of the year. By taking time off work to travel and experience something new, the worker turned tourist could restore their mental and physical health while simultaneously

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<sup>57</sup> Popp, *The Holiday Makers*, (2).

affirming their individuality and forming their own identity. Alongside the advent of paid vacation, automobile ownership dramatically increased. Americans with their new free time now also now also had the means to fulfill their wanderlust, to mobilize. Automobile ownership became a part of the American identity as a sign of individual freedom.

Individuality and the desire to wander, to go beyond the conventional routine and discover something new, are also part of the American identity. Americans are told that they are part of an open society, one that allows them the agency to do anything and go anywhere, giving them authority over themselves to “slip the shackles of normal employment<sup>58</sup>” to enjoy and further themselves as people and citizens. As a result, many tourists not only travel for fun but also to facilitate a personal transformation. They want to escape the monotony of everyday work life and collect transformative experiences that will live with them forever. Traveling broadens the tourist’s perspective, and though the perspective can be skewed, the tourist still becomes aware of a larger world, one that is outside of themselves, through experience. The act of experiencing involves learning about something new such as a place, a history, or even oneself. Through the travel experience, the tourist has the ability and tools to further their knowledge and perhaps even become closer to their idealized self. Therefore, the American tourist’s identity is formed through unique leisure pursuits instead of the continued participation within the common milieu<sup>59</sup>.

Tourists looking to form their identity through experience are drawn to national parks because of the possibility of connecting with nature. Nature, considered an exteriority, is a resource for personal change and development through picturesque landscapes and the

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<sup>58</sup> Popp, *The Holiday Makers*, (63).

<sup>59</sup> Popp, *The Holiday Makers*, (127).

exoticization of wilderness. Tourists seek to escape the franticness of their everyday urban lives by going on vacation, and nature is often deemed the perfect place to find peace and tranquility, particularly in a landscape. Barthes believes that tourists are attracted to landscapes because the image “seem[s] to encourage a morality of effort and solitude” and by just gazing upon the picturesque they can rid themselves of the urban frenzy and find an inner peace<sup>60</sup>. In addition to cleansing themselves of the urban life and finding themselves in nature, many tourists can also cultivate their national identity by visiting national parks. National parks help to nurture interest in American places and can create a sense of national pride and unity in the beauty of the American landscape<sup>61</sup>. More specifically, the American tourist can be proud that some of the most beautiful places on earth are conceived on American soil to be shared with everyone by the United States Government. National parks are for the “public good,” the moral and sensible places that are accessible to everyone for their betterment by connecting with the beauty of nature<sup>62</sup>. National parks, however, can be misconceived as the democratization of nature.

The viewing of nature and belonging to nature is generally accessible to all members of the American population because of the prevalence of the simple environment that permeates throughout our lives. However, the pristine wilderness of national parks necessitates travel for the tourist, creating a classist dichotomy between those who can afford to travel and those who cannot. Travel is inherently undemocratic and classist because of the requirement of money to own an automobile, to be able to purchase gas, food, and lodging once the tourist arrives. Advertising agencies paint a picture of an abundance of time and money in the tourist

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<sup>60</sup> MacCannell, *The Ethics of Sightseeing*, (127).

<sup>61</sup> Popp, *The Holiday Makers*, (20).

<sup>62</sup> MacCannell, *The Tourist*, (40).

world when in reality the accessibility of both time and money can hinder many from traveling<sup>63</sup>. The remoteness of national parks also perpetuates the issue of accessibility. The pristine wildernesses and even beauty of national parks are inherently remote, far from human influence, and require much time and effort to reach. With only two weeks of vacation and limited funds, many potential tourists do not have much time to travel significant distance, especially if they cannot afford to pay for plane tickets and car rentals. In addition to this, many people do not even get the luxury of vacation time because they have to constantly work to make a living for themselves, and at times, their family.

The demographics of travel and tourism, especially in national parks, reveal a racial discrepancy, generating issues of both class and race. A survey conducted by the NPS found that 78% of national park visitors between the years 2008-2009 self identified as white while only 7% identified as African-American. When asked why African-Americans were hesitant to visit national parks, 54% responded that the cost of visiting (paying for gas, lodging, and food) was too high, and the same percentage said that national parks were too far away from home<sup>64</sup>. Over half of today's low-wage workers do not have paid vacation<sup>65</sup> thus limiting their ability to connect with the American identity that they have been told comes from traveling and participating in touristic activities. The correlation between races and socioeconomic issues negatively affects the demographics of national park visitors due to distance, accessibility, and costs of travel, food, lodging, and even park admissions. Therefore, visiting national parks is a privileged and elitist activity.

