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# Slow violence in public parks in the U.S.: can we escape our troubling past?

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## ABSTRACT

Previous studies on environmental justice have paid limited attention to procedural injustice in parks. Using the concept of slow violence, this paper interrogates the ideological and philosophical foundations of American public parks in order to unearth enduring structural patterns of procedural injustice. The paper illustrates that community, state, and national parks in the U.S. were founded upon the elitism, eugenics, and racism of affluent and powerful White conservationists and social reformers. To materialize their own interests, the White elite defined, built, and managed public parks by displacing, excluding, and criminalizing the Indigenous, the poor, people of color, and immigrants. As such, many of today's park injustices, such as inequitable park availability and quality, gentrification, and non-visitation of people of color, originated from the beginning of the public parks in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and have been sustained ever since. The paper discusses corrective justice strategies to alleviate the enduring slow violence in parks.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Palabras clave

parques públicos; justicia ambiental; gentrificación; elitismo; eugenesia; racismo

## Mots clefs

parcs publics; justice écologique; gentrification; élitisme; eugénisme; racisme

## Violencia lenta en parques públicos en los Estados Unidos: ¿Podemos escapar de nuestro inquietante pasado?

## RESUMEN

Estudios previos sobre justicia ambiental han prestado poca atención a la injusticia procesal en los parques. Utilizando el concepto de violencia lenta, este artículo cuestiona los fundamentos ideológicos y filosóficos de los parques públicos estadounidenses con el fin de desenterrar patrones estructurales perdurables de injusticia procesal. El artículo ilustra que los parques comunitarios, estatales y nacionales en los Estados Unidos se basaron en el elitismo, la eugenesia y el racismo de los conservacionistas y reformadores sociales blancos ricos y poderosos. Para materializar sus propios intereses, la élite blanca definió, construyó y administró parques públicos desplazando, excluyendo y criminalizando a los

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indígenas, los pobres, las personas de color y los inmigrantes. Como tal, muchas de las injusticias de los parques de hoy, como la disponibilidad y calidad desigual de los parques, la gentrificación y la no visita de personas de color, se originaron desde el comienzo de los parques públicos en el siglo XIX y se han mantenido desde entonces. El artículo analiza las estrategias de justicia correctiva para aliviar la lenta y persistente violencia en los parques.

## **La violence lente dans les parcs publics aux États-Unis: peut-on échapper à notre passé troublant ?**

### **RÉSUMÉ**

Les recherches antérieures sur la justice écologique n'ont pas accordé beaucoup d'attention à l'iniquité procédurale dans les parcs. En se servant du concept de violence lente, cet article questionne les bases idéologiques et philosophiques des parcs publics américains dans le but de mettre à jour des schémas structurels durables d'iniquités procédurales. Il montre que la communauté, l'état et les parcs nationaux aux États-Unis ont été fondés sur l'élitisme, l'eugénisme, et le racisme d'écologistes et réformateurs sociaux qui étaient riches, puissants et de race blanche. Pour donner forme à ses intérêts personnels, cette élite blanche a défini, construit et géré les parcs publics en déplaçant, excluant et criminalisant les indigènes, les pauvres, les personnes de couleur et les immigrants. Ainsi, beaucoup des iniquités actuelles dans les parcs, comme l'inégalité de la disponibilité et de la qualité des parcs, la gentrification et le fait que les personnes de couleur ne les visitent pas, viennent du commencement des parcs publics au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et n'ont pas cessé depuis. L'article présente des stratégies de justice réparatrice pour réduire la violence lente dans les parcs.

Public parks in the U.S. are important environmental amenities that provide a variety of health, economic, and social benefits. Community parks can contribute to the physical and mental health of nearby residents because they tend to promote physical activity and a sense of wellbeing (Larson et al., 2016; Schipperijn et al., 2017). Moreover, estimates have shown that state parks annually generate 2.2 billion hours of nature recreation and more than a billion dollars of revenue (Siikamäki, 2011; Smith et al., 2020). Finally, national parks present the history and culture of national significance and serve as a source of national identity and patriotism (Dilsaver, 1994; Runte, 1997).<sup>1</sup>

