

MORE THAN LAND:  
NATIVE AMERICAN DISPOSSESSION AT GRAND CANYON

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by

Anna Magdalena Provenzano

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NATIVE AMERICAN DISPOSSESSION AT GRAND CANYON

by

Anna Magdalena Provenzano

Thesis Supervisor:

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Jennifer A. Devine, Ph.D.  
Department of Geography

Approved:

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Heather C. Galloway, Ph.D.  
Dean, Honors College

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By

Anna Magdalena Provenzano

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## **ABSTRACT**

Native American dispossession has been a constant occurrence throughout history since their first contact with European settlers. This thesis examines the different forms of dispossession affecting Native Americans around Grand Canyon National Park. My research focuses on a proposed development project on the Navajo Reservation called the Grand Canyon Escalade, and how this project illuminates three major forms of dispossession in the Navajo community: living legacies of land dispossession, the dispossession of an economic livelihood, and the dispossession of access to and control over sacred places and practices. To conduct my research, I primarily used several qualitative methods, including participant observation in Grand Canyon Semester program, and content and textual analysis of tribal newspapers and websites detailing potential detrimental impacts of the Escalade project, as well as the potential benefits. This thesis draws from the work by William Cronon about land dispossession, while also rejecting the traditional idea that dispossession is limited to land or is a singular event in history. Instead, drawing on scholarship from Dianne Rocheleau, Diana Ojeda and Jennifer Devine, I make the argument that dispossession is an ongoing situation that takes multiple forms, which can be seen through the proposed Escalade project.

## **I. Introduction**

“They made us many promises, more than I can remember, but they never kept but one; they promised to take our land, and they took it.” – Red Cloud (Lakota)

Disregard for Native American rights, unfortunately, has been a pervasive and enduring issue throughout the history of the United States. Since the first settlers from Europe established colonies in North America, Native Americans have experienced rights abuses on issues ranging from land rights to tribal sovereignty. Native Americans have suffered genocide, land dispossession, and cultural desecration of their sacred sites, yet American schools teach their students little of this history, and when they do, it often appears as a mere footnote of an event that happened long ago. Through the story of the Navajo Nation’s struggle for life and autonomy in and around the Grand Canyon, this thesis argues that Native American dispossession is an ongoing issue, rather than a historical event, and is defined by multiple forms of dispossession, not just land dispossession. I support these arguments through an ethnographic and qualitative study of a proposed tourism development on the Navajo Nation, the Grand Canyon Escalade.

The Navajo reservation is located in Northern Arizona bordering Grand Canyon National Park to the east, Southern Utah, Western New Mexico, and is broken up into different chapters, which function much like states. Each chapter has an elected president who acts as a representative to the Tribal Council, where they are able to voice the opinions of their chapter. The Escalade project is

proposed in the Bodaway-Gap chapter on the Navajo Reservation, which borders Grand Canyon National Park on its eastern rim.

The Navajo reservation were established in 1868 through a violent process of removal and relocation by the US government and created bitter land struggles between the Navajo and Hopi Tribes. Since then, tensions have been alleviated and the Navajo and Hopi people have coexisted peacefully. They have also managed to find common ground where it matters: the defense of sacred land. They both recognize the importance of sacred land and sacred ceremonies, and share the desire to preserve the sites and cultural practices for future generations. This thesis mainly focuses on the impacts the proposed Escalade project will have on the Navajo community; however, it should be noted that the Hopi Tribe will also face many adverse ramifications from the project because of its very close location to sacred sites.

The Navajo and Hopi peoples have a legal and moral right to have access to the land they call sacred. However, their ability to practice their religion on their land has become threatened by the proposal of a massive development on the Navajo Reservation located on the east rim of Grand Canyon outside of the National Park boundaries. The development is called the Grand Canyon Escalade and, if built, will include a tramway that will shuttle tourists from the canyon rim to the bottom, which is now only accessibly by trail. The Escalade will add a number of jobs on the reservation, where the unemployment rate is a staggering 60%, and where 43% of the population lives below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the

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<sup>1</sup> Landry, Alyssa. "Navajo Nation Economic Growth Creating Jobs and True Independence." *Indian Country Today*., last modified August 28, 2013

most controversial aspect of the Escalade project is that it will shuttle up to 10,000 people a day down to one of the most sacred sites to both Navajo and Hopi people: the confluence of the Little Colorado and Colorado Rivers.

The United States government has a legal obligation to respect and observe tribal sovereignty and treaty rights, meaning they have no authority to override this proposed development. It is entirely up to the tribe, and being a sovereign tribe within the United States means the tribe has the power to govern themselves and manage their own property, as well as establish government-to-government relationships between themselves and the United States federal government.

An analysis of the proposed Escalade tourism development at Grand Canyon illustrates that Native American dispossession is ongoing and takes multiple forms in the United States. I define dispossession as depriving someone, or a group of people, of land, tangible property, non-material possessions, or a way of life.<sup>2</sup> This study argues that dispossession surrounding the proposed Escalade takes the form of the dispossession of land, the dispossession of an economic livelihood, and the dispossession of the right to access sacred land. Doing so contributes to the academic literature by illuminating contemporary problems of rights infringement of Native Americans through contemporary tourism development in and around protected areas, and contributes to the growing scholarly literature that is re-conceptualizing dispossession. The

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<sup>2</sup> Devine, Jennifer and Diana Ojeda. 2017. "Violence and Dispossession in Tourism Development: A Critical Geographical Approach." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 25 (5): 605.

project's policy implications suggest that development in the name of tourism infringes upon the rights and access of the people who occupy the land.

