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When green is White: the cultural politics of race, nature and social exclusion in a Los Angeles urban national park

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Abstract

Scholars have attributed park (non)use, especially ethno-racially differentiated (non)use, to various factors, including socio-cultural (e.g. affluence, cultural preferences etc) and socio-spatial determinants (e.g. travel distance, park features etc.). But new scholarship is beginning to critically evaluate alternative explanations for park (non)use based on the ‘cultural politics’ of nature. Challenging partial and essentialist explanations, some geographers have recently argued that ethno-racial formations, cultural histories of park-making (e.g. segregated park systems), and land-use systems (e.g. zoning & property taxes) operate to circumscribe recreational opportunities for people of color. Taking up these ideas, this paper discusses findings from focus groups with Latino (non)users of the largest urban national park in the United States – the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. Some participants reported feeling ‘out of place’, ‘unwelcome’ or excluded from the park. They identified the predominantly White clientele of the park; ethno-racial profile of park-adjacent neighborhoods; a lack of Spanish-language signs; fears of persecution; and direct experiences of discrimination as exclusionary factors – though some participants actually visited the park without realizing it. The cultural politics of nature can show how practices of socio-ecological exclusion and attachment are undergirded by political struggles over the making and ordering of racialized natures.

Keywords:

National park, social exclusion, race, nature, Latinos, cultural politics

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1 Introduction

Why are people of color present in some parks and not others? And why do people of color feel excluded from some parks? Three decades of leisure research have seemingly failed to provide satisfactory answers to these questions (Roberts, 2009).ⁱ Looking for ‘cultural’ determinants for ‘minority under-participation’, the leisure literature is populated with assertions such as: ‘Whites prefer wildland hiking’, ‘African-Americans prefer structured leisure’ (e.g. basketball on city lots), ‘Asians prefer golf’ and ‘Latinos enjoy listening to music and picnicking’ (Gobster, 1998a; Ho et al., 2005; Hutchison, 1987; Johnson and Bowker, 1999; McGuire et al., 1987; Payne et al., 2002; Woodard, 1988). Dissatisfied with such reductionist and essentialist explanations, some geographers and built-environment scholars have recently begun to offer alternative explanations for ethno-racially differentiated park (non)use, grounded in the cultural politics of nature (Boone et al., 2009; Brownlow, 2006; Byrne and Wolch, 2009; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995; Loukaitou-Sideris and Stieglitz, 2002). In so doing, these scholars have started to explore how relations of racialized power and identity-making are invested in park landscapes, and how in turn supposedly ‘culturally-determined’ patterns of park (non)use are anything but ‘natural’.

An emergent literature on the cultural politics of nature offers compelling alternative explanations for park (non)use. Rather than looking for a ‘minority’ ‘cultural style’ as an explanation for observed patterns – as some leisure scholars have done (Floyd, 2001; Irwin et al., 1990; Noe and Snow, 1989/90; Sasidharan et al., 2005; Shaul and Gramann, 1998; Tierney et al., 2001) – some geographers have sought to understand *how* ideas of race and nature have worked together to imbue some urban parks with complex social and cultural

meanings, and *how* in turn these meanings have shaped both racialized identities and conceptions of what parks are, *where* parks should be built, and *who* they are intended to serve (Byrne and Wolch, 2009; Perkins, 2010; Pincetl, 2003; Pincetl and Gearin, 2005; Wolch et al., 2005). Recent geographic research on the inequity of park and recreation service provision and social exclusion in parks for example, suggests that explanations from leisure studies have missed the complex ways that racialized power-relations structure residential location, property tax revenue, service provision and park maintenance, which in turn can foster landscapes of social exclusion and even violence (Brownlow, 2005, 2006; Byrne et al., 2007; Byrne et al., 2009a; Dahmann et al., 2010; Gearin and Kahle, 2006; Rocheleau et al., 1996).

This paper investigates how some of these new ideas about the cultural politics of race and nature might help to explain why people of color are comparatively poorly represented among visitors to the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation area in Los Angeles – the largest urban national park in the United States (Byrne et al., 2009a). The paper focuses on why comparatively fewer Latinos visit and use this park than White users, and begins to explore how the cultural politics of nature may shape access to urban parks specifically, and may generally shape environmental equity outcomes within cities. We follow Moore et al. (2003: 2) in taking the cultural politics of nature to mean: “...an approach that treats culture itself as a site of political struggle, an analytic emphasizing power, process and practice”. Moreover (to paraphrase Moore et al. (2003)), we seek to show *how* the cultural politics of racialized park access may ‘...forge identities, reproduce inequalities and configure exclusions’. This is because struggles over access to environmental resources are: “simultaneously material and symbolic”. As Moore et al. explain: “few forms of nature...do not bear the traces of racial exclusion...both race and nature [are] historical artifacts...irreducible to a universal essence” (Moore et al., 2003: 2). Importantly, Moore et

al. show us that “...race provides a critical medium through which ideas of nature operate” (op. cit., see also Jackson, (2000)).

We begin by concisely reviewing the leisure research literature on park (non)use and the socio-cultural and socio-spatial explanations for park (non)visitation to evaluate what they offer us better understanding ethno-racial differences in park use. We then consider alternative explanations from geographers and land use planners, explanations grounded in the cultural politics of race and nature. Next we discuss our research methods and data analysis and review the findings from our research. We conclude by suggesting some strategies that park managers might adopt to improve Latino access to — and use of — the national park, and we offer some directions for further research. From the outset, we stress that this research is exploratory, and does not purport to represent the views of all people who self-identify as Latino in Los Angeles, nor those of all Latino (non)users of the park. Rather we seek to highlight how alternative explanations informed by the cultural politics of race and nature might better account for the exclusion of some people of color from urban greenspaces like this national park, explanations that merit closer attention.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE]

2 Factors underpinning park (non)use

Although park-providers like the National Park Service have long believed that ‘if you build it, they will come’, this time-worn adage seems unlikely (McKenna, 2002: 896). Many people do not use parks, for a variety of reasons (Gold, 1977). Some seem quite obvious – e.g. lack of money, insufficient time, travel distance and inadequate park space. Others are less apparent – racial discrimination, inequitable park programming, or potential park users’ perception that some parks may be unwelcoming or unsafe. Such factors may in fact be interrelated and mutually reinforcing, a point we will return to shortly.

Leisure scholars have surmised that four ‘classes of factors’ or types of constraint underpin the non-use of parks (Hultsman, 1995; Jackson and Witt, 1994).ⁱⁱ These are: (i) *personal / internal constraints* (e.g. fear of crime, disability, motivation, interest, depression); (ii) *social constraints* (e.g. lack of companions, family responsibilities); (iii) *structural constraints* (e.g. time, money, poor transportation) and; (iv) *institutional constraints* (e.g. user fees, park programs) (Burns and Graefe, 2007; Crompton and Kim, 2004; Henderson and Bialeschki, 2005; Jackson, 1993).ⁱⁱⁱ

Personal, social and structural constraints have received the most attention. Researchers have found that people are less likely to visit parks if they are older, impoverished, busy, socially isolated, female, ethno-racially marginalized, are unaware of park facilities, perceive parks to be dangerous, or have grown up with limited access to nature (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007; Burns and Graefe, 2007; Floyd and Gramann, 1993; Ho et al., 2005; Johnson et al., 1998; Perez-Verdin et al., 2004; Philipp, 1999; Scott and Munson, 1994). But some leisure researchers and public health scholars have also found that health-related factors (e.g. injury, disease, mental disability) and motivational and psychological factors (e.g. self discipline, interest, attitudes and support of family and friends) may also influence park (non)use (Parks et al., 2003; Skowron et al., 2008). For instance, people who have an injury or suffer from physical or mental disability appear less inclined to visit parks (Bedimo-Rung et al., 2005; Bird and Fremont, 1991; Maller et al., 2005; Nies, 1999). People who report lower-levels of self discipline, a lack of support from family and friends and who are not interested in parks also seem disinclined to visit and use parks (Hung and Crompton, 2006).