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<sup>63</sup> Popp, *The Holiday Makers*, (69).

<sup>64</sup> Taylor, Patricia A., Burke D. Grandjean, and James H. Gramann. "National Park Service Comprehensive Survey of the American Public." *Natural Resource Report*, 2011. Accessed March 15, 2015.

<sup>65</sup> Popp, *The Holiday Makers*, (146).

If the pristine wilderness is only accessible to the affluent, then so is the rejuvenation and identity that emanates from a national park experience. Additionally, if visiting national parks is inaccessible to persons of certain socioeconomic or racial groups, then the sense of national identity is also impacted for these people. The wanderlust that is supposedly embedded in the hearts of all Americans perhaps only runs through the veins of the white middle and upper-class American citizens. John Steinbeck alienates African-Americans by emphasizing his belief in the origins of wanderlust: "Could it be that Americans are a restless people, a mobile people, never satisfied with where they are as a matter of selection? Every one of us, except the Negroes forced here as slaves, are descended from the restless ones."<sup>66</sup> The ideology of wanderlust excludes anyone who does not have the individual freedom to travel for travel's sake. Those unable to travel to tourist sites like national parks, including those underprivileged due to race, class, or gender<sup>67</sup>, will not be able to encounter those transformative experiences that could possibly expand their worldly perspective or even improve themselves. Becoming closer to the idealized self, gaining knowledge from travel, and rejuvenating mind and body for a better working environment is an activity only available to the middle and upper-classes. Tourism in national parks has become an insider vs. outsider phenomenon that is rooted in the consumerist activity of travel<sup>68</sup>. This is unfair to those who don't have the same access. In addition, this is not to say that middle to upper white individuals are more worldly or know more about themselves, but rather that they have access to a medium that facilitates this process. There are obviously other ways in which those who don't

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<sup>66</sup> Popp, *The Holiday Makers*, (72).

<sup>67</sup> Class, race, and gender are inextricably tied to one another. Though the statistics provided do not explicitly discuss gender disparities, women, particularly women of color, are disproportionately affected by class hierarchies.

<sup>68</sup> MacCannell, *The Tourist*, (40).

have the means to travel can better themselves and expand their perspectives, however, tourism, for many, is not one of them.

If consumeristic activity has led to the disparity of access for many, could national parks and tourism become more democratized by encouraging tourists to travel not as consumerists, but as explorers? Tourists can have transformative experiences, build their identity, and rejuvenate their lives through travel if they shy away from the consumerist activities and instead go in search of a unique, unscripted, more personal experience. There are two types of travelers: those who travel to consume a place and those who travel in search of place. When I travel I wander in search of a place, I do not leave with the intent of having an open to the unscripted journey and the unfolding particular experience. I try my best not to participate in the consumerist culture of touristic travel. I avoid hotels by sleeping in free primitive campsites. I don't purchase souvenirs but, instead I solidify my memories through the act of writing or photographing. I generally avoid the tourist traps and go in search of a new place where I can have a unique experience, one not predetermined for me.

The most difficult part about taming my own wanderlust beast is the ease with which I can drop everything and leave the normalcy of my everyday life to experience something new. Sitting in the trunk of my car right now is everything I need to feed the beast: a tent, a sleeping pad, and bag. And even though I avoid the consumeristic activity of travel that has helped create the insider vs. outsider phenomenon<sup>69</sup>, I am still an insider. I am able to tame my wanderlust through my access to a car, having money to spend on gas and on a nice camera,

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<sup>69</sup> Insider being the privileged travelers and outsiders being the portion of the population unable to partake in touristic travel.



and the ability to leave without losing a job. Not everyone has this luxury as travel is inherently a privileged activity and the lack of accessibility taints (or should taint) the experience of all tourists because of demographic disparities. The privilege is not only in the consumption -- One still has to get there.

