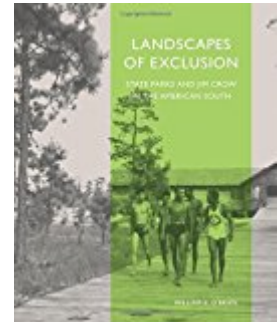


William E. O'Brien. *Landscapes of Exclusion: State Parks and Jim Crow in the American South.* Designing the American Park Series. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015. Illustrations. 208 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-62534-155-6.



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William E. O'Brien's book *Landscapes of Exclusion: State Parks and Jim Crow in the American South* chronicles how the development of state parks in the South was rooted in racial prejudices and stereotypes that justified unequal access and participation. The Jim Crow laws in the South dictated the creation and use of state parks. Southern state parks were successful in developing and maintaining segregated parks despite using federal funds.

O'Brien explains the larger narrative of how preserving North American landscapes was viewed as a method to preserve the supposed "American way of life" against African Americans and newly arrived immigrants from Europe and Asia at the turn of the century. Early American ideas of wilderness preservation were based on the theories of nineteenth-century French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck who argued that "environmental influences on the behavior and character of living animals could be inherited by descendants, suggesting that encounters with natural elements might lead to enhancement or decline of a

species" (p. 31). Although the Darwinian theory of genetic inheritance ultimately displaced Lamarck's perspective, the idea that acquired characteristics were heritable nonetheless persisted.

Racial theorists embraced the Lamarckian view and suggested that the "vitalism" needed to survive in the harsh climes of northern Europe and the American West resulted in these groups becoming superior to other races. According to O'Brien, the fear that Nordic types would lose the evolutionary battle against the recent Mediterranean immigrants who peopled early twentieth-century cities spurred the promotion of scenic parks and wilderness areas as a way to preserve an environment where white superiority could renew itself. The preservation of rural and wild places for Nordic populations would provide them with an environmental advantage over the constant flood of other races.

By contrast, advocates for wilderness recreation viewed national parks as a means to prevent black criminality. As early as the 1920s, officials ar-

gued that recreational areas and parks for African Americans would help to address stereotypical problems of crime and juvenile delinquency. In October 1925, while introducing a speaker at the Twelfth Recreation Congress in Asheville, North Carolina, Chairman Robert Lassiter stated that, “with proper attention to recreational facilities, they [African Americans] will make good citizens. Improper attention to that, and neglect and abuse of it, will make a criminal population” (p. 34). These assumptions about black criminality knew no color line. The following year, Ernest Attwell, director of the Parks and Recreation Association (PRA) Bureau of Colored Work and a Tuskegee Institute graduate, reiterated Lassiter’s views.

These arguments resulted in the emergence of another stereotype that African Americans needed outdoor spaces for loud and gregarious activities unlike their white counterparts who preferred wide open spaces for contemplative thought. This approach justified larger parcels for whites-only state parks that included hiking and nature appreciation while African American park users needed only a picnic area, hunting and fishing places, and perhaps a ball park. O’Brien argues that these early views influenced park development well into the twentieth century.

O’Brien’s book spans a period of time beginning with the origins of state park development in the 1930s to the turbulent civil rights era in the 1960s and relates how the development of state parks reflected the political and racial conflicts of these decades. Throughout, *Landscapes of Exclusion* emphasizes how local, state, and federal agencies adhered to what was called “customary” practices to justify using public funds to build and maintain segregated state parks. By the 1930s and 1940s, even as state park officials acknowledged African Americans’ need for state parks, Jim Crow laws and the hostility of white residents meant that most southern states refused to provide them.

O’Brien presents case studies for Oklahoma, Arkansas, North Carolina, Tennessee, and South

Carolina to illustrate how government agencies navigated local racist attitudes while striving for equitable development and use of state parks. For example, Arkansas proposed the South’s first state park exclusively for African Americans in 1935 during the early days of the New Deal. To preserve segregation, the planned Arkansas R-4, Pine Bluff Regional Negro Park would be located in an area that was 90 percent African American and maintained by the Pine Bluff Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal College (AM&N), a historically black college. Despite the support of AM&N’s president John Brown Watson, Arkansas governor Junius Marion Futrell, and the president of the University of Arkansas, the park was never built. Additional case studies further illustrate the difficulty of developing state parks for African Americans. For example, in 1937, the Park Service proposed a segregated camp at Swift Creek Recreational Demonstration Areas (RDA) near Richmond, Virginia. The RDA program was developed to convert agricultural land into recreational areas. Despite assurances that natural buffers (and different names) would separate white and black areas of the park, the local advisory board rejected the proposal.