Institutional or management factors may be involved too. For example a mismatch between the ethno-racial characteristics of park staff and potential visitors; a philosophy of

park management that alienates certain groups; inadequate funding for park programs; and Anglo-normative park programming may all reduce levels of park visitation (Dahmann et al., 2010; Floyd, 2001; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995; Roberts and Rodriguez, 2001). Park rules like ‘soccer prohibited’ may impact people’s perception of a park’s affability – particularly people of color – and may influence choices not to visit certain parks (Floyd, 2001; Henderson and Bialeschki, 2005; McChesney et al., 2005). And user fees may disproportionately impact low income and socially disadvantaged groups (More and Stevens, 2000; More, 1999; Schwartz and Lin, 2006; Scott and Munson, 1994).

While such socio-cultural explanations for (non)use offer valuable insights, socio-spatial factors (e.g. distance from parks, travel costs, spatial distribution of greenspace and intervening opportunities) are less well examined within leisure studies (though Payne et al., 2002; Scott and Munson, 1994 are notable exceptions). For example, fewer leisure researchers have investigated how the characteristics of park spaces – e.g. park aesthetics, presence of security, lighting, signage, landscaping, park facilities or crowding – may limit or prevent park use (for discussion outside leisure research see Burger, 2003; Finney and Rishbeth, 2006; Golicnik and Ward Thompson, 2010; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995; also see Floyd et al., 2008; Shinew et al., 2004 for discussions within leisure research). Nor have leisure researchers fully evaluated how travel distance and travel costs, inadequate information about parks, or visitors’ perceptions of park spaces and the people who use them might configure patterns of (non)use – explanations that have been posited more often by economists, health researchers, land use planners and geographers (see for example Giles-Corti et al., 2005; Hanink and White, 1999; Kemperman and Timmermans, 2008; Pendleton and Mendelsohn, 2000; Smith, 1980; Stouffer, 1940). Such socio-spatial constraints likely play an important role in delimiting opportunities for park use. The literatures of health

science, geography and urban planning in particular explicitly address these factors, and afford alternative insights into park (non)use based on the spatiality of parks.

2.1 Socio-spatial constraints and park non-use – insights from health, planning & geography

Scholars from health science, planning and geography have found that the characteristics of park spaces may configure park (non)use (Aminzadeh and Afshar, 2004). For instance, limited facilities and services and monotonous park landscapes appear to reduce levels of park use or preclude use altogether (Burgess et al., 1988; Hindley, 2007; Kong et al., 1999). Dirty or unhygienic bathrooms, damaged play equipment, faulty facilities (e.g. broken water fountains and light fixtures), dead or overgrown vegetation, broken glass, litter, graffiti and dog droppings may all deter potential users (Bedimo-Rung et al., 2005; Brownlow, 2006; Gobster, 1998b; Gold, 1986; Loukaitou-Sideris and Stieglitz, 2002). Similarly, park use may be curtailed or precluded where potential visitors lack information about parks within their neighborhoods and/or the facilities those parks contain (Hayward, 1989; Spotts and Stynes, 1985).

Research has shown that people tend to visit and use parks that are more accessible; distance to parks is thus a likely spatial constraint (Brownlow, 2006; Giles-Corti et al., 2005; Hanink and White, 1999; Sister et al., 2007). This is especially true for people with limited personal mobility due to physical disability or limited access to public transportation (Burns and Graefe, 2007; Scott and Munson, 1994). Physical barriers like freeways and rail lines may deter even able-bodied visitors – particularly where crossings for pedestrians are limited (Nicholls, 2001; Talen, 1998). And intervening opportunities (e.g. cinemas, shopping malls and golf courses) may curtail park use because alternative recreational venues can function as ‘competing destinations’ (Smith, 1980). Travel costs are another important socio-spatial

consideration since parks are seldom evenly distributed across urban landscapes (Fesenmaier and Lieber, 1985; Hanink and White, 1999; Kerkvliet and Nowell, 1999; Lindsey et al., 2001; Loukaitou-Sideris and Stieglitz, 2002; Mitchell and Lovingood, 1976; Smoyer-Tomic et al., 2004).

Park supply is a related, though infrequently discussed constraint. Some communities, especially communities of color, may suffer disproportionately poor access to parks and greenspaces – an environmental justice concern (Boone et al., 2009; Byrne et al., 2009a; Coen and Ross, 2006; Dahmann et al., 2010; Heynen, 2006; Sister et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2006; Timperio et al., 2007; Wolch et al., 2005). Where parks are located within these communities, they often have sub-standard facilities or do not offer the types of recreational experiences (e.g. hiking, camping) and encounters with nature (e.g. bird-watching) found in larger regional parks in suburban locales (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995; Loukaitou-Sideris and Stieglitz, 2002; Sister et al., 2007). For residents of color, travelling to parks in other neighborhoods may not be an option, as those parks may be considered the territory of ‘hostile’ ethno-racial groups (Hester Jr. et al., 1999; Lee, 1972; Ravenscroft and Markwell, 2000; Rishbeth, 2001).

How potential visitors perceive a park, the people who use that park, and the activities they undertake, may similarly affect park (non)use. For example, some parks may be associated with deviance, criminality, or incivility – i.e. racism, alcohol consumption, drug use, and sexual activities (Burgess, 1996; Fletcher, 1983; Gearin and Kahle, 2006; Hayward, 1989; Hung and Crompton, 2006; Luymes and Tamminga, 1995; Madge, 1997; Westover, 1985). Even socially accepted park activities like cycling or dog-walking may deter some potential users. Speeding cyclists for instance can discourage women from visiting parks and

unleashed dogs may frighten children and repel cynophobic individuals (Krenichyn, 2006; Nast, 2006; Sasidharan et al., 2005; Whitzman, 2002).

Finally, the perceived or actual absence of safety or security may discourage potential users (Fletcher, 1983), especially people who perceive parks as spaces where sexual attacks, unprovoked violence and racial harassment are commonplace (Koskela, 1999; Krenichyn, 2006; Madge, 1997; Niepoth, 1973; Whitzman, 2002). And the character of neighborhoods and land uses surrounding parks may similarly constrain or deter use, particularly where potential visitors perceive them to be unwelcoming or unsafe (Gobster, 1998b; Schroeder, 1983; Schroeder, 1982). Just the idea of having to traverse hostile spaces to visit a park may be enough to discourage some potential users (Ravenscroft and Markwell, 2000; Rishbeth, 2001; West, 1989, 1993).

Unfortunately much of the park research to date has tended to treat park spaces as ‘spatially-fixed’ or ‘self-contained’ entities, rather than as fluid and contested socio-spatial and socio-ecological constructs (Jessop et al., 2008). Yet ‘cultural politics’ scholars like Jessop et al. urge us to recognize that urban greenspaces such as parks are: “relationally constituted, polyvalent *processes* embedded in broader sets of social relations” (our emphasis) (Jessop et al., 2008: 390). An emergent literature on the cultural politics of nature offers important insights for understanding how and why people of color may or may not use all sorts of urban nature spaces, but parks in particular.