## Distance

Summer of 2013, my best friend Eric and I went on a road trip, going west, with a few destinations in mind other than Yellowstone National Park. We decided that we should probably go there because Yellowstone is, after all, the United State's first national park, one of the most popular and widely known, and neither of us had been. If one is to be a National Parks enthusiast, or at least a traveler of the American landscape, a visit to Yellowstone is absolutely necessary. Other than that, our itinerary was left to what would catch our eye in our new road atlas. We merged onto I-40W and drove until we had crossed the sea of grass and farmland that is the Great Plains. Nothing would pique our interest until we had crossed the 100th meridian. Once we reached Albuquerque, we abandoned I-40 to head north, towards the Rocky Mountains, where we could really escape the monotony of level land. I was flipping through our road atlas in order to anticipate both our route and what we could view from our windows when I noticed a national park, a green square on the map, situated in the middle-of-nowhere Colorado. Neither of us had heard of Great Sand Dunes National Park, and being card carrying members of the digital age, as well as still within reach of Albuquerque's 4G network, we Googled the park to see if it were worth seeing. Pictures on my 3x5 inch phone screen revealed giant sand dunes nestled at the base of snow topped mountains. We agreed that the prospect of materializing these photographs with our own eyes was worth going six hours out of our way.

The new route not only took us six hours out of our way, but it also deprived us of some diverse topography. We crossed one mountain range but found ourselves in another flat basin

before we even had a chance to soak in the thinner air. The western American landscape has an odd effect on weary travelers. Often the only objects within sight are miles away, blending into the horizon and becoming part of the landscape. I found myself staring at a single point of reference in the distance, waiting for it to get closer. Middle-of-nowhere Colorado does not have many references to choose from and a small house that appeared as only a dot against distant mountains had to suffice. I had been staring at the house for what had seemed like a long time and it had not changed its shape or size. After a quick check of the clock and speedometer I consulted Eric on the matter: “Yeah, it hasn’t moved. We’re in a time warp.” We were disoriented and lost in the massive 8,000 square miles that make up the San Luis Valley, searching for a landmark to anchor our spacial and temporal senses and shake the feeling of driving on an asphalt treadmill. Within our visual field we identify objects by their peripheries, their own inner horizons, and without a point of reference in the vastness of the landscape the object becomes lost in the distance<sup>70</sup>. In order for Eric and me to be oriented visually, spatially, and temporally, we needed a point of reference within the landscape, something with which we could anchor our experience. Several minutes, miles, and panic attacks later we passed the house.

It was Eric who saw the dunes first, a swath of tan painted where the Sangre de Cristo Mountains reached the level ground of the valley. Our GPS told us that we still had thirty more minutes until we reached the visitor’s center and so with a temporal reference, a point on the horizon, and a brief Wikipedia introduction, we approached Great Sand Dunes National Park with very little expectations.

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<sup>70</sup> Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (70).

Unlike us, most people direct their rental cars towards the more popular parks, ones with a reputation and big name like Yellowstone. The potential tourist has heard of Yellowstone and knows that the experience they can have there is worth the miles. They know this because their co-worker went there last summer and still hasn't changed his wallpaper from the photo he took of a bison. They know this because of the mini-documentary series on Yellowstone wildlife they saw on the National Geographic Channel. They know this because the United States government deems the place important enough to protect. And they know this because they have seen photographs, photographs that represent the beautiful landscapes, the unique wildlife, and unworldly hot springs and geysers. Before they even pack their bags the potential tourist already knows what they will experience at Yellowstone and they're looking forward to watching Old Faithful erupt right on time, as expected.

Travel agencies have long been luring tourists to attractions through advertisements that entice the potential tourist with sensational visual interpretations of attractions. Post World War II, during the heyday of the tourism industry magazines would be full of colorful advertisements enticing people to leave their homes and spend their money in wonderful, welcoming, wild Wyoming. An entire magazine, *Holiday*, was dedicated to stories and profiles of tourist attractions. Writers of *Holiday* would captivate their readers not by publishing profiles of places that introduced a new way of looking at a place, but rather by reiterating what the reader probably already knew<sup>71</sup>. When a reader comes across a profile on Yellowstone they don't want to read about the newly discovered thermophiles living in the hot springs there,

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<sup>71</sup> Popp, *The Holiday Makers*, (92).

they want to confirm what their co-worker was saying about how big the bison's head is.

Editors of *Holiday* recognized the preconceived notions that people had about places and built upon them in order to convince them that the attraction was worth seeing.

Photographs are important in reinforcing this preconceived notion and were constantly used in travel magazines. More specifically, color photographs grab the attention of the readers and effectively communicate the imagery of the place that they are trying to sell.

Photographers of travel magazines would gather their photographic material by going out on road trips themselves and then replicating the road trip that they are trying to sell. The magazine would put these photographs into a photo-essay that are in the point of view of the tourist<sup>72</sup>. The readers of the magazine can easily see themselves in the photo, imagining going on that road trip and seeing the photographs in real life. If they do travel to the photographed places they will reproduce the image experience through their own eyes and their own camera. This leads to a homogenous touristic experience because the tourist is not actually formulating their own experience, but reproducing the one presented to them by travel agencies.

