The Absence of Indigenous Histories in Ken Burns’s
The National Parks: America’s Best Idea

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Abstract: The National Parks begins in 1851 and ends with Alaska in the 1970s, yet almost entirely erases Indigenous history from the landscape, allowing Native Alaskans, Indigenous Hawaiians, and American Indians no foothold or voice in the modern story of the parks. This is remarkable, considering that all of the parks were established on Indigenous homelands and that Native people and politics continue to be intertwined with the recent history of the parks. The experiences of Ojibwe people in the Great Lakes suggest that the creation of national parks in their homeland was part of a broader colonial history of appropriating Indigenous lands and resources, and extended the damaging policies of the Indian assimilation and allotment era farther into the twentieth century.

Keywords: American Indians, national parks, Ojibwe, Isle Royale, Voyageurs

From the cliffs of Acadia National Park in Maine to the volcanoes of Hawaii National Park, Indigenous history is almost completely absent in every segment of the twelve and a half hours of Ken Burns’s documentary, a series which focuses primarily on the visions of wealthy middle-class men who had a role in the establishment of National Parks in the United States. Although the documentary begins in 1851 and ends with Alaska in the 1970s,
the film’s emphasis on the early twentieth century, if not entirely erasing Indigenous history from the landscape, allows Native Alaskans, Indigenous Hawaiians, and American Indians no foothold or voice in the modern story of the parks. This is remarkable, considering that all of the parks were established on Indigenous homelands and that Native people and politics continue to be intertwined with the recent history of the parks. In addition, Indigenous knowledge, narratives, and history are essential to the historical interpretation presented at the parks today.

I am an Ojibwe from the Red Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota. The experience of my own people with National Parks and Forests in the Great Lakes is a very messy one. Even after the fragmentation of reservations through allotment at the turn of the twentieth century, some Ojibwe held onto allotments of land and used resources in places designated to become national parks and forests. These Ojibwe faced racial harassment when they continued their livelihoods by gathering wild foods and medicines or sought out sacred places within our homelands for spiritual reasons. Eventually, they lost ownership of the allotments. From an Ojibwe perspective, the creation of national parks and forests within our homeland was part of a broader colonial history of appropriating Indigenous lands and resources. The parks extended the damaging policies of the Indian assimilation and allotment era farther into the twentieth century, and onto thousands of acres of our diminished homelands, especially with the establishment of Michigan’s Isle Royale National Park, Minnesota’s Voyageurs National Park, and Ontario’s Quetico Provincial Park.

Ojibwe homelands are located in both the United States and Canada, and spread out north of Lake Ontario, around Lake Huron and Georgian Bay, north of Lake Michigan, and along all sides of Lake Superior and areas farther west, including my own community, which is situated north of the headwaters of the Mississippi. Water is the defining feature in all Ojibwe landscapes, shaping our culture and history as well as the stories of the parks. Lake Superior’s Isle Royale is forty-five miles long and nine miles wide, with four hundred smaller islands that extend around its elongated periphery. The park is within the part of Lake Superior included in the boundaries of the state of Michigan, but located just fifteen miles off Minnesota’s north shore and the Grand Portage Ojibwe Reservation. Isle Royale became a national park in 1940, and is considered one of the world’s great micro-systems, with a moose population, but no woodland caribou or deer. Historically, Isle Royale was also highly valued by Ojibwe people as a site of important seasonal economic activities, including maple sugar processing and gathering birchbark and plants for medicines. Ojibwe people enjoyed the abundant fisheries just off the island, especially for the lake trout. One of the most valuable resources on the island is rich copper deposits, significant as a spiritual force and used in ceremony.

2. Cochrane, *Minong—The Good Place*. 
The copper deposits of Isle Royale, which stretched south into Michigan’s Keweenaw Peninsula, were a factor in a major Ojibwe land cession in 1842. In the Treaty of La Pointe, Ojibwe people ceded lands along Lake Superior in Wisconsin and the western half of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, “including all the islands in said lake.” In 1842, Ojibwe negotiated rights to hunt, fish, and gather in the ceded territory. After the treaty, Ojibwe leaders from Grand Portage and other Lake Superior bands disagreed with the federal government that the land cession included Isle Royale, and two years later a compact was added to include the island. From the perspective of Lake Superior Ojibwe people today, the inclusion of Isle Royale in the 1842 Treaty cession creates an untested treaty issue, and Ojibwe insist that they retain rights to hunt and gather on Isle Royale.

