

Moving Mountains:

Racial Politics behind Native American Sacred Land Negotiations

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Introduction

Last November, the White House hosted hundreds of tribal leaders for the first ever Tribal Nations Conference. President Obama, upholding the commitments he made while campaigning on various reservations, organized this meeting in an effort to improve inter-governmental relations between the United States and tribal governments. For many Native Americans, this signified a veritable turning of a new leaf and was lauded as a historic and momentous occasion. President Obama was certainly not the first politician to make those kinds of promises, but more often than not, verbal commitments do not translate into actual change. Excited about the possibility of a new beginning, many indigenous media outlets provided extensive coverage about the events in Washington. Meanwhile, most American audiences were impervious to the news, seeing as the stories featured on the news that day covered the Fort Hood shootings. Mr. Obama received some criticism for not postponing the conference in light of the tragedy.

President Obama addressed the leaders at the summit, albeit briefly. In his address, he expressed sympathy for the wrongs of the past, and showcased the progress his administration has made thus far in extending a helping hand to tribal nations. The event culminated in the signing of an executive order mandating that cabinet administrations submit a proposal within 90 days explaining how they intend to improve relationships with Native Nations (Capriccioso, 2009: par 10). Pursuant to the signing, there was a question and answer session in which practically every person that was selected to ask a question thanked the President for his work so far, but also stressed a variety of problems with issues that include but are not limited to: the trust responsibility, sovereignty, fishing rights, and toxic waste dumping. There was one common theme that

pervaded in the questions: **land**. Mr. Obama responded to most of these questions by smiling politely and expressing appreciation for their concerns. The only question regarding land issues that he answered substantively was one that was framed in the context of global warming, a familiar topic that concerns all racial groups in this country.

My research over the past year focuses on the racial politics behind Native American engagement with the state. Race is a hot topic in academia these days; but whereas the studies of whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians burgeon, comparatively, one major demographic is overlooked: American Indians. Granted, this group presents a very different case than other racial groups insofar as they have formal relations with the United States government as a racialized group and have a much longer and complex relationship with it. All too often, studies dealing with indigenous people are relegated to other disciplines- namely history and anthropology. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that their exceptional status merits scholarly attention. The late Lakota scholar Vine Deloria once noted that invisibility was the chief problem of Native Americans (Cobb and Fowler, 2007: 19). My work is a response to the conspicuous absence of studies of native people in mainstream academia, especially in the field of politics. I make an initial attempt to understand how native populations relate to “white” America and its government. I use the negotiation of sacred lands as an example to shed light on this relationship. The conclusions I draw are based on surveys I distributed and interviews I conducted with inhabitants of the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota -home to members of the Lakota Nation- as well as the Navajo Reservation in Arizona.

I chose to introduce this topic with the anecdote about the Tribal Nations Conference not only because it was a recent event in which Native Americans engaged in

serious dialogue at the national level (a rare event in and of itself), but also because the exchanges between the President and the tribal leaders that asked questions of him are illustrative of the main point I wish to underscore in this paper- racial animosity and ambivalence between whites and natives can be explained by a fundamental difference in worldview which plays out primarily over sacred land negotiations. I have broken this thesis down into three distinct points for the sake of expediency:

- ✓ The relationship that native people have with land is fundamentally different than that of white people.
- ✓ In order to understand the first thing about native-white political relations, it is imperative to take into account the land-spirituality-politics connection; the Native American relationship to the American state is anchored in land politics.
- ✓ This difference in political thought coupled with the focus on land explains the disconnect between the groups that has been both a hindrance and an asset to American Indian movements.

Of course, it is highly contentious to make generalizations like “native/white people believe ____”. First of all, it suggests that these cultures and their ideas are static and lack the ability to change (Alfred, 2002: 30). Both sides should consider that the context in which these mindsets operate has drastically changed over time, “indigenous people today live in a materialistic world of consumerism and corporate globalization [...] it may be difficult to recognize the viability of a philosophy that originated in an era unaffected by European ideas and attitudes” (ibid, 31). Likewise, it is unfair to say that no white people recognize the error of the ways of their pioneering predecessors. In any case, I make the distinction between whites and natives as other scholars have before me out of practicality because there does appear to be a difference between the minds of the two groups that has real life consequences for racial relations.

Due to the confines of this paper, I will not be able to return to the subject of the Tribal Nations Conference. However, I would like to point out that while the invitees asked for assistance with land problems, President Obama primarily addressed other issues. The fact that he received criticism for not putting off the conference due to the Fort Hood killings is a testament to the fact that native issues are not taken seriously by mainstream America. My hope is that this story will set the stage for the deliberations that I have spent a year studying: the Lakota claims on the Black Hills in South Dakota and the Navajo struggle for the preservation of the San Francisco Peaks outside of Flagstaff, Arizona. My hope is that by the end of the paper, readers will walk away with a basic understanding of these conflicts, but more importantly, some with some new insight into what they are about for many native people on a personal level.

Background

For many Americans, Mount Rushmore is an emblem of the country's great history situated in the breathtakingly beautiful Black Hills of South Dakota. Most of them probably do not know that the Black Hills area is the most sacred place for the Lakota people. It is the origin of the human species according to their creation story, "our spirituality is based on the fact that the Black Hills are the heart of the earth" said one Lakota spiritual leader (Personal interview, 1 July 2009). In 1868, the United States government recognized the Lakota Nation as a sovereign entity; in this same treaty, the government granted the Lakota full entitlement to the Black Hills (Clark, 2007: 44). After entering the agreement, prospectors found gold in the area and realized its value. Consequently, the U.S. government seized the territory, thereby abrogating the treaty without the consultation of the Lakota only nine years after it was signed when (ibid). At

the time, the Lakota did not have the political rights that would allow them to take significant legal action, and it was not until a century later in 1980 that the case made it to the Supreme Court. The decision ruled in favor of the Lakota and ordered a \$40 million settlement for the land, with interest (Tanner, 2007: 196). Rather than accept the payment, the Lakota -proud of being warrior people- were firm in their conviction that the land was not for sale. These were the people that defeated Custer's army with bows and arrows, after all. The trust is still untouched, now worth an estimated \$1 billion (Giago, 2010: par. 8). Although the reservations in South Dakota are among the poorest areas in the nation, rife with every social and political ill imaginable, many of the community leaders maintain that the Black Hills cannot be purchased.