However, environmental justice research has illustrated that not all individuals benefit equally from public parks. According to this stream of literature, injustices in parks fall into four categories: distributive, procedural, corrective, and interactional (Floyd & Johnson, 2002; Low, 2013; Nesbitt et al., 2018; Rigolon et al., 2019). Most of the existing research has focused on *distributive justice*, that is, the inequitable allocation of park amenities for communities of lower socioeconomic status and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC).<sup>2</sup> They have documented that poor communities of color tend to have fewer park spaces than White, middle-class communities (Byrne et al., 2009; Rigolon, 2016), and their parks are often smaller, underfunded, crowded, unkept, and/or unsafe (Jenkins et al., 2015; Rigolon et al., 2018; Sister et al.,

2010; Stodolska et al., 2011; J. Wolch et al., 2005). A recent estimation also showed that, on average, communities of color had 44% less park acreage than majority White neighborhoods and low-income communities had 42% less than high-income neighborhoods (Patino & Poon, 2021). Moreover, new park development and renovations meant to address these park disparities often trigger environmental gentrification and displace local residents, who, ironically, were supposed to be the beneficiaries of the park projects (Betancur, 2011; Gould & Lewis, 2016; Loughran, 2014; Pearsall & Eller, 2020; J. R. Wolch et al., 2014).

Research on *corrective justice* concerning specific solutions to those park disparities and gentrification has only recently begun to emerge (Curran & Hamilton, 2012; Levy et al., 2006; Rigolon & Németh, 2020; Rupprecht & Byrne, 2017). Additionally, research on *interactional justice*, which focuses on the quality of interpersonal interactions has shown that BIPOC frequently experience racial harassment, profiling, and criminalization from White visitors and park officials (Austin, 1998; Cleary, 2018; Harris et al., 2020; Ly et al., 2020; McCammack, 2017; Sharaievska et al., 2010).

What is conspicuously lacking in the literature is research on *procedural justice* in public parks. According to Pellow (2017), procedural justice emerged from the idea of participatory democracy and shifts the lens from distributive outcomes to decision-making processes. It emphasizes political and cultural practices that acknowledge the experience of marginalized groups and their participation in environmental decisions that impact their lives. Put differently, procedural justice ‘involves inclusive and representative processes to define public policies about environmental amenities and hazards’ and also ‘includes concerns about fairness in decision-making processes’ (Rigolon et al., p. 3). Procedural justice encourages us to examine the causes of the distributive and interactional injustices in parks and develop effective strategies for corrective justice. For example, a few case studies have found that today’s distributive injustices of parks in Baltimore, Maryland, and Denver, Colorado, have been caused by decades of segregation ordinances, as well as racially discriminatory housing policies, mortgage programs, and homeowners/improvement associations (Boone et al., 2009; Rigolon & Németh, 2021). However, these studies fall short of explaining how those discriminatory policies and practices were enabled in the first place and why other U.S. communities also suffer from inequitable park availability and discrimination against BIPOC. To address these remaining issues, the literature needs a macro-structural analysis of the ideological and institutional forces that have provoked and sustained enduring and widespread park injustices.

This paper aims to fill this research gap by interrogating the socio-historical context that gave birth to American public parks. In particular, we utilize the concept of slow violence (Nixon, 2011) to unearth the elitist, eugenic, and racist foundations of American public parks at the community, state, and national levels. Our analysis shows that the parks have been defined, built, and managed by affluent and powerful White elites to materialize their own interests at the expense of the lives and wellbeing of BIPOC. Hence, park injustices in contemporary U.S. society originated with the creation of the parks and have been maintained ever since. Through its distinctive and critical insight, this paper seeks to contribute to the on-going research on procedural justice in parks and calls for a more nuanced understanding of the origin, meaning, and function of public parks.

## Slow violence

Nixon (2011) defined slow violence as ‘a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, and attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’ (p. 2). While the term ‘violence’ often denotes ‘explosive,’ ‘sensational,’ and ‘spectacular’ events marked by physical and emotional suffering bonded in a particular time and location, Nixon argued that slow violence is ‘incremental and accretive,’ ‘its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales’ (p. 2). The temporality and incrementality of slow violence further impose significant ‘representational challenges’ (p. 2). It means that slow violence lingers in space and time, so that ‘both the causes and the memory of catastrophe readily fade from view as the casualties incurred typically pass untallied and unremembered’ (p. 9). Thus, slow violence is similar to Galtung’s (1969) notion of structural violence and describes concealed, incremental, and destructive forms of violence.

