

The “Nature” of Environmental Disaster: George Catlin’s Lament as Eco-genocide

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ABSTRACT

Nineteenth century America imposed a “catastrophe” on the environments and cultures of the American West. Areas larger than the continent of Europe were deforested in a single lifetime. Prairies were eradicated, reducing plant biodiversity from 250 to four species. Buffalo populations dwindled from fifty million to near extinction. By 1890, ninety-five percent of the original pre-Columbian Indian population had been wiped out. A catastrophe, indeed. In fact, an intricate discourse lamenting this catastrophe formed in the nineteenth century, encompassing political documents, literature, theater, art, and science. My paper explores this discourse, this rhetorical performance of assumptions about disaster, power, and justice. I claim that this discursive lament legitimated ways of explaining environmental and cultural genocide that simultaneously perpetuated the practice. Underlying this discourse, this language of lament, was a key and destructive assumption—that eco-genocide was as “Natural” as it was sad. I will focus on the discursive participation of George Catlin, ironically one of the earliest critics of these practices. Catlin’s desire to “preserve” the “Natural” West through his literary, artistic, and theatrical lament both distracted audiences from social justice efforts among Indian cultures and defined the “vanishing” fate of Indians as “Natural.” Preserving “Nature,” rather than struggling with cultures protecting their environmental relations became the central goal of Catlin’s discourse, and, unfortunately, of American environmentalism to this day. I thus argue for an “environmentalism without Nature,” a discourse of ecological disaster that refuses to inadvertently naturalize social injustice.

KEY WORDS

nature, environment, disaster, catastrophe, George Catlin, discourse, injustice, politics, Andrew Jackson, lament



In the Great American Indian novel, when it is finally written, all of the white people will be Indians and all of the Indians will be ghosts.

—Sherman Alexie.

If "nature" is what makes it possible to recapitulate the hierarchy of beings in a single ordered series, political ecology is always manifested, in practice, by the destruction of the idea of nature.

—Bruno Latour

The world has witnessed a multitude of devastating events in the past several years, from the extensive innocent death of 9/11 and the American "War on Terror," to the widespread destruction of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. All four of these examples are devastating environmentally, culturally, socially, and emotionally. Yet, the latter half of these examples, the tsunami and hurricane, are deemed *naturally* catastrophic, while the former two examples are generally understood as the tragic consequences of *political* decisions. Under what criteria, and from whose perspective, is a devastating event "naturally" catastrophic? Objective interpretation of events is tricky business, as we must come to terms with "real" events through our less-than-perfectly-precise efforts to represent them in language. Representations of events must also function within a discourse, within accepted linguistic and epistemological methods of knowing reality; thus, a given discourse frames our way of seeking,

articulating, and practicing, but not necessarily discovering, “truth.” Discourse thus complicates our ability to name an event as either indisputably “catastrophic” or “natural.” That is, discourse limits our capacity to understand the event beyond our construction of it. Under such linguistic confines, choosing to call a catastrophe *natural* rather than *political* is always, on some level, an act of faith.

But the constructed character of human relationships with reality should not confuse the stubborn fact that billions face social and ecological catastrophe every day. Discourses, more urgently than imposing epistemological challenges, enable and validate power relations between individuals, cultures, and environments. As Michel Foucault claimed, “each society has its own regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth—that is the types of discourses it accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 131). Such discourses allow individuals to call *choices* that perpetuate power *necessities*, semantically transforming social injustice into natural inevitability. What, then, do discourses surrounding “catastrophes” tell us about how we deem environmental and socio-political power “natural”? What relations of power, what consequences of unjust choices, are seen as inevitable and *outside of choice*, once they are described as “natural catastrophes”?

This paper explores how discourses of natural catastrophes exonerate individuals and societies from the obligation to question the full complexity of power and injustice globally. I base this exploration on a case study of an early discourse of natural catastrophe, by looking at mid-nineteenth century American depictions of Indian genocide as destined, as part of the “natural” course of events. More specifically, I discuss nineteenth century artist, writer, entertainer, and early environmental critic George Catlin, who lamented Indian removal as a disaster rather than accepting his time’s discursive description of progress. This paper argues that although Catlin was critical of the language of progress, he portrayed the catastrophe as inevitable, as outside choice, as natural—thus enacting the very discourse and logic of domination characteristic of the powers he intended to challenge.