The Lakota are one of the more iconic tribes of the Plains Indians. In terms of contemporary demographics, the Lakota people residing in South Dakota comprise a significant portion of the state's population; at last count there are about 63,400 (nine percent) living on nine reservations (McCool et al, 2007: 131). A study several years back calculated that four out of the ten poorest counties in the United States are on Indian reservations in South Dakota (ibid, 143). Ever since the time of contact, "American Indians and the state of South Dakota have had a complex and difficult history," including 87 years of sustained armed conflict with white settlers (McCool et al, 2007: 131). There are many parallels between the way that they have been treated in day to day life with the experiences of African Americans in the South prior to the Civil Rights Movement (ibid, 133). Because the relationships with outsiders have been so negative, it is hardly surprising that much of the American Indian Movement activity happened in South Dakota in its heyday. From the breach of the Fort Laramie Treaty in 1868 to the

occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 in which activists had an armed standoff with the Federal Bureau of Investigation over the course of ten months to avenge the takeover of their territory and subsequent massacre, the ugly history of confrontation with the United States government has left its mark on racial relations even to this day (ibid, 136). One need not look too hard to observe the tensions, the “CUSTER HAD IT COMING” bumper stickers and “THE ORIGINAL FOUNDING FATHERS” tee-shirts featuring Chief Joseph, Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and Red Cloud against the backdrop of Mount Rushmore are fairly prevalent around the reservation.

Similarly, for a relaxing ski vacation in the southwestern United States, many families head to the Snowbowl, located outside of Flagstaff, Arizona. The Snowbowl has been operated by the National Park Service for seventy years now, but for the various indigenous populations in the region recognize the San Francisco Peaks –the mountains in which the ski resort is situated– as the most sacred part of their spiritual beliefs (Brown, 1999: 62). For the Navajo people, the mountains are “the physical embodiment of one of the Holy Ones or Navajo gods [...] The Navajos pray directly to the peaks as a living, sacred being to whom they are intimately related” (ibid). Therefore, it was a significant blow to the Navajo and other tribes that worship the mountains, when the Park Service decided to allow the construction of the ski resort in the 1930s; the Navajo likened it to “a painful incision on the body, or more frequently, to a cancer growing within the Peaks’ body” (ibid). The Navajo, Hopi, and other nearby tribes have all continued to fight against the resort to no avail; the conflict recently escalated with the latest development concerning the Peaks. Due to climate change in the area, less snow has been falling on the peaks, limiting the number of days that the slopes can open; in order to deal

with the resulting declines in revenue, the owners of the Snowbowl began to produce artificial snow out of reclaimed waste water (The Snowbowl Effect). Infuriated by the flagrant desecration of the mountains, coalitions in the region mobilized in opposition to the move.

The Navajo (Diné) are the iconic people of the Southwestern United States. Their reservation is the largest in the country -roughly the size of West Virginia- and is mostly located in Arizona, although it does spill over into parts of Utah and New Mexico. It is home to more than 180,000 inhabitants (Personal interview, 7 Aug. 2009). The Navajo have had their fair share of traumatic encounters with white settlers, the most well known being the Long Walk in which thousands of members were made to walk 18 days through the desert away from their ancestral lands to an internment camp 300 miles away; life in the camp was less than ideal and many people perished (Personal interview, 8 Aug. 2009). The Navajo have been rather resilient however, and have had a decidedly less radical political trajectory. They are known for being quite diplomatic, having sent their first delegation to Washington in the 1800s and currently operate a full-time, staffed office on Capitol Hill whose objectives are to monitor policy and lobby tribal interests (Personal interview, 10 Aug. 2009). The Navajo have been able to use the democratic process with relative ease; their traditional system of governance may account for this, as their values are much more compatible with American democratic models of government compared to the Lakota which are not (Henson et al, 2008: 19-20). The Navajo have consistently higher levels of political participation and optimism- sentiments that have been quantified by survey data, but is fairly evident just in speaking with people there (McCool et al, 2007: 110). They even had a member elected to the New Mexico state

legislature as far back as 1964 (ibid, 19). That election in particular sparked white fear of an “Indian takeover,” although the people I talked to had mixed responses about whether or not racism was currently a regular problem for their group (ibid). Interestingly, many of them noted that racial tensions escalated considerably with the advent of the Peaks debate. I heard of a few, isolated incidents of violence being taken out against indigenous people in the region, but the animosity against native people did not seem to approximate the levels that are characteristic of South Dakota.

Nota bene: It would be misleading to downplay the efforts that the Hopi and multiracial, non-tribal entities (namely the Save the Peaks Coalition) have had in spearheading the efforts against the developments of the Snowbowl. Nevertheless, I chose to focus on one tribe for the purposes of this paper and likewise with the Lakota. These tribes are two of the largest and most well-known in the United States and as such, other tribes have looked to them to represent pan-tribal interests.

