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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Visualising Heritage: a critical discourse analysis of place, race, and nationhood along the Erie Canal

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ABSTRACT

The Erie Canal forever changed the American environment, both materially and ideologically. Since 1825, the iconic New York waterway's primary use has evolved from transportation to recreation. Today, leisure along the Erie Canal celebrates the "Empire State" throughout a Rust Belt still reeling from the racialised environmental injustices of industrial development and decline. This study collectively examines a wide sample of Erie Canal representations along its historic corridor to see their most recurring pattern: the dominant Erie Canal discourse. Through critical discourse analysis, this research qualitatively examines what is most often included and excluded in Erie Canal communication. The findings reveal a nostalgic, imposed gaze underpinned by the powerful ideologies of place, race, and nationhood that sustain inequality. We argue that in order for Erie Canal heritage spaces to initiate a democratisation process, these reproducing discourses of exclusion must be taken seriously.

KEYWORDS

Erie Canal; environmental justice; museums; heritage tourism; critical discourse analysis; New York

Main text introduction

Visualising the past, present, and future are inherently social processes because "what we see when we look is always culturally circumscribed" (Gabrielson 2019, 29). Perpetually growing knowledge about the world, combined with our limited capacity as individuals to process it all, makes us each reliant on the communication of others. According to the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), one site of communication the American public highly trusts is the museum (Wilkening 2021).

However, many point out that museums are far from neutral sites of communication (Autry and Murawski 2019; Wilkening 2021). Communication itself is power-laden, especially in the authoritative space of a museum (Gee 2004; Gee and Handford 2013; Urry and Larsen 2011). Power comes from "what people are told they are seeing" through social processes of meaning-making (Urry and Larsen 2011, 149). Museums expose something in their particular pattern of choices out of the infinite possibilities. Choices often lean towards romanticism because heritage spaces are "one way that nations present themselves to themselves and to others" (Urry and Larsen 2011, 146; Savoy 2015). But romanticised communication maintains an "uncomplicated picture" of history that can contradict other sources, even the surrounding local environment or one's lived experience (Autry and Murawski 2019; Jennings and Jones-Rizzi 2017; Sheriff 2018, 380).

In order to see the power and non-neutrality of the heritage space, one must examine what historic representations include and exclude, who is shaping the picture, for what purposes, and with what impacts. Not only do museums hold the power to market "heritage fantasies" (Urry and Larsen 2011, 140) that can become "sincere fictions" (Sue 2016, 24) about American history, they also have

the capacity to meaningfully contextualise the present moment through public historical engagement. Historical engagement is critical for progress towards justice (Autry and Murawski 2019; Jennings and Jones-Rizzi 2017). But the reason heritage scholars are discussing inclusivity today is because museums are not and have not historically been inclusive spaces (Autry and Murawski 2019). Research makes visible the significant lack of diversity in museums' narratives, representations, leadership, and power (Chakrabarty 1992; Jennings and Jones-Rizzi 2017). However, authenticity in cultural tourism consumption is defined as "a value or judgement brought forward by the consumer" (Ramkissoon and Uysal 2018, 104).

A recent AAM study about museums and trust states that "White people are more trusting than people of colour, and significantly more trusting of museums" (Wilkening 2021, 44). Anti-inclusive visitors who avoid inclusive content or are "extreme White nationalists" are "the most likely to find museums credible on history" (Wilkening 2021, 36, 38). Furthermore, people who "think museums have a political agenda" skew "more racially and ethnically diverse" (Wilkening 2021, 33). Yet, the study summarises that museums widely maintain their "superpower of trust" (Wilkening 2021, 55). Perhaps credibility, here, is less about critical historical engagement but rather a trust to privilege certain ideas, emotions, and people in the leisure space (Sue 2016; Wood and Ball 2013). Tourism literature argues that "tourists may not always seek to self-reflect while they are on holiday"; they are often seeking relaxation, pleasure, and place attachment (Ramkissoon 2020; Ramkissoon and Uysal 2018, 105). Place attachment is an emotional bond to the local environment with "profound impacts on our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well being" (Ramkissoon 2020). But, this raises the question: who gets to have place attachment and at what cost?