Jacksonian America & Natural Progress

In mid-nineteenth century America, particularly throughout the 1830's, President Andrew Jackson implemented policies that displaced Indians, expanded slavery, and degraded environments. Areas larger than the continent of Europe were deforested in a single lifetime (Kline 26). Prairies were plowed under, reducing average plant biodiversity on the plains from 250 to four species (LaDuke 146). Buffalo populations dwindled from fifty million to near extinction. By 1890, ninety-five percent of the original pre-Columbian Indian population had been decimated (Moore 24). A catastrophe, indeed—all in the service of an expanding, industrializing market society that increased its population ten-fold (Kline 25) and intensified its textile production by over one hundred-fold (Bruchey 149) in a single generation.

But these calamities occurred within a discourse of “destiny” that legitimated exploitation as progress. Andrew Jackson, in an 1829 proposal of the Indian Removal Act, exemplifies this:

What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms, embellished with the improvements which art can devise or industry execute, occupied by more than 12,000,000 happy people, and filled with the blessings of liberty, civilization, and religion? (Mason 101–02)

Jackson poses Indian Removal as an ethical dilemma for the “good man” interested in protecting “liberty, civilization, and religion.” After all, given this rhetoric, what kind of person would dare stem the tide of 12,000,000 people in pursuit of happiness?

Jackson does not deny that Indians face displacement, but he describes it as a necessary condition of progress. In an 1830 Annual Message, he states, “humanity has often wept over the fate of the aborigines of this country . . . but its progress has never for a moment been arrested, and one by one have many powerful tribes disappeared

from the earth” (Jackson 28). In another address, Jackson declares, “this fate [of worldly disappearance] surely awaits them . . . humanity and national honor demands that every effort be made to avert such a calamity” (Wallace 1993: 123). Indian removal is not a choice for Jackson, as “fate” offers no options or alternatives. It is no longer an event deliberated and decided upon by humanity—it is thus seen as natural rather than political. Within a discourse describing displacement as natural fate, humanitarianism itself takes on a contorted meaning. Removal in this discourse becomes not the cause of calamity, but the most honorable way to offer relief from its aftermaths. Displacement, in Jackson’s discourse, is not merely some “necessary evil” of progress, but justice itself—justice in the face of the natural “calamity” of genocide.

Catlin’s Lament & the Politics of Nature

Jackson’s Indian Removal Act passed in 1830. The act legalized the displacement of 70,000 Indians in ten years, culminating in the 1838 “Trail of Tears,” where 18,000 Cherokees were removed from Alabama and Georgia, 4,000 of whom died along the forced march (Remini 52). George Catlin refused to accept Jackson’s explanation of progress. In 1831 Catlin set out to travel the American West for six years, visiting over forty tribes to study, paint, and record their environments and cultural traditions before disaster struck. In his seminal work *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of North American Indians*, Catlin describes his goals:

I have flown to their rescue—not of their lives or of their race (for they are *doomed* and must perish), but to the rescue of their looks and their modes, at which the acquisitive world may hurl their poison and every besom of destruction, and trample them down and crush them to death; yet, phoenix-like, they may rise from the ‘stain on a painter’s palette,’ and live again upon canvas, and stand forth for centuries yet to come, the living monuments of a noble race. (16)

The very settlers Jackson calls "happy," Catlin calls "acquisitive"; the very endeavors Jackson calls "prosperous," Catlin calls "poison"; the very changes Jackson calls "blessings," Catlin calls "destruction." To Catlin, Jackson's method of avoiding "calamity" itself begets calamity. Catlin hopes his talents as painter and writer will redefine the way Americans explain themselves to themselves—from "manifest destiny" to "manifest catastrophe." He publicly laments what is otherwise celebrated, offering up a seeming challenge to the discourse.