Nixon used the concept of slow violence to illustrate the enduring negative impacts of environmental disasters. For example, Agent Orange, the herbicide and defoliant chemical used by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War, created an ‘ongoing slow-motion slaughter’ (Nixon, 2011, pp. 13–14) as it is still found in food sources and natural environment, leading to Parkinson’s disease, ischemic heart disease, still births, and spina bifida. Nixon explained that this environmental disaster lingers as its aftermaths transcend the time and location of its use and continues to devastate vulnerable populations, yet the general public is rarely aware of its seriousness because of its gradual and extensive damage as well as the current media climate, which focuses more on instant gratifications and stimulations. To date, researchers from various disciplines have adopted the concept of slow violence to bring a new and critical analytic perspective to their respective fields (Davies, 2019; Dillon, 2015; Kern, 2016; Pain, 2019; Ward, 2015; Witter & Satterfield, 2019).

Slow violence has garnered distinctive research attention within geographical scholarship. For example, O’Lear (2016) critically analyzed the ways in which technoscientific narratives and practices reduced climate changes into a measurable numerical phenomenon and constructed such a reductive approach as legitimate scientific knowledge. She argued that these narratives and practices functioned as slow violence because they discredited other scientific views and disempowered countries with fewer resources and less political power. Kern (2016) focused on the temporal aspect of slow violence and illustrated how gentrification changed the everyday rhythms of Toronto neighborhoods and exerted significant displacement pressure on local residents. In his ethnographic studies at ‘Cancer Alley,’ an area of chronic petrochemical pollution in Davies (2018, 2019) documented the disproportional and attritional impact of toxic chemicals on rural and impoverished communities of color. Other geographers have also used the notion of slow violence to examine psychological trauma from housing dispossession (Pain, 2019), toxic risk from military base conversion projects (Dillon, 2015), resettlement of local residents in Limpopo National Park in Mozambique (Witter & Satterfield, 2019), and domestic abuse and violence against Muslim women (Piedalue, 2019).

However, geographers also offered several critiques of slow violence. For example, Cahill and Pain (2019) asked, ‘is violence really slow and “unseen”? What does “slow” mean – slow to whom? Whose gaze is privileged? Who is seeing, who is hiding, and who is being obscured?’ (p. 1058). Christian and Dowler (2019) pointed out that Nixon’s

conceptualization largely overlooks the contribution from feminist, critical race, queer, and postcolonial and decolonial scholars who questioned the slowness and invisibility of violence. They further argued that slow and fast violence are not separate but mutually constitutive categories, and that the invisibility of slow violence is 'intimately tied to the very raced and gendered epistemologies that conventionally separated binaries of personal and political, hot and banal, violence and peace, and intimacy and war' (p. 1070). Davies (2018, 2019) introduced the concept of slow observation and emphasized that in contrast to Nixon's view, victims of slow violence are often able to observe the attritional impact of slow violence via increased mortality and health issues among community members as well as gradual decays in surrounding vegetation and buildings.

Despite these criticisms, a unique methodological advantage of slow violence is its holistic analytic scope that transcends contemporary time and space. As Vorbrugg (2019) noted, slow violence 'urges us toward more explicit methodological engagement with time, multi-temporality, imperceptible change, and drawn-out calamities' (p. 3). That is, it demands that researchers view the totality of a catastrophic event, not only by conducting a historical analysis that excavates its root causes, but by expanding their investigation into seemingly irrelevant and harmless issues. By embracing this methodological lens, this paper recognizes that the inception of American public parks was also the beginning of the slow violence that has engendered today's distributive and interactional injustice in parks. The remainder of this paper illustrates how White elites defined, built, and managed public parks at the community, state, and national levels, while displacing, alienating, and criminalizing immigrants, the poor, and BIPOC.

### **Central park: the beginning of american public parks**

The history of public parks in the U.S. can be traced back to Central Park in New York City. When the idea of Central Park emerged in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, appropriating tax funds to create and manage more than 800 acres of land for public recreation was unheard of in the U.S. The urban elites who advocated for Central Park argued that the park would be a distinctive artistic expression of national spirit and cultural sophistication (Taylor, 1999). For example, Fredrick Law Olmsted, the co-designer and first superintendent of Central Park, claimed that the park would garner national attention due to its 'democratic development' and 'progress of art & esthetic culture' (Olmsted, 1858, January 14).

