

Performing Geology: Risk and Conquest in the Origin Stories of a Field Science

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Abstract

Stories about the foundation of US geology as a discipline are prominent in the culture of field geology today. This article traces the threads of such “origin stories” through field geology practices and undergraduate training. The repetition of these origin stories obfuscates the colonial and race-fueled motives that underpin the actions of the US geologist characters featured in these stories. Increasingly, the field is recognized as a site of sexual and racial harassment and abuse. By making visible the racialized subplots in the history of US geology, which include entrenchment in racial science and land dispossession, I posit that the curated origin stories repeated today perpetuate processes of gendered and race-based exclusion and subjugation in field geology.

Keywords

Earth science, geology, fieldwork, scientific training, origin stories

Introduction

My fingertips trace bumpy grains and smooth textures in rocks that encode worlds past. The field is a tangible environment that immerses you within a study system. This transcendent space is what drew me to study the Earth, sparked by a field experience in geology studying ancient ice ages in the summer before I began a PhD program in Applied Physics. In my first semester of graduate school at Harvard University, I switched disciplines into Earth science to follow an interest in the ice age. Fieldwork brought me into Earth science, but those experiences also kept me from pursuing research in the field. Despite my entry via

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the field, I did not become a field geologist. I am now a computational geoscientist studying past ice sheets and sea level by modeling how the solid Earth deforms under the weight of massive ice sheets, which grow and melt over tens of thousands of years. I hold an assistant professor position in Earth science at UC Santa Cruz, a US public research university. I am a white-presenting Jewish Latina American woman. My mother is Argentine and Jewish, and my father is American, of Mexican Californio and Jewish Romanian descent.

From this positionality, I became increasingly aware of patterns of exclusion in the Earth sciences. I was particularly struck by both visible and invisible rules about how geologists' bodies were expected to act or look in the field. The stories we tell and the stories we repeat set norms for our discipline's culture and practice. In geology, especially in the study of deep-time rocks, the stories I heard were stewed in masculine notions of ruggedness and adventure. I started to ask myself where these dominant stories came from. How do the stories we tell, and more importantly, the stories we choose not to tell, construct an ideal of the field geologist's body?

In seeking to answer these questions, I am inspired by Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity to consider how the field geologist's body is expected to behave to be seen as legitimate by the geology community. Butler proposes that "a body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (1988, 523). Thus, gender identity can be created by repeated performance. This concept can similarly be applied to the field geologist's body, which can be identified and recognized as a "field geologist" through its behavior or performance. Sharon Traweek's (1992) conception of scientific culture argues that repeated practices and daily routines render a set of actions and beliefs as the only obvious and rational approach. Stories told in geology codify a culture with a set of rules for how bodies should perform in field environments. The field geologist can then "become" a field geologist through actions, guided by social rules and reinforced through storytelling. This scientific culture can be identified in the ways that undergraduate training omits past and ongoing racialized and gendered encounters in geology. This omission causes students to experience epistemic injustice, an injustice of access to knowledge (Fricker 2007). Within the concept of epistemic injustice, philosopher Miranda Fricker defines testimonial injustice, a prejudice in the credibility of someone's expressed knowledge, and hermeneutical injustice, when someone has unfair access to information for interpreting their social experiences. The embodied nature of fieldwork requires understanding how culture can cue performed behavior, as well as how such cultural rules are mediated by the ways we access and share information about our lived experiences.

Science is always socially situated. As a practitioner of Earth science, and a beginning feminist science studies scholar, I am inspired by feminist science and

technology studies scholars before me who have critically examined practices in their scientific disciplines, such as Donna Haraway, Banu Subramaniam, Deboleena Roy, Sara Giordano, and others. In “Ghost Stories for Darwin,” Subramaniam (2014) argues that the history of eugenics continues to haunt scientific research in genetics and ecology on diversity. Subramaniam’s analysis of science history illustrates how the institution of science can be accessed at different times for different purposes, and this inspires me to listen to the ghosts in the walls of my own discipline to uncover these multiplicities. I am drawn to Haraway’s assertion that is difficult to imagine “the possibility of new stories not strangled by the same logics of appropriation and domination”(1989, 523), especially when the stories we tell and retell are stories based on oppression.

Some readers will likely already be familiar with Butler’s theory of performativity, while others will be more deeply acquainted with the figures within the history of geology named herein. My approach attempts to bridge geology practitioners’ experience in research and teaching with concepts in feminist theory that interrogate the social and political ramifications of science practices. I see the two-pronged nature of this essay as a necessary element of a bridging piece, to create space for science practitioners to more readily borrow from feminist science studies. Traveling between these academic spaces has challenged my own approach to science and my connection to the Earth by uncovering the cultural values imbued within research questions and methods.