Theory and Literature Review

The United States is often described as a melting pot- a cultural milieu where people of all colors and countries cohabitate and, in recent years, it has become popular to talk about these relations. Despite the fact that indigenous people have a longer history in this country than any other “minority group,” they are rarely given as much attention in the aforementioned discourses. Whereas the behavior of blacks, Hispanics, and Asians is highly scrutinized, native people are often lumped into the “other” category, if not ignored completely and doing so “den[ies] their existence, but also recognize[s] no dignity or value in these ‘others’” (Wilmer, 1994: 269). Despite the history of exclusion since the arrival of the first colonists, there are several other factors that complicate the

study of their political behavior, or lack thereof- namely the fact that many of them live on isolated reservations or other tribally designated lands (Wilkins, 2006: 196). In these areas, access to phone lines and other basic resources, compounded with cultural and language barriers, make research exceptionally difficult compared to other populations (ibid). This likely explains why the majority of scholarship on native politics comes from heavily Indian populated states and from academics that identify as being native.

The consequences of having such little scholarly work done on this group are considerable. Very little about the way that American Indian politics operates and the way that it interfaces with mainstream politics is taught in non-tribal classrooms. The result is often a general ignorance about certain, important issues- for instance, the status of “tribes as sovereign partners with the federal government” (Meyer, 2002: vii). Some would go so far as to argue that this “enduring naïveté and lack of scholarly acknowledgement [...] has contributed in no small part to the destabilized and ambiguous nature of tribal political status and to nearly perpetual tension in indigenous-non indigenous political, legal, cultural, and economic relations” (ibid). Whether or not the paucity of knowledge about native politics informs racial relations is arguable, but certainly warrants further investigation.

One of the most helpful sources in this endeavor was Indians and U.S. Politics: A Companion Reader, a compendium edited by John Meyer. This book is a collection of essays from various scholars that specialize in indigenous politics. The objective is to clarify how Native Americans interact with the US government and does so by examining its institutions like federalism, the bureaucracy, the presidency, etc and what the relationship with tribes is amongst these institutions. The fundamental argument here

is twofold: first, that Native Americans form a distinct racial group whose relationship to the state is unlike that with any other group and second, that their sovereignty must be understood and preserved. The book is helpful for understanding the legal and political battles that have been fought between whites and natives, which have contributed to the ambivalence and animosity between the two groups. It is written very much in academic style, but manages to be couched in strong indigenous paradigm. As such, it offers a thorough discussion of the role and the importance of land- a point that I attempt to develop by applying it to racial relations.

David E. Wilkins does similar work in American Indian Politics and the American Political System. This encyclopedic work traces the historical and contemporary political disputes in which native populations in this country take part. It provides a comprehensive overview of past and present United States Indian policy as well as intra-tribal politics and is a nice supplement to Meyer's compilation. Wilkins also includes a discussion of how indigenous governmental entities engage with the state on the local, state and national levels. This book is a foundational text for understanding the subject at large.

Daniel McCool, Susan Olson, and Jennifer Robinson's Native Vote: American Indians, the Voting Rights Act, and the Right to Vote published in 2007 is the other book employs a political science framework, but much of it sounds a lot like law, seeing as they focus quite a bit on litigation. This book actually takes on a project I was hoping to expand on, investigating voting behavior; however, this is a difficult subject to tackle for the aforementioned reasons, therefore, their method provides an effective, concrete way of showing the real life effects of racism on political activity among native populations.

Ultimately, their argument concerns the Voting Rights Act's ability (and inability!) to bring suffrage to native communities. The book illuminates the different experiences and resulting attitudes of both the tribes that I chose as my case studies, which provides some much-needed context for explaining the vastly different political climates on the two reservations. The authors are able to show how native people engage with the American polity through the "political process" i.e. voting, litigating, and lobbying, and in their case studies from South Dakota it is easy to see how those claims relate to land claims.

The State of the Native Nations is a recent product of the Harvard Project on American Indian Development, published in 2008. The aim of the book is to trace the status of economic and political development among Native nations as they stand today. Their focus is largely on sovereignty- how tribes have gained and lost it over the course of 500 years and how it is still being negotiated in the era of "self-determination". For the purposes of this book, the Harvard Project takes several tribal case studies which are varied not only in terms of their geographic and cultural diversity, but also in terms of their socioeconomic and political statuses, the particular challenges they face, and their myriad strategies for facing them. The studies consistently show that projects that skillfully marry widely accepted economic strategies with local, cultural values have largely been successful. The authors stress that although native communities face huge and disproportionately severe social, medical, and economic ills, most of them are on the rebound, so to speak- they are making use of the resources available to them and reaffirming their power. Ultimately the message is a hopeful one, insisting that sovereignty coupled with responsible, non-paternalistic assistance is the best way for tribes to thrive and achieve their goals of becoming self-sufficient.

Patricia Penn Hilden takes a very different approach to Native American politics in From a Red Zone. This book engages various postmodern, postcolonial, and feminist theories to interrogate how Native communities have been racialized and their women gendered accordingly. True to form, it privileges the subject position of native people as being able to understand these processes. One of the main qualms the author has with most scholarship on this subject is that it is not produced by indigenous people; the author attempts to take on the project of de-centering American/European perspectives and culture, which continue to strongly influence people's worldviews and historical narratives not only about that world, but also of the proverbial "other". The book uses personal accounts as an attestation to the value of lived experiences of natives, women, and native women. This book was influential in encouraging me to focus on native epistemologies and even to exchange "white" methodologies for indigenous ones in an effort to conduct less intellectually imperial research.

Social Change and Cultural Continuity among Native Nations best captures the essence of my work. Duane Champagne shows how native traditions interface with the western parameters in which tribes must operate. In this work, he traces various indigenous social and political movements and carefully elucidates the different forces at work. Much in the same way that tribes take from multiple traditions, he takes some elements of western social science but simultaneously engages indigenous methodologies and perspectives. Champagne's work is valuable in showing the role that native spiritual communities play in these campaigns. Champagne theorizes the pressures to negotiate between western and indigenous frameworks when politically mobilizing; the tribes I use as my case studies very much support his model.