## II. Background

### American westward expansion

Westward expansion was fueled by Manifest Destiny—the idea that spreading out was “inevitable, justified, and benevolent.”<sup>3</sup> The sentiment of the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century was how American frontier was a place of vast wilderness inhabited with Native people that needed to be civilized and shown how God could positively influence their lives through the altruism of settlers from the East. Thomas Jefferson believed westward expansion was healthy for the nation, and urged people to colonize the land acquired through the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. He envisioned settlers living and farming in freedom, all while spreading “the great experiment of liberty,” as stated by John O’Sullivan, who coined the term “Manifest Destiny” in his 1845 article, “Annexation” in *Demographic Review*. According to O’Sullivan, the continuation of American freedom depended on expansion.<sup>4</sup>

In many ways, manifest destiny and westward expansion were a form of American exceptionalism, most notably because settlers heading west believed they had a unique mission to transform this new area to reflect a more perfected society to the east, while also maintaining the idea of superiority over others. This feeling toward expansion was active in the minds of Americans during this time period, but the Monroe Doctrine was the closest the United States ever came to

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<sup>3</sup> Kuchera, Carolyn. 2016. *Manifest Destiny*. New York: Oxford University Press.  
–*Manifest Destiny* book

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

making Manifest Destiny official policy.<sup>5</sup> Simply put, in his annual address to Congress, President James Monroe warned European nations that the United States would defend other nations against any further European colonization. This eventually led to the idea that Americans were morally superior, and, because of that, had an obligation to share their liberty.

### **Navajo tribal history around the Grand Canyon**

The expansion of people across the country meant more opportunities for individual land ownership, but it also meant encroaching on land occupied by Native American tribes for hundreds, and in some cases, thousands of years. People, whether living seasonally or permanently, have been a constant in the history of the Grand Canyon for more than 10,000 years.<sup>6</sup> Archaeological evidence puts the existence of the Navajo people, who call themselves the *Diné*, dates to 1541 in Northern New Mexico. It is believed that from there, they made their way to the Grand Canyon, as suggested by traditional oral histories that reference the Colorado River.<sup>7</sup> Traditional tribal beliefs still held by many of the members of the Navajo Nation today claim that their people passed through four worlds before entering into the current and final Fifth World.

When occupying this region, the Navajo developed extensive trade relationships with the Ancestral Puebloan and historic Puebloan people. It was during this time in the early to mid-sixteenth century that new goods, such as

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<sup>5</sup> Murphy, Gretchen. 2005. *Hemispheric Imaginings: The Monroe Doctrine and Narratives of U.S. Empire* Duke University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Biggs, Patricia. "Navajo.", last modified July 8, accessed February 10, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

flint points and moccasins were introduced to the Southwest, where they still remain a popular cultural element in the region.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Navajo Origin Story**

An understanding of the Navajo people would not be close to completion without the explanation of where they came from as a people, through the telling of their origin story. The Navajo creation story is a complex web of what is referred to as the First People making their way from the First World to the current world Fifth World.

In *The North American Indian Reader*, the printed Navajo origin story is told in November of 1928 by Sandoval, Hastin Tlo'tsi hee (Old Man Buffalo Grass), who was a principal Navajo chief. He told the story to the editor for the primary purpose of future generations knowing where their people came from.<sup>9</sup>

The First World was dark, with four corners and four clouds. The First Man and First Woman, along with the first corn, was formed when the Black Cloud met the White Cloud. The World is described as being a small island, thick with mist, with only one pine tree. Humans were not in their current form at this point, and they were known as the Mist People, taking no exact form. Many other beings emerged at this time, making the first world crowded, with many people living unhappily together. This unhappiness lead them to move from the First

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<sup>8</sup> "History: The Navajo." Utah American Indian Digital Archives., accessed February 12, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Turner, Frederick W. 1974. *The Portable North American Indian Reader*. New York, NY: Viking.

World, or the World of Darkness and Dampness, to the Second World, or Blue World.

A number of beings were already living in the second world when the First Man and Woman arrived, mainly blue feathered birds. The First Man and Women again became frustrated with the lack of space in the Second World, and, much like their ascent from the First World to the Second, they left behind the Second and crawled into the Third World.

When they arrived in the Third World, they encountered two rivers, one running East to West described as male, and the other running North to South described as female. There was no sun in the Third World, and the only landforms were the two rivers, and six sacred mountains. The First People inhabited this world for a long time until the First Female became bored with the monotony of her life. She asked one of the other first beings, the Coyote, to steal two children for her, a boy and a girl, from the Water Buffalo where the two rivers cross. Coyote completed the task, but Water Buffalo wanted their children back, so they brought a great flood to the First People, forcing them to exit out of the Third World by climbing up a pine tree. When they entered the Fourth World, the Water Buffalo followed them, demanding they return the stolen children. Coyote agreed, and returned the boy through a ceremonial offering, but decided to keep the girl. The Water Buffalo agreed, and the floods receded from the Fourth World when she left.

The Fourth World was not a large place, and First Man was not satisfied with it. It was small and barren because of the floods caused by Water Buffalo, so growing food was near impossible. While the First People were contemplating

their existence in the Fourth World, they met a new being, the Locust, who offered to climb a tree through the top of the Fourth World and into the Fifth to see if it was habitable for the beings of the Fourth World. When he emerged into the Fifth World, he was met by what Sandoval described as a water bird, and what the editor of *The North American Indian Reader* clarifies as a grebe. The Locust had to prove himself to the water bird that he was worthy of inhabiting the Fifth World, and when he did, he invited the First People who were still waiting down below in the Fourth World.

The Fifth and current World is described as the Many-Colored World, as well as the Changeable World. It was after their emergence into the Fifth World that the First People built their Hogan, which is still considered a traditional Navajo structure built of logs and earth.

This creation story is essential in understanding how the Navajo are connected to their land, and how they have related to the Grand Canyon region for thousands of years.