Although rich cultural traditions in geology exist across the globe, this essay focuses on US field geology, and is specifically concerned with deep-time rock-centric research. In the US, there are stories about the foundation of geology as a discipline that remain strong fixtures in field geology today. As geologists trained in the US are aware, these “origin stories” are often stories of adventure and exploration rooted in nineteenth-century US geology that sanction scientific rigor. The implicit storylines about the motivation of early US geologists are the backdrop to the history of settler colonialism, Native American removal, and creation of racial hierarchies ordained by US science (Monarrez et al. 2021; Pico 2019). Repetition of these origin stories, and the reperformance of the values they uphold, set a disciplinary culture that positions geologic fieldwork as an act, governed by behavioral rules and expectations. Such repeated performance, ingrained in routines and cultural norms, is reinforced by the stories told within the discipline, creating a seemingly “neutral” field geologist. Can we locate the stories that are still “living” in the field geology community? What stories are retold and what stories are not? Which bodies can tell stories in geology? And do these stories only get told about certain bodies?

By documenting the ways that the idealized field geologist’s body is constructed through the repetition of origin stories, I aim to demonstrate how the gendered, racialized, and able-bodied nature of this body perpetuates exclusion and

subjugation in both training and research practice, evocative of the colonial practices so central to US geology's disciplinary foundation.

The Field as a Socially Situated Site

Increasingly, fieldwork is recognized as a potential site of sexual and racial harassment and abuse (Clancy et al. 2014, 2017). Understanding the prevalence of such behaviors in the field requires illuminating the pervasive cultural norms that allow patterns of abuse to persist. Importantly, if we can identify when, where, and how such behavioral norms are transmitted through training of the next generation of field scientists, then it may be possible to intervene. At stake are the safety of students and science practitioners.

Outside of geology, disciplines explicitly encompassing the human dimension have addressed the field as a socially situated site, showing its impact on research questions, process, and outcomes. A substantial body of literature in anthropology and geography reflects on the positionality of the fieldworker, especially how the research practice itself is modulated by body markers such as race, gender, or able-bodiedness (Hausermann and Adomako 2022). Such literature focuses on how information gained during fieldwork is mediated by the body or how experiences of embodiment influence the choice of field sites and research topics (Billo and Hiemstra 2013; Hanson and Richards 2017; Henderson 2009; Jokinen and Caretta 2016; Kuklick and Kohler 1996; Lopez and Gillespie 2016; R. Powell 2002; Reich 2003; Sparke 1996; Turner 2000). I wish to extend this concept of embodiment to include the behavioral norms imposed on the field geologist's body through cultural cues.

Connections between geology, colonialism, and race-based exclusion today have been explored in Earth science education literature. One such study applied an intersectional conceptual framework to Earth science education to identify how cultural identity, institutional power, and historical sociocultural factors influence retention and success of undergraduate Earth science majors (Núñez, Rivera, and Hallmark 2020). Núñez and others identify how the history of geology in westward expansion can be unwelcoming to communities of color, in addition to the expectation of toughness or expensive gear required to be comfortable in the field. A recent article by Pedro Monarrez and colleagues explored how the history of colonialism and extraction in paleontology and Earth sciences shape the structure of the science today (Monarrez et al. 2021).

Recent initiatives in the Earth sciences and other field sciences have brought such discussions to the forefront through community-led discussions and publications (Cronin et al. 2021; URGEGEOSCIENCE, n.d.), as well as research funding sources, such as the National Science Foundation's (n.d.) recent focus on shifting community relationships in Arctic research beginning in 2017. The focus on race

and colonialism in these initiatives has been highlighted in studies on pedagogical practices in Earth science. An analysis of Earth science textbooks found pervasive themes that included sexist messaging, negative portrayals of people of color, and positive and nationalist messaging about the military-industry complex (Phillips and Hausbeck 2000). Another initiative in prior work has brought feminist science perspectives into climate system curricula (Mayberry and Rees 1997; Mayberry and Welling 2000). I recently led an Earth science curriculum intervention, GeoContext, that builds on this work; its aim is to incorporate a sociopolitical historical context in commonly taught subjects in introductory Earth science (Pico et al. 2021). At a time when geoscientists are attempting to tackle issues of diversity and equity, there is a need for positive efforts for inclusion. I aim to expand and deepen the range of practices in geology. In this piece, I raise the possibility of telling alternate stories—stories that resist the dominant cultural narrative of heroic origins of US geology. I propose telling a multiplicity of stories, which include the racialized and colonial threads within geology. Instinctually, as geologists we may avert our gaze from difficult pasts. Nevertheless, telling such stories can allow for a full and complex history. Learning about these troubling histories of racism helped me to recognize and weave through existing power dynamics in Earth science. From my perspective, such knowledge offers pathways for those on the margins to navigate the tunnels of geology's modern social structure, which carry traces of its problematic foundation through culture and practice.