Erie Canal heritage tourism

This paper examines the inequality inherent in and actively maintained by Erie Canal heritage communication throughout the state of New York. Erie Canal tourism fits into a global pattern of "nostalgia for the industrial past", a gaze that distinctively generates from post-industrial decline and the "interest in industrial heritage" (Urry and Larsen 2011, 140; Ramkissoon 2020, 168). Followed by industrialisation and deindustrialisation, heritage recreation is one way for New York to generate new economic growth while marketing its own history. The particular inclusions and exclusions of industrial heritage are, thus, entrepreneurially motivated (Burd 2016) and "tell us more about the era in which they take place than they do about the era that they are recalling" (Sheriff 2018, 371).

The Erie Canal was one of the United States' first large-scale infrastructure projects when it joined the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes via a navigable waterway across New York. In 1825, this 363 mile long and four foot deep "artificial river" facilitated new possibilities for transportation, settlement, communication, and industrialisation as New York rose to become the "Empire State" (Burd 2016; Sheriff 2018, 375). Its successful "compression of distance and time" in the early nineteenth century is often represented as evidence of America's ingenuity and exceptionalism, emphasising the Canal's ongoing role and symbolism in the progress and "making of a great nation" (Bernstein 2005; Burd 2016; Sheriff 2018, 375). This narrative can be found along a modern canalway now used for recreation by "pleasure boaters, cyclists, and hikers" (Sheriff 2018, 374). One interpretive sign along the canalway appears briefly aware of itself, stating that "National heritage corridors are not created for nostalgia alone. They exist for tomorrow. They protect corridor communities so they will be good places to live".

Surrounding Erie Canal heritage tourism are the Canal's offspring: cities and still reeling from the profoundly asymmetrical and specifically racialised impacts of American "progress" (Ducre 2013; Perreault, Wraight, and Perreault 2012; Poverty & Race Research Action Council 2018; Teron 2022). The Erie Canal Museum, located in Syracuse, New York stands on the homelands of the Onondaga Nation. The Haudenosaunee Confederacy is a representative democracy of Six indigenous Nations of New York: the Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, Mohawk, and Tuscarora, whose lands were ethnically cleansed in the Sullivan-Clinton Genocide (Koehler 2018). In 1779, when George Washington

demanded the “total ruin, destruction, and devastation” of the Haudenosaunee, America’s first President was ordering the erasure of an entire ethnic group- the indigenous peoples of New York (Founders Online *n.d.*; Koehler 2018).

America’s first genocidal campaign did not erase the Haudenosaunee, but its racially motivated violence caused environmental destruction, migration, starvation, and a death toll up to 55.5% of their population, depopulating, damaging, and enabling successive thefts of the lands that would later carry the Erie Canal, “the mother of cities” (Koehler 2018, 427,429; Perreault, Wraight, and Perreault 2012). Today, Erie Canal leisure takes place directly upon Haudenosaunee lands while seldom acknowledging their ongoing presence and role in the formation of New York. Neither is the American institution of slavery, nor New York state’s consistent Black population and their relationships to the Canal represented proportionately in the canal years.

The 15th Ward of Syracuse, a historically redlined Ward with a concentrated population of Black residents, was later displaced by a new wave of the transportation revolution: interstate highways. Construction alternatively would have destroyed the historic Weighlock Building, the present-day home of the Erie Canal Museum. But Erie Canal preservationists, predominantly White, as well as residents from the 15th Ward, who were predominantly Black, both protested to protect their interests. Ultimately, a heritage site was preserved over a community. The Erie Canal Museum was open for two years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed racial segregation. However, urban renewal projects continued to racialise space. This can explain why Syracuse’s Everson Museum of Art currently stands where there were once Black-owned homes and businesses (Wright 2021, 1). Here, we see a multi-scalar pattern of environmental injustice exposing the state-sanctioned harm of environmental racism (Agyeman 2008; Baker 2021; Bolin, Grineski, and Collins 2005; Bullard 1990; Norgaard 2012, 85; Park and Pellow 2013; Pellow 2016; Pellow and Brehm 2013; Sturgeon 2009; Wright 2021).

Environmental justice

On their online homepage, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network asserts that “we all deserve a healthy and clean environment where our communities can thrive”. Greenpeace identifies this simply as the right to “an unthreatened existence”, a right everyone equally shares (Ducre 2013, 1). Yet, environmental justice (EJ) research continues to reveal global scales of environmental racism: a pattern of environmental threats disproportionately patterned and targeted along the biologically meaningless racial categories of difference that evolved alongside the idea of “pure” nature and have since “codified race into the Earth” (Agyeman 2008; Baker 2021; Bolin, Grineski, and Collins 2005; Ducre 2013; Finney 2014; Gabrielson 2019; Norgaard 2012, 82; Pellow and Brehm 2013; Ray 2013; Sturgeon 2009; Wright 2021, 1). Ducre emphasises the compounding impact of gender by placing “Black women’s experiences at the centre of analysis” and inviting us to bear witness to Black women’s agency in the face of environmental injustices (2013, 4). Though this paper attends more to race in Erie Canal communication, intersections of gender will be identified and are strongly encouraged for further study.

