

Abstract

Ancestral Devotion, New England Conservation, and the Challenge of Environmental Justice

Dan McKanan, Harvard Divinity School

Scholars of religion and ecology have long recognized that some of the most biodiverse places on planet earth are “sacred groves”—places that are protected from economic exploitation because they are understood to be the residences of ancestors and divinities. Many assume, following the lead of Lynn White, that the roots of the contemporary environmental crisis lie in western Christianity’s antipathy to ancestral devotion, which rendered many landscapes—especially those colonized by Europeans—especial vulnerable. What is less widely recognized is that one of the starting points for the modern conservation movement was a return to ancestral devotion. Beginning in nineteenth-century New England, the seventh-generation descendants of that region’s settler colonialists began creating “garden cemeteries” as places where urban people could remember loved ones and connect to nature at the same time. Within a few generations, the garden cemeteries inspired the creation of the first conservation land trusts and state parks, usually on land that had previously been deforested or otherwise disrupted by settler activity. Many of these places were designed as memorials, either to settler ancestors or to young people (such as the landscape architect

Charles Eliot) who had died too soon. In the century since they were preserved, they have become sites for many additional memorials, both for their caretakers and for people who simply enjoyed spending time in them.

By exploring the role of memorials within urban and suburban conservation land, I wish to clarify the vexed relationship between “environmental justice”—understood as concern for the ways environmental destruction disproportionately impacts indigenous, impoverished, and racialized communities—and the conservation movement. The best remembered expressions of nineteenth-century conservation involved the protection of supposedly untouched “wilderness” spaces that had recently been taken from indigenous communities. Leading conservationists such as John Muir and Madison Grant justified this practice on explicitly nationalistic and white supremacist grounds, promoting the dangerous view that what makes a wilderness is the total absence of human beings. Their version of conservation has been rightly judged to be diametrically opposed to the ideals of environmental justice.

The New England conservation tradition, I argue, offers an intriguing alternative. Memorial parks designed to heal disrupted landscapes suggest a different understanding of wild spaces. What makes a space wild, from this perspective, is not the absence of humans, but the presence of ancestors. By creating parks that were wild in this sense, New Englanders were atoning for their ancestors’ acts of deforestation and also, implicitly, for those ancestors’ failure to honor ancestors. Yet this gesture was inherently paradoxical, for they also honored the ancestors for whom they needed to atone!

The thought experiment I wish to bring to this conference is that advocates of environmental justice who are also settler descendants must embrace paradoxes of this sort. Robin Wall Kimmerer has famously asked, “Can Americans, as a nation of immigrants, learn to live here as if we were staying?” Doing so, I suggest, requires both devotion to our own ancestors and relinquishing the space that others, both indigenous and diasporic, require for their own ancestral devotion. As we walk this path, we can learn from the New England conservationists and from the subsequent generations who continue to create memorials within New England parks.