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*This Radical Land* and Its Relation to Geographical Injustices

In a politically polarized, emotionally charged, and physically decaying environment, concerned Americans seek any help they can get in fixing the natural environment that their country's destroyed and the social injustices it's caused over the years. One crucial point to take a look at in the turbulent climate (both physically and politically) is the past. In *This Radical Land: A Natural History of American Dissent*, Daegan Miller examines the past and ongoing relationship between radical people/ideas and the development of geographies they inhabit.

Miller's original take on an environmental science book is that he narrates the stories of historical figures to demonstrate the impact that capitalism and individuals have on natural landscapes. Following household names such as Henry David Thoreau and Karl Marx as well as less-known but equally radical people like A.J. Russell and Burnett's Haskell, Miller's characterization and focus on the characters builds a connection between them and the reader. Miller's argument is that understanding the ideas and manifestations of radicals is necessary to understanding why humans "settle" or essentially plow down natural spaces for economic or social agendas.

Climate Change has never been a hotter topic, and continuously relevant faces in the media such as Greta Thunberg and Jay Inslee are rallying the younger generations to preserve the environment. But sometimes it's more powerful to tell a story with an ending. Miller uses

*historical* factions and actions as evidence rather than speculating about the future. These past, set-in-stone stories teach and inspire a reader in completely different ways than the media or current activists. These are *facts* that may be fused with opinions, but nevertheless, it's a history book. And in the same way that we can evaluate the past in terms of equality, freedom, and information, we can evaluate it in terms of natural landscapes.

In Act Two (or Essay Two), "The Geography of Grace," Miller discusses the geographical displacement of the Native Americans defending the grounds of the Great Northern Wilderness, the Adirondack. "*Adirondack, wilderness, wild, unsettled*: the four words were indefinite and interchangeable and indistinguishable in the nineteenth-century New York woods" is a particular quote scrutinizing the capitalist venture of America's construction. Miller similarly criticizes the destruction of "unsettled" environments in the Civil War. Using A.J. Russell, a Union soldier and photographer in Act Three, Miller discusses the implementation war history has on natural environments. Riddling the pages of the book in Russell's photography of nature and destroyed battle ruins, characterizing him, and expressing the sympathy Russell had for the sites are tactics Miller uses to demonstrate physical manifestations of subjective ideologies. These few examples of characters and American methods for progress (capitalism, growth, and defense) accentuate Miller's connection between the minds of leaders and the trees around them (Miller actually uses trees as a device for perspective; how they're affected, how long they've been around, and how much they've "witnessed"). Aside from the battle of slavery and the Trail of Tears, however, natural landscapes also cause socioeconomic conflict and injustice still today through boundary-building and "value" of spaces. Geographically, the phenomenon is similar to the more acute, modern practice of gentrification.

In the removal of the Adirondack from the Great Northern Wilderness, American policy-makers needed a reason to “justly settle” the land in which the Adirondack resided. They built an equation involving population, natural resources (or their value), and other factors to decide if a natural landscape is a “wilderness.” However, as Miller realizes to the audience, “the equation of wilderness with critique and freedom was trampled under the soles of well-heeled financiers and the pitter of a scrambling middle class,” meaning that when allowed to decide what is a “wilderness” or “unsettled place,” leaders in the past have unfairly abused the power. Similar to the way we see leaders call the Adirondack’s home a “wilderness” to settle it, today we see urban developers and lawmakers label neighborhoods or areas as “unsafe,” “low-income,” or other vague, umbrella terms to gentrify them.

A great way to understand a current issue is to talk to a college professor who studies it. Stefano Bloch, geography professor from Brown University and currently at the University of Arizona, teaches classes that discuss the ways in which geographical landscapes experience social injustice. His take is that, “Any sort of alteration or even seemingly benign engagement with a natural landscape is dependent on a physical manifestation of a social, political, spiritual, cultural, or economic ideology. And since modern social structures are, without exception, hierarchical and exclusionary, all forms of engagement with national landscapes contribute to social and economic imbalances.”

Public spaces - wildernesses, commercial zones, public parks, residential zoning, and others - decide the *value* of where Americans live. And as Miller says, “who we are depends on where we are,” so allowing value and boundaries to be placed on the soil under our feet is not

only opening it for destruction and profit, but opening *ourselves* to injustices such as gerrymandering, gentrification, and in the worst historic cases, forced displacement.