2.2 The cultural politics of ethno-racially differentiated park (non)use

Applying insights from political ecology, cultural ecology, landscape studies, and environmental justice, some geographers have recently attempted to ‘unmask’ supposedly ‘natural’ patterns and processes of the racialization of environmental resources (Byrne and Wolch, 2009). Studies within the ‘cultural politics of nature’ research frame for example,

have been particularly insightful. Cultural politics scholars recognize the complex interplay of polyvalent factors when analyzing nature-society relations. As Grove (2009) explains: “analytical attention is directed to technologies and mechanisms of power that work to legitimize particular ways of relating to the non-human”. Recent studies on the cultural politics of nature have examined diverse topics including: forest carbon management in Canada (Baldwin, 2009); fisheries management (Olson), fair trade (Goodman) and the creation of biodiversity reserves (Asher and Ojeda, 2009). Studies like these collectively show us how projects of nature-making have historically been projects of territorialization and exclusion. The ‘cultural politics of nature’ thus offers a useful lens for exploring ethno-racially differentiated patterns of park (non)use. In this section of the paper we seek to begin a conversation about how assemblages like ‘park’ or ‘Latino’ are socially constructed, not ‘naturally’ existing things, and in turn how historical projects of making ‘White’ natures, and the racialized allocation of ‘park’ resources might configure park (non)use.

What leisure scholars seems to have overlooked is that spaces like national parks have long histories of dispossession, resistance, conflict and violence (Byrne and Wolch, 2009). Unfortunately, when explaining park (non)use or ‘under-participation’ by so-called ‘minorities’, much research to date has failed to factor in how nature-spaces like parks, “[wipe] away the historical traces of their fashioning” (Moore et al., 2003: 3). We must remember that many national parks required the forced eviction of Native Americans to create ‘pristine’ natures (Everhart, 1983; Johnson, 2005; Meeker et al., 1973; Sellars, 1999; Spence, 1999). Up until the 1960s, many states of the United States had separate urban park systems for ‘Whites’ and non-Whites based on Jim Crow ideologies (McKay, 1954; Nickel, 1997; Power, 1983). In the past, many parks have also been the locus, if not cause, of violent and murderous race-riots (Foley and Ward, 1993; Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, 1965; The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, 1922; Tuttle Jr., 1996;

Wolcott, 2006). And Whites supposed ‘genetic’ affinity for nature actually reflects many decades of social reform and educational campaigning by the State and its organs and allies (Foley and Ward, 1993; Gagen, 2004), such as efforts in Los Angeles to indoctrinate city dwellers into ‘healthy’ exercise regimens and ‘American’ value systems (refer to figure 5). Similar trends have been observed in the making of middle-class White natures in the United Kingdom (see for example Matless, 1997, 1998).

In this section of this paper we discuss focus group research that we undertook with self-identifying Latino (non)users of Los Angeles’ Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. This urban national park is a good place to explore the cultural politics of park (non)use because it was ostensibly created to meet the needs of people of color (e.g. African-Americans, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans etc.) who otherwise lacked the ability access the ‘national park experience’. During the 1970s, as the United States Civil Rights Movement gained traction, impoverished and ethno-racially marginalized residents within US inner-city neighborhoods began to demand better access to national parks and wildlands. The United States Congress responded by creating a new type of park – the urban national park. Los Angeles’ Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SMMNRA) is a case in point (see figures 1 and 2). The largest urban national park in the US, the SMMNRA was specifically developed to bring the ‘national park experience’ to Los Angeles’ impoverished and socially marginalized residents (Subcommittee on National Parks and Recreation of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, 1976). But recent research suggests that the park has seemingly failed to meet this mandate (Byrne et al., 2009a; Wolch et al., 2003).

3 Methods

There are five reasons why we chose to examine Latino (non)use of the SMMNRA. First, Latinos are the fastest growing ethno-racial group in the United States; they are now the numerically dominant ethno-racial group in Los Angeles (Allen and Turner, 2003; Sasidharan et al., 2005). Second, large Latino communities live within reasonable travel distance to the park, in Oxnard (on the park's northern perimeter), Pacoima in the San Fernando Valley (on the eastern perimeter), and to a lesser extent in central and south Los Angeles (south east of the park) – which are all within 10 miles of the park (see figures 1 and 4). So we might reasonably expect that Latinos would visit this park. Indeed, previous survey research has shown that users of the park regularly travel from as far away as Newport (Orange County), Ventura and Riverside to visit the park (a distance of 20 – 30 miles / 30 – 50 km) (Wolch et al., 2003).

Third, while past research has shown that Whites were overwhelming the largest ethno-racial group visiting the park (comprising 72% of visitors), Latinos were the most numerous non-White ethno-racial group (11.8% of visitors) using the park, compared with Asians (5.5%), African-Americans (1.6%) and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (0.5%) (Byrne et al., 2009b). Our contention here is not that Latinos do not use the park, but rather they do not use the park in the numbers commensurate with the proportion of Latinos living within the park catchment (comprising approximately 30% of catchment residents).

Fourth, past research has demonstrated that many Latinos express a strong desire to visit parks – especially nature parks and open space at the urban-wildlands interface (Chavez, 2002, 2005; Chavez and Olson, 2009; Floyd et al., 1993; Gobster, 2002; Ho et al., 2005; Tinsley et al., 2002). Indeed, past research by the National Park Service has demonstrated that people of color – including Latinos – want to visit and use the Santa Monica Mountains

National Recreation Area, but may face constraints related to proximity and time availability (Lee, 1980; Mark and Holmes, 1981). Finally, Latinos are especially at risk of obesity and associated diseases; they have the highest rates of physical inactivity among any ethno-racial group (Voorhees and Young, 2003), making the ability to access urban greenspaces like this park an important environmental justice and public health concern.

Several related questions and hypotheses have motivated this research, reflecting the explanations for non-use discussed in the literature above. First, is Latino use of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area comparatively lower than Whites because Latinos do not have cultural appreciation for wildland greenspaces and the activities they foster, as some leisure scholars have suggested? Low visitation could reflect Latino preferences for more developed park landscapes that support active recreation. Or is comparatively lower utilization of the park by Latinos due to their attitudes to nature? Perhaps Latinos are less concerned about native plants and local wildlife than other ethno-racial groups, and thus are not attracted to ‘wilderness’ parks. Or could low visitation mirror constraints or barriers to use that reflect a ‘cultural politics of nature’ at work in the park, and if so, what are these constraints and how might they operate?

3.1 Research design

Most studies investigating the non-use of parks have employed quantitative techniques such as telephone surveys (e.g. Burns and Graefe, 2007; Payne et al., 2002; Tierney et al., 2001) and face-to-face or mail-back surveys (e.g. Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007; Hung and Crompton, 2006; Shores and Scott, 2007). Some have used qualitative techniques such as in-depth interviews (e.g. Burgess et al., 1988; Ho et al., 2005; Krenichyn, 2006). Fewer studies have used focus groups (e.g. Burgess, 1996; Gearin and Kahle, 2006; Zhang and Gobster, 1998).