However, Catlin's attempts to reframe Jackson's euphemistic justifications do not subvert Jackson's discursive foundations, as Catlin perpetuates the ideology that genocide is inevitable, that Indians "are *doomed* and must perish," that it is outside of choice and now a natural component of the continent's future. "Many are the rudenesses and wilds in Nature's works, which are destined to fall before the deadly axe and desolating hands of cultivating man" (Catlin 269). In short, Catlin redefines Jackson's calamity as a *natural catastrophe*. Catlin has not "flown to the rescue . . . of their lives or their race . . . but to the rescue of their looks and their modes" (16). Catastrophe cannot be avoided, so one has only to lament what will soon die, and preserve it to "live again upon canvas." Once Indians are recorded in writing, once painted and preserved for civilized posterity, Catlin seems as optimistic as Jackson regarding the blessings of civilization.

If [America] would introduce the ploughshare and their prayers amongst these people . . . they would soon . . . be able to solve to the world the perplexing enigma, by presenting a nation of savages, civilized and christianized (and consequently *saved*) in the heart of the American wilderness. (184)

Catlin does not set out to prevent the destruction of societies, the exploitation of environments, or the massacre of individuals. Catlin hopes to thwart the vaporization of any *record* of "natural" Indian societies or beautiful Indian landscapes that whites may study for enlightenment or enjoy for pleasure (2). Thus, both Catlin and Jackson argued genocide was a destined fact of nature; both strengthened a

discourse that eliminated the choice of social and environmental justice for native peoples, strengthening power over them.

Removing Black Hawk

This discourse of fated injustice is best exemplified in one of Catlin's most famous paintings, his portrait of the Sac activist and warrior Black Hawk (see endnote).^{*} In 1832, two short years after Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act into law, Black Hawk led Sac and Fox Indians to reclaim their traditional territory in present day Illinois. White settlers called this an invasion—initiating the Black Hawk War. Black Hawk originally lost these lands in 1830, when General William Clark made a deal with the Sac chief Kee-o-Kuk, who was a disputed authority among the Sac. As historian Anthony Wallace points out, the Black Hawk War ended tragically for Black Hawk's people, "the band, including men, women, and children, was slaughtered at the crossing by fire from steamboats, and the survivors who reached the western bank were hunted down by Sioux warriors. The leader, Black Hawk, lived to tell the tale" (108).¹ Jackson used the Black Hawk War as a vindication for Indian removal (475). He preyed on dormant fears of what happens when Indians neither assimilate *nor* remove *nor* vanish—they revert to "savage" behavior. Jackson imprisoned Black Hawk and other Sac leaders in St. Louis.

As Catlin sketched his portraits of the defeated, shackled Indians, one of Black Hawk's countrymen pleaded Catlin to paint them in their chains, to show the world the way in which they were unjustly imprisoned and displayed without dignity (Bank 476). In demanding their shackles be included in the portrait, they effectively asked Catlin to show the world that their resistance and therefore their potential presence as active members of the continent's future had not "vanished" (Bank 476). Catlin chose instead to portray him "as though free and at repose" (Bank 476). Perhaps he did not want to humiliate Black Hawk by showing him so confined. Perhaps Catlin hoped that humanizing this generally disparaged "savage" in a caring, proud, and thoughtful light would subvert Jackson's propaganda.

Still, couched within a discourse of natural catastrophe, this painting functions in society in problematic ways. Catlin does not recognize the Sac request that Black Hawk be portrayed as forcibly in jail and shackled in chains. Such a setting would portray Black Hawk not as inevitably vanished, but as a still-resistant voice in the American dialogue on how (and whether) justly to expand its republic. The aesthetic goals of the image decontextualize Black Hawk from his continuing struggle—accelerating his vanishing. Even the painting of Black Hawk shows a vanished backdrop. Not only does Catlin artistically remove Black Hawk from the context of the prison; he removes him from his own Illinois landscape and from any recognizable context of American life. The viewer can now safely admire the beauty and visual culture that is "natural" Indian-ness, without considering their struggles or critiques. The viewer can lament Black Hawk's fate, without any obligation to question it.