### **Details of The Escalade Project**

The Escalade Project was formally proposed in 2012 by members of the Confluence Partners, Lamar Whitmer and Albert Hale. The development will consist of a tramway starting at the rim, and ending at the high water above the Colorado River, at the boundary of the Navajo Nation and Grand Canyon National Park (see Figure 1). It will also include a restaurant, hotel, RV park, and amphitheater, all along the rim. The Confluence Partners tout that the project will bring in 3,500 new jobs to the area; however, they are not legally obligated to

hire only Navajo people, and are entirely responsible for the hiring process themselves, basically meaning they could hire anyone.

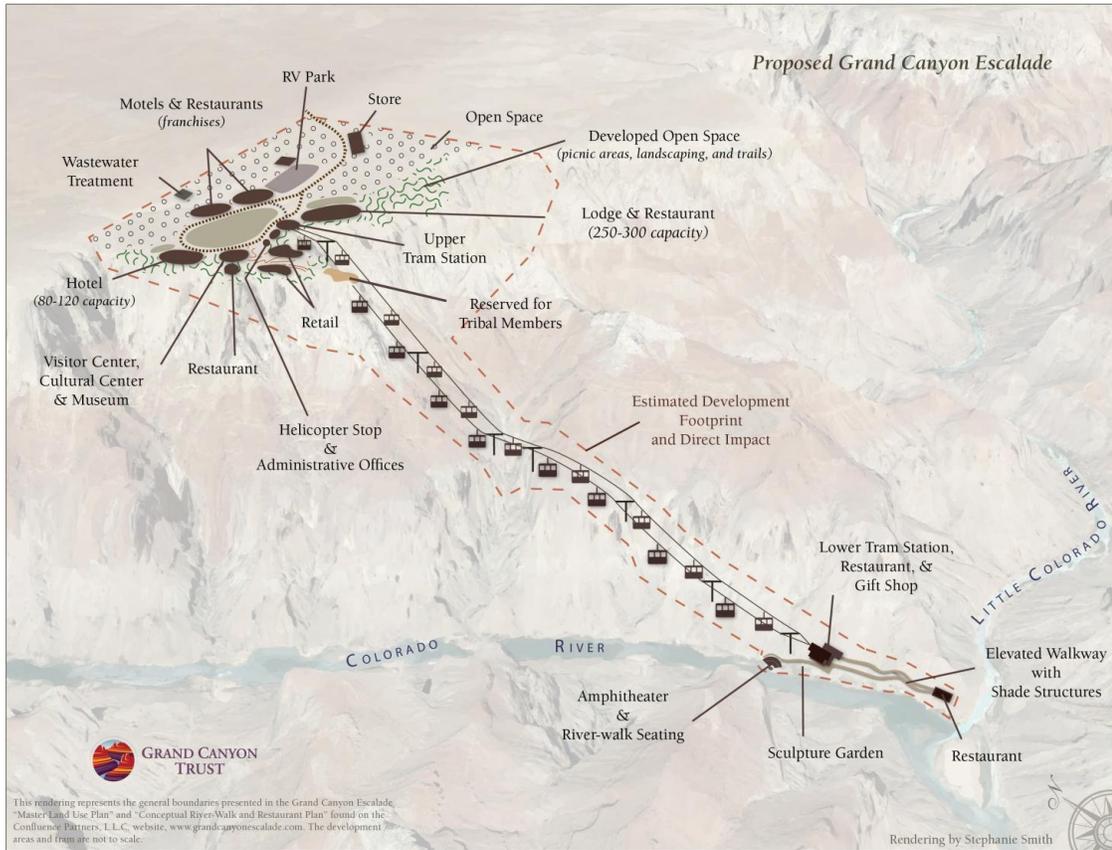
Since the Confluence Partners are an outside corporation unaffiliated with the Navajo Nation, they are able to decide the amount of profits the tribe will receive from the project. To start, the tribe will only receive 8% of annual profits when the project is built, and caps at a deprecatory 18%; however, the tribe will only reach this cap if the Escalade receives at least two million visitors a year. In 2013, Grand Canyon National Park received close to five million visitors for the entirety of the park, which shows that it will be near impossible for the Escalade the receive the same number.<sup>10</sup>

The Navajo Nation is incredibly split on the Escalade project. Many are in favor, including members of the tribal council, and they believe it is an opportunity for growth and development, which will eventually bring jobs to the reservation. Those who are opposed live in the close vicinity of where the Escalade is proposed to be built, and who will be impacted the most by the project, are almost unanimously against it. They are aware that they will not only lose their land to the development, but the access to grazing space for cattle, and the loss of visitation and worshipping rights to their sacred sites.

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<sup>10</sup> Eberle, Sinjin. "Grand Canyon Escalade -- how could this Happen?" American Rivers., last modified August 31, accessed February 20, 2017

**Figure 1: Map of the proposed Grand Canyon Escalade**



Smith, Stephanie. "Proposed Grand Canyon Escalade". April 21.

### III. Theoretical Framework

#### The Trouble with Wilderness

Wilderness is a social and cultural construct<sup>11</sup>. According to the Wilderness Act of 1964, humans are visitors who do not remain. Joseph Christmas Ives was contracted to explore the blank spot on the map that is now known to be Grand Canyon. He viewed the “extent and magnitude of the system of canyons to be astounding...the plateaus are cut into shreds by these gigantic chasms...” Even though he went on to conclude that the canyon had no monetary value in terms of potential mineral extraction, it was exactly this sentiment of awe invoked by not just Grand Canyon, but many other “grand” landscapes, including what is now Yosemite, Yellowstone, and Glacier National Parks. Ives’ description reflects romantic ideals that had dominated art, literature, and music both in America and in Europe in the nineteenth century; however, the two were regarded differently. The Romantic movement was very influential in terms of developing the idea of wilderness, but that idea, according to William Cronon in his essay, *The Trouble with Wilderness*, was not always something that was thought of as an attractive and divine place, as Romantics saw it, but as savage, desolate, and barren. It was thought of as a place where one became lost—where one could be tempted by the devil lurking in places people could not see. Before the Romantic movement took hold, wilderness was where people went against their will, a place of darkness and worthlessness.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cronon, William. “The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” *Environmental History* 1, 1 (1996). 7-28.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