Focus groups offer several advantages: they are cost and time effective; they foster interactive research; and they enable researchers to investigate sensitive issues (Cameron, 2005; Goss, 1996; Morgan and Krueger, 1993). Focus groups also furnish contextually rich, descriptive data (Krueger, 1994: 19), enabling researchers to draw upon respondent's own words when reporting results (Cameron, 2005; Krueger, 1994; Morgan and Krueger, 1993; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). Importantly, as Wolff Knodel, & Sittitrai (1993) have noted, focus groups can facilitate access to 'hard to reach populations'.

Focus groups foster a more intimate and convivial research environment. They shift the locus of power away from the researcher to the participants (Wilkinson, 1998), opening up greater possibilities for participants to share their life experiences, attitudes, opinions, feelings, values, perceptions, behaviors, and 'ways of seeing' the world (Krueger, 1994; Zeigler et al., 1996). In focus groups participants may feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics such as racism, sexism, violence, etc., which can elicit strong feelings, enabling participants to express their views in front of others with a similar background and / or life experiences (Cameron, 2005; Zeller, 1993).

3.2 Focus group recruitment

Recognizing that variables such as age, sex, race, ethnicity and income can influence research results (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990) we sought to recruit Latino participants who spoke English, were between the ages of 21 and 65 and who were non-users of the national park.^{iv} Participants were recruited through Internet searches, web-based bulletin board postings, and telephone calls to community organizations.^v Initial recruitment was difficult, but two community groups - the Healthy Homes Collaborative in the Pico-Union / Wilshire district of Los Angeles and Pacoima Beautiful in the San Fernando Valley proved adept at recruitment. The Healthy Homes Collaborative is a non-profit organization that assists migrant women in

finding jobs and Pacoima Beautiful is a neighborhood improvement organization committed to developing strategies to green the urban environment. These two groups provided access to distinctive urban and suburban Latino populations.

The Healthy Homes Collaborative recruited nine monolingual Spanish-speaking female domestic workers who cleaned houses near the national park. Pacoima Beautiful recruited fourteen residents from the San Fernando Valley – twelve females and two males, four of whom were Spanish-only speakers. Compared to regular park visitors, focus group participants were generally low-income earners (US\$ 25,000 or less), not college educated, had children under 18 living at home, lived in two-parent households and mostly rented. The viewpoints discussed in this paper are therefore mainly those of lower-income Latinas – a departure from the intended sample population, but a group that is nonetheless poorly represented in the literature on park (non)use. Given that this research does not purport to be representative, but rather has sought to obtain rich and detailed descriptions of park use constraints this was not seen to be problematic.

3.3 Conducting the Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted on weekday evenings – at times and venues selected by the recruiters – to ensure that the meetings were convenient and comfortable for participants. Each focus group lasted approximately two hours. Snacks and non-alcoholic beverages were provided and all participants received a \$25.00 honorarium. Potential participants received an invitation letter two weeks before the focus group, followed up with a reminder telephone call the day before the meetings. Before each focus group began, participants completed a short questionnaire providing basic socio-demographic information and information about their patterns of park use. At this time participants were told about the voluntary nature of the research and asked to provide their informed consent.

As a warm-up exercise, participants were given a map of the national park, helping to familiarize them with the area under discussion. Participants introduced themselves, and told the group how long they had lived in Los Angeles, what they did for a living, and the types of recreational activities they enjoyed in their spare time. Participants then responded to six groups of questions about: (i) the benefits that they derived from recreation; (ii) their attitudes towards the environment; (iii) their awareness and perception of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area; (iv) whether they had ever experienced any constraints or barriers to park use; (v) whether they had experienced conflict when visiting parks and; (vi) actions they would take to fix the problems they encountered when visiting parks.^{vi}

All participants in the first focus group were monolingual Spanish speakers – as were four participants in the second focus group. A Latino, Spanish-speaking moderator ran the first group and a Latina, Spanish-speaking community volunteer co-moderated the second group. These moderators simultaneously translated focus group questions for participants and the participants' responses. Where clarification of questions was required, moderators asked for feedback and then translated the responses back into Spanish.

Participants' comments were recorded on tape recorders and notes were taken, documenting the order in which participants spoke and capturing non-verbal communications (e.g. gestures and facial expressions). Afterwards, the tapes were transcribed and Spanish sections were translated into English. Participants received a copy of the focus group transcripts – in both English and Spanish – and were given the opportunity to provide feedback. To protect their anonymity, all participants' names were changed to pseudonyms. No feedback was received on the transcripts.

Transcripts were coded and analyzed using QSR N5 – a version of NUD*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing) qualitative research

software (Richards, 2000). A coding tree – developed prior to the focus groups – guided initial coding. Later, the coding tree was modified based on participants’ responses; the modified version formed the basis for transcript analysis. Using the coding tree, key themes were identified and matched to subjects. These themes included the types of parks participants visited, barriers they encountered, benefits they derived, their recreational behaviors, their attitudes towards nature, experiences of conflict, and their perceptions of park users and their behaviors.

4 Results

Some findings were expected, as similar results have been reported elsewhere, such as how time constraints and perceptions of safety affect Latinos’ ability to use parks. But other findings were unexpected. For example, some Latinos may perceive particular parks to be ‘racialized landscapes’; a lack of Spanish-language information about parks may constrain their use; and although some participants possessed a strong desire to access urban nature spaces, racial formations in Southern California may limit their ability to visit and use certain parks and urban greenspaces – directly through park supply, and less directly through various mechanisms of social exclusion.

4.1 Recreational and leisure activities

Focus group participants engaged in various recreational activities. Many centered upon family activities such as picnicking, barbequing, and swimming, and were typical of those reported in the literature. Active recreation (e.g. volleyball, soccer, and baseball) and passive recreation (e.g. reading) were mentioned with the same frequency - though many entailed group activities rather than individual pursuits.

Participants engaged in a range of activities that researchers associate with Latinos. They reported swimming, cycling, sewing, going to church, walking, running, listening to

music, playing with their dog, watching television, home or automobile maintenance and gardening. For example, Liani, a 55 year old Mexican native who has lived in LA for 25 years, said that when she and her family visit parks:

“We play baseball...even including myself, I play baseball with them, with my kids. And we made some barbeque, and we have fun. Yeah, but we do all these – we play tennis, you know. ...[w]e go we go as a family...in a special day like Easter.”.

Another participant - Solana, a 54 year old Mexican native and mother of three spent time “rid[ing] horses with [her] husband”. Duena – a 37 year old domestic worker, also mother of three, enjoyed basketball and soccer. And Juanita – a 35 year old Mexican native, mother of two and environmental home-educator liked “arts and crafts and making clothes”. And Fonda – a 33 year old domestic worker said: “well we do a barbecue, or we celebrate a birthday”

But some participants also told us that they enjoyed recreational activities and preferences which are not usually associated with Latinos. For instance Sally, a 45 year old Chicana, liked to jet-ski; Monica – who was a 25 year old mother and a recent immigrant – enjoyed shopping; Santiago - a 38 year old Mexican native, father of two and manual laborer liked going to movies; Herminia – a 40 year old mother from Guadalajara took yoga classes; and Elisa – a 31 year old teaching assistant, program aid in a community garden and mother said she liked to “go to the beach to walk, to run, and to lie under [her] umbrella”.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 AROUND HERE]

4.2 Park visitation

Almost all the focus group participants reported that they enjoyed visiting parks. Some were very frequent park-goers. Duena for instance said that visiting parks was: “one of my favorite things – outdoors, green areas, rocks, all that. ...I like a lot to go to the park, to ride a bike.