By the mid-1830's, Catlin had transformed his paintings and writings into the first full-fledged Wild West Shows featuring "real Indians," touring Pittsburgh, Boston, New York, London, and Paris. In 1837, Black Hawk appeared on Catlin's stage, before an audience of 1,500. Included with Black Hawk was a delegation of Sac, Foxes, Iowas, and Sioux (Reddin 1999). Having Sioux and Black Hawk together on stage is significant, as the audience could now safely admire previous threats and previous rivalries—it was the Sioux who helped the U.S. military slaughter Black Hawk's people.³ Safe from the dangers of Indian resistance to injustice, audiences could cathartically lament "natural" catastrophes of the past. This lament allowed them to envision a new era in which they could spread across a continent upon which they were now, ideologically, natives—manifested in the destiny of the landscape.

"Mutually Reinforcing" Catastrophes & the Jacksonian Era

Perceiving catastrophe as natural erases from view complex webs of domination driving injustices. For example, the ability of Jacksonian Americans to harvest forests the size of Europe in a single lifetime, and

in turn to eradicate the habitat of the now-extinct passenger pigeon (Steinberg 67), relied on a combination of racial hierarchy, exploited factory labor, gender inequities, and increasingly loose definitions of consumer “needs.” Without an ethno-centric view of the pre-American continent as a “country . . . ranged by a few thousand savage hunters” it would have been difficult to imagine Indian lands as empty, as amorally ripe for resource extraction. Without the white supremacist view of black “natural” inferiority that dehumanized slave labor, it would have been difficult to achieve the levels of labor needed to transform forests into fields into factory products so feverishly. Without an objectified female labor force in northeastern factories (those unmarried women who did not follow the “natural” path of marrying into a domestic sphere and who could not legally own property [Lewis 699]), it is hard to imagine how natural resources (extracted by slave labor) could have been produced into capitalist commodities so quickly.

Jacksonian ecological catastrophe did not occur in some vacuum of individual, “anthropocentric” greed. It required these interdependent and thus ever-intensifying modes of social domination. As ecofeminist philosophers Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen say of our own time period, “the current global crises are the result of mutually reinforcing ideologies of racism, sexism, classism, imperialism, naturism, and speciesism” (285). To explain the catastrophe of Jacksonian eco-genocide as “natural” acquits those individuals and choices that perpetuate injustice. More importantly, this discourse of natural catastrophe shrouds the actual forces driving the injustices, and the interlinking relations of power in need of resistance. “Nature,” when it comes to this particular catastrophe, serves as a fetish that simplifies the whole, holistic complexity of social, cultural, economic, and political domination down to a constructed, unaccountable, and palatable part of that whole.

Environmental historian Theodore Steinberg, in discussing this time period, claims that industrial capitalism “rearrange[d] the components of an ecosystem, packaging them up and delivering them to where demand was greatest. In the process, resources such as cotton, cloth, pigeon meat, and lumber lost binding ties with their place of

origin and the human and natural processes responsible for their existence" (69). Capitalist fetishes distracted consumers from the origins and impacts of the commodities they desired. Similarly, discourses of natural catastrophe distracted the Jacksonian citizen both from seeing the unjust choices leading to eco-genocide *and* from confronting the interdependent power relations that discourses on natural calamity rendered simple, invisible, and thus acceptable. Catlin's discourse of natural catastrophe, like Jackson's, specifically erased from view this web of "mutually reinforcing . . . complex systems of oppression" that (far from natural) drove eco-genocide.

Ironically, Catlin pushes this discourse even further with his most famous environmental essay (one viewed as among the earliest eco-critiques)—his idea of a National Park. He proclaims, "What a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world, in future ages! *A nation's Park*, containing man and beast, in all the wild[ness] and freshness of their nature's beauty!" (729).⁴ Catlin challenges the egocentric, capitalist ethics of his era in attributing aesthetic value to the "wild" and to "Nature." His idea that non-"civilized" spaces have intrinsic meaning should very well be seen as an early environmental ethic. Yet, although Catlin's park aimed to set aside a large track of land to protect Indian traditions, it is also a park meant to construct a "thrilling specimen" for a post-lament, post-natural catastrophe, post-genocide America to "hold up to view." Similar to his paintings, writings, and performances, the preserved "Nature" of this park softens the "destined" domination of Indian lands, economies, and cultures. That is, Catlin's idealized park further distracts potential viewers from critiquing the "mutually reinforcing" webs of exploitative *choices* leading to the "doom" Catlin so lamented. The park epitomizes Catlin's acceptance of the discourse of natural catastrophe, because it emerges specifically out of Catlin's desire to preserve "natural beauty" as the remaining ethical response in facing "natural catastrophe."