However, Central Park also created many issues almost identical to today's environmental injustices in public parks. Similar to the distributive injustice of public parks in contemporary U.S. society, Central Park was built far from the working-class and immigrants, making their access to the park costly and time-consuming (Rosenzweig & Blackmar, 1992; Taylor, 1999). In fact, the idea of creating the park was initiated by wealthy and powerful White businessmen, newspaper editors, and political leaders, and one of their main goals was to create a safe recreation space for middle- and upper-class White families by demarcating racial and class boundaries (Larson, 2018; Loughran, 2017; Taylor, 1999). Racial prejudice was widespread in New York City when the park was built. Black migrants who escaped slavery were forced to live in segregated neighborhoods, and countless stories also exist of Blacks experiencing violence in public spaces such as the New York City Draft Riots, which ultimately resulted in violence against Blacks, abolitionists, and other race sympathizers (Gellman & Quigley, 2003).

Moreover, environmental gentrification coincided with the creation of Central Park. The major landowners in the city lobbied for the park's development because they hoped that it would displace Blacks and Irish and German immigrants, beautify the communities, and increase their property values (Rosenzweig & Blackmar, 1992). Indeed, the construction of Central Park razed Seneca Village, the first free Black community in New York and one of the few areas where Blacks were allowed to own property (Taylor, 2010). Furthermore, the demolition of Seneca Village took away Black residents' voting rights because, in 1821, New York State required Black men to own at least \$250 in property and hold residency for at least three years to be able to vote (Central Park Conservancy, 2018; Wood et al., 2009). It is also noteworthy that Seneca Village was a stop on the Underground Railroad and the village's basements served as hiding places for Blacks who escaped slavery (Gilligan, 2017; Serena, 2017). To make matters worse, displaced Black residents could not find jobs in Central Park during the midst of one of the worst depressions in New York, because the park was built by an all-White workforce (Taylor, 2010). Essentially, the major landowners derived the greatest financial gain from the park development, while Blacks and those individuals who used the land for their livelihood were disfranchised and devastated (Rosenzweig & Blackmar, 1992).

The creation of Central Park also prompted the criminalization of certain park visitors through its elitist managerial approach. For example, Olmsted viewed Central Park as a work of art and asserted that quiet and contemplative activities, such as walking and sightseeing, were appropriate park behaviors (Blodgett, 1976). Although he argued that the middle- and working-class individuals could harmoniously mingle at the park and that the latter would learn decorum from the former, their encounters were often awkward and hostile, escalating into class conflicts (Taylor, 1999). Consequently, Olmsted developed 'fundamentally instructional' policing rules to support middle-class mores in the name of cultural development and refinement (Thacher, 2015). As such, early park regulations and rules criminalized and restricted working-class recreation such as drinking, picnicking, dancing, gambling, sports, and other forms of entertainment (Thompson, 1998). More recently, when a White female jogger in Central Park was brutally assaulted and raped in 1989, the local police department arrested five African American and Latino teenagers who were at the park even though none of their DNA matched the DNA collected from the crime scene and no physical evidence tied them to the crime (Burns, 2011). The five teenagers were convicted wrongfully and sentenced five to 15 years in either juvenile detention or prison. This incident, the Central Park jogger case or The Central Park Five case, is one of many examples of the criminalization of BIPOC in parks.

The creation of Central Park inspired many other urban and community parks in the U.S., yet the slow violence toward vulnerable groups also continued. Similar to the case of Central Park, White elites and social reformers in major U.S. cities believed that creating public parks would beautify the urban environments and alleviate population density and air pollution (Bluestone, 1993; Cranz, 1982). They also believed that public parks and their programs would help immigrants assimilate into American culture (Mobily, 2019; Scott, 2014). In addition, park supporters claimed that parks would foster the cultural improvement of the working-class by promoting interactions between different social classes. For instance, Stephen Duncan Walker, a Baltimore clergyman, argued that parks were where 'the rough corners of the character became smoothed by the attractions of genteel intercourse' (as cited in Schuyler, 1986, p. 65). Similarly, L. E. Holden, the vice-president of the American Park



and Outdoor Art Association (APOAA), posited that parks were ‘great civilizers; they are great equalizers; they equalize up, not down, they lift the people to a higher life’ (American Park and Outdoor Art Association (APOAA), 1897, p. 48). American urban parks and recreation movements emerged as a genre of gifted and educated gentlemen who espoused the elitist idea that they are responsible for aiding the less fortunate (Blodgett, 1976).