In The Common Pot, Lisa Brooks uses indigenous methods to discuss the struggles to recover native space in the Northeastern part of the United States. She shows how the distinctions between history and native literary traditions frequently blur and challenges the reader to think outside of a Western framework, not even really choosing a central thesis and instead ruminating on the topic and resisting a narrative that shaped by colonial influence. Following a trend that occurs in native studies, she blends history, tradition, and activism. Her work validates the strategy I use in my paper, borrowing from both schools of thought.

My work starts where the other work ends. After having read many accounts of how the U.S. broke however many treaties and continues to pretend like it never happened my curiosity about the intricacies of native-white relations sparked. I have read various manifestos decrying white insensitivity to native issues, especially those pertaining to spirituality. Scholars have asked for years whether or not white and native ways of thinking are compatible or not; rather than try to answer this question, I theorize which elements of each system facilitates the disconnect between the groups.

Research Design and Hypotheses

Initially, this project was launched to answer the question: how do Native Americans living on reservations relate to the political process? I sought to understand the level of engagement (or lack thereof) at the national level, primarily through voting, but also making inquiries about other activities including lobbying and demonstrating. To this end, I designed a survey asking 15 questions primarily borrowed from old Pew Center research polls used on other minority groups. The questions asked basic things

such as, “do you vote?” and “do you feel that you are a valued citizen of the United States?” I planned to administer the survey in two ways: for the first half, I printed questions on a double side sheet of paper, with multiple choice answers that the respondents could select. As for the other half, I planned to ask the questions in an oral, recorded interview, but leaving the questions open ended for the informants to answer in the way they deemed adequate. Between these two methods, I hoped to elicit both personal, meaningful accounts through the latter method, as well as quantifiable data through the written questionnaires.

Although the life of the Lakota people on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota is worlds different from that of the Navajo people on their reservation in northeastern Arizona, upon arrival in both places, it became immediately obvious that the methods submitted to the Institutional Review Board would not work quite as smoothly as originally envisioned. Indigenous populations around the world -but particularly in the Americas- have had a long and tenuous relationship with researchers of all kinds: historians, anthropologists, and just about everyone else that has sought to study them. For centuries, white people have “parachuted into” these communities; their objectives run the gamut of excuses, but in most cases, researchers have shown up uninvited, taken whatever it is that they want/need for some kind of personal gain (academic advancement, etc), and then leave, never to be seen again by the tribes (Personal interview, 27 July 2009). Oftentimes the data collected has not been used to benefit the community or even to its detriment. In one of the most difficult conversations I had out in South Dakota, one informant pointed out to me, “yeah, you got a research grant and on

opportunity to write a thesis that will look nice on your resume... what does that leave us?" (ibid).

Frequently, there is no consultation with the "subjects" to seek their comments or approval; in other words, the relationship has been characterized by a certain greed and/or disregard for the Native people. Many tribes have reacted against this intellectual exploitation and have consequently taken steps against it, "yep, up at Six Nations [the tribes] put an end to researchers coming in and doing that all together" (ibid). That being said, most tribes are plagued by social and economic ills and recognize that there is much research that needs to be done. Conducting research on indigenous populations is something that is undoubtedly valuable –even necessary– but it must be done in tandem with those that will be studied. This was a somewhat difficult lesson that I had to learn; nevertheless, it an important one, especially as it relates to my personal project of cautioning future researchers about appropriate ways to work with Native populations of the United States and elsewhere.

For this reason, I decided to turn to ethnographic methods of inquiry. There were various individual level barriers that impeded my ability to faithfully execute the scientific method devised prior to arriving on the reservations. One of the greatest challenges of this project was getting access to Native communities. Rather than stand in a public spaces on the reservation seeking a random sample of respondents (an idea that people literally laughed at), I had to seek out interviewees in a sort of snowball method which oftentimes consisted of sitting in the living rooms and dining rooms of the homes I was staying at drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes and listening to people ruminate about life, politics, and everything in between, allowing the conversations to flow naturally.

This was made possible by contacts established prior to arriving at the reservations. It is advisable and practically necessary, for that matter to have an “in” because strangers are frequently frowned upon, particularly in South Dakota, where few (if any) tourists pass through. Therefore, I was at the whim of people who did have the ability to bring me into the communities. Perhaps this does something to diminish the objectivity of the study. It is undeniable that a significant percentage of the sample is comprised of activists and people that are more attuned to local and contemporary politics, compared to the average citizen. Nonetheless, the information collected was rich and plentiful and I got the impression that these activists by the very virtue of living in those communities, had a very good sense of the politics and the sentiments of their non-activist counterparts.

Finally, I faced other difficulties during the interviews. Understandably, I had to rephrase the wording of the questions, which despite their avoidance of large words, are framed in a somewhat technical manner, particularly for those that do not regularly read about politics. Even when I had made the question as clear possible, there was oftentimes a disregard or even a dislike of the question. Although all of the questions provided multiple-choice answers, the informants would often select more than one option even when the question called for them to choose one answer, or they would create their own option all together, for instance, number ten asked, “in your opinion, which of the following issues is the most pressing in your community?” The answers provided were: “health care,” “environmental protection,” “land rights,” “education,” “economic development,” and “other”. The most common response was “all of the above”. In spoken interviews I would push them to be more specific and choose the single most

important issue, but roughly half of them chose not to identify one. This, I do not believe to be a misunderstanding of the question, but rather an aversion to its framing.

After several rounds of interviews, I understood that it was more effective to simply listen to that which the informants were willing to discuss, rather than forcing my own agenda on them which proved fruitless. Fortunately, I was able to discern a pattern and draw a conclusion about what is meaningful when it comes to politics. Apparently, voting in national elections does not exactly top the list for many of the individuals with whom I spoke, although this is seemingly less true for the Navajo than for the Lakota. I now suppose that that some of the informants knew what I wanted to hear, but instead opted to express what they deemed an appropriate response, as an act that allowed them to maintain agency and ownership of the knowledge that they shared with me.