That is what I like most...four times a week I like to go to this park. Now that we have a dog in the house, I love to take him...so that he can run...”. Ines – who also works as an environmental home educator – said that she too liked to take her dog to the park: “I just go with my husband and my two daughters and one dog [laughs]. When I go we always make carne asada”.

Many participants said that taking their children to the park was an important reason for their visit. For example, Solana liked to take her kids to her neighborhood park because it had a pool, play equipment and a library. For Ruis, a U.S. born tree-trimmer, visiting the park gave him an opportunity to: “play baseball, play sports, basketball, play with my kids...and just have fun”. Drina, a Mexican native who has lived in L.A. for 11 years, said that she also took her children to the park: “because a lot of people do the (sic) parties in the park [smiles]. They like it and the kids play a lot and nobody complains [laughs]”. Belinda, a U.S. born assistant manager who was a regular park visitor went to parks to escape the city: “because it’s so hot in apartments...you kinda go out there and get some fresh air...so when you’re in the park and everything, there’s fresh air, trees, play with the kids, walk around...you know...collect pine cones, do a trail and stuff”.

The importance of parks to children and the role of childhood experiences in shaping park visitation were two interconnected and recurrent themes throughout the focus group discussions. Rosario articulated a commonly felt sentiment when she said: “I like to be in the parks and in green areas because that reminds me of when I was a kid. I used to love to hike, to go to a ranch, and when I am in the countryside thinking, I imagine that I am back there in Mexico”. Some participants described how their early experiences of nature shaped their desire to be able to engage in nature-oriented, outdoor recreation. It is useful to repeat their discussion here at length:

- Juanita: What I wanna (sic) say is that last year we went with a group of people... and went camping, and I took my son, and the little one, and you know what he said: 'Momma, thank you Mommy for, you know, taking me, bringing me to the trees, it's wonderful.' And then he said: 'Does this, uh, park have bears?' 'Yes, they have'. And he was kind of scared, but we had fun.
- Isabel: I like the water a lot. I like to swim a lot. When I was a child I used to live where there was a big river. Nothing was better than the river and the water.
- Herminia: When I was a child I was in a boarding school so I was indoors all the time. But in vacation they used to take me to a ranch, and I loved it [sounds excited/sentimental]. There was quicksand, and a lake, a river. It was great.
- Liani: When I was a child, I remember what we used to do...it was a town, a very small town...we used to go to hills...my grandma used to live at the bottom, and we used to go to the hill and play [smiles]. And we used to look for some little things to take out of the ground, like a little, uh, something that you eat.
- Solana: My mom and my dad never went with us because there was (sic) five in our family...and ...two cousins...we were seven. We would get together with other kids after school. Ten minutes away there was a lake on a river. After school we would go there and...would throw our bags...[everyone laughs]...on the way to the river we would take off our clothes, and then they would jump in.

But other participants like Ines, were put off by early childhood experiences with snakes, heat, etc.; they now prefer to spend time in their backyards or local parks, not in wildland areas:

- Ines: Uh, I was born in Mexico and I lived...in a small town, a little ranch. ...There was a big mountain just for us, and, uh, rivers. And I had, I had, a wonderful life when I was young, but I had problems with the snakes, because I, oh my God, I am scared. And that's why now I don't want to...I don't like to go camping, because I am scared of snakes.

Educating children about nature was a clear benefit derived from visiting parks. But participants also reported numerous other benefits, including: 'escaping the city', 'getting fresh air', 'exercise' and 'health', observing 'beautiful scenery', 'enjoying nature', 'relaxing',

'escap[ing] daily routines' and providing 'relief from hectic work schedules'. Several participants felt that being with the family was an especially important benefit. Elisa explains: "this is the only time we have together. Between school, work and so on, we don't see each other". This opinion was echoed by Ramona who said: "because I work, and they go to school, we need to have time together, to go out to the park and to walk".

Visiting parks gave some participants a chance to 'forget about [their] problems'. Duena is a good example. She said: "I change completely there. My mind changes. I wouldn't be able to live without a mountain...". Her strong attachment to nature was shared by others. Lola captured a widely-held sentiment when she said she visited parks: "because I like the silence...no car noise, no people noise, I am happy with just hearing birds singing, little animals here and there, it is good for your health". We can see that some of these benefits reflect participants' attitudes to nature.

4.3 Attitudes towards nature

Participants displayed a range of attitudes towards nature, from egocentric to ecocentric perspectives (Merchant, 1996), but most shared the belief that nature should be protected in some way, though not to the exclusion of people. Bewildered by a question about whether the Santa Monica Mountains should be set aside for nature or for people, Ines for instance said:

There in the mountains...there are many houses. Why are there houses there?
We are talking about saving the mountain, and there are people selling places
where the rich people can live, so we're not saving the mountain!

Despite her fear of animals, Ines believed nature had value. Others expressed similar opinions. Sonja stated: "The reason is the environment. Unfortunately, it is very destroyed, and we need to return to it some of what we have taken from it". Similarly, Rosario stated that: "I think those areas would be for plants and animals...Because I love animals, plants

and it would be good for all the people who like animals”. But some, like Duena and Lola, felt strongly that humans also had a right to use these places:

- Duena: When you ask me that question, it is hard to answer - (sighs) - because, if I say people, they fill it and if I say plants, I can't get in. I prefer plants and animals, but I also want to get into the parks, because I can't think of a place without plants or animals.
- Lola: I agree with her, I choose nature, but how can I answer this question? I think that from the very beginning, men and animals were together. I think we should keep both.
- Duena: If we educate people, we can have people, plants and animals all together. Animals are a risk for us, or we are a risk for them. But, for instance, when we went to Griffith Park, we hiked and we saw a deer and that was something that I will never forget. My kids were: 'Hey Mami, it is a deer.' I said 'wait, wait, wait... I want to see it!' ...because it is a beautiful experience to see an animal that you don't get to see in your every day life.

And some participants like Ramona believed that the main reason why we need places like the Santa Monica Mountains is for people and active recreation:

- Ramona: I think that recreational parks are for people. The animals should be in the zoo. If we want to see animals, we can go to the zoo. Parks are for people, if there is a car or a bike, the animals go away. Parks only for animals, or only for people.

We can see that focus group participants held strong opinions about the function and benefits of parks. Experiencing nature was an important part of their lives. Yet many participants also reported that they encountered a range of barriers when trying to access parks.

4.4 Constraints to park access and use

Few participants believed they had sufficient access to parks. While some barriers were just a nuisance (e.g. litter and crowding), others prevented them from visiting parks altogether – such as fear of crime (e.g. gangs and drug activities). The constraints they identified included:

absence of shade, parking shortages, poison oak, overcrowding, litter, lack of companions, experiences of racism and substandard facilities. For example, Ines said: “I don’t like to go to the park alone with my two daughters because I am afraid”. Responding to a question about what types of people they found intimidating in parks, Rosario stated “black people”. Elisa immediately interjected:

When you say ‘black’ I assume that you mean those black people who have the look of a gang member, because if I go to a park and I see a black person, I don’t care. But if they are homeless, and they bother people asking for money, then I would feel uncomfortable. Even my girls run away and say ‘mommy, mommy, look at that guy...’.