Historically, environmental justice claims and scholarship have evaluated exposures to, and demanded protections against, environmental racism largely rooted in the exposures of Black Americans and communities of colour to toxins (Bullard et al. 2008). Since the EJ Movement’s inception, claims have confronted a broad range of environmental threats as well as made calls for heightened proximity and exposure to environmental amenities and livelihood provisions. Related work has incorporated matters with global implications, including demands for climate justice, contests over land resulting in displacement and dispossession and broad concern for ecological justice related to growing threats from human products entering, and undermining, biospheres (Hoyett et al. 2016; Khayat 2022; Nkansah-Dwamena and Bonnie Raschke 2021). Local and place-based concerns have also been centred, including the scarce attention that EJ has historically received from municipal governments and sustainability

minded work, generally (Clark and Miles 2021; Teron 2015). Research also considers the unique conditions in which Indigenous communities can experience environmental inequality (Harris and Harper 2011), the symbolic annihilation of Black Americans, and the erasure of linguistically isolated population's concerns in environmental programming and sustainability planning, respectively (Teron 2016; T'Shari 2018). Emerging energy justice scholarship often focuses on energy burdens, transitions, and potential threats that arise in the absence of equity concerns (de Onís and Lloréns 2022; Hernández 2015; Reames 2021).

But inequalities remain out of sight wherever New York represents itself to itself via heritage communication. Exclusive representations "not only disseminate information, they create realities" (Ray 2013, 22). Communication can maintain injustice by naturalising the erasure of certain peoples, environments, and even inequality from sight, thus naturalising inequality itself. Julian Agyeman's "just sustainabilities" framework describes "the inseparability of environmental quality and human equality" (2008, 752). Thus, racism is an environmental toxin and public health crisis threatening humanity and planet Earth (Wright 2021). Local events range from the high profile – including the notorious 2022 massacre of ten Black patrons, with three others receiving nonfatal wounds, at a grocery store in Buffalo by a suspected White nationalist, the asphyxiation of Daniel Prude in Rochester by that city's police department – to less sensationalised, systemic barriers (Grawert, Kimble, and Fielding 2021; Jargowsky 2015;) and environmental assaults that have positioned Black residents at heightened proximity to harm (Teron 2022) and taken them "in (and out of) place" (Wright 2021).

Researchers are calling for more attention to the social processes that produce and sustain environmental inequality as it is "first and foremost a social problem" (Bolin, Grineski, and Collins 2005; Pellow and Brehm 2013, 235). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a qualitative social science methodology that views communication as both data to examine the reproduction of inequality and a powerful tool for liberation from inequality (Gee and Handford 2013, 9). The method is both "an academic and ethical approach to research" (Roderick 2018). By examining the discursive maintenance of inequality, CDA frees us to "consciously conform or actively resist" the ideas that cause harm (Grinner 2004, 200; Roderick 2018). This is important to do, as the reinforcement of bias is harmful whether intentional or not (Bolin, Grineski, and Collins 2005).

The following is an examination of the dominant discourse of the Erie Canal and how it reinforces harm.

Materials & methods

Between September of 2021 and January of 2022, X visited each of the 47 recommendations from the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor's 2014 Directory of Sites brochure, a widely distributed pamphlet across the canalway and in the Erie Canal Museum, where they work. Some sites were museums, others parks or canalside waterfronts with historic interpretation. At each site, they took photographs, collected pamphlets, literature, and recorded "locally informed fieldnotes" (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 10). Sites that were not open due to Covid-19 or seasonality were analysed from their online presence. Data collection also involved a close, analytic read of the New York Times Bestseller and popular historical narrative of the Erie Canal, *Wedding of the Waters: The Erie Canal and the Making of a Great Nation* (Bernstein 2005). Together, these data provided an entry point into the Erie Canal.