The end of the nineteenth century was a turning point for the perception of wilderness. With John Muir's description of the Sierra Nevada in 1869 that "no description of heaven that I have ever heard or read seems so fine,"<sup>13</sup> many places that had the same awe and power that Ives experienced at Grand Canyon were given more attention. They were suddenly places that the American people had to see and experience. Cronon attributes this shift to two phenomena: the romantic sublime and the frontier. The sublime was something that stemmed from Romanticism—the idea that one could look at a landscape and feel both awe and terror at the same time; a sublime landscape was a place where God had complete and total control, and both man and nature were at His will. For the American people to accept it, wilderness had to become sacred. In some part, the sacred ideal had always been there because if the devil was there, then so was Christ. It was a place where "the boundaries between human and nonhuman, between natural and supernatural, had always seemed less certain than elsewhere"<sup>14</sup>

Wilderness is supposedly the only place where the disease that is human civilization has not infected. The idea of primitivism is coupled with the romantic sublime, and goes back to at least Rousseau, and is "the belief that the best antidote to the ills of an overly refined or civilized society was to return to simpler times."<sup>15</sup> Cronon writes extensively about the idea of the frontier, and continually presents it as a national myth. The movement was about rediscovering and reinventing, especially along the lines of feeling the urgent need to spread

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<sup>13</sup> Spence, Mark David. *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Environmental History* 1, 1 (1996), 10.

civilization and liberty to unknown, wild places. This sentiment later became known as Manifest Destiny, which, according to Cronon, not only allowed for expansion westward, but provided the perfect location for “experiencing what it meant to be an American.”<sup>16</sup> The people that believed in the frontier also held the sentimental value that the era of the frontier would pass, and usually tended to look back to “simpler” times. This specific way of thinking, that the frontier was a new and wild place, but also inevitably disappearing, laid the foundation for the desire for preservation. It was at this time of the passing frontier, not ironically, that the idea of national parks as a place for preserving wilderness, began to gain momentum.

During the times following the Civil War, it became a privilege for the upper class to seek out wilderness. To them it was not a place for habitation or “productive labor,” but merely a place separate from their lives for recreation. At this time, wilderness was viewed as form of escapism; people, primarily members of the upper class, would use wilderness as a way to get away from the common stresses that everyday life entails. Also around that time, the national park movement was gaining momentum, the Indian wars were drawing to a close and the remaining Native Americans were moved to their respective reservations. As Cronon and other have stated, the idea of “virgin uninhabited wilderness has been cruel,”<sup>17</sup> especially to Native Americans who once called these places home. Now that they were on their reservations, the white people could safely enjoy the pristine landscape in its natural, God envisioned state.

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<sup>16</sup> Cronon, William. “The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” *Environmental History* 1, 1 (1996), 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

Mark David Spence, in his 1999 book *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of National Parks*, describes the fascination with wild America in the antebellum era. Also, Spence claims that Indian removal did not stem entirely from romantic sentiments, as Cronon alludes to, but from a dissatisfaction with American politics and society, as well.<sup>18</sup> There were many displeasing things happening with politics, urban growth, rapid industrialization, and increased immigration that were causing unrest within American society. Furthermore, during this antebellum era, there was the obvious growing division between North and South that “undermined a sense of national unity.”<sup>19</sup> It was in part this unrest that fueled the movement of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny—to get away from society and spread liberty across the continent.

Since the beginning of the nation’s founding, American governments struggled to achieve what they thought of as “expansion with honor.” The ongoing question was how to assimilate Indian Territory with a growing country. According to Spence, in theory there were only two solutions to this quandary: assimilation or removal. It was questionable whether or not Americans could accept the “Red Man” into their society, but assimilation was more honorable than outright removal. Early members of westward expansion naively thought they could buy land in the distant western territories, missionaries could set up permanent missions, and native people could assimilate at their own pace.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Spence, Mark David. *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 34.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

## Defining Dispossession

According to Jennifer Devine, Diana Ojeda, and Dianne Rocheleau, tourism development is an ongoing process and can be linked to different types of dispossession other than land.<sup>21</sup> By giving up their sacred land for the sake of development, the Hualapai tribe, who built the Grand Canyon Skywalk, and potentially the Navajo Nation, lose the “autonomy of their community,” while the commodification of sacred sites “dispossess them of their own cultural heritage, history and recognized presence in space.”<sup>22</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, the definition of dispossession will be based on the definition from Devine and Ojeda, who define dispossession as an act that can occur without physically displacing a community of people, that is, *in situ*. They go on to explain that this kind of dispossession is related to the loss of the community’s autonomy.

To understand dispossession and the current literature on the topic, the 2003 work by David Harvey must be mentioned. Harvey, as cited and restated by Devine and Ojeda, builds from a Marxist foundation concerning primitive accumulation. He argues that dispossession occurs when people are violently separated from their means of production, marking “capitalism’s predatory expansion.”<sup>23</sup> This thesis will reinforce the existing body of literature on dispossession, as well as contribute to the geographical understanding of dispossession in relation to tourism by uniquely examining the Grand Canyon Escalade project.

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<sup>21</sup> Devine, Jennifer and Diana Ojeda. 2017. "Violence and Dispossession in Tourism Development: A Critical Geographical Approach." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 25 (5): 605.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

## **IV. Methodology**

This thesis employs a post-positivist epistemology and a variety of qualitative research methods that include participant observation, textual analysis, and archival research.

