THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Social Distance: Urban Prairie Landscapes and The Production of Forced Distance Through Public Ecology

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An essay submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Law, Letters & Society
and honors in Anthropology

Department of Anthropology
Law, Letters & Society Program (New Collegiate Division)

April 2021

Abstract[1]

Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced us all to dramatically reconsider how we exist within and engage with public spaces. Drawing from the exigency of this moment, I employ the practice of *social distance* (a framework taken from the context of the pandemic but with a long history in the social sciences) to explore the relations between public landscapes and the communities that move within them. In exploring this practice within urban space, I focus this essay on prairie restoration administrative policies pursued by the Chicago Park District across Chicago over the past 30 years. In producing these landscapes, I argue that city agencies work to create urban landscapes existing outside of conventional expectations for public ecology. Namely, through producing practices of *social distance* within urban space, I argue that prairie restoration policies, as a form of intentional design, create separation between individuals and deteriorate the role of parks as a space for collective utilization. Using ethnographic, autoethnographic, and archival methods, I focus on how these areas produce both physical and subaltern practices of *social distance* through their physical construction and the historical narratives that are spatialized within them. Moreover, I then go into a discussion of how this distance affects and reframes the role of the public while catering to the interests of the private developers and conservationists that create these geographies in the first place.

[1] Acknowledgments. Nothing that appears in this paper would have been possible without the guidance and inspiration from the following individuals, each of whom has my warmest gratitude. I would like to extend my thanks to Professor Susan Gal and Sarah Johnson* who are serving as my readers for this Bachelor's Paper in Anthropology and Law, Letters & Society. I would also like to extend my appreciation to Rebecca Journey, who has helped me every step of the way with draft support during the Bachelor's Essay Seminar in Fall 2020 and coursework in Proximity: An Anthropology of Social Distance in Winter 2021. Additionally, I owe a debt of gratitude to my family for supporting me throughout my undergraduate experience, and to my friends for their reassurances and occasional draft support over the past year. Summer 2020 research funding for this paper was provided by the Foundation for the Advancement of Anthropology and History (FAAH).

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Authorial Reflection

I am writing this essay in the Winter and Spring of 2021 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past year, my life and the lives of those around me, have been fundamentally transformed and reconfigured through the emergence of novel modalities of being within both public and private spaces alike. Part of how I processed this shift over the year was by spending time reconnecting and rekindling the connection that I had lost with nature and the local built environments of city parks in Chicago. On a personal note, this reconnection was important in that it enabled me to reflect upon the many reasons why I've always held a certain pride in living in and coming from this city.

Growing up in Chicago, my local park, Lincoln Park, was a constant source of fascination, intrigue, and play; from summer days watching the wildlife at South Pond when I was young to marathon training laps around North Pond in more recent years. Additionally, my family has always reinforced this interest in parklands and nature policy measures in Chicago. As the grandchildren of Daniel Burnham, the architect of the "Chicago Plan" that has loosely guided city planning since the Colombian Exhibition in the late 19th Century, my second cousins have always shared with me their passion and emotional investment in the success of those policies and how they affect communities across the city. Even as a relatively minor component of park policies, prairie landscapes have long been a source of intrigue for me because they hold within them the imaginaries of "pre-capitalist," and "natural" forms of city geography. The project of understanding the symbolic and spatial meanings of these landscapes along with their impact on communities in Chicago is what inspires and drives this project.

Methods

Because of the difficulties of working in the COVID-19 context, my methods were aimed at diminishing the need for extensive interviews and interactions with interlocutors. This shift in approach enabled me to study phenomena of *social distance* while simultaneously engaging with it as an epidemiological practice. Due to the specificity of my research objectives, I was limited in my access to videos, photography, and other forms of archival media. Because of this, in the course of my ethnography, I have decided to study and present my various research sites as a unified composite field site with in-depth analyses of a few individual spaces to elaborate on more generalized realities. This practice is in line with prevailing anthropological methods used by Anna Tsing, Jason De Léon, and countless others in the field.

While I did not perform interviews, the vast majority of my research is dedicated to my observation and analysis of people roving within my research sites. By knowing about how people interact with and move through park spaces, I was able to think about the impact of those natural areas through how they influence and shape interactions between people and the environment. In pursuing this research, the various components of my composite field site can be separated into three tranches. They are as follows:

Foundational / Experience-based:

- *Lincoln Park*: Due to its prevalence within my memory of growing up in Chicago, Lincoln Park is significant as a source of auto-ethnography and personal experience within Chicago parks. Within Lincoln Park, its 'South Pond' area is a highly-developed prairie restoration area—complete with raised pathways and modern pavilions. In addition to this area, the park also consists of extensive athletic fields, a running circuit, and lawns—elements that are constructed to maximize the land's utility for public use.