Not all states rejected segregated parks for African Americans. Those built in this period drew on the resources offered by the New Deal to preserve segregation. In Oklahoma, Roman Nose State Park opened on May 16, 1937, and included a picnic area for African Americans. Designed by Park Service staff and constructed by members of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), it featured a bathhouse with a concrete pool fed from a local spring as well as camping facilities and overnight cabins. The area set aside for African Americans, referred to as the “Negro Picnic Area” on the park’s master plan, was located in the extreme northwest sector of the park and included picnic tables, barbecue pits, restrooms, a playground, and a parking lot. Despite these amenities, its day-use only status and significant distance from the African Ameri-

can population meant that the “Negro Picnic Area” went largely unused.

After World War II, in the face of mounting challenges to segregation, southern states proposed a more expansive network of segregated parks for African Americans and the leasing of whites-only parks to private entities in an attempt to prevent integration. Despite these attempts to preserve Jim Crow, civil rights activists nonetheless persisted. In 1951, four African American beachgoers were denied entry into Seashore State Park on Cape Henry in Virginia. When attorneys from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filed a lawsuit, the Virginia Department of Conservation offered to build a park for African Americans near Seashore State Park with similar amenities. When the NAACP rejected this offer, they filed suit in *Tate v. Department of Conservation*.

At the same time, the NAACP filed another case, *Lonesome v. Maxwell*, in the summer of 1952 to desegregate Sandy Point State Park in Maryland. The park had separate facilities for African Americans and whites on the same grounds, “including segregated beaches and bathhouses.” After the eight plaintiffs were refused access to South Beach (for whites only), officials directed them to East Beach, “a virtually unusable area” reserved exclusively for the use of African Americans (p. 130). Initially, Judge Calvin Chestnut ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in 1953 but overturned the verdict one month later after the state improved the facilities at East Beach.

While both *Lonesome* and *Tate* were pending, the Supreme Court issued its ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education*, ruling that “separate but equal” was unconstitutional. Although the ruling focused on school segregation, its broader implications, including integrating parks and recreational facilities, soon became evident. With Judge Walter E. Hoffman finally set to hear the *Tate* case on April 26, 1955, Virginia officials anticipated an adverse ruling and attempted to lease the public park

to a private entity to avoid desegregation. Judge Hoffman issued a temporary injunction on March 12, 1955, that barred any such leases until after the April court hearing.

The Fourth Circuit of Appeals forbade the state of Maryland from operating segregated parks in the *Lonesome* case. The outcome confirmed what Virginia’s segregationists feared would happen. Ultimately, Judge Hoffman ruled that Virginia must desegregate all state parks and could not avert this ruling through privatization. In response, Virginia governor Thomas B. Stanley defied the court’s ruling and ordered the closure of Seashore State Park for the 1955 season and refused to desegregate the rest of the state’s parks.

My criticisms of the work are, for the most part, minor. Because O’Brien focuses on how southern states sought to maintain segregation, he does not discuss how northern states approached these same issues. Given the persistence of segregation both above and below the Mason-Dixon Line, it would have been enlightening to read how local, state, and federal officials outside of the South acquiesced to “customary” practices of segregated parks and services.

The strength of O’Brien’s book is explaining how the preservation of recreational areas and parks were viewed as a method to maintain white superiority. The author’s case studies also clearly illustrate the difficulties that civil rights activists faced as they fought to desegregate a park system initially built to support Jim Crow. The historical photographs included in the book also provide readers with a nice visualization of how these parks were constructed. *Landscapes of Exclusion* offers readers a well-rounded and thoroughly researched history of the South’s legacy of racial segregation in the state park system.

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