In the fall of 2014, I participated in a 15-week program through Northern Arizona University called Grand Canyon Semester. The program focused on the social, political, and environmental issues, both past and present, surrounding the greater Grand Canyon region and Colorado Plateau. Through the program, I was able to informally interview Navajo and Hopi people in strong opposition to the Escalade development project. They shared both their personal and cultural reasons for the opposition, which I was fortunate to hear first-hand. I also had the opportunity to informally interview the director of the Native America division of the Flagstaff-based non-profit organization, Grand Canyon Trust. He has been working directly with the Native American-run grassroots organization, Save the Confluence, since its beginning in 2009. He also shared a strong opposition to the Escalade development, and has devoted much of his division's effort to informing the public on the facts of the Escalade, and how it will not benefit the Native American community.

In my textual analysis, I reviewed a number of newspaper articles and online websites. I gained a lot of information about specific Navajo tribe members from the tribal-run newspaper, The Navajo Times. An article that was particularly helpful was one detailing the outstanding effects of the Bennett Freeze. The article gave a clear and detailed background of how the Bennett Freeze was initiated back in the 1960s before transitioning into the current

situation on the Navajo Reservation, specifically in the Bodaway-Gap chapter. I analyzed this and other articles to make the argument that the lifting of the Bennett Freeze allowed for development corporations to move in and propose projects such as the Escalade.

Another online article I found helpful was a letter to the editor of the *Navajo-Hopi Observer* from the then president-elect of the Bodaway-Gap chapter in the Navajo Nation. His ardent anti-Escalade rhetoric helped me in my argument that the Escalade will not be wholly beneficial to the Bodaway-Gap chapter, and possibly not even to the Navajo Nation. His statement that he Escalade has only divided the community helped my argument. It was very beneficial to read a first-hand account of actual grazing permit holder, and how he, as president of the chapter, will actively argue against the Escalade Project because it would allow for thousands of tourists to roam unrestricted, which is a direct violation of his grazing rights.<sup>24</sup>

I gained a lot of valuable information from both the pro and anti-Escalade websites using content analysis as a method. The grassroots organization, Save the Confluence, provided a lot of insightful information on the importance of the Confluence of the Colorado and Little Colorado Rivers as a sacred site that Navajo people have considered extremely culturally significant for many generations. Their site also provided information about how the Escalade would impact the environment at the Grand Canyon, which is already a fragile ecosystem whose resources have been exploited for a long time. The Confluence

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<sup>24</sup> Yellowman, Raymond D. "Letter to the Editor: NABI Committee should Get Facts before Voting on Escalade Project." *Navajo-Hopi Inquirer.*, last modified December 9, 2016.

Partners, LLC, website GrandCanyonEscalade.com, gives very general information about the specifics of the project, and how they believe it will be beneficial to the Navajo Nation. I found it interesting that there were instances between the two sites where one would make a claim about the project, and the other site would write a rebuttal piece refuting that claim. For example, the Confluence Partners website made the bold claim that the Confluence was not a sacred site whatsoever to the Navajo people, which Save the Confluence quickly and adamantly denied.

I obtained many resources through Alkek Library, Northern Arizona University's Cline Library, and the Grand Canyon National Park's archives. Most of the Navajo Times articles came from Alkek Library. I also had the privilege of speaking with several librarians at the Cline Library who helped me locate sources about the Bennett Freeze and tribal history in the Grand Canyon region. Most of the information located in the Background section detailing the different events leading up to the formation of Grand Canyon National Park I obtained from Grand Canyon National Park's online archives, which is free and open to the public.

To analyze this data, I used open coding and grounded theory to analyze my texts and my field notes.<sup>25</sup> Grounded theory suggests that you do not have predefined arguments or themes in analyzing your data, rather you use "open coding" to identify themes as they emerge. I selectively coded my field notes,

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<sup>25</sup> Charmaz, Kathy. 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. 2. ed. ed. Los Angeles [u.a.]: SAGE.

newspaper articles, and website information to identify the three themes that structure my discussion.

This research has its limitations, mainly by the time I was able to spend at Grand Canyon, and additional interviews with tribal members would have deepened my research. This project would also benefit from in-situ archival research at Northern Arizona University. I have also thought carefully about my positionality within the research and realize that as an outsider to the Navajo community, I am never fully able to understand the ways in which their tourism decision and the production of paradise entail the dispossession of Native American lands and livelihoods. I also realize, however, that I can leverage my position as an American citizen to educate non-Native people about the ways tribes like the Navajo and Hopi experience dispossession as an ongoing and multifaceted experience.

## **V. Discussion: More than Land Dispossession: the Escalade Development**

### **a. Living Legacies of Navajo Land Dispossession**

The Escalade development project is deeply rooted in historical and contemporary Native American land dispossession, primarily through two aspects: the historical creation of reservations, and the dispossession of usufruct rights through the Bennett Freeze.

The proposed Escalade development illuminates the many ways in which Native Americans living in and around the Grand Canyon experience multiple, interwoven forms of dispossession, many of them a result of historic land dispossession. The Escalade development is proposed to be built on land that has continually been occupied by the same families for many generations. Those in opposition to the project have a deep connection to their ancestral lands, as well as a growing fear they will not be able to share important elements of their culture with the younger generation that are primarily exhibited through the use of their land. This entire development has its roots in historical land dispossession, when the Navajo people were moved from the ancestral lands to their current reservation, and the repercussions of an outdated policy that enabled further dispossession.