Referring to MacArthur Park (a Los Angeles urban park – see figure 4) Duena said: “there are a lot of negative people...in that park. That prevents us from going because there are a lot of people who are strange and bad around”. Elisa and Lola concurred. Elisa stated: “we have seen things that we don’t want our children to see...like drug dealing”. Lola said: “I never go there because there are a lot of people drinking. I am afraid that they are going to do something to me...I don’t go because of the people.” And Rosalind recounted a story of how her brother-in-law who lived in Panorama traveled a long distance to visit Brandford Park because his wife’s purse had been stolen in a park closer to home. He felt safer in the more distant park. Hearing her story, Ruis asserted: “some parks do not have enough lights. They’ve got cholos [gangs] out there and there’s [sic] lots of activities that shouldn’t be going on where there’s [sic] families”.

Several animated discussions occurred around the topic of park facilities. Speaking of Lafayette Park (see figure 4), Lola said: “I don’t want to go there...everything is so dirty. The parks are beautiful but they are not clean, there are no trees, it is not comfortable...”. Lola wanted parks that had running water and clean paths. Rosario mentioned her desire for “places to wash my hands” and “games for the kids” as well as “toilets, bathrooms and a

place to sit, green grass, trees...”. And Belinda identified crowding as a problem: “we find that at every park that we go to, there is overcrowding. There’s nowhere to sit. You have to go there early...the parks around here are so messed up”.

When asked if they thought they would like to visit the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, some participants expressed enthusiasm: “[i]t looks beautiful. I like it. And I would like to go” (Liani); “if that park is big and nicer than other parks, then I’d like to go to it” (Belinda). But others felt that various constraints would prevent them from visiting the park, such as limited knowledge about the park: “if we don’t know where it is, how are we going to get there” (Monica); and “I don’t know about it...I don’t know the name” (Lola). Other issues included transportation difficulties, language issues, time constraints, expense of travel, entry fees, work responsibilities, park staff, park facilities, potential experiences of racism and the types of people thought to visit the park.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 AROUND HERE]

Travel distance affected many participants. Lola for example said: “I imagine that it is far away, and it is not an option [for me] to go so far away”. Isleta similarly remarked that: “it is too far away to take the bus, one spends the entire day in the bus. I want to go, but I need to go with someone with a car!”, and Fonda agreed: “I don’t have a car to go there”. Rosario was constrained by her work commitments: “Sometimes we are cleaning an apartment and someone says ‘oh, I want to go [to the park]’, but how? Taking the bus? I’d better stay home sleeping.” Being dependent upon public transportation inhibited many participants from visiting parks. They expressed frustration that the bus takes too long. Monica summed this up when she said: “[t]he convenience of a park being close by, the distance is short and is faster to get there, especially if you only have two hours to relax”.

Some participants also said the characteristics of the park and surrounding neighborhoods constrained their use: “park entrances are in hidden areas, and you can’t really find them. In general there is no information about possible activities” (Delores). Others felt that they would be ostracized by park users:

- Ines: I have a question. The people who live there... they are not going to get mad? Because it sometimes happens that people...that Spanish people or illegal people... already know to go to that park? [general laughter] Because do they really know that there is a park? [laughter]
- MOD: So tell me a bit more about this. Would you feel comfortable going to this kind of park?
- Ines: Well, if there is not a thing that...lets Mexicans in...if they agree for us to go...
- Juanita: You know, like a kind of permission...they won’t like Spanish people coming in...[trails off]
- MOD: You said something a second ago Herminia that I didn’t quite hear...
- Herminia: Well, we don’t know because we haven’t been there, but there could be racist, uh...white...disrespectful...[behavior] Not a lot of Latino people go there...

Ines’ comments about “illegal people” and other participants’ laughter in response, suggests participants felt they lacked standing in the wider community, and this in turn may have influenced their park-use decisions.

Many participants believed for instance that if they visited the national park they would encounter racism. Juanita recounted a story of how her uncle worked on houses in Malibu and needed a pass to get onto the estates. She thought she might need a similar pass to visit the park. Santiago even suggested that residents might call the sheriff if they saw Latinos using the park. Lola captured much of the apprehension about using the park when she stated: “that is the area of American people, that is their park...it never occurred to me to go to that park. Not even my church goes there”. When the moderator prompted Lola to clarify what

she meant by ‘American’, Duena put it bluntly: “gringo” she said, much to the amusement of others who burst into laughter. Santiago saw localized park use as a particular problem. Like many participants, he perceived the national park as a Wealthy, white space:

MOD: Santiago, can you tell me who you think goes out to the mountains? Who uses those areas?
Yolanda: [translates for Santiago who is very animated]
Yolanda: Mostly Americans.
MOD: Americans? Uh-huh. What kind of Americans?
Drina: They are rich. Rich people.

Luna similarly felt that the national park was the territory of others: “[t]hat is the area of American people; that is their park”. Some participants expressed anger over this perception of social exclusion: “I think that those parks should not only be for American people but for everybody” (Duena), while others were more philosophical: “I guess the Mexicans and...whatever race you are you feel more comfortable if there are people that are the same race are there...so they probably would feel uncomfortable if there’s White people there, Chinese people were there, you know, Filipino, whatever you may be...” (Ruis). What is clear is that participants identified some parks as the exclusive territory of particular ethno-racial groups.

Some participants attributed the Latino ‘recreational style’ as being responsible for why they may not be welcome in some parks. Several suggested that Latinos were boisterous when they visited parks, visited in large groups, played music and had fun, which would offend White park users. Duena for instance, believed that: “American people go there to rest, to get out of the city, and we go to make noise, to have fun and that is not good for them”. Some, like Delores, expressed discomfort in visiting parks like this national park, perhaps because they were unsure of behavioral norms in such places:

Dolores: My sister and I went there. We were really afraid because we thought that we were going to be thrown out. We didn't want to make any noise and we didn't want to talk loud or anything.

But Ramona had a slightly different concern; she did not want to feel like an outsider. She said: "I would feel like a stranger...around American people." She elaborated: "maybe they think we don't belong there, or maybe it's a private area, or they might think we are invading them." Participants expressed concerned about being identified as different or feeling like outsiders; not being able to communicate with other park users emerged as a related issue.

Many participants felt that English language signage was exclusionary and thus a constraint. Limited numbers of bilingual park staff was also identified as a constraint to park use. For example, Monica said: "the problem is the language. I would feel very uncomfortable and tense if I can't communicate for basic stuff – 'what time is it?' or 'how do I get there? etc.". Ramona agreed, saying:

I wouldn't feel good because I don't speak English. If I have a problem, I can't talk to them and they can't talk to me. ...And also there are millionaires there, and I am poor. How am I going to approach them? If I approach them, they will feel that I want something from them or that I am going to do something to them.

Many participants reported that they would be reluctant to visit the national park because there was no Spanish-language information available. Lola summed up this feeling when she said: "because you can't talk to them if you don't know English, you will be mute."

Participants wanted to see even just simple information about 'how to get to the park?', 'what things we can do there?', 'where are the toilets?', and 'what kind of food are they eating there?'. Others wanted to know: 'do we need a permit?', can we get 'driving directions?' and as Monica said, it would help: "if a sign said 'public park' in Spanish".