Building on literature in Earth science education and embodiment in anthropological fieldwork, I focus on the field as a site of performance through cultural conditioning. First, I document origin stories told about the foundations of US geology through a textual analysis of undergraduate textbooks. Next, I ask how these stories set behavioral norms for field geologists by analyzing North American field geologists' language in field experience descriptions. Finally, I turn to undergraduate training practices, using concepts of epistemic justice to consider which stories are told and which stories are omitted in undergraduate field education. By invoking concepts of performativity and epistemic injustice from feminist theory, I theorize the field geologist's formation through repeated practice imposed by a culture ingrained within narratives.

Documenting Geology Origin Stories

In US Earth science courses, both introductory and advanced, the glorification of nineteenth-century US geologists is common practice. Stories about the origin of the discipline become formalized through undergraduate teaching and are documented in textbooks. These stories indicate to students where the discipline came from and what values geologists hold. I document the language of origin stories used in undergraduate Earth science textbooks published in the US, which frequently include anecdotes about foundational characters in nineteenth-century US geology.

While there are several canonical figures in early US geology, for the sake of concision, here I focus on two who repeatedly appear in Earth science courses: John Wesley Powell and Louis Agassiz. While I examine only these two figures, a broader study encompassing more key characters is merited in future work. I reviewed six textbooks (Press and Siever 1974; Chernicoff and Fox 2003; Prothero and Dott 2010; Levin 2010, 2013; Grotzinger and Jordan 2014) published between 1974 and 2014 gathered from current syllabi of major geology departments in the US.¹ I pay particular attention to how language has, or has not, changed over the decades in introductory texts that include these characters.

Most geologists trained in the US are familiar with John Wesley Powell, who is famous for leading a government-sponsored expedition to raft down the Colorado River into the Grand Canyon. A classic textbook published in the 1970s recounts the Powell expedition in heroic terms, insisting that it is “still an adventure” to travel the Colorado River and repeat the “first perilous journey” led by Powell in 1869 with “his party of nine men in four small rowboats” (Press & Siever 1974, 28). This rhetoric underscores bravery, painting the Powell expedition as a feat of physical endurance that pushed the bounds of the unknown. The textbook shares that Major Powell was a geologist who contributed to founding the United States Geologic Survey (USGS), becoming one of the agency’s first leaders (Press and Siever 1974).

More recent textbooks echo a similar adventuring and glorifying rhetoric about Powell. A 2010 textbook extols that “[Powell’s] greatest feat was a journey by boat through the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River in 1869” (Levin 2010, 25). A later edition of this textbook even adds additional detail highlighting Powell’s bravery: “John Wesley Powell saw service during the Civil War. He lost his right arm as a result of a wound received during the Battle of Shiloh. That handicap, however, did not curtail his geologic work in the slightest” (Levin 2013, 25). A 2003 textbook lauds the journey as “the wildest, longest, and most dangerous white-water river ride,” and describes Powell as a hero with “tough and persistent nature” (Chernicoff and Fox 2003, 12). This language parallels that of textbooks decades prior, emphasizing Powell’s manly character as he overcame physical obstacles.

Textbooks highlight and reflect the masculine and colonial values of conquest that continue to be held by geologists today. According to these stories, geologists seek adventure. They persevere when faced with any physical barrier. The description of Powell’s body and actions becomes a “supercrip” narrative of overcoming adversity (Schalk 2016), and Kenny Fries (2007) narrates how such stories can evoke a complex response for the disabled community in “Aqua Booties, Size Six.” Stories about Powell in textbooks published in both the 1970s and 2010s focus on heroism, adventure, and danger, echoing themes of white

manly heroism identified in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century US society (Bederman 1995; Oreskes 1996; Ray 2013).