Towards an Environmental Discourse without Nature

If discourse is helpful in unveiling how Catlin's and Jackson's discourses surrounding natural catastrophes hide the *social* power and injustice behind eco-genocide, how might it be helpful in examining power relations in catastrophes seemingly more "natural" in their origin—such as the 2004 tsunami?

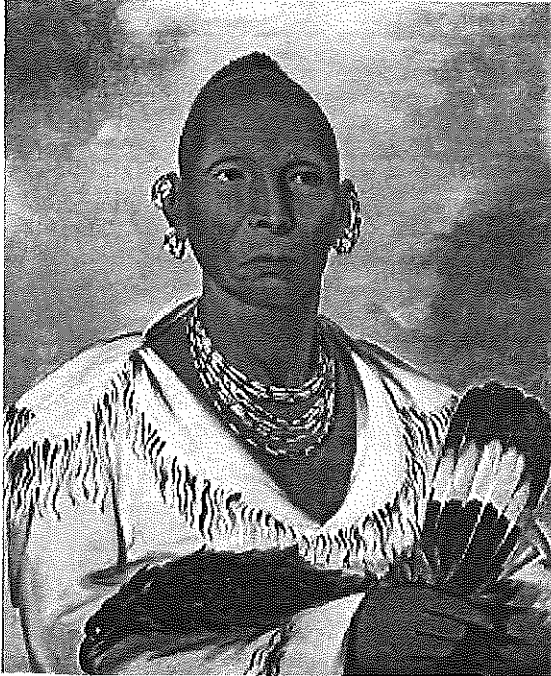
Although the tsunami emerged from an earthquake deep within the Indian Ocean, its catastrophic significance arose from conditions just as socially unjust as nineteenth century eco-genocide. Political ecologist Mike Davis suggests in a January 2005 interview that although rising waters indeed crushed coastal nations, "they are killed by their poverty." Social critic Lance Newman points out that 250,000 people were killed by waters, but five million were left homeless, hungry, and in danger of cholera, malaria, measles, and dysentery. The massive wave surges are natural occurrences, but lack of access to sanitation, housing, and health care are social disasters.

Even the 250,000 killed by the waters of the natural event seem to have been victims of social more than "natural" conditions. Newman argues that corporate globalization will "concentrate . . . poor people in vulnerable locations . . . When natural phenomena like tsunamis occur, the devastation is unprecedented." Davis highlights that ninety five percent of future population growth will occur in third world cities, with a majority of that growth "in flood plains, in low-lying coastal areas." The tsunami is merely a preview of the calamities facing coastal and impoverished nations as sea levels promise to rise due to climate disturbance—far from natural in its causes, with the United States emitting twenty-five percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, exacerbated by its rejection of the Kyoto Protocol.⁵ Additionally, continuing colonial extraction of local resources, such as tourist development and aquaculture farms for U.S. markets have resulted in the clear-cutting of fifty percent of the tsunami region's coastal mangroves (ecological buffers for tsunami impacts in coastal regions)—intensifying the water's assault.⁶

Events such as the tsunami should reveal in new ways, rather than hide in the oldest of ways, the complexity of social crises. It all depends on the discourse; whether or not this tragedy highlights or hides inequalities and injustices depends on the extent to which it and its aftermaths are discursively rendered "natural." As with Jackson and Catlin on genocide, discourses of the tsunami as a natural catastrophe wipe from view complex, "mutually reinforcing" webs of domination. While solutions such as a warning system for the Indian Ocean or the impressive amounts of humanitarian charity have offered important measures, both immediate response and charity are limited in that they function within a discourse of "natural" disaster. Neither solution questions the levels of poverty and environmental exploitation that transform natural occurrences into global catastrophes.