People like it when their opinions are confirmed and advertisers and travel magazine editors capitalize on this by synchronizing their message with the preexisting public imagination of a place in order to generate and perpetuate the aura of a place<sup>73</sup>. Profiles of sights would focus on particularities of it that seem to encapsulate this aura, or the essence of the place. Writers and photographers created the profiles by reinforcing a mythology of the place. By focusing on the aura and spotlighting distinct aspects, the editors build up vivid imagery of the tourist attraction that entices the potential tourist. Old Faithful is the attraction at Yellowstone,

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<sup>72</sup> Popp, *The Holiday Makers*, (84).

<sup>73</sup> Popp, *The Holiday Makers*, (94).

the one place you must go if you want to experience the park. The profiles of Holiday would spotlight particulars like Old Faithful because its familiarity to the reader. After reading Holiday's profile on Yellowstone National Park, the tourist is prepared to experience the Yellowstone that has been laid out before them in textual and visual descriptions. When they do visit, they will make sure to go to the highlighted parts of the park and confirm their expectations of the experience. The tourist does not experience the park as only a collection of sense organs that perceive the park, but rather as a body that is inseparable from the set of memories, emotions, and attitudes that impact and shape our experience. The knowledge and emotions evoked by travel advertisements and media play a role in how the tourist will experience a place, they are a point of reference that the tourist will use to orient themselves within the national park experience. When the tourist is experiencing the park, they will refer to their expectations that are memories of prior knowledge and experiences. In this case, tourists are functionally reproducing prior images and ideas they've seen to ensure that they have completed and fulfilled what they believe to be, the "authentic tourist experience." Memories are not just a recollection, but a force that makes the tourist experience the attitudes, emotions, and imagery that expectations evoke.

Yellowstone was a disappointment, particularly Old Faithful. The notions that Eric and I brought with us to the park had told us that we were to be blown away by the geysers, but we left having only experienced smelly bursts of water coming out of a grey landscape. Besides preconceived notions there is a whole collection of internal and external factors that affect an experience. The weather was gloomy the day we were there, cold and wet, and we could hear

plenty of grumbling coming from the crowds of tourists. Except for the occasional geyser enthusiast (affectionately known as “geyser geeks” to Eric and me), no one seemed to enjoy it as much as a *Holiday* article would suggest.

The aura that is created around national parks is used as a point reference (generated from memory) for the tourist and affects their experience. Memory is not just a recollection of the past, disassociated from the present, but rather is a return to an experience or an idea with significance to the present. When one remembers something they are projecting a previous experience onto their unfolding perspective of the present<sup>74</sup>. Expectations work in this way, too. When the tourist expects Yellowstone to be a “wonderland” as the NPS describes it, they will project this expectation onto their experience of the park. Memories and expectations can be materialized and the experience of the park can resemble the mythic perceptions of parks that make up public opinion. However, expectations can fall short, like Eric and I’s experience, for an actual experience is comprised of a multitude of factors that make up our perception beyond, but still including, memory<sup>75</sup>. Regardless, one can go into a park with no expectations, no point of reference, as Eric and I did with Great Sand Dunes, and have an experience untainted by pre-formulated notions.

As we drove towards the park entrance, the mass of sand dunes, our point of reference, was slowly growing bigger and bigger, but it was still taking what seemed like eternity to get there. Just like the house that never got closer, the dunes were expanding in size, but our spacial perception was still tainted. We had no idea how far away we were from the dunes on the horizon. When we gaze upon a horizon, whether it be the edge of a landscape or what is

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<sup>74</sup> Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (187).

<sup>75</sup> Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (70).

just beyond my sensory field outside of the room I'm sitting in, we have an expectation of what we will find there. Unlike when we visited Yellowstone, without having any prior knowledge of the park or any previous experiences on which we could formulate assumptions, we gazed upon the horizon free of expectations. By the time we reached the entrance we were already amazed at the sheer size of the dunes. Once we parked the car we took off our shoes and walked out onto the sand perimeter that surrounds the dunes that had now eclipsed the mountains behind them. Even as we walked towards the dunes our perception of distance was obscured. Just like driving towards the park, even though the dunes appeared close, it took a lot longer to reach the first dune than we expected. Even as the horizon became closer we still never fully understood the scale of our point of reference until we were immersed in it.