A critical discourse analysis "seeks patterns in linguistic data", not merely for their visual qualities, but rather, what those qualities reveal about power (Gee and Handford 2013, 9; Roderick 2018). Notably, some patterns are invisible "absent presences" (Ray 2013, 8). Discourse analysis looks for the power hovering "above the level of a sentence" and observes the "contexts within which that text is placed and which it, in turn, helps to create" (Van Dijk, Gee and Hanford 2012). This study observes the power relations represented in and negotiated by a dataset of Erie Canal heritage communication.

Analysis involved iterative stages of coding, a “careful sifting through” to attend to each data, find repetitive patterns and relationships between them, condense the dataset, and situate findings within appropriate literature (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 166). As researchers, we remained aware that we do not neutrally or objectively discover meaning in data but rather “render the data meaningful” through a self-reflective, human process. (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 168; Gee and Handford 2013). Inherent to this process is the understanding of one’s relationship to the content and interrogating the implicit biases they may have, as “none of us are immune from inheriting the biases, stereotypes, prejudices, and falsehoods of our society” (Sue 2016, 171).

Initial codes that emerged while visiting the sites and reading *Wedding of the Waters* were: America, Empire, progress, civilisation, art, nature, wilderness, frontier, development, systems, conquer, control, colony, encampment, “others”, discovery, Whiteness, wealth, unity, industry, tourism, heritage, leisure, and outdoor recreation. Further stages of coding involved revisiting the data, writing memos to track idea development, collaging photographs, pamphlets, and field notes and eventually grouping earlier codes into the three categories of place, race, and nationhood.

Results

Dispersed throughout the Erie Canalway of New York and emphasised in Bernstein’s New York Times Bestseller (2005) is a recurring pattern of Erie Canal representations. We call this pattern the dominant Erie Canal discourse and dissect its ideologies in the context of heritage tourism. The following photographs and quoted texts are data directly collected from interpretive sites along the canalway or from Bernstein’s popular bestseller.

Place

The dominant Erie Canal discourse often begins in the early nineteenth century with colonial European Americans living along an unfamiliar “border of wilderness”. The early American environment is predominantly described in Erie Canal heritage communication from a European American vantage point, despite there being European, Indigenous, and African Americans in New York throughout the canal era. When “Europeans set eyes upon Western New York”, from their gaze, they did see an “unmapped west”. But to the entire continent of Indigenous peoples living across America, this place was home. Few exhibits along the canalway expose this inconsistency, that “humans have lived in what now call New York for about 13,000 years”. European American representations of place are so dominant in American culture that they shape Erie Canal communication exclusively (see Figure 1). “Wilderness” discursively justifies the Erie Canal, as well as the genocide, colonisation, and continued erasure of the Haudenosaunee from New York historical narratives.

In *Wedding of the Waters*, Bernstein mentions Alex de Tocqueville, a visitor to New York in the mid 1830s after the opening of the Canal. The political theorist observed how the “full-blooded” American seems “*encamped*, not established, on the soil he tread upon” [emphasis added]. A particular colonial disconnect or unfamiliarity with place becomes visible in Erie Canal exhibits. American “Nature” is objectified by landscape paintings as a wild, primaeval, virgin, untamed, and uninhabited frontier. A sight, or a peopleless scene, fundamentally aesthetic, and separate from humans. New York, with “her” Mohawk River Valley through the Appalachian Mountains, is represented as the perfect “God-given” landscape for European Americans, with their supposed superiority, to harness, master, and civilise American nature through “engineering marvels” like the Erie Canal. But there were many doubts that this was possible. In 1809, Thomas Jefferson famously expressed that “making a canal of 350 miles through the wilderness ... It is little short of madness to think of it at this day”. Sceptics dismissed the idea as “Clinton’s Ditch” or “Clinton’s Folly” in reference to the Erie Canal’s biggest political advocate, the “father of Erie Canal”: New York Governor, De Witt Clinton. But two centuries later, the Canal is represented as “America’s destiny”.



Figure 1. Wilderness and Harnessing the River.

Construction began in 1817. The many labourers of the Erie Canal are seen as Man in an epic battle with Nature. Students of “America’s first engineering school” learned how to “tame the wilderness” and “defy nature”. Canal construction involved the dangerous labour of deforestation, blasting through limestone with black powder, and upheaving environments that were long stewarded by and taken from the Haudenosaunee. In the dominant Erie Canal discourse, transforming the wilderness is often legitimised with religious language and fits within larger Christian ideologies like “Manifest destiny”, the “Doctrine of Discovery”, and “Divine Providence” (Plate 2017). Rivers are described as “intended by the Almighty for feeding canals”, canal construction as evoking “feelings of gratitude to that Being who has bestowed to his creatures so much power and wisdom”. In other words, this discourse claims that “Progress was God’s sanction” (Plate 2017).