The attitudes of white settlers toward Native Americans in the mid 1800s were comprised of a combination of paternalism, racism and greed.<sup>26</sup> This

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<sup>26</sup> Elliott, Sarah K. "How American Indian Reservations Came to Be." Public Broadcasting Station., last modified May 25, accessed March 2, 2017

sentiment was reinforced by President Andrew Jackson's notorious reputation for Native American land dispossession, which reflected the general attitude of the American population. Before he even became president, he was known as "Sharp Knife" by Native Americans in their battles on the frontier, and thoroughly expressed his view about the character of Native Americans in general: He believed that Native Americans had:

"Neither the intelligence, the industry, the moral habits, nor the desire for improvement which are essential to any favorable change in their condition. Established in the midst of another and a superior race, and without appreciating the causes of their inferiority or seeking to control them, they must necessarily yield to the force of circumstances and ere long disappear."<sup>27</sup>

Along with the loss of their land, Native Americans during this time were subject to the enrolment of boarding schools, which can be thought of as "cultural annihilation."<sup>28</sup> These schools were thought of as a way for helping young indigenous children by indoctrinating them with the morals and values of white society. But, it was more important to the creators of the boarding schools to erase, in a way, the way of life and cultural traditions that Native Americans had been a part of for so long—even more so than introducing them to white culture.

The Dawes Act came in 1887 and further instituted the values of white society on Native Americas by supporting the notion of individually owned private property, which carried over to reservation land. The reservation land could now be broken up into smaller parcels of land for individual families, which was radically different than the communal-style of living Native Americans

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<sup>27</sup> Elliott, Sarah K. "How American Indian Reservations Came to Be." Public Broadcasting Station., last modified May 25, accessed March 2, 2017

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

had been practicing for generations.

The first time the Navajo people came into contact with the United States Army was in 1846 during the Mexican-American War. A peace treaty was later reached between Navajo leadership and the army, but many young Navajo raiders did not honor the treaty and continued to steal livestock from New Mexican settlers. Another treaty was signed 3 years later and allowed for forts and trading posts to be built on Navajo land. The building of the forts has been cited in military documents as a precautionary measure to protect settlers and the Navajo from each other because livestock raids were still occurring. It was at this time that Colonel Kit Carson was ordered to go in and obtain the surrender of the Navajo. Only a few surrendered when Carson first went in, and it was not until Carson and a group of New Mexican militia went on a raid through the Navajo territory killing people and destroying crops did the remaining group of Navajo surrender. The time that followed is known in history as The Long Walk of the Navajo.

In 1864, the remaining Navajo, around 9,000 men, women, and children, were gathered together, and forced to walk over 300 miles from their land to Fort Sumner, New Mexico to be interned at Bosque Redondo. Along with the fact that it was an internment camp for Native people whose land was just taken from them, Bosque Redondo was somewhat of a disaster. Clean, adequate water was not provided, along with wood, livestock and basic provisions.<sup>29</sup> The internment at Bosque Redondo ended when Navajo leaders and the United States Army

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<sup>29</sup> Iverson, Peter. 2002. *Diné : A History of the Navajos*. 1st ed. United States: University of New Mexico Press.

signed the Treaty of Bosque Redondo in the summer of 1868. The treaty terms included the official establishment of the Navajo reservation, along with compulsory education for Navajo children, the protection of basic rights for Navajo people, and agricultural provisions, such as seeds. In one of the few instances where native people were allowed to return to their original land, after the treaty was signed, the Navajo were allowed to return to their land located within their four sacred mountains, which is split between Arizona and New Mexico.

The Bennett Freeze has been a longstanding issue in the Navajo-Hopi community for over 40 years. Enacted in 1966 by former Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Robert L. Bennett, a development freeze was placed on 1.5 million acres of Navajo and Hopi land. The freeze was supposed to quell a long-standing land dispute between the Navajo and Hopi, but instead created extremely adverse conditions for the families living in the freeze zone. The conditions on the reservation were execrable because the freeze prevented any kind of development in the affected area, from simple maintenance like plumbing and roof repair to the building roads and schools and even opening a business.<sup>30</sup> President Obama lifted the freeze in 2009 and several families were marked for emergency development who were living out of their cars or with relatives.<sup>31</sup> The lift of the ban, finally, was celebrated as an achievement, however, with the ban now lifted, many community members believe it has made it possible for

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<sup>30</sup> Linthicum, Kate. "Trying to be Rebuild After 40 Frozen Years." *Los Angeles Times.*, last modified November 5, accessed December 15, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Minard, Anne. "The Bennett Freeze's Surreal Nightmare should be Ending— But It's Not." *Indian Country Today.*, last modified December 18, accessed January 4, 2017.

development corporations, such as those involved in Confluence Partners, LLC, to propose development on this land when it was not allowed before.

The Bennett Freeze is a prime example of the loss of usufruct rights in the community, meaning when the Freeze was in place, the Native American community in the Bodaway-Gap chapter was dispossessed of their ability to make very basic decisions about their own land. By not being able to build or maintain basic infrastructure on their land, they lost their ability to use and enjoy their property, which should be protected with usufruct rights. Native American tribes are recognized as sovereign nations, yet the Bennett Freeze shows that the United States Government still dictates much of what happens on the reservations.

If the Confluence Partners had not come in, it would have been another corporation to propose a large-scale development, and another, and so on. These corporations, much like mineral extraction corporations, move into an impoverished area, make many promises having to do with jobs and economic ventures that the community sees as an opportunity to move forward. Nonetheless, in reality, they do prioritize community needs, whether it is acquiring land or valuable resources, as long as there is profit.

The living legacy of land dispossession is exhibited through the historic creation of reservations, where the majority of Navajo people reside today, and the contemporary loss of usufruct rights through the Bennett Freeze. The loss of land, as demonstrated in the definition of dispossession, is not just the loss of a material item, but the loss of something tangible that alters a way of life.