However, what was often obscured in the rhetoric of park advocacy was the desire of those White elites and social reformers to maintain and reinforce their class and racial superiorities. They advocated for parks as natural beauties within cities. Yet, in this city–nature binary, cities were equated with immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities as well as various social and health problems, while parks, encapsulations of nature, were matched with the White middle-class and their benign cultural practices (Loughran, 2017). Moreover, White elites wanted to civilize the masses and make immigrants Americanized, not because they were altruists or humanitarians, but because they believed that the cultural advancement and Americanization would lead to fewer assaults to their dominant social position and middle-class sensibilities (Taylor, 1999; Young, 1996). In other words, the park supporters implanted elitist and racist ideologies in parks and used them to reject the agency of the working-class, immigrants, and BIPOC and to legitimize their cultural values and social practices. As such, many public parks were built apart from racially mixed cities, and strict park regulations ensured that the visitors adhered to middle-class norms (Shepard & Smithsimon, 2011). Robert Moses is a representative example of how elitist and racist ideologies of park leaders prevented the park access of the poor and BIPOC. Moses designed and built many public parks, beaches, and playgrounds as the president of Long Island State Park Commission and the chairperson of New York State Council of Parks. However, he bulldozed Black and Latino communities to make way for parks and intentionally built bridges across parks very low to restrict bus access because buses were the primary transportation of poor people of color (Caro, 1974). Thus, public parks in the U.S. were founded upon White middle- and upper-class sensibilities and contributed to the creation and reinforcement of racial and ethnic boundaries (Byrne & Wolch, 2009; Loughran, 2017).

By all accounts, the motives and ideologies behind the creation of Central Park and the first generation of urban public parks showed little to no resemblance to the conventional view that public parks are democratic and inclusive spaces that welcome people from every walk of life. Rather, they were initiated by powerful Whites to benefit middle- and upper-class White families, Americanize immigrants, and inculcate White middle-class values in the working-class. The construction of new parks was routinely glorified as cultural and social advancement or as a welfare project for American citizens, while displacing, disfranchising, and criminalizing the working-class and people of color. Until the 1960s, public parks were built, in part, as a means of social control over the powerless (Scott, 2013; Stormann, 1991). Thus, the creation of the first generation of American community parks shows issues that are strikingly similar to park injustices in today’s American society.

## U.S. national parks

After the creation of Central Park, slow violence continued during the early history of U.S. national parks. In fact, researchers have argued that the birth of U.S. national parks was marked by ‘imperialist, xenophobic, and racist features of American nationalism’



(Cosgrove, 1995, p. 36) and that ‘the exclusion of the poor and people of color was also a hallmark of the US national park system’ (Byrne & Wolch, 2009, p. 747). Inspired by romanticism and transcendentalism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, White preservationists, intellectuals, and political leaders viewed nature as an antidote to urban problems and aspired to create national parks as sanctuaries from cities (Nash, 2001). Yet, those White elites who were instrumental in the creation of the national park system were also eugenicists and/or racists and, as such, envisioned creating national parks as a means by which to maintain White supremacy (Gerstle, 1999; Merchant, 2003; Mowatt, 2020).

For example, Madison Grant, a lawyer and zoologist who worked tirelessly to create Denali, Olympic, Everglades, and Glacier national parks, linked eugenic and conservation ideologies and claimed that Nordics were a superior race to the Alpine and Mediterranean peoples because they evolved from harsh northern climates. Thus, preserving wild nature would help Nordics thrive and contribute to the nation’s prosperity (Spiro, 2009). Similarly, Theodore Roosevelt, the 26<sup>th</sup> president who established many national parks, was ‘almost fanatically concerned with [White] race preservation’ and ‘feared that the white race would become soft and allow itself to be pushed out of first place’ (Sinkler, 1971, pp. 337–339). Like Grant, he believed that modernization had attenuated the tough character that the White Anglo-Saxon had developed through their struggle with wild nature (Dyer, 1992). Roosevelt also described Native Americans as savages who needed to be exterminated for the nation’s racial purity and African Americans as an inherently inferior race who were leaving ‘an indelible black mark on the white nation’ (Gerstle, 1999, p. 1285). Thus, similar to the environmental determinism which justified imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Painter & Jeffrey, 2009), both Grant and Roosevelt believed that the preservation of wilderness, which included the creation of national parks, was a mean for preventing racial degeneration and maintaining White superiority. Likewise, John Muir, the first president of the Sierra Club who is considered to be the ‘father of the National Parks’ due to his pivotal role in creating Yosemite and Sequoia national parks, believed that American Indians were dirty, barbaric, and hideous, while African Americans were lazy and noisy (Merchant, 2003). His theocentric environmental ethics embraced both human and wild animals as a part of nature, yet excluded the Indigenous; he stated that the Mono Indians in Yosemite Valley ‘seemed to have no right place in the landscape’ and he was ‘glad to see them fading out of sight’ when he continued his trip in the Valley (Muir, 1894, p. 108).