It has been said that growth emerges from loss. The tsunami, with all of its loss, offers an opportunity for us as global citizens to grow beyond Catlin's lament for "nature," and re-imagine our own discourses not just on natural catastrophe but on ecological disaster. If we continue to employ a concept of "nature" that hides from view "mutually reinforcing" modes of domination (either in terms of naming catastrophes "natural" or in hoping to preserve "nature" in the face of environmental disaster) we will continue to apply band-aid solutions to both natural catastrophes and environmental problems, ignoring their emergence from the intersection of racial displacement, colonialism, gender inequalities, and systematic social underdevelopment. We must take the "nature" out of catastrophe to see, critique, and de-link these webs of domination. While we're at it, perhaps we should take the "nature" out of environmentalism itself.

NOTES



Catlin, *Black Hawk, prominent Sauk chief*. <http://www.omnifineart.com/prod/index.asp?fuseaction=viewdetail&sku=10824>

¹ Catlin attended this and a series of other treaty negotiations as Clark's personal, invited guest (Roehm 48). It was around this time that Catlin painted Clark's portrait, and Catlin did not hesitate to paint rapidly as many Indian portraits as he could. It was also during this trip that Catlin made many of his connections with the American Fur Company, who eventually escorted his legendary journey west.

² Black Hawk's cell had found a life in the newspaper stories, gossip, and folklore of American frontier life and throughout the eastern cities. Even T.D. "Jim Crow" Rice, credited by many historians as the 1828 inventor of racially dehumanizing blackface minstrel shows, featured the cell in the play "Black Hawk" at the Bowery Theater in New York.

³ The spectacle for Black Hawk did not end in the cell, the papers, or on

Catlin's canvas. A significant part of Black Hawk's prison sentence and Jackson's publicity stunt was "a tour of eastern military installations and cities to fully absorb the extent of American white might. Transported by steamboat, stagecoach, and railroad, the [Sac] prisoners-of-war were newsmakers everywhere they were displayed" (Bank 476). Jackson's was a blatant message that those who attempted to challenge his regime of truth were so powerless that they became automatons in Jackson's live Indian puppet show for re-election. These forced tours that Black Hawk endured "were conducted with ceremony to the theaters, the public gardens, the arsenal, and other places of interest . . . amid fireworks, balloon ascensions" (478).

⁴ Many environmental historians find enough compelling similarities to locate Catlin at the origins of American environmentalism. John Opie features Catlin in *Nature's Nation*; Catlin is anthologized in such readers as *The State and Nature* and the *Norton Anthology of American Nature Writing*. Roderick Nash refers to this quote from Catlin as "the birth of the national park idea in the United States" ("American Invention" 728). Benjamin Kline declares that Catlin's "arguments for preserving wilderness in the United States initiated the idea for national parks and, in particular, the creation of Yellowstone National Park" (35).

⁵ In fact, some colonized cultures have begun answering back. For example, as journalist Amy Goodman reports, the Inuit have filed a lawsuit with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights against the U.S. for emitting many of the emissions that the Inuit believe to have led to the loss of their polar ice caps—thus eliminating their ability to hunt seals, to travel, and to have protection from arctic storms. The Inuit have had to relocate some communities due to rising sea temperatures, and they hold the US accountable for a new kind of removal—environmental devastation from over consumption.

⁶ Moreover, the global corporate drive towards the privatization of the commons is aided by such events. The devastation of the tsunami has placed private water companies in a position to benefit from the now deepened dependency of third world peoples, who traditionally saw water as a human right, not a commodity. Even before the tsunami, women in some parts of Africa and Asia spend over forty hours per week walking to collect clean water, obstructing their time for education, family, and political participation (Warren 7). These cultures are in a worsening position of limited choices and will likely

have to access water through private companies more than ever (the epitome of systematic underdevelopment). The World Bank's hope that water (the world's fastest growing market) represents a one trillion dollar per year industry (Shiva 88) has certainly been strengthened by the crises created out of the tsunami.

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