5 Discussion

Focus group participants visited parks for many reasons – some of which are rarely reported in the literature (e.g. educating children about nature, exercise and escaping the city). This suggests that views of Latinos as people whose park activities revolve around picnics, barbecues and soccer are at best stereotypical, and at worst may essentialize and denigrate Latinos. We also found that non-use of parks may be shaped by spatial constraints. Despite their general desire to visit parks – especially nature parks – most participants suggested that an array of constraints prevented them from doing so. Some said that the park was too far away from their homes. Others thought that they would not be welcome in the park. Several said the idea of traversing predominantly White neighborhoods surrounding the park made them feel anxious. Other factors also affected park use. These included little knowledge about the park, poor access to park information, lack of time, and concerns about the types of people who use the park.

Although we hypothesized that Latinos may visit the Santa Monica Mountains in comparatively fewer numbers than Whites, because they favor more active recreational pursuits / or developed parklands, this assumption seems invalid. Most focus group participants reported that they enjoyed a range of outdoor activities such as hiking, camping, swimming and picnicking – activities that are typically associated with national park use. A second hypothesis was that Latinos' values might configure their park visitation patterns. Perhaps Latinos do not value nature, and instead prefer more developed environments as some leisure scholars suggest? Yet many focus group participants reported a strong affinity for nature; some exhibited highly ecocentric values. Although some participants expressed fear of wild animals (e.g. snakes & bears), many more said they took their children to parks specifically to educate them about nature.

Several other studies have found that Latinos value natural environments such as parks, forests, lakes and rivers and wildlands (Gobster, 2002; Ho et al., 2005; Sasidharan et al., 2005) and have strong affinity for vegetation and wildlife (Ho et al., 2005; Shaul and Gramann, 1998). But participants in the focus groups demonstrated a wider range of attitudes towards nature than have been reported elsewhere. Many said they derived substantial benefits from experiencing urban nature. Their childhood experiences seemed to play a central role in shaping their park use. Participants reported that enjoying nature was an important component of their wellbeing. Many expressed a desire for their children to be able to enjoy nature too. Importantly, several participants expressed the idea that people's enjoyment and use of parks and conservation objectives are not mutually exclusive. It seems unlikely then that Latinos attitudes towards nature or their environmental values are responsible for their comparatively lower levels of visitation to this national park.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 AROUND HERE]

Focus group participants did however encounter social and structural constraints to visiting the national park. Many were busy with work and had limited time to travel long distances, especially using public transportation. Others had family responsibilities that required them to spend time at home, or they felt so fatigued after working that they could only visit parks on the weekend. Some could only visit in the afternoon and evenings – making park use in winter particularly difficult due to the early onset of darkness. And for several, just the expense of traveling to the park was a major constraint.

Not having information about the park was reported as a formidable barrier to park use, because there is very little Spanish-language information about the park or signage within the park. Baas et al. (1993) have reported that many Latinos appear to rely upon word of mouth or other informal channels for park information (see also Ho et al., 2005). The focus

group participants reported few opportunities to learn about the park. For example, information on the park website in Spanish is brief. Spanish-speaking participants also reported that they were uncomfortable using a park where they could not communicate in Spanish with park staff or with other users. But these constraints were not universal - six participants had actually visited parts of the national park including Soledad Canyon (1), Malibu Creek State Park (2), Will Rogers State Park (2) and Chantry Flats (1). Others believed that the barriers they encountered were not insurmountable.

These findings are consistent with several studies that have indirectly investigated the constraints or barriers that face Latinos wanting to use parks and open space (Baas et al., 1993; Gobster, 2002; Shaul and Gramann, 1998; Tierney et al., 2001). Those studies found that a lack of public transportation, crowding, few Latino staff, absence of multi-lingual signage, financial constraints, poor facilities and perceived discrimination were all factors affecting the ability of Latinos to visit and use parks (Gobster, 2002; Ho et al., 2005; Perez-Verdin et al., 2004; Tinsley et al., 2002). Gender, age and level of education are also said to influence Latino park-going behavior (Ho et al., 2005; Sasidharan et al., 2005). But we also found constraints to park use that have not been reported elsewhere, constraints related to the cultural politics of nature at work in this park. Perception in particular, seems to play an important role and the perception of the park as a racialized space has much to do with the ideas of nature that have been mobilized in the creation and management of this park space.

6 Conclusion

Parks are socio-natural assemblages that reflect power struggles and cultural contests over very specific ideas of nature. The United States, like other 'settler nations', has a long history of ethno-racial exclusion from park spaces. Central Park in New York for example required the destruction of Seneca Village – a largely Irish and African-American marginalized

neighborhood (Gandy, 2002). And recent research by Byrne et al. (2007) and Byrne and Wolch (2009) among others, has recently noted that up until the 1960s, separate park systems for Whites and people of color as – well as segregated recreational facilities – were common in US cities, a fact conveniently overlooked by most leisure scholars searching for explanations for what they have termed ‘minority underrepresentation in parks’. National parks in particular have long histories of social exclusion. As ‘nature-making’ projects, where park developers enacted versions of ‘pure’ or ‘pristine’ nature, national parks required the oftentimes violent dispossession of park inhabitants (Asher and Ojeda, 2009; Byrne et al., 2009; Everhart, 1983; Foresta, 1984; Meeker et al., 1973; Neumann, 1996; Olwig, 1996; Sellars, 1999; Spence, 1999). While the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area – the largest urban national park in the US – was ostensibly created under the aegis of the parks to people movement it is little wonder that comparatively fewer ‘minority’ users visit this park. This national park enshrines a particular version of nature that represents the park as ‘pristine’, ‘pure’, ‘unspoiled’ and ‘requiring protection’; a culture-nature assemblage that is decidedly ‘White’.

The research discussed in this paper was not about why Latinos avoid the park altogether, for they do not. Rather the paper has begun to explore why comparatively fewer Latinos use the park when compared with Whites. Although Latinos certainly are the largest group of ‘minority’ users of this park, they are not a substantially large group of park users (remember 72% of park users are White) (Byrne et al., 2009). What this suggests though is that social exclusion shapes ethno-racial differences in park use, particularly – as we have discussed in this paper – since large numbers of Latinos live within reasonable commuting distance of the park and could reasonably be expected to visit the park. We noted for instance that the proportion of Latinos living within the park catchment was higher than the proportion of Latinos using this park. Moreover, the comparatively lower numbers of Latinos visiting

the national park are not likely due to the intervening influence of other parks. As figure 4 shows, many of the parks frequented by focus group participants are actually further from Latino population concentrations than the national park, and many participants reported using parks that were further from their homes than this park – for reasons of safety and affability. Nor were the park leisure pursuits mentioned by focus group participants substantially different to those listed by Latino users of the national park – suggesting that park facilities may not be contributing to the observed patterns of (non)use. Of course further quantitative (survey based) research will be required to empirically test this proposition.

This research has focused on Latinos as a way to begin to challenge leisure scholars' assertions that ethnic or racial proclivities are responsible for patterns of park use and non-use decisions. For this reason it has been important to review the leisure literature on socio-cultural barriers to park use and the geography and planning literature on socio-spatial barriers to park use, not to construct a laundry list of barriers, but rather to establish commonalities in these explanations, and to build a picture of interrelated and mutually reinforcing factors of exclusion, factors that point to larger structural and cultural processes at work. These processes have not been identified by researchers simply looking at the behavior of individuals. What much of the park-use literature currently contains are fragmented explanations that never quite grasp the bigger picture, a bigger picture which suggests that many of these factors affecting park use are actually interconnected and may reflect what has been termed the 'cultural politics' of nature.