The experience that we had when Eric and I finally reached and fully engaged the sand dunes is nearly indescribable. The dunes engrossed us, we climbed up and down mountains of sand until we were lost inside, and all we could see in any direction was a sea of grains. The experience was surreal and unlike anything else.

I've returned to Great Sand Dunes National Park twice since the first time and each time the person I brought with me reacted in the same way that Eric and I did. I prepared Dad for the experience, I communicated my memories of past experiences to him through stories, and he had seen the photographs I had taken, but he was still amazed. Even with expectations formulated Dad reacted in the same way that I did when I first experienced the park. The grand scale of the dunes consume you and make you feel small, like when you stare into the night sky and try and count the stars. You feel like a child again and want to run through the sand playing with the strangeness of a shifting earth and bewildering lines and shapes formed by wind and



sand. Dad got down on his hands and knees and watched the wind blow away the fine grains and leave a gentle sloping curve that led to a small valley.

## Grand Circle

One day while I was photographing at Sunset Point in Bryce Canyon, a filled tour bus pulled up, a long line of elderly folk filed out of the bus and gathered together. A younger man with a hat and clipboard spoke loudly to the group and then led them to the overlook. I went up and asked the young tour guide where the tourists were from and where they were going. He said that they were from Orange County, California and, glancing down at his clipboard he told me, "We're going to Arches National Park tonight. We need to leave here in eighty minutes if we're going to make it by sundown." He then left to take some pictures of his tour group. Throughout our time in national parks, we encountered many tour busses like this one, but especially near Bryce Canyon and Zion which are in the middle of what tourist agencies refer to as "The Grand Circle".

The Grand Circle is an imaginary circle drawn around the corners of Utah, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado with a radius of approximately 300 miles. Within the circle are numerous national parks and attractions, some of the most notable include Grand Canyon, Arches, Bryce Canyon, Zion, Canyonlands, and Mesa Verde. Not to mention the beauty of the area, the appeal of the Grand Circle is the density of national parks and the possibility of seeing many attractions in a short amount of time. In the Grand Circle Association's guide book they claim, "In the Grand Circle, there is no reason to pick one vacation over another - you can do it all."<sup>76</sup> Tourists flock to this corner of the American Southwest because within their week long vacation they

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<sup>76</sup> Grand Circle Association. Grand Circle Official 2014 Travel Planner. Phoenix: Grand Circle Association, 2014. Print.

can fly in, rent a car, and see more national parks and monuments than anywhere else in the country.

Moving from park to park may be the most efficient in the quantity of sights you'll get to see, but perhaps it's not the most efficient in the quality of the trip's experiences. In observing and talking with tourists during my research, I discovered that this kind of traveling, trying to see as much as possible in a given time (the holiday), is the norm<sup>77</sup>. Due to limited vacation time, this kind of travel is appealing if the tourist only has a week off from work or school; they want to be able to experience as much as they can within that week of vacation. When I graduated from high school, my family flew into Las Vegas where we rented a car for cheap and drove through Nevada, Utah, and Colorado stopping at all of the highlights, spending approximately a day at each. We would usually spend the morning driving somewhere like Arches, spend the day exploring the park, camp there that night, and then the next day, drive to the next park and repeat.

In my research, I've encountered many tourists who travel in this manner, attempting to see as much as possible. Visiting a park in a day promotes a quick and standard experience which usually consists of a driving tour and viewing landscapes at overlooks. However, this type of encounter in the national parks can also severely limit the experience by not allowing sufficient time for the encounter to be thought about and digested. In order to have a truly fruitful experience the tourist must not settle for a brief overview of the park presented to them through a landscape, but must synthesize an experience through interactions with the

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<sup>77</sup> Snow, Rachel. "Tourism and American Identity: Kodak's Conspicuous Consumers Abroad." *Journal Of American Culture* 31, no. 1 (March 2008): 7-19. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost. Accessed March 4, 2014.

many fragments, the places within a place, that make up the park. National parks are way too vast to be able to see it all in a day, maybe not in a week, or month, or even year. In order to really experience and understand an intricate place like national parks it is “better to idle through one park in two weeks than try to race through a dozen in the same amount of time.”<sup>78</sup> In the national parks, the depth of an experience is often more important than the breadth.

