Exploring the Destruction of Habitats in the Creation of a National Park: Material Landscapes and Artistic Representations of the Grand Canyon National Park, USA

Introduction

The Grand Canyon National Park was established in Northern Arizona, USA, in 1919, and receives an average of 6.2 million annual visitors (Cuthbert & Yogerst, 2019). The national park is one of the most studied geologic landscapes as it presents a record of three geological time eras and has a large fossil and rock record (National Park Service, 2018). Besides its geological importance, the national park has multiple major ecosystems and is an ecological refuge with "over 1,500 plants, 355 birds, 89 mammalian, 47 reptile, 9 amphibian, and 17 fish species" (National Park Service, 2018) and is also associated with 11 indigenous tribes (National Park Service, 2024). In addition to the material landscape, Grand Canyon has a wide range of artistic representations, such as fictional books, realistic and abstract paintings, photographs, and cinema.

With its large natural importance, along with historical importance to Indigenous tribes, the Grand Canyon has created the social issue of negatively affecting indigenous and natural habitats through the creation of the National Park. This essay aims to discover which interpretative method between (online) ethnography and environmental historiography best addresses the social issue in the Grand Canyon landscape. Online ethnography studies "cultural and social domains of human interaction through the Internet technologies they use" (Elon University, n.d.) and environmental historiography studies the different interpretations of a place's environment throughout history (Northern Michigan University, n.d.) and studies the relation between people and the environment.

Background information on the destruction of indigenous and natural habitats in the Grand Canyon

In order to be able to analyze the landscape and conclude which method is most effective, the issue must firstly be discussed. The US government defines a nation park to be "large swaths of land that protect a variety of resources, including natural and historic features"(U.S. Department of the Interior, 2023). However, Grand Canyon is more of a human artifact than a natural one as the river running through the canyon is dictated by two dams (Krakoff, 2020) and the land has been transformed to accommodate to tourists (Worster, 2003) such as the creation of trails with railings, roads, tourist centers, and more. Additionally, the violent displacement of eleven American Indian Tribes, mostly by U.S. Army removal (Ruland, 2023), in order to create public land for the national park and uranium and coal mines and coal power plants (Krakoff, 2020) have all affected the landscape.

Methodology

The online ethnographic method for this assignment will be looking at Reddit posts and their comment sections and the interactions taking place on the platform regarding the chosen subject. Reddit was chosen as it allows users to submit a post and have other users discuss and comment on the post, allowing lengthy discussions on a topic. To find appropriate Reddit discussion, key words such as "Grand Canyon", "landscape", "Native Americans", "Indigenous tribes", "art", and "habitat" were used. For the environmental historiographic method, google search was used to find interpretations of the Grand Canyon material landscape and artistic representations of the National Park. The material and the artistic representations of the landscape will be analyzed using both methods. The two

analyses will then be compared and contrasted to discover the most effective method of the two best addresses the consequences of creating public land for the National Park.

Analysis on the Grand Canyon's material landscape

Online discussions constantly spark on social media such as Reddit. Reddit discussions such as the comments on "TIL about an ancient Native American tribe that still live at the bottom of the Grand Cayon" (rdsyes, 2012) present people's opinions about the displacement of such indigenous groups and the state of the landscape. One user (Timoneer) posted saying "We camped there, and the condition of the campsite was atrocious; trash, broken restrooms, generally unkempt" depicts the landscape as dirty while other users depict the landscape as beautiful. Many Reddit pages can be analyzed about how Indigenous communities and habitats were affected by being controlled by the government as "public" land, as well as Reddit pages about protests lead by tribes and environmentalists against uranium mining however there are no comments and hence no discussions to analyze with these posts.

Figure 1 Grand Canyon Landscape with Visible Human Transformation of Landscape (National Park Service, n.d.)

Donal Worster critically analyzed in *Environmental History: The View at the Grand Canyon* (2003) the material landscape and implemented the environmental historiographic method in his article, which presents multiple interpretations of the park's history. Before the land became a national park, buildings such as hotels and mining shacks had been scattered around the area and later became the Grand Canyon Village with almost a thousand man-made structures. Nowadays, the village produces 4,000 tons of waste and consumes 160 million gallons of water annually. The historian commented on American consumerism being brought to remote locations such as the Grand Canyon and in the late twentieth century, the contrast between "civilization" and "nature" became apparent as Grand Canyon became popular to have the frontier "nature" experience, that is a theory also discussed in *The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature* by William Cronon.

Aside from this cultural and societal idea Worster discussed, he also analyzed the geological and evolutionary science of the landscape and how the landscape was transformed to accommodate tourists. "Park Service put dynamite and pickaxe to work carving improved trails down the rock face" depicts how the landscape, originally natural and untouched land became a path for tourists to hike. The construction of the Glen Canyon Dam also altered the landscape, as the river carries ten times less sediment than it used to as the rest is stuck behind the dam. Worster concluded by stating that the

effects of changing the landscape slightly have immense consequences on all habitats in the Canyon, however does not elaborate on such consequences. Hence, Grand Canyon's changes in environment and its interactions with humans is observable.