At any rate, coupled with the largely invisible status that indigenous American people have on the national scale due to the social and policy constructions over the centuries, logistical barriers make working with Native populations particularly difficult. Reservations or certain parts of reservations are often very remote places; Eagle Butte, the capital of the Cheyenne River Reservation, is comprised of a single street which is home to a school, a grocery store, a bank, a Dairy Queen, and little else. The capital of the Navajo Reservation, Window Rock, is cosmopolitan by comparison, but there are parts of the reservation way out where people still read by the light of oil lamps (Personal interview, 8 Aug. 2009). Additionally, there are sometimes language and cultural barriers that impede researchers from being able to operate as easily as they might among other populations. These are only some of the explanations as to why there is so little scholarship done on the politics of these people. By this, I do not mean that Native people

are too difficult to study or work with or that non-Native researchers cannot effectively study their politics. I am merely stating that studies should be conducted in concert with the people and there must be an understanding by the researcher that “Western” or canonized methodologies may not be the best way to procure data in this scenario.

I include this thorough discussion of my methodologies deliberately. I believe that showing the transition in my methodologies speaks to my point about the disconnect between white and native thought processes. Upon arrival at the reservations and learning that the proposed methods would be inadequate, I realized that there are oftentimes different epistemologies, frameworks, and viewpoints at work. The point is not to essentialize and say that native people think like this and white people think like that, but rather to show that the values that inform political moves from both sides are distinct. This notion is crucial for understanding another one of the central theses being pushed: holding on to an indigenous ideology/schema as a basis for political rhetoric and action has been both an enormous asset, as well as a serious detriment for Native Americans when trying to engage with the American state.

Findings

1. The relationship that native people have with land is fundamentally different than that of white people.

The main problem impeding racial harmony, as I have come to understand it, is a fundamental disconnect between western thought and native creed; these are two, distinct ways of thinking and understanding the world. Still embedded in the Western worldview are Enlightenment era principles of secularism, progress, and Protestant work ethic. Operating in a Lockean mindset, settlers came to the New World believing that land and

money were divine rewards for industriousness. This is what led them on the quest for Manifest Destiny and the maximum development of the territory. These values are diametrically opposed to native beliefs which typically state that human beings are merely stewards of the land, having an intimate relationship with it; native beliefs teach that people should live sustainably, not taking more from the earth than needed, and being grateful for the bounty that the earth provides.

Land plays an intimate role in influencing indigenous identity. A recent study done concerning racial identification concluded that people that are part American Indian are more likely to identify only as American Indian if they have some tie to the indigenous homeland (Liebler, 2007: 1). The reasoning here is that land, whether it is a field or a mountain or a forest, is a “culturally meaningful” space in that it influences language, stories, and ceremonies (ibid, 2). As one Lakota woman put it, “The fight for our land is at the core of our existence, as it has been for the last two hundred years. Once the land is gone, then we are gone too. (Crow Dog, 1991: 11). Although this may seem redundant, it is worth reinstating that indigenous people are designated as such because of their connection to the land, the term “indigenous” refers to this relationship.

An important component of native belief systems is the role that land plays in spirituality. In most native spiritual thought, the surrounding land is very much a part of the history and every day life. The Lakota creation story literally begins in the Black Hills, with humans being borne of the materials under the mountains. Likewise, the San Francisco Peaks are still a place where many Natives from the various local tribes go to pray and exercise their spiritual practices, the notion being that one has to maintain and cultivate the relationship with the land. As one Navajo informant put it, “people and the

environment are inseparable- a healthy and balanced person needs to have healthy relationships inside and outside the home” (Personal interview, 10 Aug. 2009). The differences can be boiled down to fairly simple terms, however, “it’s not like they [white people] would like it if we went and pissed all over the Vatican, would they?” (Personal interview, 29 July 2009). According to this point of view, development and commodification of the land compromises its sanctity.

Given the spiritual value of land in native traditions, it stands to reason that its importance influences their political decisions and actions. One of the most significant departures of white political tradition from native political tradition is the doctrine of separation between church and state. This is not the case in indigenous traditions, one native scholar notes, “an indigenous existence cannot be realized without respecting all facets of tradition: culture, spirituality, and government” (Alfred, 20002: 18). Although there is undoubtedly some hypocrisy in the implementation of this separation at every level of the United States government, it is an idea that is formally mandated and is treasured by many American citizens. The same doctrine does not govern native politics, in fact, the converse is true. Past Indian policy tried to replace indigenous governing bodies with democratic ones based on Western models, which ultimately had deleterious effects on the communities in which they were introduced, “native social and political relations are part of a cosmic balance of the universe, and separating religious views is an alien concept [...] the adoption of secularized tribal political institutions violates tribal worldviews and may be viewed as a cause for their ineffectiveness” (Champagne, 2007: 79). This is a point that merits its own investigation and quite a bit of work has

been done on this topic, but I introduce it now to draw a connection between the native view of land and political maneuvers.

An anecdote from my research experiences over the summer may help to further illuminate this point. I mentioned in the Methodologies section that I had difficulty getting my informants to stay on the topic of voting, lobbying, and other components of what many Americans understand to be the democratic process. Though I worked hard to draft what I thought to be the least offensive or invasive questions possible in preparation for the interviews, the participants would frequently go on tangents that seemed to be entirely unrelated to my carefully crafted inquiries. I struggled to bring the conversations back to the topic of citizenship and engagement with the state, but instead I kept on hearing about the surrounding environment and tribal mythologies. Not seeing the connection to political science, I spent the better part of my summer questioning my worth as a scholar and trying desperately to connect the dots back to my original proposal. Only after studying the inseparable link between culture, spirituality, and politics in native traditions, did I come to realize that these stories are equally meaningful and relevant to their politics.

