



The Biopolitics of America: Bodies, Environments, and the Liberal Imagination

International Conference, Würzburg, July 28-30, 2016

Sandow Birk. *Salinas Valley State Prison (SVSP) - Soledad, CA.* Image courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery.

Nigel Hatton (Merced)

Parks for Some, Prisons for Others: The Spatial and Racial Politics of Incarceration and Recreation in the United States

In its centennial year, the U.S. National Park Service is witnessing record levels of visitation to the hundreds of parks, monuments, shores, trails, and recreation areas it manages across 84 million acres in the United States and its territories. However, as activists and scholars have pointed out, rising participation and employment at national parks has routinely excluded Native, African-American and nonwhite Hispanic populations. Whereas President Barack Obama proclaims the park system as central to “a sense of just how immense, how diverse, and how important the vast array of wildlife is to understanding and appreciating the world and our place in it,” environmental justice scholars like Carolyn Finney have noted that the “face of America is rapidly changing, yet our public lands do not reflect this demographic and ethnic diversity.” This paper, drawing on forgotten (formerly enslaved) voices, legal fictions, visual ironies, and literary hauntings, locates the temporal traumatic traces of historical memory and the dehumanizing effects of carceral spatiality, as key sites of analysis in confronting contemporary disparities in park use among diverse ethnic and racial groups. Particular focus is placed on two of the oldest parks in the national system, Yosemite, and Sequoia & Kings Canyon national parks in California, lands circled by carceral presence—tens of state and federal adult and youth prisons, jails, work camps, and penal colonies that manage to do what the National Park Service cannot: involve high and increasing numbers of African-American and nonwhite Hispanic populations (only as inmates and employees). Just as the outdoor violence of slavery, fugitive hunts, and black codes made the environment a prison for African Americans in the nineteenth century, legacies of that past and hyper incarceration in the 20th and 21st centuries combine to organize and maintain a precarious relation between African American life and environmental justice. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, and the National Park Service, both roughly 100 years old, encounter and compete with one another in ways that require greater analysis.