Given the eugenic and racist prejudice of the national park leaders, it is not surprising that the creation of many national parks essentially served as an ‘ethnic cleansing’ that forcibly removed Indigenous people from their homelands, outlawed their subsistence activities, such as fishing and hunting, and sent them to reservations to die slow deaths (Kantor, 2007, p. 1). Indeed, the creation of national parks in the West can be described as European Americans’ military conquest and genocide against the American Indians. Indigenous cultures and civilizations were *expunged*, and newly established national parks were advertised as ‘uninhabited’ or ‘untouched’ lands so that park officials could justify the land ownership and obscure the ethnocide (Merchant, 2003; Spence, 1999). At the same time, their heritages were *explicitly visualized* for tourism marketing. For example, Great Northern Railway not only distributed photographs and stories about the

Blackfeet Indians in Glacier National Park in popular magazines and newspapers to attract more tourists, but brought Blackfeet to major cities in the U.S. to set up teepee camps on the roofs of downtown buildings as a marketing campaign (Spence, 1999).

Thus, eugenics, racism, and genocide were at the center of the inception of the U.S. national parks. Although the national parks signify a distinctive national identity and are described as ‘the crown jewels of America’ (Dilsaver, 1994, p. 1), these symbols of America were constructed through the slaughter of millions of Indigenous people. White racists and eugenicists envisioned the national parks serving as a means of preserving White hegemony and supremacy, so Indigenous cultures and civilizations were eradicated from the landscape or heavily commercialized to attract tourists. Accordingly, many American Indians view national parks as symbols of exploitation and humiliation (Meeker, 1973; Schelhas, 2002).

## State parks

After the development of community and national parks, slow violence once again prevailed in state parks. The inauguration of the National Park Service (NPS) in 1916 gave rise to the state park movement, and Stephen T. Mather, the first director of the NPS, organized the first National Conference on State Parks in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1921 (Conard, 1997; Tilden, 1962). A year later, Mather introduced the idea of establishing ‘a state park every 100 miles from coast to coast,’ which soon became a conference slogan (Conard, 1997). While park leaders were declaring the egalitarian ideal of state parks, Jim Crow laws and customs were being solidified across the South (O’Brien, 2012). As such, the overwhelming majority of state parks in southern states were not available to African Americans because of the ‘separate, but equal’ doctrine (O’Brien, 2015). They had to use either ‘Negro areas’ adjacent to White parks or the parks built exclusively for Black citizens. Those park facilities were extremely rare and inferior in functionality and aesthetic value. McKay’s (1954) study on state park provision in nine southern states documented that in 1952 there were 180 state parks available to Whites, yet only 12 were available to African Americans.

The exploitation of African American labor was another earmark of the early stage of state parks. The New Deal project and its Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) during the Great Depression gave much needed momentum to the state park movement. Subsequently, about 250,000 African Americans were assigned to Black CCC units to build and renovate state parks across the country (Brandimarte & Reed, 2013). In Texas, at least three to four Black CCC camps built new state parks or repaired deteriorated park infrastructures from 1935 to 1942 (Steely, 1999). Nevertheless, due to Jim Crow laws and customs, those Black CCC members were essentially creating White parks that they could not use. For example, when Millard Fillmore Rutherford, a former Black CCC member at Fort Parker State Park in Texas, returned to show his bride the park, they were told that African Americans were not allowed to enter the park (Brandimarte & Reed, 2013, pp. 76–77).