But “civilising” New York was not easy. During Canal construction, “the wild Nature of America” was an uncooperative, interfering, defiant, violent, forbidding, frightening, troublemaking (and gendered) “savage queen”. The Erie Canal’s success at “penetrating” and “intruding on her” is framed as a testament to American exceptionalism in the face of “impossible” odds. Sheriff identifies “one of the earliest tropes of Erie Canal boosterism” as “its representation of the triumph of civilisation over savagery, including the subjugation of New York’s native peoples (2018, 378)”. Throughout the canalway today are monuments and historical markers erected by the State of New York that commemorate the Sullivan Clinton Genocide, calling it “an expedition against the hostile Indian nations”.

Race

The Erie Canal officially opened in 1825 with grand celebration. At the “Wedding of the Waters”, Governor De Witt Clinton addressed the crowd and said, “May the God of Heavens and the Earth smile most propitiously on the work, and render it subservient to the best interests of the human race”. Yet, among the inaugural flotilla of canal boats were the *Seneca Chief* and *Noah’s Ark*. Not only did the *Seneca Chief* appropriate the name of a nation removed prior to building the Canal, but on *Noah’s Ark* were a “motley cargo of fauna from the west”, including two Seneca children. These tense, often unspoken details expose even more: “The country’s propensity for violence justified by racial difference... and its willingness to perpetrate genocide” for personal gain (Koehler 2018, 448). De Witt Clinton did not include everyone in the human race, and neither did his father. The father of the Erie Canal’s “father” is General James Clinton of the Sullivan-Clinton

Genocide. One interpretive panel in the far end of a room documents De Witt recalling the actions of his own parent, as if distantly:

In my imagination I was carried back to the time when this country was occupied by roving barbarians and savage beasts, when every trace of civilization and refinement was excluded ... In the course of time, he felt the power of the man of Europe ... [and] is now dwindled down to absolute insignificance.

One hundred years later, De Witt Clinton's grandson, George Clinton, publicly reinforced the racist trope that the Haudenosaunee were "savages pure and simple" at the 1917 centennial of the Erie Canal (Sheriff 2018, 379). Many have since reinforced the notion that certain people are naturally more hostile, angry, unintelligent, animalistic, undesirable, abnormal, uncivilised, primitive or passive than others, but much of this reinforcement is implicit, thus, "more subtle, covert, and insidious" than the Clintons' words (Sue 2016, 84 99).

Throughout Canal murals, dioramas, paintings, photographs, and interpretation across New York, there are countless humans visualised in the past, present, and future of the Erie Canal. The vast majority of people represented in Erie Canal communication have something in common that's not being addressed, something visible: their skin colour. Not only are White Americans privileged visually, but mere references to Indigenous and African Americans are often spatially marginalised in small corners, separate rooms, or entirely absent from heritage representations. Racial exclusions also exclude the acknowledgement of race and racism, as if pseudoscientific skin colour based categorisation suddenly didn't exist at the top of the racial hierarchy. This "conspiracy of silence" maintains the "invisibility of whiteness" (Sue 2016, 11).

In the centre of the exhibit shown in Figure 2 is a panel communicating how "Colonial Schenectady is the story of the American spirit; the birth of a worldview we hold dear today". Yet, around a corner on a small shadowed piece of paper (seen on right) is the statement: "Slavery existed at the heart of colonial Schenectady". The extreme tension between a centred colonial worldview and the marginalised details of its racialised chattel slavery are visible in the space. Around the room are three large framed portraits featuring a White man, a White woman, and a young White boy. Behind a corner, a wool card is used to represent "the Enslaved". "It is likely", the artefact's description reads, "that Sambo assisted with the Sander's family wool processing, using this card. One thing we know for certain about Sambo: he was famous in Schenectady for his dancing skills".



Figure 2. The Founding and the Enslaved.