To date, much of the research examining ethno-racially differentiated park (non)use has seemingly overlooked the socio-spatiality of parks, the political and cultural beliefs that have underpinned the creation of parks, and the symbolic and material *work* that parks perform in instantiating and legitimating nature-based ideologies and practices. To borrow a

phrase from Grove (2009: 214), analyses of park (non)use – from leisure studies in particular – have tended to ‘dehistoricize and de-politicize the non-human’, forclosing the possibility of seeing parks as carefully scripted culture-nature assemblages with a purpose. Taking for granted the naturalness of parks and regarding them as mere settings for human activity, rather than as socio-natural artifacts which shape human activity, means that we can easily become blind to how park spaces entrench and reproduce ethno-racial formations and racist and/or elitist power dynamics. Moreover, holding White park-use as an index against which to assess that of other ethno-racial groups elides the complex ways in which parks and park-use have been instrumental to the making of ‘Whiteness’.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 AROUND HERE]

In this paper we join a growing cadre of scholars in contending that the socio-cultural, and to a lesser extent socio-spatial explanations from leisure research offer only partial glimpses into the complex ways that social exclusion operates in urban nature spaces (Brownlow, 2005; Byrne et al., 2007; Ravenscroft and Markwell, 2000; Sister et al., 2010; Wolch et al., 2005; Yeo and Teo, 1996; Young, 1996). Geographical perspectives, we have argued, can bolster our understanding of park non(use) and in turn broaden our knowledge of the ‘*cultural politics of nature*’ (Moore et al., 2003). Our research has shown for instance, that many of the focus group participants we spoke with have strong ecological ethics, yet they appeared to feel some ambivalence about how those ethics were expressed in regard to park use, which perhaps contributed to their reluctance to use this particular park. And the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area appears to be racialized in complex ways – some Latino participants actually visited the park, though they reported feeling excluded; they nonetheless regarded the park as a ‘gringo’ or ‘American’ space.

We have seen in our research that how Latinos perceive a particular park may influence their ideas about whether the park is a ‘hostile’ space. Certainly the spatial characteristics of parks (e.g. the condition of park facilities, the presence of shady trees, presence of animals and their habitats, cleanliness of benches and having a place to wash hands) emerged as an important aspect of how participants perceived the affability of parks (see Floyd et al., 2008). But many participants were also emphatic that the types of people who use parks strongly affected their desire to visit and use those parks. For example, several participants said they feared gangs, drug users and homeless people in central Los Angeles’ parks like MacArthur and Lafayette parks, and consequently did not want to visit those parks.

Just as concerning though is the fact that a number of participants also felt uncomfortable and afraid about visiting wildland parks like the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area because they perceived that most park users – and most people living close to such parks – would be White, wealthy and xenophobic. Participants said they feared that if they visited such ‘gringo’ parks they would be singled out for being different, boisterous or just because they were Latino. Some even believed that they would need a pass to visit and use the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area or that park users or neighborhood residents would call the sheriff because only ‘Americans’ were welcome in this park. Several participants expressed feeling anxious about visiting the park because they were unsure about the social norms that control behavior in wildland spaces in the United States. And many of those norms are norms of ‘Whiteness (e.g. quiet hiking vs. boisterous picnicking)’.

What our research therefore shows is that the (non)use of parks by certain ethno-racial groups may be less likely a function of those groups’ cultural predilections than their perceptions of racism and social exclusion, informed by long histories of park-making and

the ways that these histories are embedded in park landscapes. Non-White ethno-racial groups may also hold ideas about, and attitudes towards, other ethno-racial groups based upon suspicion, distrust or even fear – which may act as deterrents to park use, something warranting further scholarly attention. The fact that some of the focus group participants associated gang violence, drug use and homelessness with some African-American park users suggests that ethno-racial antipathies transcend White-non-White dualisms.

Obviously not all the constraints to park use facing participants that we have reported here are easily remedied. Some like long working hours, fatigue and long travel distances are difficult to overcome, as they may operate as interlocking and mutually reinforcing barriers (Mowen et al., 2005; Samdahl and Jekubovich, 1997). Others may not be universally constraining because some people may find ways to negotiate associated difficulties (e.g. lack of time) (Brown et al., 2001; Carroll and Alexandris, 1997; Crompton and Kim, 2004). But clearly park managers can nonetheless take steps to limit the impact of some of the constraints reported here – especially those arising from the cultural politics of nature (Li et al., 2008).

Our research suggests that if access to parks and nature spaces in cities like Los Angeles is to become more equitable, not only must socio-spatial barriers and constraints to park utilization must be remedied, but park managers must recognize that park use reflects the cultural politics of nature-making. As Grove (2009: 209) reminds us: “cultural practices through which nature is inscribed with meaning are thus always political, for they are bound up in questions of ‘whose nature’ may legitimately be practiced.” Efforts to redress patterns of ethno-racially differentiated (non)use then, must work at first de-territorializing park nature (Grove, 2009). One has to seriously question the motivations of park managers when their websites contain information about the park predominantly in English, when park

images convey representations of ‘White’ nature (e.g. landscapes emptied of people representing ‘pristine’ or ‘pure’ nature), and when park staff are mostly White and park signs written only in English. Ameliorative strategies should be based on a more inclusive definition of park ‘nature’. Spanish-language park signs and information about the park in Spanish would be an obvious place to begin, as would Spanish language information about nature in the park (both educational and about hazards e.g. rattlesnakes). After-school and weekend nature education programs could also be beneficial. Our findings suggest that we need more research into how ethno-racial formations and the cultural politics of nature shape park spaces and concomitantly affect park use, rich terrain for further investigation.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Most studies of ethno-racially differentiated patterns of park (non)use begin with the work of Randall Washburn Washburn, R.F., 1978. Black underparticipation in wildland recreation: Alternative explanations. *Leisure Sciences* 2, 201-210. as a 'point of departure' for their investigations. Observing ethno-racially differentiated park use, Washburn posited two possible explanations: (i) socio-economic marginality; and (ii) what he termed 'ethnicity' (a term he used interchangeably for, yet which elided, race). Leisure scholars have since mostly focused on (dis)proving the assumed socio-cultural determinants of ethno-racially differentiated park (non)use (e.g. affluence, cultural preferences, assimilation, experiences of racism etc.), rather than questioning the historic-socio-spatial assemblages and processes that have produced racialized nature. Not surprisingly, much of their work uncritically naturalizes and essentializes ethno-racial formations such as 'Asian recreation preferences'.

ⁱⁱ See Samdahl and Jekubovich Samdahl, D.M., Jekubovich, N.J., 1997. A critique of leisure constraints: comparative analyses and understandings. *Journal of Leisure Research* 29 (4), 430-452. for a critique and Raymore Raymore, L.A., 2002. Facilitators to leisure. *Journal of Leisure Research* 34 (1), 37-51. for an alternative 'facilitators' approach.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shaw et al. Shaw, S.M., Bonen, A., McCabe, J.F., 1991. Do more constraints mean less leisure? Examining the relationship between constraints and participation. *Journal of Leisure Research* 23 (4), 286-300. also discerned between reported constraints and perceived constraints.

^{iv} The ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Southern California prohibited recruiting participants younger than 18 years of age. We found it difficult to recruit participants aged between 18 and 21 years of age and participants older than 65. Future research will need to target these groups to see if our assertions are justified.

^v The protocol for the study was reviewed and approved by the University of Southern California's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

^{vi} Copies of questions are available from author upon request.