1. **Direct Ethnography:**

- *Jackson Park*: As one of Chicago's oldest developed parks, Jackson Park was originally established in 1869 and designed by Frederick Law Olmsted (the same landscape architect behind New York City's Central Park).[2] It was later selected as the site for the city's Columbian Exposition of 1893. I chose this site because of its historical importance to Chicago (the Columbian Exhibition remains signified on the city's flag) as well as its accessibility from my apartment near the University of Chicago's campus in the nearby Hyde Park neighborhood. It holds a small prairie setback near the park's golf driving range on the eastern side of the park.
- *Washington Park*: Similarly designed by Frederick Law Olmsted in the 19th Century, Washington Park is Jackson Park's quieter—yet similarly expansive—twin to the west. Unlike Jackson Park, Washington Park was never developed for the world's fair and thus remains largely unchanged to this day, with much of its land developed before the neighborhoods around it were built. I also chose this site due to its convenience of location in the Hyde Park neighborhood. It holds a large prairie wetland and forest on the southern half of the park.
- *Northerly Island Nature Area*: As my last ethnographic site, the Northerly Island Nature Area sits on top of the former Migs Airport on the city's lakefront. Even unfinished, it remains one of the city's most ambitious prairie restoration projects—part of a multi-year plan to develop the space for city residents. Although the more elaborate components of that plan have since been scrapped (an artificial reef, outdoor auditorium, etc.), the first

[2] "Jackson (Andrew) Park | Chicago Park District."

phase was implemented, and it remains one of the largest prairie savannahs anywhere in the city.[3]

- *Burnham Wildlife Corridor*: The Burnham Wildlife Corridor is a stretch of parkland that saddles the city's lakefront path near the McCormick Convention Center. In trying to understand how people through these spaces and understand its symbolism, this corridor is critical to my research as its use is based upon the idea of movement and one's translation through space.

2. Symbolic:

- *Millennium Park*: Because of its central place in the city's branding and the imaginaries that it crafts around prairie restoration projects on Chicago Park District properties citywide. Within the park, the Lurie Garden presents these landscapes in a way that manicures and represents an ideal of what they can be. In determining the perceptions of value around prairie restoration policies, Millennium Park is useful as a lens into how the city wishes to present them to the world.

Across all of my sites, one of the defining features of prairie landscapes is their general inaccessibility to humans. When a prairie is first planted, the seedlings that compose the landscape are incredibly delicate and must be roped off to protect them as they grow. Likewise, once they reach their full height, that same area becomes inaccessible due to the density of the plants. In my fieldwork, I found that these areas in Chicago Parks are exclusively accessed via purpose-built paths and platforms. This reality of the prairie is what sets it apart from other forms of park development. Unlike a grassy lawn or a sports field, prairie landscapes are not usable space in the way we usually think of public parks. Sure, you can walk/run through them or stop if

[3] Studio Gang, "Projects - Northerly Island."

there is a bench, however, these are generally not a space for congregation or community. In other words, they discourage lingering while emphasizing movement. Even in my fieldwork, I never saw these spaces being used by more than 2-4 people at a time (generally couples and families on walks).

In the context of COVID-19, this ethnographic component was especially important to my understanding of how these landscapes are used and the impact of their insertion into the landscape upon local communities. As more and more people took to working from home or became unemployed throughout the pandemic, these spaces took on an increased significance as they became one of the few places that the public could safely congregate (with certain measures taken) outside of the home. When visiting my field sites, I would spend 30 minutes to an hour within the space; watching people as they came and went and taking notes on how they were reacting and moving through these spaces. In line with my insight above, I almost exclusively found that these spaces were explicitly (possibly implicitly as well) avoided, with the communities I watched avoiding even going into the prairie spaces, opting instead for an open lawn or parking lot. Even in the most "developed" of my sites, Millennium Park, the Prairie section of the park was far more sparsely used than the surrounding areas (comprised of a bandshell/great lawn and a sculpture garden).

The body of my research is also necessarily rooted in my own auto-ethnography. Fundamentally, my research design is informed by my personal experience of growing up and living in Chicago throughout my life. In addition to reflections on my fieldwork, I incorporate some of my memories from the time I have spent in parks throughout my life to think about how I access and experience parklands personally (both prairie and non-prairie). Central to this is my view of parks as a space for people to congregate and use—as a runner, for picnics, etc. This

auto-ethnographic component is also important as a way to ground my research observations and analyses within experience while allowing for change over time. Moreover, in thinking about public space, I believe that my approach must be (at least) partially autoethnographic because thinking about parks as a public crossroads presupposes a specific perspective and an understanding of group membership beyond the self.