Nevertheless, Powell's legacy is more complicated. A biography of Powell, written by novelist Wallace Stegner (1954), includes how he conducted ethnographic work on Native American tribes in the regions he was mapping out. Powell used ethnographic research on Ute languages to justify the superiority of English and Christianity, and the inferiority of Native American cultures, noting that "next to teaching them to work, the most important thing is to teach them the English language. Into their own language there is woven so much mythology and sorcery that...the ideas and thoughts of civilized life cannot be communicated to them in their own tongues" (J.W. Powell and Ingalls 1875, 25). Powell was commissioned by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to report on the status of Native American tribes in the Canyonlands and make recommendations on how to integrate them into white American society (Stegner 1954).

Powell collaborated with Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, a Harvard professor in geology, who, at the turn of the twentieth century, wrote volumes detailing how North American topography has been "shown by their human products...unfitted to be the cradle places of great peoples," while praising "the geographic conditions that led to... the institution of slavery". (Shaler 1897, 166, 205). At Harvard, Shaler was one of numerous faculty involved in scientific racism that ultimately contributed to the eugenics movement (Fiorito 2019). Over decades, the origin story focused on bravery has been repeated, without including Powell's more complex racialized legacy. Such an emphasis on bravery, in the backdrop of contemporary racial science, connects this trait to deeper patterns of exclusion, shifting how we understand the centrality of bravery to the essence of fieldwork.

In Earth science textbooks Louis Agassiz is described as a naturalist and geologist. A 1970s textbook lauds Agassiz's accomplishments as a "a young professor, not yet thirty" who was a "pioneer in the measurement of glacier flow," recounting how Agassiz and his students built a hut on a glacier and tracked its velocity (Press and Siever 1974, 216). This textbook notes Agassiz as "instrumental" in founding glacial geology (Press and Siever 1974, 216). A 2010 textbook emphasizes Agassiz as a well-regarded American scientist: a Harvard professor who founded the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology and published important studies (Levin 2010). By yoking Agassiz's pioneering spirit to his pre-eminence as a figure in geology, this textbook contributes to an origin myth steeped in heroism.

Throughout the decades, these textbook anecdotes include no hints to Agassiz's more complex legacy; their exclusions continue to reinforce narratives of heroism that have historically contributed to justifications of white supremacy and racial hierarchies (Menand 2001). Agassiz advocated for polygeny, the idea that different human races were different species, and thus should not intermix.

Agassiz's research included studies of skulls and daguerreotypes often collected without consent (Fernandes 2019; Menand 2001). Indeed, the development of racial science in US universities parallels the involvement of higher education in the institution of slavery (Wilder 2013). Academic scientists at nineteenth-century US universities expounded the use of science to justify racial categories and hierarchies. Agassiz and his contemporaries played important roles in legitimizing ideas about racial hierarchy, bolstered by their position as scientists. Nevertheless, the stories told about these individuals in undergraduate Earth science textbooks highlight certain aspects (brilliance, discovery, or bravery) while burying colonial and racist motivations.

Origin stories in Earth science textbooks offer cultural cues to students about the discipline. These stories about the foundation of US geology underscore geology as a discipline of exploration and adventure. This narrative avoids US geology's connection to white supremacy and colonialism. These stories mark the geologist's body with implicit social categories of gender, race, and able-bodiedness. Historians of science are aware of the connection between geology and imperialism in the US (M. Black 2018; Robinson 2006). However, knowledge of this critical literature has not been integrated into stories told by geologists about the origins of the discipline. Retelling these stories reinforces a narrative that privileges the white, masculine, and exceptionally fit body (set on overcoming any physical obstacles) as the legitimate field geologist. The repetition of these dominant stories and practices makes the cultural norms and expectations for the geologist's body, and its performance, appear neutral and natural.

How Do Practicing Field Geologists Connect to Origin Stories?

The Hero-Scientist Trope

In geology, stories from the field elicit awe and honor. In graduate school, when a fellow student returned from the field, I sat listening to harrowing tales of a postdoc nearly falling off a waterfall to his death as the research group climbed across rocks in Peru. Indeed, some risks taken by professional field geologists have led to deaths in recent decades (Cantine 2021). Geologists place especially high value on fieldwork in remote, difficult-to-access areas. In scientific talks I have regularly witnessed speakers include photographs from the field that highlight an especially dangerous aspect of fieldwork (crossing a river rapid, scaling mountains in a blizzard, or camping near polar bears). For example, a 2021 virtual series on Precambrian research featured a talk with multiple slides showcasing the field conditions, which included a description of "boats overladen with equipment and food" and a field camp photo taken "at about 1 o'clock in the morning when we finished setting up" after being stuck in a "bad storm" and moving camp at 9 p.m. (Rainbird 2021).