The softening of verbs to describe enslavement like assisted, performed or helped obscure enslaved peoples' extreme lack of choice and suggest their willingness to serve. By reproducing and failing to critically interpret the derogatory racial term, Sambo, and the racist stereotype that enslaved African Americans were docile and childlike, the communication of this exhibit implicitly reinforces racial stereotypes. Bernstein, too, discursively warrants slavery and indentured servitude in *Wedding of the Waters* by phrasing that "The situation left Washington with no choice but to buy Black slaves to take over the indentures of Irish immigrants" when discussing Washington's earlier attempt with the Erie Canal's predecessor: the unsuccessful Potomac Canal. Together, these biases "represent a subconscious worldview of inclusion-exclusion, superiority- inferiority ... derived from a White Euro-American perspective that are imposed upon marginalised groups in our society" (Sue 2016, 99).

Interpretation of race and the Erie Canal do not often overlap, although both topics can be found throughout the canalway. In one museum, on a floor separate from their interactive Erie Canal lock, is an exhibit interpreting racist communication in America through historic objects and images. The museum features a definition of White supremacy, "the belief that White people are superior to those of all other races and should therefore dominate society". Following it is an exhibit about the history of the Underground Railroad in New York, even more spatially distant from the Erie Canal lock, despite growing research between the two topics.

Exhibits that do explore slavery, colonialism, and enduring racism seem to represent a separate world from the one of the dominant Erie Canal discourse. In one exhibit, Harriet Tubman describes slavery as the "next thing to hell". But one brochure disseminated along the canalway invites tourists to "Visit the country estate of the Revolutionary War General Phillip Schuyler: military man, entrepreneur, politician, and godfather of the canal system of New York State". In the marketing material for this site of New York enslavement, enslaver is left out from Schuyler's description.

Nationhood

The Erie Canal has become a symbol throughout New York heritage tourism for the bold American spirit on its "road to progress". Bernstein further argues that "the heroes of this story had the foresight to change the face of the earth" and that "globalisation is where the Wedding of the Waters renews its vows". The Erie Canal is communicated throughout New York State as a world-class tourist destination to experience "the Great American Adventure Story" and celebrate the "great westward movement of America". Heritage leisure offers tourists a modern "opportunity for discovery" through "inspiring picturesque scenery" and "remarkable history". The vast majority of people visualised in these recreational images are also White.

Prior to the Canal, some were already convinced that it would lead New York, the nation, and ultimately the world. Jesse Hawley, a struggling flour merchant, was in debtor's prison scribbling incredibly precise essays on the logistics and effects of a canal from Lake Erie to the Hudson River. Eventually, De Witt Clinton saw the Erie Canal as an inevitable national necessity. He gathered support from powerful men like Revolutionary Gouverneur Morris, Surveyor General Simeon De Witt, and the wealthy American politician Stephen Van Rensselaer. They discussed the Canal as "an object of the highest public utility, and worthy of noblest ambition", as it would "unite people in every part of the nation". Clinton did not relent, and though he got to witness the Canal's execution, he could have never imagined its complex and lasting effects. In one final commentary, Bernstein attends to this by closing his book with Clinton's prayer for the human race. 180 years later, Bernstein confirms: "His prayer was answered".

But the dominant Erie Canal discourse maintains its positive self-image through active denial, rationalisation, and justification of the profound environmental and human costs of "progress". Heritage sites represent the Erie Canal today as a legendary, remarkable, and irresistible "national treasure" by evading the Canal's disproportionate impacts across peoples, local environments, and the planet. Paired with imagery of packet boats, mules, and soft soothing colours, the Canal's powerful role as serving the "Pathway to Empire" is suggested to be quaint, neutral, patriotic, and entirely



Figure 3. Nationhood in the heritage space.

welcoming to visitors (See [Figure 3](#)). Repeatedly, the Canal is emphasised for how it “opened the interior of North America”, particularly for the “precious cargo” of European immigrants.

Promotional material invites visitors to “Discover what we’re made of” via Erie Canal tourism and to “follow America’s destiny”. The mid 1800s are represented as the “flourishing canal days” with Erie Canal heritage sites “keeping alive the spirit of the old nineteenth century towpath canals”. Sites across New York welcome visitors to “travel back in time”, “plunge into past times”, or go “where time stands still”. Museums themselves are framed as “time capsules”, or places to “remember the triumphs of the past”, and even “immerse yourself in the sights, sounds and emotions” of history. This messaging seems to entirely forget about the histories of racialised chattel slavery and colonisation which continue to shape social relations today. All along the Rust Belt, Erie Canal heritage leisure is described as “gliding past lush farmland, famous battlefields, charming canal towns, and thriving wildlife preserves”, centring the positive details of industrialisation, even the privileged escape from it through outdoor recreation. Nature continues to be represented as a vacant landscape of leisure to leave the city, “go wild”, sightsee, explore, “discover some beauty”, and ultimately, discover yourself. Both urban environments and people of the global majority appear absent, implicitly communicating that they either do not exist or do not matter.