There seems to be a perception -on behalf of some native people at least- that there are even greater differences on some fundamental level between white and native mentalities. These differences are understood to be governing much more than just political decisions, but also moral ones. One Navajo activist that I spoke to explained it this way:

“white economic value systems include a top-down mentality, categorization and separation, thinking with minds not emotions, separation from the spirit at a young age, and the ‘illness of inhumanity’ i.e. greed, racism, and hate [...] indigenous values are

about interconnectedness, respect, consciousness, sharing humanity, and creating love" (Personal interview, 10 Aug. 2009)

This dichotomy was echoed in an essay by Native scholar Taiaiake Alfred, who states that, "indigenous governance systems embody distinctive political values, radically different from those of the mainstream. Western notions of dominion [human and natural] remain noticeably absent; in their place we find harmony, autonomy, and respect" (Alfred, 2002: 18). These distinctions are decidedly polarizing ones that make vast generalizations about how individual white and native people might actually understand the world and their relationship to it. Nevertheless, they seem to get at the crux of the differences between the two groups. Whether or not these distinctions are exaggerated or have some truth to them, as long as they are perceived to be real, they fuel the misunderstanding and tension between whites and natives.

It is worth noting here that before European contact, indigenous groups did not have the notion of race and coexisted as separate nations; race was a concept that was imposed and even now has little resonance with them. This makes it particularly difficult to study racial identity and politics, since native people commonly identify themselves as members of nations (i.e. the Lakota Nation or the Navajo Nation) rather than simply "Native American". Traditionally identification was based on a matrilineal system, more recently though, governments have urged the use of blood quanta. Such qualifications are not always salient however, "the general rule is that whoever thinks, sings, acts, and speaks like an Indian is a skin, a full-blood, and whoever acts and thinks like a white man is a half-blood or breed, no matter how Indian he looks" (Crow Dog, 1991: 49). A recent study done of racial identification on the United States Census upholds this idea; one scholar found that American Indian identity tends to be somewhat flexible,

depending largely on the circumstances of upbringing, which include: the location, language spoken at home, cultural practices, etc (Bratter, 2007: 826). Recognizing the diversity of language, culture, and everything else, it is safe to say that there are some pan-tribal values that do seem to exist, namely this relationship with the land, and the implications of that relationship for other aspects of life. Without privileging either system, I wish to put forward the idea that the misunderstanding about the relationship between spirituality and politics between those working with a western framework, and those operating with a native paradigm is at the heart of their conflicts over sacred lands and otherwise.

2. In order to understand the first thing about native-white political relations, it is imperative to take into account the land-spirituality-politics connection; the Native American relationship to the American state is anchored in land politics.

Throughout the course of 500 years of mostly unfavorable Indian policy, Native Americans have lost much of the land that they once inhabited; however, the space they do have in the present day is significant. According to the 2000 census, there are more than 560 federally recognized tribes that are occupying 100 million acres of land (Cobb and Fowler, 2007: x). This may seem like a large number, but only 1/3 of the 43 million people that identify as native currently inhabit these tribal lands, the rest have relocated to cities and small towns. For American Indians, losing, maintaining, and reclaiming these lands has been a “politics of survival,” a struggle that has endured for hundred of years and across every level of government (ibid). To say that these populations have been persistent in their defense against intruders is an understatement; it has been at the core of the vast majority of their political struggles in which they have had to engage, willingly or not (ibid, 19). These battles have been diverse in nature, ranging from the exchange of

land for citizenship, to ownership of casinos, and just about everything in between (McCool et al, 2007: 5). The Lakota and Navajo fights for the Black Hills and San Francisco Peaks, respectively, are only two examples of the kinds of negotiations that go on all round the country and have been for years.

As it was mentioned in the introduction, American Indians have a peculiar status in comparison to other minority groups in the United States because of their longstanding engagement with the state as a racialized group. Not only are they the only racial group mentioned in the Constitution, but also up until the year 1871, Indian policy was comprised of a series of treaties, many of which dealt with land claims (Wilkins, 2007: xxv). The Lakota for instance have no less than 33 treaties with the United States government, including the infamous Fort Laramie Treaty which granted them title to the Black Hills (Personal interview, 27 July 2009). Despite the fact that the practice of treaty making has been abandoned and many of them abrogated, these documents have sculpted both the past and present of the nature of the relationship between tribes and the American government, first and foremost by otherizing them to a point that established them as perennial foreigners. Many people contest the government assistance that tribes receive in the form of subsidies, tax breaks, and other benefits, but perhaps they do not understand the history of how these institutions were brought about. As recently as 2006, incidents of disenfranchisement on the basis of tax exemption were being brought to the courts (McCool et al, 2007: 67). As one Lakota historian explained, “the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota all gave up land to the United States in exchange for the best healthcare, education, etc promised to us by the government; these are not handouts” Personal (Personal interview, 28 July 2009). A Navajo government official commented “we don’t

want special treatment, we just want to be equal [...] we try to hold the US government to the treaties, but it's very hard" (Personal interview, 8 Aug. 2009). These statements directly uphold the idea that land is at the foundation of native-white political relations, seeing as this example is not unique to that tribe, but rather, exemplary of other agreements.