These field anecdotes reify the notion of the tough and rugged geologist. The implicit requirements for a geologist's body and its performance are signaled through stories that emphasize physical and mental rigor. Such a narrative about geologists fits snugly into the "hero-scientist" role, which Mary Terrall describes as requiring "risk-taking and physical toughness, to accompany the intellectual brilliance required of the successful man of science" (1998, 85). Terrall links the hero-scientist to masculinity, as "men sought glory through the emulation of soldiers," which rendered science a means for seeking honor (85).

Today the hero-scientist trope is accessed through stories of danger in the field. By choosing (and bragging about) dangerous field sites in scientific talks, geologists prove character through sacrifice, a theme analyzed by Rebecca Herzig in *Suffering for Science* (2005). As Herzig illustrates, the suffering by scientists that legitimizes their place as heroes can only be accessed by some bodies. For example, the Peary expedition to the Arctic glorifies the suffering of the two white men explorers, extolling how their brilliant discoveries rested on these sacrifices, while diminishing and silencing the contributions of Matthew Henson, the Black male explorer who, according to Herzig, was "arguably the most crucial member of the team," and marginalized in the story of sacrificial character (2005, 80).

In *The Coldest Crucible*, Michael Robinson argues that the combination of science and exploration reinforced nineteenth-century notions of masculinity: "Traits considered essential to science, such as rationality and discipline, also played important roles in defining ideals of manliness" (2006, 6). These explorers attained status through storytelling, using "different forms of rhetoric—scientific, manly, and moral," and such stories "more than specimens or scientific observations, constituted the real currency of Arctic exploration" (Robinson 2006, 6). Naomi Oreskes, in "Objectivity or Heroism," notes how the perception of "scientific heroism," a characterization less likely attributed to women, plays an important role in validating scientific work as "objective" (1996, 90). Scientific talks that include images and anecdotes of difficult-to-access field sites and physical challenges affirm these aspects of fieldwork as part of scientific ability. These stories make implicit claims for what kinds of bodies can perform this science today. The markers for this body are gendered and raced, reinforcing the white and masculine hero-scientist role.

The repetition of stories and behaviors sets cultural rules and disciplinary norms. If we suppose that a field geologist can be recognized by a set of cultural acts, then Butler argues that "the performance renders social laws explicit," setting rules that define the identity of the field geologist (1988, 526). These repeated practices become part of the quotidian, making the rules seem natural, and these rules shape an idealized field geologist body. In this way, becoming a field geologist involves negotiating the behavioral norms of those seen as legitimate

field geologists. These social performances, informed by the origin stories that are alive in the discipline, are then transmitted to the next generation. Stories alone may not necessarily produce bodies; however, the curation and transmission of origin stories produce a culture that establishes expectations of the performance of bodies. Through these repeated performances, the field geologist's body becomes recognizable as such. These stories curate which bodies, as marked by social identifiers, can tell the stories, and which bodies can be the subject of stories.

“Suck It Up”: Embodied Identities in the Field

Modern geologic fieldwork shares themes with nineteenth-century geology driven by nationalism. The history of military involvement in nationally sponsored geography and geology expeditions renders the field a site of conquest. As examined by Matthew Sparke (1996) in “Displacing the Field in Fieldwork,” fieldworkers are free to enter and leave their field site, a position that communities inhabiting this space cannot claim. In this way, field geologists mimic the military in how they enter a site unexpectedly, dominate this space and acquire resources, and remove themselves when their goal is complete. The status of the fieldworker plays an important role in acquiring this level of power. I interviewed a PhD student in field geology, who identifies as a woman, in the year following a summer of fieldwork (April 2018). The student shared that “the culture of the country you’re in affects how you behave. In [country of field site redacted for anonymity] there are conservative ideas for the role of men and women. Guys will wrestle and horserace, but they’ll expect different things from women. My male colleague played into these roles... It’s a way of earning people’s respect that is less accessible for me.” The position of gender and race mark the fieldworker in the new field space and modulate access to power over resources in this space (Henderson 2009; Vanderbeck 2005).