Although lack of interactions on Reddit complicates the use of online ethnography, this method reveals public opinions and experiences of the Grand Canyon. Published works on the Grand Canyon provides factual evidence for the analysis of the social and environmental consequences of the creation and maintenance of the national park. Therefore, using environmental historiography is the better method for a focus on context and content within material landscapes.

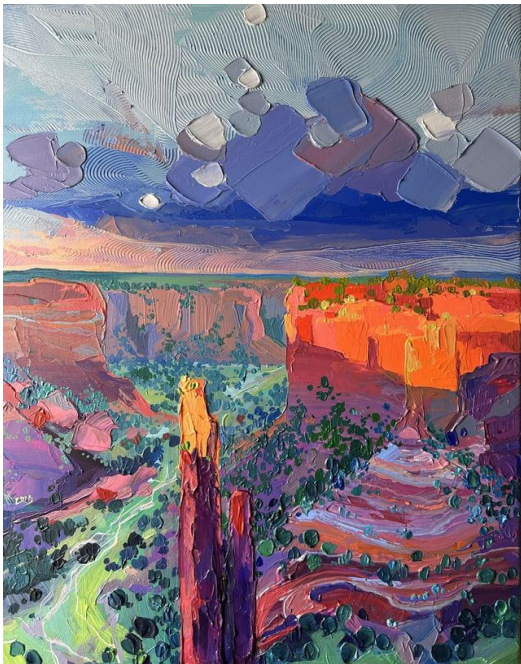## Analysis on the Grand Canyon's artistic representation of the landscape

Figure 2 Acrylic painting of Grand Canyon (Anastasia_Trusova, 2023)

Like other social media, people also post their artwork and photography on Reddit. A reoccurring theme seen within all of these artistic representations of the Grand Cayon is the idea of the sublime and the pristine aesthetic. Dr. Sean P. Smith defines the pristine nature of landscapes to be a genre is which the natural environment is depicted without human impact, and describes "untouched nature" as a visible element in photographs and artworks. These two elements in artistic representations lead to shorter comments such as "this is stunning" (oooortclouuud, 2018), "beautiful scenery" ([deleted], 2021), and longer comments on such as "the magnificence of the valley and the breathtaking beauty of the momentary transition of nature are fully depicted with bold colors and brushstrokes." (konkon_arctice_fox, 2023).

Therefore, online ethnography fails to depict the issue of loss of habitat and indigenous displacement cause by government creation of public land within the sample of Reddit posts chosen focus solely on the idea of pristine and aesthetic landscape. None of the artistic representations on Reddit contain any trace of indigenous presence, such as indigenous artwork, or human presence such as hiking trails, fences, or signs, which can be explained through the concept of representing "good" traits in artwork and turning a blind eye to the destruction of land and through the unappreciation of social issues being depicted in art.
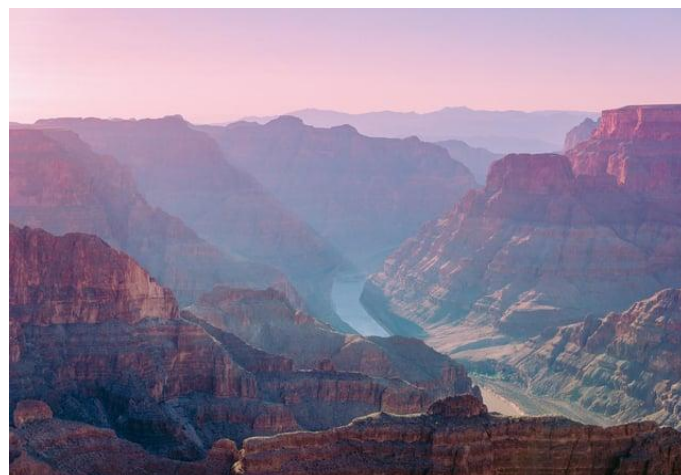

Figure 3 Photograph of Grand Canyon (Mjones_bulldog, 2018)

On the other hand, the environmental historiographic method addresses the issue much more appropriately. In artworks, human influence such as the dams which have already been discussed are represented. For example, Norman Rockwell's Glen Canyon Dam painted in 1969 depicts the landscape and the environmental aspect of the issue very well, though presents it from a colonial perspective. Already being depicted in the twentieth century, the issue is also depicted in the twenty-first century as the problem becomes more pressing. For example, Stephen Nash's book *Grand Canyon for Sale: Public Lands versus Private Interests in the Era of Climate Change* published in 2017 presents the same idea as Norman Rockwell's painting of the effects of human impact on the Grand Canyon environment yet from another perspective. The *Voice of the Grand Canyon* Film directed by Deidra Peaches and released in 2023 presents an artistic representation of the Grand Canyon from the perspective of indigenous people and what the Grand Canyon means to them culturally. They describe their home as an environment more than a landscape for tourists, and display evidence of their displacement from the Grand Canyon into what is now New Mexico (Peaches, 2023). Hence, throughout history, the environment of the landscape of the Grand Canyon has always been depicted as changing and interpreted differently through colonial and indigenous perspective in artworks. To conclude, environmental historiography works well to analyze artistic representations of the Grand Canyon as multiple interpretations and perspectives can be found.