The manner in which whites and natives relate to the land is different; however, this does not go to say that whites do not value the land at all. It is hardly coincidental that these land struggles have been so fierce; they are not merely about the physical space, but rather the fact that the spaces that native peoples have occupied are endowed with natural resources of all kinds. White settlers have very much had an interest in native lands, albeit a different in nature. "The United States has political and economic interest in [the Black Hills and other sacred lands] because of the minerals" one former AIM activist proclaimed (Personal interview, 1 Aug. 2009). The Fort Laramie treaty was abrogated with the discovery of gold in the Black Hills more than one hundred years ago, but the discovery of Uranium on Navajo lands presents a more contemporary example of the United States government trying to reclaim parts of the land that they had ceded to the native populations; in this second case they claimed ownership of the land under the reservations. Land disputes have resulted in a host of unforeseen consequences that are in many cases are still being negotiated. For example, in the Navajo case, the US government hired many inhabitants of the reservation to mine the Uranium in highly unsafe conditions from the 1940s through the 1980s, resulting now in exorbitantly high rates of cancer on the reservation; "lots of Uranium victims are bitter because they can't get money for reparations" says one Navajo government official (Personal interview, 6

Aug. 2009). “We’re up against a monster” lamented a prominent Lakota community leader (Personal interview, 28 July 2009). Although quite some time has passed since the seizures were made, the issues surrounding them await resolution.

Presently, as demonstrated by the Black Hills and San Francisco claims, land issues are still at the heart of United States and tribal relations. The people of these and many other tribes are feeling the need to get that land back into their hands, perhaps stronger than ever. It seems that all tribes have their eyes on land acquisition, whether it is a tribe trying to expand the territory they already have, or an unrecognized tribe trying to get some in the first place. One Navajo community leader working on the Peaks case commented, “the most pressing issue? Land governance. Tribes oversee the lands, but they’re only trustees, the feds hold the power” (Personal interview, 10 Aug. 2009). This brings up an issue that cannot be addressed within the confines of this paper, but has to do with land and sovereignty; in short, most tribes at this point do not own their land, rather, they are permitted to occupy it by the United States government- the entity that has actual ownership of the land (*ibid*). Another youth activist described to me the difficulty the Navajo Nation has in trying to overcome this obstacle, “the government here wants us to become self-sustaining, but at what cost? They want to sell the coal, but that comes with damages to the land, takes water, relocates people, and causes heart problems and asthma” (Personal interview, 6 Aug. 2009). To put it lightly, indigenous land claims are very fraught issues with personal and tangible consequences. For this reason, land claims are likely to stay at the center of tribal-governmental relations.

At this point I would like to return once more to the anecdote about my initial frustrations with conducting interviews because it speaks to this point as well. It became

clear to me only after I had completed all the interviews and returned back to the East coast that these interviews were hugely successful, even more so than if I had gotten the answers that I anticipated going into the project. In retrospect, the informants were very generous with the information they shared with me, even when it was short-winded. Their silence on the issue of voting –particularly among the Lakota– speaks loudly about where it stands on their list of political priorities. I came to find that discussions of sacred mountains were equally relevant to politics. As whole entities, it seems that tribal interaction with the United States is more often about negotiating the return of their ancestral lands than about going to the ballots at election time.

3. This difference in political thought coupled with the focus on land explains the disconnect that has been both a hindrance and an asset to American Indian movements.

For a group with so much ethnic, linguistic, cultural, geographical, and other kinds of diversity, the ability to unite under one banner as Native Americans has been a tremendous asset for indigenous people of this country in terms of political mobilization. Spirituality had always been a source of strength for Native American political movements, even before the time of contact with European settlers, but no more did this become apparent than in the late 1960s and 1970s with the American Indian Movement (AIM). One former AIM activist explained the origins of the movement to me as actually being the realization of an Ojibwe prophecy about resistance to foreign encroachment on native lands, “[the American Indian Movement] was a spiritual awakening, it was no accident [...] it was a reconnection with spiritual ways” (Personal interview, 1 Aug. 2009). This was a momentous time period where members of very different tribes came together for spiritual gatherings to pray together and exchange traditions, especially in

South Dakota where they were still practicing powerful ceremonies, “several groups contacted the Lakota and their medicine people from all different tribes at the Sun Dances; this is one of our most sacred ceremonies you see” (ibid). AIM’s major campaigns were all instances in which native activists were organizing in the name of sacred land claims; the important thing to note here is that the shared interest in the spiritual value of the land was great enough to unify members from various tribes in a common, somewhat successful movement.

During AIM’s era of Red Power, native peoples proudly used their spiritual commonality as a bedrock for organizing and demanding justice; this continues to happen on the local level, as the Black Hills and San Francisco Peaks cases demonstrate. The Lakotas and the Navajo are not the only tribes that worship those mountains, respectively. It is particularly in the latter case that several tribes, namely the Navajo and the Hopi -who themselves have had land disputes with each other and have different interpretations about the spiritual value of the peaks- have forged an alliance as native people in the fight for spiritual and environmental integrity. As a unified front, their message holds more power, and they have been able to bring attention to their struggle against the developments of the Snowbowl.

“Spiritual power is all we have left to fight with,” a prominent Lakota community leader told me (Personal interview, 28 July 2009). The same faith in the spiritual-political system was echoed by a high ranking Navajo elected official with whom I had the privilege to speak, “the reason for our success is our medicine men [...] we’ve survived because of our relationship to nature and the elements” (Personal interview, 7 Aug. 2009). Several people in both communities that I spoke with noted that as an increasing

number of young native people get more in touch with their heritages and traditional values, they learn about these relationships and consequently become advocates for their own people and causes. Their enthusiasm is further driven by cultural knowledge that they can draw upon and share even with their counterparts from other Indian nations. This has been exchange of traditional wisdom has been enormously helpful, particularly for the young native activists that I was able to interview.

The benefits of this pan-tribal unity should not be understated, but despite the many efforts to make themselves understood, the reliance on spirituality as the locus of political force appears to also be a hindrance to their movement. We have already seen that politics, religion, and culture are inextricably linked in native paradigm; however, perhaps because of the western privileging of secularism, it seems to that it is hard for many people to understand the fact that spiritual demands about land are just as pressing and just as important as other struggles, like those for improved healthcare, education, or anything else. Put in simple terms, it seems as though often times white people simply do not “get” where the native people are coming from, particularly when it comes to reclaiming sacred lands. There have certainly been very negative reactions from the white communities adjacent to the Navajo and Lakota communities that are the case studies for this investigation.