Although the *de jure* racial segregation in public parks was outlawed by the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* in 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, slow violence continues to impact African Americans’ park visitation negatively. Today, visitor statistics of many state parks have commonly documented that African

Americans constitute a fraction of their total visitors (Missouri Department of Natural Resources, 2009; The Research Edge, 2017). For example, in Maryland state parks, Whites accounted 77% of day visitors while African Americans accounted only 2.2% (Dougherty, 2011). Likewise, in a visitor study of three Georgia state parks, Whites constituted 82.2% of visitors observed at trailheads while Blacks accounted 6.1% (Whiting et al., 2012). Significantly, the same visitation pattern is also noticeable from national parks and forests (Floyd, 1999; Scott & Lee, 2018; Taylor et al., 2011; USDA Forest Service, 2013; Weber & Sultana, 2013). Researchers have suggested that years of racial oppression and exclusion are the culprit for the racial disparity in park visitation because they have prevented Blacks from developing a cultural disposition and environmental attitude that appreciate parks and the great outdoors (Gramann, 2018; Johnson & Bowker, 2004; Lee & Scott, 2016). In sum, consistent with community and national parks, slow violence has dispersed into state parks and excluded and exploited African Americans to benefit White Americans.

### **Connecting the dots: enduring slow violence in American public parks**

By embracing Nixon's (2011) call for combative writer-activism, we critically analyzed procedural injustice in American public parks and exposed centuries of slow violence against BIPOC. Our analysis of the creation of community and urban parks (mid- to late 1800s), national parks (late 1800s to early 1900s), and state parks (early to mid-1900s) illustrates that elitism, eugenics, and racism have undergirded the ideological foundation of American public parks. In particular, affluent and powerful White individuals have conceptualized, built, and managed parks to gain economic benefits by increasing property values, create White recreational spaces, Americanize immigrants, instill White, middle- and upper-class values to others, and preserve White supremacy. Moreover, they built these parks by displacing immigrants, the working-class, and BIPOC, committing genocide against American Indians, and excluding and exploiting African Americans. Thus, consistent with Nixon's theorizing, slow violence has been dispersed across different times and spaces of the three types of public parks and has continued to limit access for marginalized and vulnerable groups.

It is also troubling that the slow violence in parks has often been obscured by the rhetoric that public parks are essential for solving urban problems and improving American citizens' cultural and social conditions. Although recent studies have documented the prevalence of distributive and interactional injustices in parks, such as inequitable park availability and quality, gentrification, criminalization of BIPOC, and disproportionate White visitation to state and national parks (Jenkins et al., 2015; Rigolon, 2016; Rigolon et al., 2018; Sister et al., 2010; Stodolska et al., 2011; J. Wolch et al., 2005), it is clear from our analysis that these issues originated from the very beginning of the public parks in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and have been perpetuated throughout U.S. history. From these observations, the creation of public parks appears to be a means for oppression or a tactic of the plutocratic and racist tyranny of the White ruling class.

Our findings not only offer some theoretical implications for slow violence but also urge a broader epistemological and philosophical reorientation of public parks' primary functions, meanings, and constituents. Several researchers have challenged Nixon's characterization of slow violence as 'out of sight.' For instance, Davies (2019) argued that the invisibility of slow violence is not due to a lack of arresting stories but due instead to the

politics of indifference that make these stories 'do not count' and silence the voice of the marginalized. Similarly, O'Lear (2016) contended that slow violence 'can result from epistemic and political dominance of particular narratives or understandings' (p. 4) and Christian and Dowler (2019) argued that the imperceptibility of slow violence is shaped not only by its slowness, but by racialized and gendered epistemologies that decouple the origins of violence from their gendered, raced, and colonial roots. In accordance with these critiques, our findings indicate that slow violence in American public parks has continued for centuries not because it is slow, but mainly because it has been obscured and perpetuated by the enduring elitist and racist ideologies. As such, we argue that future studies employing the concept of slow violence should pay close attention to the specific sociopolitical and ideological circumstances which enable the slowness and the representational challenges of slow violence. Furthermore, when park researchers and practitioners attempt to address park injustice, it is important to understand the historical and ideological foundations of public parks and critically examine why parks were built in the first place, what types of people advocate for them, for what reasons, who actually gains the most benefits from them, and how park funding was, and is, collected and used.