Finally, the third source for my research is drawn from a review of the news stories and policy disputes that emerge when private disagreements over public space and its utility cross into the public realm. Although the majority of evidence that I rely upon to build my argument is drawn from my own ethnographic and auto-ethnographic research, my assertions are most clear in the case of neighborhood controversies and public criticism against the Chicago Park Department/Cook County Forest Preserve that make it into the news. In covering this archival data, I rely heavily on articles posted in Chicago area newspapers (The Chicago Tribune, The Chicago Sun Times, The University of Chicago Maroon, etc.) as well as Reid M. Helford's ethnography on this controversy, *Constructing Nature as Constructing Science: Expertise, Activist Science, and Public Conflict in the Chicago Wilderness.*[4] Through these materials, the process of ethnography in the archive is an integral supplement to my work and forms the foundation for my argument alongside works drawn from ethnographic theory and works broadly.

[4] Helford, "Constructing Nature as Constructing Science: Expertise, Activist Science, and Public Conflict in the Chicago Wilderness," 119.

Key Terms

Social Distance: Although this terminology is in the midst of a renaissance due to the exigency of the COVID-19 Pandemic, *social distance* as a concept in the social sciences is rooted in a long tradition of inquiry and research into how individuals and groups orient themselves spatially. This term is most commonly used within Urban Studies as a means through which to understand the role of space constructions in urban community building. In the context of this paper, I draw inspiration from the work of Edward Hall[5] and Henri Lefebvre[6] in using this term as a way to analyze and explicate the impact of city park policies on residents. Using Hall's rather practical notion of social distance, I work to show how individuals relate to one another from various distances—and the impact of forcing that distance through physical impediment. Additionally, in exploring subaltern practices of *social distance*, I draw inspiration from Lefebvre's trialectic of spatial regimes (Spatial Practice, Representations of Space, and Representational Space) to understand multilevel constructions of meaning in space.

The Frontier / Settler Colonialism: When most people think of the frontier, they often do so via its mediation in popular media (i.e. Western films and television, etc.) and the construction of natural spaces in the western United States at sites such as Yosemite, Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, and others. But on a much grander scale, the frontier in the sense of this project is a space, both metaphysical as well as physical, that encompasses and holds a unique history and set of perspectives oriented towards nature and indigenous peoples that spatializes settler colonialism. On a physical level, the history of the American Frontier is the history of the country as a whole—from its nascent state before manifest destiny took hold at the beginning of

[5] Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*.
[6] Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

the 19th Century to its ascendancy as a superpower in modernity. Fundamentally, the success of the United States and the growth of its modern-day economy was made possible only through land expansion and the genocide or forced eviction of native populations. As the space at the bleeding edge of this historical movement, the frontier represents all that was conquered and all that was claimed by (predominantly white) Euro-American settlers in their march to the Pacific. Even national and state parks in the US reflect this history of the frontier. In The Trouble with Nature; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature, William Cronon writes "The tree in the garden is in reality no less other, no less worthy of our wonder and respect, than the tree in an ancient forest that has never known an ax or a saw—even though the tree in the forest reflects a more intricate web of ecological relationships."[7] Rather than existing as a remnant of the frontier, those parks are a direct result of the frontier's history and the deliberate decisions made overtime to restrict nature and open space for the production of capital. This history and the decisions of the past are what then establish the frontier as a subaltern space.

Historical Ecology/Political Ecology: Typically, I would separate these two terms from one another, however, in the case of tallgrass prairie, these terms underly my argument in such a way that serves to make them generally analogous. In incorporating history as part of my analysis, I am also arguing that that given history is also political. In this thread, even recent policy developments have a link to history and elements rooted firmly in the past. In plain language, Historical Ecology is an analytical framework that understands ecological creation via a historical perspective. This means looking at past trends and utilizations of a given space to understand its current meaning within a historical-social context. In parallel to this, Political

[7] Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," 87.

Ecology is an analytical framework that seeks to understand ecological creation as part of an intentional decision-making process by those in power. This can be as limited as a specific policy for a specific space, or more abstract political threads such as long-term policies of environmental racism and urban policy (such as redlining).

The Public / Public Space: For the purposes of this project, the public can be defined as 1.) "Communal, non-private space owned and operated by government," or 2.) "patrons or likely patrons of a given communal space operated by the government." Namely, the public is a general, overarching, term that encompasses both my field sites and the persons that move within them. Notice, however, that in these definitions, I exclude privately held forms of communal space (retail space, private plazas, etc.) to emphasize the role of government (of any level) in creating public space within the context of this paper.