Challenges accessing a field site, such as trekking through mountains for days with little (or rotten!) food or hitchhiking on motorbikes can be safer for certain identities: in casual conversations my women colleagues have told me of colleagues who are white men lodging at brothels during fieldwork, which they shared would have made them feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

Norms in geologic fieldwork that stress rugged heroism can be laden with social markers and expectations. My field geologist colleague notes how she feels less valued in the field because of her smaller size: “I’ll feel bad about not being able to carry things; they’ll say just hand it to me and not get in my way.” Indeed, for some ocean-going fieldwork, the survival gear itself is designed for a specific body type, which as Anna Glüder details, mortally endangers bodies that deviate from the “standard definition of the 50th percentile North American male” (Glüder, 2020). The colleague I interviewed also cites behavioral expectations: “In the field

there is pressure to suck it up, you have to get along with people. You're really dependent on other people for work to happen. If you upset them, they can cut you off easily. You're in a foreign country with no resources." For instance, she cites choosing to "suck up" racist comments to preserve relationships with scientists who are "giants in the field" (personal interview, April 2018).

My interview with this colleague presents another narration of the rugged heroic individualism that is lauded in geology textbooks or public research talks in field geology. Such a narrative from a different perspective allows us to see that some geologists find themselves at odds in fulfilling the physical and cultural expectations required of a field geologist's performance. An account by Riley Black (2021) on her field experiences in paleontology as a transgender woman includes macho and sexist norms in field settings dominated by men: "Young men would talk about their sexual conquests but slut-shame women who acted much the same as the boys. Peer pressure to drink can be as stereotypically over-the-top as an after-school special...How ridiculous it is that some women like to wear makeup in the field is a common point of conversation, while nothing is said about men who don't change their clothes for a week and regularly nurse hangovers of varying intensities." This double bind underscores the vigilance required for certain identities to adhere to perceived norms. These experiences suggest there are expectations for the ideal field geologist's behavior that extend beyond research outcomes. The expectations for exceptional physical ability and adventurous character evoke the historical archetype described in origin stories, always a white man. When the training of new field geologists includes physical ability and adventure-seeking as scientific rigor, stories are repeated about who can be seen as a legitimate field geologist.

"You're Seeing It for the First Time": The Privileging of Remote Sites

Today, field sites that are seen as remote or difficult-to-access are often considered pure and untouched knowledge vessels by Western scientists. Geologists are likely familiar with colleagues justifying the choice of a field site by explaining that "no one" has mapped this region since pre-plate tectonics theory (1970s) or that there are no measurements of X technique in this region. One US field geologist notes, "Working in the Arctic, working in Mongolia, what really attracts me to places like this is that they're so undescribed, so unknown. You go out there and make a lot of first order observations, and you're seeing it for the first time. Nobody has seen these, nobody has made these observations, so there's still this really fresh sense of discovery" (Harvard Museum of Natural History 2014). This geologist views their knowledge of a remote site as the "first" despite these spaces being inhabited by people, who have likely made "first order observations." Privileging remote fieldwork may be connected to racialized perceptions of nature and conquest. The conceptual history of nature and wilderness has been tied to ideas about racial purity and human primitivity by

scholars such as William Cronon and Carolyn Merchant. In the nineteenth century, wilderness was often depicted as containing the supernatural just behind the surface (Cronon 1995; Merchant 2003). In *Black Faces, White Spaces*, Carolyn Finney (2014) illustrates how during the mid-nineteenth century, landscapes inhabited by Indigenous Peoples were thought to represent untouched nature, and these places, uninhabited by white US Americans, became idolized as sites of national identity. In *The Ecological Other*, Sarah Jaquette Ray argues that rhetoric about conservation was more about “an imagined body politic,” citing wilderness as a purification tool for producing ideal Anglo American men (2013, 9). Conservation rhetoric portrayed Native American peoples’ bodies, as Ray further notes, as simultaneously “at one with nature” and as something to be sacrificed for environmental good (10). Through the institution of slavery, Black people were similarly rendered a part of a primitive nature scene, “treating them with the same mixture of contempt, false reverence, and real exploitation that also marks American environmental history” (Finney 2014, 38).