Yet, there are cracks in the romanticised Erie Canal discourse, even within its exclusive representations of history. One exhibit calls the Erie Canal’s low cost “a good deal”, yet inches away, another panel admits that workers endured “harsh living conditions and all for little pay”, also called exploitation. Those who provided the labour of the canal are often represented as the “dregs of community”, as “drawn from the fringes of society” or even “corrupt”, although many were paid in dependence-forming alcohol. Though there is no known evidence of enslaved Black labour used on the Erie Canal, we know there were certainly African American labourers and labourers without agency. Some were imprisoned, others sons, daughters, or orphans who voluntarily went to prison during the canal’s off season. Bernstein goes as far to mention that “In 1831, the Rochester Observer proposed that the canal should be renamed the ‘Big Ditch of Iniquity’”. But these historical details do not linger for long in the dominant and nationalistic Erie Canal gaze of heritage leisure. Rather, interpretation instinctively returns to the nostalgic vision that “New York would be the leading city of the nation, and in time, the world”.

Discussion

When examined closely, the dominant Erie Canal discourse is defined by powerful communication about place, race, and nationhood that can help one see and contextualise the inequality

evident by the heritage leisure space. Its underpinning ideas are not at all uncommon to museums (Autry and Murawski 2019), yet their continued reinforcement and legitimisation throughout the canalway reveal and maintain New York's enduring power asymmetries, thus, exposing the discursive process that perpetuates racial bias (Kimmel 2018; Norgaard 2012; Pellow 2016; Pellow and Brehm 2013). The dominant Erie Canal discourse exercises power by privileging gazes like wilderness as a frontier separate from humans, racial (and gendered) hierarchies as "natural", and an American narrative exclusive to White Americans. But if humans and nature are not on opposite poles, and if equality really is inseparable from environmental quality, Erie Canal heritage discourse may be considered an environmental threat to New York (Agyeman 2008). We contend that, regardless of tourist authentication, the romanticising of communication in heritage tourism sites serves the same functioning as the uneven and discriminatory built environment does in limiting the potential for collective place-making by marginalising populations and constraining the potential for these sites to become democratised, and thus, truly inclusive. What we need is a "complete regeneration of the understanding of humanness" (Wright 2021, 14) as well as a grave reminder that the local environment, and heritage, are much more than "something to look at" (Burd 2016, 33).

Recently, state and federal actions have shown heightened interests in incorporating environmental justice in policy, including New York State's landmark Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act and the Biden Administration's Justice40 Initiative (Executive Order 14008) both of which seek to target upwards of 40% of climate programming benefits to "disadvantaged" communities. Notwithstanding these efforts, governments have historically acted as an impediment to environmental justice and worked as a purveyor of racial and environmental inequality through its state-sanctioned violence (Wright 2021). Inequalities persist throughout New York, the "Empire State". Amongst US cities with at least 100,000 residents, three of the top six cities with the highest percentages of childhood poverty are in New York: Syracuse, Rochester and Buffalo (Tampone 2022). This is within a context of extreme school segregation (Kucsera and Orfield 2014). Environmental threats loom as well, including racial disparities in exposure to air pollution (Cheeseman et al. 2022) and when coupled with broad economic inequality across the state (Cha and Skinner 2017), the impacts of racial, economic and geographic disparities have converged during the Covid-19 pandemic to inform health inequality resulting in uneven mortality and morbidity rates across racial and economic strata (Khayat, Teron, and Rasoulyan 2021).

Democratising New York inevitably involves the unlearning of popular historical narratives, like the dominant Erie Canal discourse, which have not only romanticised but sanitised much of New York State and American history. Embedded in their ideologies of wilderness, race, and "Pathway to Empire" are the persisting social processes of erasure, dehumanisation, and marginalisation of anyone in the way. In today's context, the dominant Erie Canal discourse sanitises history on the behalf of those who get to enjoy leisure. Yet leisure spaces cannot be taken lightly, as "the power of representation lies in its ability to shape today's reality through the reality of the past" (Finney 2014, 3). The communication and reproduction of certain authenticated representations in the heritage space must be taken seriously.