How can we address this deep-seated and prolonged slow violence in public parks? Although its representational challenges make slow violence difficult to cope with, Piedalue (2019) introduced the notion of slow nonviolence and advocated a micro-scale, grassroots activism that promotes the empowerment and collective responsibility of the victims of slow violence. Similar recommendations were made by park researchers, asserting that affordable housing programs, community engagement in park planning and designing, creating smaller parks, diversifying the workforce, and developing new programs for marginalized groups would make new or existing parks more accessible and less vulnerable to gentrification (Curran & Hamilton, 2012; Levy et al., 2006; Rigolon & Németh, 2020; Rupprecht & Byrne, 2017). In addition to these strategies, we advocate the creation of policies, regulations, and/or laws that protect vulnerable groups, because slow violence in parks is a deeply entrenched structural issue that must be confronted with legal and institutional mechanisms. For example, scholars have proposed community benefits agreements (Baxamusa, 2008; Salkin & Lavine, 2008), urban anticipatory governance (De Barbieri, 2018), and community benefits funds (Vance, 2018) as specific strategies that promote a fair distribution of park benefits and community members' participation in park development and management. Similar to slow nonviolence, these strategies intend to empower local residents by promoting their sense of ownership and shared responsibilities in parks.

Furthermore, park practitioners need to examine institutional biases that might exist within their organizations. Our review of the history of public parks suggests that institutional discrimination is deeply embedded in the cultural and political landscapes of many park agencies, so it tends to obscure and maintain elitist White hegemony. Indeed, Scott (2000) argued that institutional discrimination is prevalent within public leisure service, and many agencies have historically been ineffective in serving disenfranchised groups because of their entrepreneurial management approach, emphasis on maintaining a loyal customer base, lack of diversity in the workforce, and the optimistic belief that recreation resources are fairly distributed to all constituents. Similarly, Santucci et al. (2014) mentioned that some NPS units not only held conservative cultures that restricted new managerial approaches but lacked clear policies and support for diversifying visitor

demographics. Thus, park agencies need to be cognizant of any discriminatory cultural and managerial practices that might exist within their organizations and work hard to dissolve them. The National Parks and Conservation's Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Statement of Intentions (2019) is one example of how public park agencies can acknowledge their complicity in racial, ethnic, and class oppression.

Finally, it is also crucial to understand the adverse effects of park designs and norms that are rooted in White elitism. For the first generation of community parks, park planners used trees and bodies of water to create a clear separation between the park and city and legitimized park behaviors that emphasized privacy, solitude, and contemplation as more appropriate and desirable than other behaviors (Cranz, 1982; Loughran, 2016). However, the general public has repeatedly questioned such park designs and functions and, eventually, succeeded in creating spaces for games and sport activities (Rosenzweig & Blackmar, 1992; Taylor, 1999). Similarly, research has shown that today's people of color do not embrace the idea of the 'appropriate' park behavior imposed by the White upper-class; they tend to prefer collectivistic activities and visit parks in larger groups than Whites do (Gobster, 2002; Tinsley et al., 2002). For example, research has shown that Latino Americans tended to visit parks in large groups because they preferred family-oriented social activities, yet camping sites, picnic tables, and playgrounds in most public parks and national forests were usually too small for them since these sites were designed in accordance with White, middle-class norms that emphasized privacy and isolation (Stodolska et al., 2011). Thus, striking a balance between conflicting park usages of different racial and ethnic groups has become a challenging, yet critical issue for making parks more just and inclusive.

## Conclusion

Using the concept of slow violence, this paper aims to bring a sharper focus to the early history of American public parks and the ways in which community, state, and national parks disadvantaged vulnerable groups. By illustrating some of the historical and structural patterns of procedural injustices in parks, we intended to excavate the root causes of today's distributive and interpersonal injustices in parks and contribute to the on-going research effort to make public parks more inclusive and just. Park injustices such as inequitable access and quality, gentrification, criminalization of BIPOC, and disproportionate White visitation to state and national parks are not only current but continuous issues that began in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when public parks were first created. Thus, we suggest that environmental justice scholarship and park practitioners become more circumspective of the elitist, eugenic, and racist foundations of park injustice. We also contend that creating legal and institutional mechanisms against park injustices, bringing awareness of park agencies' organizational biases, and understanding the park design and code of conduct rooted in White elitism can help alleviate the slow violence occurring in American public parks.

## Notes

1. The distinction between these three types of parks lies in their administrative entity and funding source: Community, state, and national parks are managed by municipal, state, and federal government, respectively.

2. There are on-going discussions about whether or not racial and ethnic terms should be capitalized (e.g., 'Black' vs. 'black' and 'White' vs. 'white'). As we believe that being consistent is a more just and reasonable approach, we accept the recommendation from American Psychological Association (Section 5.7, 7th edition) and used capitalizations across different racial and ethnic groups.

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