Comparing the two analyses

Both interpretative methods allow for adequate analyses of the material and artistic representation of the Grand Canyon landscape. In both analyses, online ethnography provides large amounts of online interactions that provide multiple perspectives and allows to see the general populations ideas online. However, online ethnography could only be used to properly analyze the material landscape as online interactions were lacking in certain areas which was visible in the analysis of artistic representations where the issue was not addressed. Therefore, there was a much more in depth analysis on the material landscape than artistic representations of the landscape. On the other hand, environmental historiography was a successful method for both analyses and plenty of evidence supporting the social issue could be found. For both analyses, environmental historiography was more effective than online ethnography.

Conclusion

To conclude, the environmental historiographic method was much more suitable than the online ethnographic method at addressing the issue of the government creating public land for the National Park whilst affecting indigenous and natural habitats, which was found through an analysis of both the material landscape and artistic representations of the landscape of Grand Canyon National Park. The environmental historiographic method allows the development of the presence of the issue to be analyzed within the Grand Canyon landscape.

The purpose of this essay was to discover which method was more successful at addressing the issue presented to allow us to analyze similar situations of destruction of natural and human habitats at the hands of governments and the long lasting problems that follow this issue. In this essay, the issue was addressed best by the environmental historiographic method as change in environment and its effects caused by the creation of the National park can be observed in both analyses.

References

[deleted]. (2021). *Reddit*. Retrieved from My painting of this beautiful and magical place! The Grand
    Canyon at Sunset!:
    https://www.reddit.com/r/grandcanyon/comments/kzhdhf/my_painting_of_this_beautiful_
    and_magical_place/

Anastasia_Trusova. (2023). *Reddit*. Retrieved from Grand Canyon. Evening sun, me, acrylic, 2023:
    https://www.reddit.com/r/Art/comments/12lz8e9/grand_canyon_evening_sun_me_acrylic_
    2023/

Cuthbert, L., & Yogerst, J. (2019, March 15). *National Geographic*. Retrieved from Everything to know
    about Grand Canyon National Park: https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/national-
    parks/article/grand-canyon-national-park

Elon University. (n.d.). *Elon University*. Retrieved from Digital Ethnography:
    https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/percs/digital-ethnography/

konkon_arctice_fox. (2023). *Reddit*. Retrieved from Grand Canyon. Evening sun, me, acrylic, 2023:
    https://www.reddit.com/r/Art/comments/12lz8e9/grand_canyon_evening_sun_me_acrylic_
    2023/

Krakoff, S. (2020, July 23). *Colorado Law*. Retrieved from Not yet America's Best Idea: Law, Inequality,
    and Grand Canyon National Park: https://lawreview.colorado.edu/print/volume91/not-yet-
    americas-best-idea-law-inequality-and-grand-canyon-national-
    park/#:~:text=The%20Havasupai%2C%20Hualapai%2C%20Hopi%2C,the%20West's%20cities
    %20and%20suburbs.

Mjones_bulldog. (2018). *Reddit*. Retrieved from Finally made it to the Grand Canyon...Worth it.:
    https://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/8gwamh/finally_made_it_to_the_grand_canyon
    worth_it/

National Park Service. (2018, July 16). *National Park Service*. Retrieved from Nature & Science:
    https://www.nps.gov/grca/learn/nature/index.htm#:~:text=However%2C%20the%20significa
    nce%20of%20Grand,desert%20types%20in%20North%20America.

National Park Service. (2024, March 29). *National Park Service*. Retrieved from Grand Canyon
    National Park : https://www.nps.gov/grca/index.htm

National Park Service. (n.d.). *National Park Service*. Retrieved from Grand Canyon: National Park
    Arizona: https://www.nps.gov/grca/planyourvisit/index.htm

Northern Michigan University. (n.d.). *NMU Writing Center*. Retrieved from Historiography:
    https://nmu.edu/writingcenter/historiography#:~:text=Historiography%20is%20the%20stud
    y%20of,past%20events%20through%20historians'%20eyes.

oooortclouuud. (2018). *Reddit*. Retrieved from Finally made it to the Grand Canyon...Worth it.:
    https://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/8gwamh/finally_made_it_to_the_grand_canyon
    worth_it/

Peaches, D. (Director). (2023). *Voices of the Grand Canyon* [Motion Picture].

rdsyes. (2012). *Reddit*. Retrieved from TIL about an ancient Native American tribe that still live at the
    bottom of the Grand Canyon.:

https://www.reddit.com/r/todayilearned/comments/k6ieu/til_about_an_ancient_native_american_tribe_that/

U.S. Department of the Interior. (2023, January 1). *U.S. Department of the Interior*. Retrieved from America's Public Lands Explained: https://www.doi.gov/blog/americas-public-lands-explained#:~:text=National%20parks%20tend%20to%20be,by%20the%20National%20Park%20Service.

Worster, D. (2003, January 16). *ParkNet: National Park Service*. Retrieved from Environmental History: The View at the Grand Canyon: https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/hisnps/NPSHistory/environmentalhistory.htm