## **b. Dispossessing the Navajo of an Economic Livelihood**

Another form of dispossession that arises from the Escalade project is the dispossession of an economic livelihood. Since the reservation was created in 1868, the primary source of income and occupation for the community living in the Bodaway-Gap chapter has been the grazing of livestock, those of which hold legal grazing permits from the government. In order for the Escalade project to be approved, the Confluence Partners will have to receive unanimous support from the over 30 grazing permit holders residing in the Bodaway-Gap chapter.

The project has many stipulations, but the only one that has the power to disrupt the lives of the people residing near the proposed development is their forfeiture of 420 acres of land where the development will be built. The land is currently used for grazing cattle, and, if the project is approved, many people will lose an income that is crucial for those who live in such a rural and isolated area through the loss of grazing rights.

Furthermore, the idea that the Confluence Partners are coming from a purely altruistic place is somewhat fabricated, and if the Navajo benefit at all from this project at all, it is because they fit the needs of the developers, and not the other way around. The project really only has one goal, and it is to increase the wealth of the developers.

Another economic stipulation for the approval of the project is the requirement of the Navajo Nation to pay an estimated \$65 million for the construction of an all-weather 28-mile road leading to the Escalade from Highway 89, while also holding responsibility for its maintenance, therefore

adding additional future costs.<sup>32</sup> This is a substantial sum of money for any government, but especially so for the Navajo Nation where many people are living in third world-like conditions, many of which were the outcome of the Bennett Freeze. After the freeze was lifted, the community was promised a sizeable amount of money to repair the neglected infrastructure that the freeze created; however, the money still has not come through almost a decade later. Instead of pouring the \$65 million into a development that will dispossess the community of a right to their land, the Navajo Nation can give the money directly back to the community, which will have a much more long-term benefit than the Escalade.

Poverty and unemployment are rampant throughout the Nation as a whole, but the people living in the Bodaway-Gap chapter face unique conditions having been an area affected by the Bennett Freeze. There are still homes in desperate need of repair, but money the community was promised after the freeze was lifted has not come through yet. Those in support of the project are setting their hopes on the inflow of cash from the project, however, the money from the project will not go directly to the Bodaway-Gap chapter, but to the Navajo Nation Tribal Council who will decide how, or if, to distribute the money across the chapters.

The dispossession of an economic livelihood can clearly be seen through the Escalade project. Valuable grazing land will be forfeited, and many people will lose money all in the hopes of being able to work at the new development, which

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<sup>32</sup> Eberle, Sinjin. "Grand Canyon Escalade -- how could this Happen?" American Rivers., last modified August 31, accessed February 20, 2017.

is not even guaranteed in the first place. This loss of land contributes to the definition of dispossession that is evaluated in this thesis because the Navajo community will be dispossessed of their right to make a living, thus moving beyond traditional land dispossession.

### **c. Dispossession of the Sacred**

The dispossession of sacred land and practices for the purposes of a large development project is not a new event in Native American reservations around the Grand Canyon. The Grand Canyon Skywalk is an emblematic case and presages potential impacts of proposed Escalade project.

When outside developers move into an area promising great wealth to an impoverished people, there are, more than often, strings attached, and the Navajo are not the first Native American tribe to embark on an extensive development project. In 2007, the Hualapai Tribe, whose reservation is located on the Western edge of Grand Canyon outside the park, invested in a \$30 million project known as the Grand Canyon Skywalk. In this case, and in the case of the Escalade, the developments were both proposed on sacred land, but the Hualapai people chose to relinquish their land for the sake of money and development. The Grand Canyon Skywalk is an 800-foot-long horse-shoe shaped glass walkway extending over the rim of Grand Canyon so visitors can see directly below them. Visitors to the skywalk, 70% of which are from foreign countries, pay between \$100 and \$400 for entrance to the Skywalk, or a package that includes a

helicopter ride, a short ride up the Colorado River and a tour of Hualapai sacred sites.<sup>33</sup>

According to the Assistant General Manager of the Grand Canyon Skywalk and member of the Hualapai Tribe, Lola Wood, in a 2006 National Public Radio (NPR) interview said the Skywalk provided the tribe with the opportunity to buy the things that every other American gets to buy—about buying things new, not renting or buying second-hand. She notes that since the Skywalk has been built, she has noticed that people who are employed by the Skywalk are able to buy the new things they have desired for so long, so the development has brought in the revenue that the tribe so desperately needed.<sup>34</sup>

Since the Skywalk's initial construction, the tribe has built a restaurant, more lodging, and a museum highlighting the Hualapai's extensive cultural ties to Grand Canyon. Wilford Watanani is a member of the Hualapai tribe and guides visitors to sites that are held sacred by his tribe. While he guides tours, he dresses in Native attire including a shell necklace and eagle feather in his hair.<sup>35</sup> In the NPR article, he states that foreign visitors are always in awe of his appearance—that they have never seen a Native American before. These members of the Hualapai tribe are in control of their religion, however, now it has become a commodity. Through the construction of the Skywalk, the Hualapai have commercialized on their tribal history and sites that have been sacred to the

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<sup>33</sup> "Grand Canyon Skywalk: Tickets and Tour Packages." Grand Canyon Skywalk., accessed April 17, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Robbins, Ted. 2008. *Has Grand Canyon Skywalk Helped the Hualapai?* Renee Montagne. National Public Radio.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

tribe since before written history.<sup>36</sup>

The development of the Skywalk closely resembles the Escalade project, but on a much smaller scale. There were fierce opponents of the Skywalk, much like there is with the Escalade, who argued that the project disturbs sacred ground, where the supporters counter that the development will bring job opportunities to the 2,000 person Hualapai reservation that suffers from widespread poverty and a 50% unemployment rate, much like the larger Navajo reservation.<sup>37</sup>

Many critics argue that the Hualapai Tribe gave up their sacred land for the sake of profit, thus giving most of their control of their ancestral to the development corporations, whose idea of profit is rooted in exploitation. The issue is exactly the same with the Escalade. Lifting the Bennett Freeze allowed for corporations to move in and advise the communities on what they thought the Tribe needed, all while proposing development projects that pose a threat to the cultural significance and existence of sacred land. The Hualapai are still allowed to practice their culture; however, they now have to share it with one million annual visitors. Not all of them have a problem with sharing their culture with the world, like Hualapai tour guide, Wilford Watanani, yet many disagree with the aspect of sacred lands for profit. This very sentiment is what helped spark the “Sacred Not For Sale” slogan coined by the founders of the grassroots organization, Save the Confluence.