In a flashback to nineteenth-century geology, spaces deemed wild, natural, and primitive are still privileged for fieldwork, and one feature of these spaces is their inhabitation by Indigenous communities. When field sites most valued by geologists are located on historic lands of Indigenous Peoples, failing to recognize this can render Indigenous communities invisible as humans, and camouflaged into the landscape. Geologists may be drawn to conducting research in these areas to gain legitimacy through the heroic explorer scientist trope. Unaware, or unable to articulate these power dynamics, the US geologist may mimic the same oppressive practices performed by nineteenth-century colonialists, exploiting natural and human resources to attain their scientific goals.²

How do geology origin stories about the primitivity of landscapes inform the choice of remote field sites? Might field geologists form an intellectual wall between the physical geology they are studying and the humans that inhabit this space? If so, the field of geology and its tendency to consider geological phenomena as separate from Indigenous Peoples’ knowledges and heritage enacts similar logics as other scientific disciplines that impose strict boundaries between the scientific and the social (Harding 2008). Alternatively, when geologists exploit their field site for both natural and human resources, this case recalls nineteenth-century geologists who wrote about Indigenous people in their same reports about rocks, imagining them as a part of the landscape they studied (Chakrabarti 2019, 2020). In this situation, the field site blends humans with nature, blurring the bounds of the inanimate world (Luciano and Chen 2015; Povinelli 2016). Such practices may perpetuate stories about what bodies (and knowledges) can be seen as representing a legitimate scientist and what bodies and ways of knowing can be seen as part of the physical landscape.

What Stories Are Omitted in Undergraduate Field Training?

Racist and Sexist Encounters

Origin stories in geology textbooks taught in US undergraduate courses highlight bravery, toughness, and heroism in the field, and such stories are also transmitted through undergraduate training. Field experiences in undergraduate Earth science are seen as central and formative to a geologist's training (Anadu, Ali, and Jackson 2020; Sharp 1988). A 2008 study of 278 US geology programs found that 99 percent of these departments required "field camp" as part of their curriculum (Drummond and Markin 2008). The respected role of the outdoors in Earth science education is highlighted in a study analyzing field learning, which underscores that "studying geology in the field has also contributed to the social structures that have served to train generations of geoscientists" (Mogk and Goodwin 2012, 134). In 2001 the editor of the *Journal of Geoscience Education* reminisced fondly about the toughness of undergraduate field camps: "whether we thrived upon the hardships of field work or merely survived them...field camp has served as a rite of passage—a complex combination of basic training, fraternity initiation, and baptism by fire" (Drummond 2001). Likening field camp to a fraternity initiation hints to a hazing ritual that, like college Greek life, bonds students who are most aligned with this culture while alienating those who are not. Undergraduate field camps are known for involving some physical risks, and although rare, student deaths have occurred during fieldwork (Cantine 2021).

Underrepresented minorities make up less than 7 percent of undergraduate Earth science majors in the US (Bernard and Cooperdock 2018; Stokes 2013). Studies analyzing factors for underrepresentation of students of color in geology cite the importance of early experiences in the outdoors, which are more common for white students, and socioeconomic barriers related to expense and unfamiliarity with camping (and other outdoor) gear (Núñez, Rivera, and Hallmark 2020; Stokes 2013; Stokes, Levine, and Flessa 2015). Such underrepresentation in outdoor activities can be linked directly to the racialized history of demarcating what is defined as wilderness, as argued by Finney (2014) and Ray (2013). Although undergraduate field courses often reinforce values such as toughness, included in origin stories such as those shown in Earth science textbooks, stories about exclusion (such as the reasons students of color are less likely to declare geology as a major) are less often included.

For example, many field courses are conducted in rural regions of the US, areas that can be openly hostile towards non-white US Americans. A video published by an Earth science undergraduate student in 2020 recounted the constant racial tension he experienced as a Black person working in the field in the heart of the United States, including being stared down, being ignored by locals who spoke

past him to his white colleagues, and threatening run-ins with people who had white supremacist and neo-Nazi symbols on vehicles or tattoos (Anadu 2020).

During my month-long field camp in graduate school near Death Valley, California, every day when we drove out of our base camp, we passed a water tower vandalized with Latinx slurs.³ Racism during field experiences, either through encounters or language written on the landscape, may have the largest impact on students of color, whose identities may be personally targeted. Such racist encounters may seem to come from outside the geology community. However, an understanding of nineteenth-century US geology's connection to imperialism, colonialism, and racial science uncovers this history's role in such modern manifestations of a racist system.

Another story of exclusion that is seldom transmitted to students is about sexual abuse in field settings, despite the high likelihood of occurrence in such settings. Studies that show high rates of sexual harassment and sexual assault (experienced by approximately 70 percent of study participants) in fieldwork environments (Clancy et al. 2014). Such studies indicate that women of color are at particularly high risk for incidents of sexual harassment (Clancy et al. 2017). Recently, there has been a push for leaders in the field to purposefully anticipate these dangers (Anadu, Ali, and Jackson 2020; Demery and Pipkin 2021; Olcott and Downen 2020). Not only can geologists pre-empt these problems through preparation, but we can also understand the history of why they occur in our discipline. By bringing to light the history of colonialism and racial science in geology, it is possible to identify deeply ingrained cultures and practices that lead to race- and gender-based exclusion and harmful behaviors.