Realizing our need to slow down, to add our own personal depth to the encounter, Dad and I had spent over a week in Bryce Canyon. We set up camp inside of the park and took our time exploring. We parked the car and walked to the trails. We saw corners of the park that we had never encountered before, where the crowds never reach. We chose to experience the park as Abbey suggests, taking our time to really engage the place more than on a surface level. However, our method of traveling for the past two weeks had gotten the better of us. By studying tourists, we fell into the practice of rushing through parks in order to try and make it to the next one before sundown. Our minds and bodies were tired, we had traversed across the country and had our fair share of experiences, some unique and some we shared with the hundreds of fellow tourists that surrounded us.

Tourists travel to have experiences and adventures that they will remember and share with others. Tourists travel to change how they perceive the world and ultimately help them enjoy home more. The word “experience” shares its English origin with the word “experiment.” When Dad and I set out on our journey, we were engaging in an experiment. “Experience” can perhaps be better understood in the context of our journey as a verb, “experiencing.” Our

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<sup>78</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, (62).

experiment is an ongoing one, even when the minivan finally pulled back into our driveway at home the experiment was not over. That road trip will not be my last, but I also know that next time I will pack my bags a little differently. The next time I come across a fork in the road, I'm going to turn left where before I turned right. Next time, I won't try and cram as many national parks into my trip as possible; instead, next time, I will choose a place to dwell and deepen that encounter. Even after six days in Bryce Canyon alone, I had a deeper understanding of the place than ever before, but there is still more to learn. Maybe next time I will learn more and will add to my continuing thought process and understanding of the national park experience. This is not a solidified argument, but one that will be constantly changing as I continue to experiment.

One night Dad and I were having a dinner of ramen noodles, we had exhausted out more complex meals, and our conversation was almost as monotonous as our dinner. We were too exhausted to talk and when we did, our conversation revolved around the things we missed: a home cooked meal, our dog Bailey, sleeping in a real bed. We had experienced so much in the past couple of weeks and I wanted to share stories, but I was not ready yet. We had spent days researching and photographing the park and its people, but we also wanted to be able to relax and just enjoy being in the present moment. We had been trying to cover as much of the park in the past couple of days, photographing people and studying the environment, and now we were tired. We had also been away from home for over two weeks and even with the time that we took off in order to enjoy ourselves, we began to feel a little home sick. The windows to our camper were open and a cool breeze passed through our

temporary home. Over the hum of the AC units of our neighbors we heard thunder rumbling in the distance.

We cleared our dinner plates and when I walked outside to wash the dishes I noticed the clouds rolling in from the north. I instantly felt a sense of dread. It had been a clear blue sky all day and I thought that I was going to finally get a chance to photograph the stars. Southern Utah has some of the clearest skies in the United States and the last time I was in Bryce Canyon I made some incredible photos of the Milky Way, but as I saw the sunset paint the approaching storm clouds purple I began to give up hope on reproducing those photographs. Star gazing is one of my favorite activities to engage in, but a part of me knew that I wasn't in Bryce Canyon for that.

When I finished cleaning the dishes, Dad and I decided to go on a walk. Our camping spot was only a short distance away from the canyon rim and every day we had walked southwest towards the main part of the park, but this evening we chose to walk east. As we walked a few raindrops started to tap on our heads. There was no sight of humanity as everyone was clearly smarter than us and knew to hide from the impending storm. We talked about how storms just like this one formed Bryce Canyon by slowly eroding away the landscape and creating a new one. The raindrops that danced on our heads as we walked were actively shaping the landscape, washing away the pebbles that we stepped on. I drug my foot along the dampening trail and several pebbles cascaded over the edge, we were shaping the landscape too.

The next morning was our final morning in the park, I woke up and Dad was gone. The french press was wrapped in a towel so the coffee would stay warm. I filled my mug, grabbed a

lawn chair, and walked to the edge of the rim where I found Dad. We sat in silence and watched the canyon being awakened by the rising sun. We spent the rest of the morning in this one spot, contemplating the landscape and its nature. A few tourists walked past us, but for the most part we were alone. Our scenery didn't change, only the length of the shadows did, but we never grew bored, never felt the urge to get in the car and find the next "attraction." We had become a part of the landscape. Still, we longed for home, the all important place "to stash valuables, especially [our] valued memories and hopes, and [our] identity."<sup>79</sup> We had set out on an experiment, to try and have an authentic national park experience, and I am still unsure if we succeeded. However, experiments are not about attaining a predicted outcome, but instead having gained new knowledge. We had become closer to each other, and ourselves, built upon our identity, and collected new experiences. Now we needed to remember them.

We could have remained sitting on that edge forever, but we decided to go home.

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<sup>79</sup> MacCannell, *The Ethics of Sightseeing*, (120).