The National Park Service has been reluctant to recognize American Indian treaty rights in national parks. Yet even today, several dozen prominent families of non-Indians, who built summer resorts and seasonal cabins on the delicate environment in the early twentieth century, remain on Isle Royale. Their quaint cottages are regarded as charming and picturesque, and the newcomers have stayed on in the national park through an elaborate system of “life-time leases, special-use permits and other agreements,” which have somehow been recognized as legitimate and passed down through families. Indian families with historic ties to Isle Royale remain outside this web of special federal protection.

Voyageurs is the first national park in Minnesota, dating from April 1975. It covers 218,000 acres within the lakes region that borders Ontario just east of International Falls, Minnesota, with 84,000 acres of water. Discussion of creating a park from lands that were part of the Superior National Forest and state lands dates from 1891 with a resolution by the Minnesota legislature. The park’s name was meant to evoke the state’s fur trade heritage. A long political struggle to establish this park involved two of Minnesota’s most famous conservationists, Sigurd Olson and Ernest Oberholtzer. Oberholtzer had a desire to preserve the so-called “wilderness” along the Minnesota-Ontario border.
border, especially after a canoe trip to Hudson Bay in 1912 with an Ojibwe guide named Billy Magee, who resided in that border country with his relatives and community.

Ojibwe people lived on the land that became Voyageurs National Park well into the twentieth century. The Bois Forte Band of Ojibwe ceded land in their treaties of 1854 and 1855, but remained in their homelands fairly undisturbed for the rest of the nineteenth century. In the 1860s, the Bois Forte Band agreed to remove to a reservation on Nett Lake, and ceded reservation lands at Vermillion Lake. In the 1870s, however, the Ojibwe abandoned the Nett Lake area in favor of traditional village sites, including those within the boundaries of the current national park. According to annuity records covering 1881–1903, four Ojibwe village sites were located within the park’s boundaries.9 Ojibwe Bois Forte band members remained connected to their land within the national park during the allotment era. For Minnesota Ojibwe, allotments of 160 acres came under the Nelson Act, a provision of which act allowed the Ojibwe to take allotments off-reservation in the areas where they resided. Tribal members took twenty-seven allotments within the current boundaries of Voyageurs National Park of approximately 2,300 acres.

The number of Ojibwe people living in the park boundaries declined throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, as tribal members increasingly removed to the Nett Lake Reservation after 1920.10 In 1939, the last permanent residents of the Moose Bay community passed away, and permanent Ojibwe settlement in the park was to have ended in 1941, when the Black Bay community removed to the reservation.11 Why did the Nett Lake and Bois Forte Ojibwe leave their villages in the park? Their removal to the reservation was hastened by environmental changes that were damaging to traditional Ojibwe labor. Dams were created at International Falls in 1909 and Kettle Falls in 1914, which resulted in the complete destruction of wild rice beds, an essential part of the traditional Ojibwe economy. Ojibwe communities could no longer make a living in their older village sites.12 Wild rice, harvested in late summer and stored through winter without any spoilage, was essential to Ojibwe survival in the border country. Wild rice is an annual plant very susceptible to small fluctuations in water levels, and if the rice crop fails one year, there are then no seeds going into the water to sustain the next year’s crop.13