Epistemic Injustice

Undergraduate teaching in the field can reinforce values of toughness and bravery through the expectation that field camp is a rite of passage that consists of surviving hardships in the outdoors. Geology origin stories told to students exclude racialized histories and continue to glorify white men who were invested in movements designed to uphold white supremacy. The exclusion of a discussion surrounding the racist nature of foundational geology leaves an absence in knowledge that would allow a student of color to contextualize their experience in geology. Knowing about this history is especially important when undergraduate experiences may include significant racist and sexist encounters. This lack of knowledge regarding a significant part of this student's social experience is an example of systemic hermeneutical injustice, a term coined by Fricker (2007) to refer to structural prejudice that limits access to shared resources for interpreting and expressing social experiences, constituting a form of epistemic violence (Spivak 1988). Without access to an intellectual framework through which to understand their lived experiences in geology, students are disconnected from

epistemic resources that would aid them in understanding which parts of their social experience are shared or isolated.

Because US undergraduate geology programs have a small number of majors that are students of color (Stokes 2013), these students are less likely to have their experiences validated by peers with similar experiences. Furthermore, students of color may not be successful in having their voices heard. As Kristie Dotson (1998) describes, because the audience (leaders in geology departments) may not identify the speaker (a student of color) as a producer of knowledge and expertise, their epistemic authority may be questioned. This epistemic silencing limits the ability of students to be supported or even to testify to their own race-modulated experiences.

Furthermore, Dotson defines the idea of “testimonial smothering,” where a speaker may identify limitations in the audience’s willingness or ability to appropriately understand the testimony of their experience (1998, 244–50). Testimonial smothering results in the speaker curating their testimony, such that it only contains content that the audience is deemed competent to grasp (Dotson 1998, 244). Thus, students of color, realizing the limits of their leader’s ability or willingness to comprehend, may offer abridged palatable versions of their experiences—such that leaders will inherently be limited in knowing how race modulates students’ experiences. This process perpetuates narratives told by white field geologists. Student perspectives that do not align may be smothered by a dominant white narrative before a student is even capable of articulating their experiences.

Conclusion: Towards a Multiplicity of Storytelling in Geology

In geology the field is a site bridging past and present. You can sweat in the desert sun, standing on rocks full of pebbles dropped by icebergs from an ice-covered globe over half a billion years ago. Layers of time and climate are stacked and melted into each other, like the strata of sociocultural practices through the history of geology. By critically examining how geologists act in this space, I aimed to uncover and intercept deeply ingrained cultural patterns. In this article I attempted to demonstrate that the behavioral norms required for US field geologists to be recognized as legitimate are encoded in the discourse of origin stories told in field geology training and research. Curated origin stories about the foundations of US geology are repeated to the next generation of geologists in field training and textbooks. However, the racist subplots of these histories are often omitted, even though they foreshadow the racialized and sexualized encounters many students face when they enter the field. The omission of such stories perpetuates patterns of exclusion and abuse in both training and research practice.

This essay suggests a critical intervention in the discourse about the origin of US geology. I am inspired by the new relationships we can imagine between humans and the inanimate world. By examining the values and practices ingrained in disciplinary narratives, is it possible to intercept the retelling of dominant storylines to insert space for alternate practices and viewpoints? Can we crack open the stories we've been told and unpack the values they teach? Can we begin to tell a multiplicity of stories that allow new possibilities for the future of geology?

Notes

¹ Textbooks postdate the acceptance of plate tectonic theory; see Oreskes 1999.

² For a discussion of how scientists portrayed encounters with Indigenous Peoples through tales of adventure, see Smith 1999.

³ A 2021 campaign notes that more than 1,400 place names in the United States contain racial slurs (Ranganathan et al. 2021). While these names can be found in every state, the majority are in western and southern US states, and appear in rural regions where geologic fieldwork takes place. The geoscientists behind this campaign emphasize the uneasy effect of these place names: "we cannot ask for more diversity in the Earth Science community and then put geoscientists of color in the situation of confronting this language in their daily work" (Ranganathan et al. 2021). While many of these names may be remnants from decades or centuries ago, these place names serve as visible reminders of the deeply rooted white supremacist ideologies that continue to haunt these landscapes. See Ranganathan et al. 2021.

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