Backlash from whites has harmful and limiting effects on native movements because ultimately, they are the ones that determine the proverbial “rules of the game” insofar as having political power deeds to the land goes. After all, land claims are inconvenient for those that benefit from keeping the land in their control:

“by insisting on their ownership of ancestral territories, cultural autonomy, and self-determination, the original people of this land remain a problem for the state [...] In the area of culture, folklore and the arts are promoted while traditional political values are denied validity” (Alfred, 2002: 17)

In South Dakota, this backlash phenomenon has mainly been manifested in the form of unabated racism. Racial relations in this state are abysmal and have been for as long as people can remember, “in South Dakota white kids learn to be racist almost before they learn to walk” (Crow Dog, 1991: 22). The people that I spoke with confirmed this sentiment. Although I did not administer enough surveys to substantiate my claims, all the respondents on the surveys that I did collect indicated that racism against American Indians was either a major or minor problem on a nationwide scale, but those that said minor, qualified the answer by saying that the South Dakotan situation was particularly bad compared to the rest of the country, “in South Dakota it is *definitely* a major problem, the state government does not want us to succeed and they do everything to try to keep us down” (Personal interview, 30 July, 2009). All said they had experienced mistreatment for being native in recent history (ibid). Due to the hostile racial climate, it will be very hard for the Lakota to launch a successful renegotiation of the rights to the Black Hills. It is virtually inconceivable to imagine a return of the Snowbowl land, let alone Mount Rushmore and the national parks that surround them.

In Arizona, the tensions manifest themselves somewhat differently. The claims regarding the San Francisco Peaks are frequently framed in economic terms, the non-Natives having a vested interest in making any move that will promote tourism in Flagstaff and the surrounding areas. Much of the feuds play out in opinion editorial pieces, city hall meetings, and bumper stickers on cars (“SAVE THE PEAKS” versus “RECLAIM THE PEAKS”), with people stating their opinions on the matter. Many

people have dismissed native claims on the land as being “bullshit”; in one memorable instance, “one guy wrote an op-ed in the local paper comparing the claims to a theoretical scenario in which Christians were to declare property rights on the moon” (Personal interview, 8 Aug. 2009). It seems that some people are just missing the point. Although a few interviewees reported violence against native people, particularly against drunks on the streets, the racial relations landscape was decidedly less severe, with some claiming that they had not recently experienced racism at all. The economic arguments for developing the peaks are more easily combated, but still present a formidable challenge to native demands based on spirituality, which white people tend to view as an abstraction. In an interview I conducted with a local ethnobotanist in Flagstaff, the heart of the Peaks debate, she reasoned that:

“The environment is everything to them[...] there are so many images and concepts that don’t translate, concepts for deities that can’t be described in terms that most [white] people can understand [...] we as Anglos are separated from [the land]” – interview (Personal interview, 10 Aug. 2009).

This is different kinds of discourse being employed by many of her “Anglo” counterparts at the Flagstaff Chamber of Commerce who insist on the economic benefits of developing the Snowbowl (ibid). The debate gets tricky seeing as the two sides tend not to address each other’s concerns directly and instead talk past one another. The Navajo and their allies did not manage to prevent the use of reclaimed waste water for snow production, but continue to vehemently resist the measure.

Potential Implications

The proliferation of campaigns to reclaim sacred lands in Arizona, South Dakota, and elsewhere signifies the growing political relevance of this subject. Native people in this country are increasingly self aware of themselves, the violations committed against them, and the importance of getting their land back. Although we here on the eastern seaboard may be completely clueless as to what the status of the Black Hills negotiations is (or even that there are negotiations forthcoming), in their respective regions, those are the issues that make the local headlines. Two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson theorized that small, homogenous groups ought to live separate from one another; however, this is much less feasible in the 21st Century world that we live in now (Cobb and Fowler, 2007, 23). Disputes over sacred lands are visceral, passionate fights and have resounding consequences for everyone involved.

As part of this self-actualization, native populations are making their voices increasingly and effectively heard, even to a point that cannot be ignored, certainly not on a regional level in places where their populations are most concentrated. In several of these heavily Indian concentrated states they are beginning to vote in higher numbers and have been able to call several close elections, no more has this been evident than in both South Dakota and Arizona (McCool et al, 2007: 147). Some experts implicated the Native vote as a deciding factor in the elections of both Republican Senator Tim Johnson in South Dakota and former Democratic Governor Janet Napolitano in Arizona (ibid, 177). The few studies conducted on this subject find weak party loyalty among native populations, although slightly in favor of Democrats; the few surveys I conducted also support this claim (ibid, 180). It would behoove candidates from both sides of the aisle to

be sensitive to native issues –sacred land claims are a good place to start. Many of the people I spoke with on both states said that they felt disappointment and in some case resentment towards the government in Washington. This anger, coupled with the growing numbers of the native population, will pose more and more of a threat to politicians that have gotten away with ignoring native demands for so many years.

Many Native American groups are mobilizing at a level that non-natives in heavily native populated regions cannot afford to disregard. The sacred land issue is a particularly salient one, and it is not a band aid issue; by that I mean that it is highly intractable and as such, cannot be resolved by merely throwing money at the tribes, as the Black Hills case clearly demonstrates. It is an issue that has legal, financial, personal and emotional ramifications. This has even more profound consequences for race relations, which are already shaky in Arizona and bad in South Dakota. The complexity and fraught nature of these conflicts is politically expedient to ignore now, but as Native American groups continue to increase and take advantage of their political clout, they will push those buttons even more loudly and forcefully.

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