There is a profound irony regarding the treatment and exclusion of the Haudenosaunee in communication along the Erie Canal. While the extent of influence that the Haudenosaunee Confederacy has had on American governance, including the US Constitution, may be contested, to be clear, a number of institutional governance bedrocks, including a bicameral legislature, predated the events of 1776 (Haudenosaunee Confederacy 2022). Benjamin Franklin admitted this, and in 1988, Congress acknowledged such. The irony is that the patriotic "Pathway to Empire" was laid over a society that the 100th US congress acknowledged were influential in advancing the "democratic principles" (US Senate 1988) that were foundational to the early Republic. By failing to mention the Haudenosaunee in Erie Canal heritage communication, their ongoing presence in New York and the colonisation process that took place to create the heritage space continues to be actively

erased from sight. Meanwhile, tourists get to enjoy place attachment on dispossessed lands where America's first genocidal campaign occurred.

There is also tension between the romantic communication of industrial growth in the outdoor recreational contexts designed to escape the harmful environmental effects of industrialisation (Cronon 1996; Finney 2014; Lears 1994). Both heritage tourism and outdoor recreation overlap as highly racialised spaces of privilege (Finney 2014; Jackson 2020; Menakem 2021; Ray 2013). European Americans historically originated outdoor recreation as a segregated space of privilege (Cronon 1996; Lears 1994). Race continues to predict proximity to recreational spaces like parks, but access goes well beyond proximity (Mascarenhas 2016; Norgaard 2012). This includes how financial considerations and constraints also act as barriers to entry. While many heritage activities may have nominal entry costs, the full cost of participation must be accounted for (e.g. not having a boat or even a car limits one's capacity to partake in a number of Erie Canal related activities). Additionally, even when amenities are at low or no cost, issues such as (perceived) safety and belonging may create systemically inhibiting barriers (Finney 2014; Jackson 2020).

One's sense of safety in the local environment is consistently ruptured by the recurrence of targeted discrimination and violence (Finney 2014; Jackson 2020; Menakem 2021; White 1999). In 2016, not even the president of the Sierra Club, Aaron Mair, was safe from racist verbal harassment while taking photographs in the Adirondack Mountains of New York. In May of 2020, Christian Cooper was bird-watching in Central Park when he filmed Christina Cooper, a White woman, calling the police in distress and emphasising his Black skin. This occurred on the very day that a White police officer, Derek Chauvin, was filmed murdering George Floyd publicly and in broad daylight over a suspected counterfeit \$20 bill. The video was shared online virally, making the entire world witnesses to his death. George Floyd's execution then spurred a resurgence of global Black Lives Matter demonstrations protesting police brutality during a global pandemic with disproportionately higher cases, hospitalisations, and deaths in racialised communities (Khayat, Teron, and Rasoulyan 2021).

The potential is significant for environmental justice to not only advance access to historically exclusionary spaces, but to also democratise the long sanitised and white-washed historical narratives that justify targeted harm. Consider the potential for procedural justice, which prioritises transparent and inclusive decision making, thus influencing who actually shapes policy. By giving deference to eradicating systemic barriers and inequality, procedural justice mandates the recognition of a wide cross section of stakeholders to not solely be considered in decision and policy making, but actively involved in such and outcomes that minimise the disparate impacts of structural racism. The above goes well beyond simply heritage representation or even leisure participation and involvement, but interrogates the structural systems that create disparate outcomes in order to shift towards democratic institutions and spaces. Without a serious level of scrutiny and interrogation of abetting systems can institutions adequately grapple with the reproduction of historic inequalities that inform the public disaffection and lack of faith and trust in institutions that create a mass "checking out" that we cannot afford as a species.

Like all landscapes, democratising the Erie Canal will not come without contest (Wright 2021). As new populations negotiate their own relationships with the Erie Canal and heritage spaces, said reimaginings may not coincide with, and indeed run counter to, status quo uses and narratives. While inclusive tourism is about giving marginalised and historically excluded populations access to the dominant status quo activities, in this case hiking, cycling and boating, democratised spaces will necessitate new users to adapt environments in their own meaningful ways that will diversify the currently accepted practices. American writer Audre Lorde (1982) argues that "What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other ... And in order to do this, we must allow each other our differences at the same time as we recognise our sameness". The future of New York depends upon this inherently environmental commitment; after all, "National heritage corridors exist for tomorrow. They protect corridor communities so they will be good places to live".

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