In 2012, the Escalade project was formally introduced to the Navajo

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<sup>36</sup> Robbins, Ted. 2008. *Has Grand Canyon Skywalk Helped the Hualapai?* Renee Montagne. National Public Radio.

<sup>37</sup> "Impossible Places - the Skywalk, a Step Too Far?", accessed April 17, 2017

Nation Tribal Council by Confluence Partners members Albert A. Hale,<sup>38</sup> and Lamar Whitmer.<sup>39</sup> According to Ranae Yellowhorse, who is a founding member of the Save the Confluence organization, states that the confluence of the Little Colorado and Colorado Rivers is sacred to the Navajo people, as well as 16 other tribes in the area, including the Hopi. In a video made for Grand Canyon Trust about the controversy surrounding the project, she says that the confluence is “the place where waters meet and is connected to our prayers and our Yeibichi<sup>40</sup> song, which is what we were taught and what we know.”<sup>41</sup> Another member of the Save the Confluence organization, Delores Wilson, who grew up three miles from the development site, says that her grandmother told her hold beings were in the confluence. The beings reside in the canyon, in the wind, in the river, and when you call out over the canyon, the echo is the holy beings speaking back to you.

This area has incredible significance in the culture of the people who have lived on the land for generations, including Ranae Yellowhorse, Delores Wilson, and their entire families. In the video, Yellowhorse takes her young grandchildren to the confluence for the first time to show them what her grandmother showed her, and the generations before her, and to share a very important aspect of their culture. If the Escalade is built, not only Ranae Yellowhorse and Delores Wilson will lose access to an integral part of their culture, but their children and

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<sup>38</sup> Member of the Navajo Nation Tribal Council

<sup>39</sup> *Save the Confluence: Keep the Canyon Grand*. Directed by Deidra Peaches, Jake Hoyungowa, B. C. Campbell, Sakya Calsoyas and Shirley Peaches. Paper Rocket Productions, 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Traditional ceremonial song

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

grandchildren, as well. The construction of this project dispossesses members of the community of their right to practice their religion and culture in a space that is untarnished by development and tourism, while also turning the very thing they call sacred into a commodity for outsiders to exploit.

According to Devine and Ojeda, dispossession is central to how tourism operates. In the Grand Canyon landscape, the desire of people not Native to consume tourism spaces and experiences has led to putting a price tag on the sacred through a practice of spatial fetishism. Spatial fetishism can be thought of as an act in tourism development that takes a certain aspect of an area, or in this case a culture, and turns it into something that can be objectified and sold as a commodity. Only certain elements of a culture are used as a product because they appeal to a broader audience when they are promoted. In the case of the Skywalk, Wilford Watanani dressing in his traditional Hualapai attire to attract the attention of foreign visitors can be considered as that aspect of spatial fetishism because he is using this culture as a product to make money.

The loss of a right to access land is not just land dispossession, but also the dispossession of the right to practice a culture and religion. The Escalade development will directly dispossess people of the land, which, in turn, dispossess people with the right to worship on their sacred land, thus being deprived of an integral cultural element. This scenario was seen with the Hualapai people and the Skywalk, and how they are capitalizing on their sacred land, and, with the looming possibility of the Escalade becoming a reality, the Navajo could be facing the same situation.

In sum, this participant observation and textual analysis of archives and press coverage of the Escalade development illustrates that Native American dispossession takes many forms. I have identified three types of dispossession defining the Escalade project: through historical and contemporary land dispossession, the dispossession of an economic livelihood, and the dispossession of the right to access and worship on sacred land.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Native American rights and dispossession are still a thing many people think of as a one-time even in history—that Native Americans were moved from their ancestral land to reservations, and that was the end of it; however, recent development projects such as the Escalade and Skywalk at the Grand Canyon illustrate that dispossession continues to define Native American communities relations with non-Native governments, corporations and tourists.

This thesis illustrates the many ways in which Native American people living around Grand Canyon experience multiple forms of dispossession. In writing this thesis, I set out to find the different ways in which Native American people could potentially experience dispossession through the proposed Escalade project, and, through my research, I was able to explain that traditional land dispossession was not the only form of dispossession. I found that if the project is built, they will also have to forfeit the ownership of 420 acres of land right on the eastern rim of the Grand Canyon. Furthermore, because of this forfeiture of land, they will lose the right to graze their cattle, which dispossesses them of an economic livelihood. Also, with the site of the development resting on one of the most sacred sites known to the Navajo people, the site will become a commodity to the nearly 10,000 tourists expected to visit every day. The site will begin to lose its meaning among the people who hold it sacred if their access is restricted, or outright denied by the existence of the Escalade and the many people it promises to bring.

The Escalade is a current, working example of how dispossession is an ongoing and significant occurrence still plaguing Native American communities

today. It is disguised as an incredible opportunity in a community that so desperately needs it; however, it is nothing more than dispossession in the name of development.

Future research on the topic of Native American dispossession could focus on the definition of dispossession discussed in this thesis, and apply it to other current or recent situations where development projects are proposed on land Native American people find culturally significant or sacred, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline, or even on indigenous lands throughout the Americas.

This research has contributed to this field of study is furthering the discussion on current examples of Native American dispossession, while also contributing to debates surrounding the proposed Grand Canyon Escalade development.

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