Logging moved into the border country after 1910. Dams were created to

9. A reported 160 people lived in the villages, which represented a sizeable portion of the overall Bois Forte population, which was 803 people in the 1900 census.
10. This was a quick turn-around, given that only 200 of the 622 Bois Forte Ojibwe lived on the reservation in 1911, 41 years after its creation. For the Bois Forte communities in the national park, there were 130 Ojibwe within the park boundaries, according to the 1910 census. The first community in the national park area to remove to the Reservation was at Kabetogama Lake in 1933.
11. Richner, People of the Thick Fur Woods.
12. Richner, People of the Thick Fur Woods.
aid timber harvest, which began in 1912 in the park boundaries. By 1927, all of the old growth forests were clear-cut. Even so, some Ojibwe continued to utilize the area for traditional labor activities. Ever resourceful, the Bois Forte Ojibwe modified cutover areas through controlled burns for blueberries and after 1924, they engaged in commercial blueberry harvesting within the park boundaries. By the 1940s, forest growth choked out open areas that sustained blueberries, and that form of labor declined. In the park today, never a “wilderness” but a homeland to Ojibwe people of the Bois Forte and Nett Lake communities, a few individually owned tribal allotments and land held under the Chippewa Indian Trust remain.

On the Canadian side of the border, Ojibwe faced a harsher reality. The protected one-million acre “wilderness” of Quetico Provincial Park as we know it today was achieved by expelling the Sturgeon Lake Ojibwe band in 1913. The provincial government of Ontario pressured the Canadian federal government to create the park and remove the Ojibwe living there. Ontario unilaterally dissolved the 5,948 acre Sturgeon Bay Reserve without monetary or land compensation to the band in order to create the “forest preserve.” Forest rangers destroyed Ojibwe traplines and cabins and forced Ojibwe families out at gunpoint. Ontario criminalized off-reserve hunting in 1914, despite federal treaty rights. After 1914, Ontario game wardens continually harassed Indians and freely shot Ojibwe “poachers” in the park. Sturgeon Lake Ojibwe were forced to live among relatives in other communities or flee to Minnesota. Quetico was formally declared a “wilderness” in 1973, an area unaffected by humans, according to Ontario’s provincial minister. None of these significant and controversial Ojibwe stories were part of the documentary film series, just film footage of some of the more beautiful places in the parks located in the Great Lakes.

Like many viewers, I appreciated the environmental message within Ken Burns’s The National Parks: America’s Best Idea. The documentary also made an effort to introduce diversity into the narrative of the national parks, a subject Burns has been harshly criticized for ignoring in previous films, especially The War. The National Parks: America’s Best Idea includes some valuable and lesser known twentieth-century stories, including those of Japanese immigrants and their newfound connections to American landscapes, especially the artists George Masa and Chiura Obata, whom Burns imagines as part of the story of American democracy, despite their internment during World War II.

14. Logs were moved to lakes by horse and oxen where they were cached over the winter until spring thaws moved the logs downstream to the sawmill. Dams were built on most lakes that were connected to rivers to raise water levels so that the lake could hold more logs.
15. Richner, People of the Thick Fur Woods.
16. Three allotments owned by individual tribal members and two parcels of land under the Chippewa Indian Trust remain within the park boundaries.
Episode 5 relates a fascinating story of Park Service employee George Melendez Wright, a Yosemite biologist of Salvadoran heritage who pioneered a wildlife survey of the parks at a time when many animals who roamed the park were considered “predators” to be killed rather than part of a natural ecosystem. Many years later, Wright’s work resulted in policy change and new attitudes about the place of wildlife within national parks.

America’s Indigenous people, including the Ojibwe, are not really part of Ken Burns’s paean to the democratic ideal he sees manifested in the history of our national parks. American Indians have an inconsequential role, existing primarily as historic people, as evidenced by the many close-ups of the abandoned dwellings at Mesa Verde and the Blackfeet men in full regalia at Glacier who appear to be relegated to the role of amusement for tourists. Episode 5, Great Nature, opens with the familiar trope of the last surviving member of the tribe, an aged woman descended from people exterminated after the gold rush by California militias, men who were paradoxically among the first non-Indians to experience the magnificence of the Yosemite Valley. Gerard Baker, the National Park Superintendent for Mount Rushmore, who is from the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota, eloquently explains the sacred connection to place that exists in North American Indigenous cultural worldviews, though he does so as the sole contemporary Indian voice in many hours of documentary film. The creation of our national parks, like the rest of American history, requires all of us to examine a wide array of histories and interpret the presence of Indigenous people in generations past and today.

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