The Urban: On a fundamental level, the urban exists in opposition to the rural. Although superficial, the images elicited via this opposition prove the point: when we think of the urban, we think of a concrete landscape without nature, when we think of the rural, the images elicited are those of farming, forests, and open space. Moreover, because the spatiality of the urban is generally contained, one of the secondary aims of this project is to delineate the urban as a unique set of connections and networks that are facilitated through its form. One aspect of the urban that I explore is how, as a framework underlying community, the urban prefigures groups of private individuals and puts them in contact within the public (private parties in a park, or even living in an apartment building. Especially in urban areas, because public space is generally created rather than found, the actions taken to make that space must be considered to be as critical as that space's contents.

Hostile Geography: A theory of space that approaches land use via a perspective of constructed hostility. In the context of this paper, hostile geography assumes an intentionality of design that works against the persons and groups of groups of persons moving within and through a given space. While this idea of hostile geography is relatively novel, the concept itself is one with deep roots in the social sciences. Most commonly, the same ideas behind hostile geography are shared with explorations of hostile design or hostile architecture. An archetype of this theory is that of the public bench. In cities across the globe, perspectives of hostile design contribute to the deployment of benches integrally designed to disincentivize usage by certain classes of persons. To perform this end, benches in urban areas are often constructed with bars that separate individual seats or even "do not loiter" plaques to dissuade members of vulnerable populations from either sleeping or lying down.[8] More broadly, Canadian urban scholar, Cara Chellew describes hostile architecture as "use[ing] elements of the built environment to guide or restrict behavior in urban space as a form of crime prevention, protection of property, or order maintenance."[9] To produce this hostility, designers use both physical additions such as bolts, spikes, aggressive slants, and fencing as well as physical omissions such as seating or tables that encourage congregation. Hostile Geographies accomplish a similar end; producing natural landscapes such that they dissuade lingering or usage.

[8] Hu, "'Hostile Architecture'"; Chellew, "Defending Suburbia," 19.
[9] Chellew, "Defending Suburbia," 19.

Perspectives on Urban Greenspace

Fundamentally, the challenge of studying the urban is the challenge of studying meaningful design. More than just a modality of modern life, the urban as a field site is uniquely situated as a reflexive space; a built environment that embodies the sentiments, perspectives, and aims of the people and communities that construct and inhabit it. Over time, this embodiment of the collective within urban spaces grows to become a framework for groups of private individuals; putting them in contact with one another within the realm of the public (strangers in a park, or residents in an apartment building, etc.). In destabilizing the role of urban space as a formative mechanism for creating these groups. I argue that some administrative constructions of intentional space practice *social distance* through alienating of the public via either separation or rejection.

But what is *social distance?* For the purpose of this paper, *social distance* will be defined as:

> A practice that creates separation (physical as well as affective) between persons or groups of persons for an expressed or implicit reason; the production of alienation within shared social or public space.

In the context of the pandemic, *social distancing* is an act, a maneuver; something as minor as swerving to avoid entering someone's 6-foot bubble in the supermarket or hesitating briefly to give space when going through a door. Within designed space, however, *social distance* becomes not just an act between individuals, but also an administrative practice that produces alienation. As a force for the creation of intentional landscapes within parklands across the city, I argue that prairie restoration policies do just that—maintaining regimes of *social distance* between individuals not only through physical separation but through subaltern rejection of individuals within the public as well.

As it stands today, Chicago is a city of nearly 3 million inhabitants across a landmass of 227.5 square miles (145,600 acres).[10] Within the city, there are approximately 8,800 acres of public parkland, all of which are actively managed by the Chicago Park District.[11] When discussing 'prairie areas' within these spaces, the geographies in question are plantings of heritage tallgrass prairie and oak savannahs (a very similar 'heritage' landscape) in these parks.[12] Throughout Chicago parks, these prairie spaces are advertised as "Natural Areas"—landscapes that exist separately from other forms of intentional park design either through holistic park planning projects (as in Burnham Wildlife Corridor and Northerly Island) or as a set-aside (as is the case for my other field sites). Although there is no fixed date for when these projects began (dates vary), by the 1990s, the Chicago Park District and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County were at the forefront of restoration projects nationally.[13] Since then, these "Natural Areas" have become policy, one applied to city parks throughout Chicago as a twofold solution to pressing administrative issues: decreasing maintenance costs while building the appearance of ecology as a policy priority. [14]

As a force for developing urban geographies in Chicago, prairie restoration policies should create landscapes under the principle that urban spaces exist as one that is reflective of the public. However, although these ecological spaces are constructed within this project of reflective space, the people and communities embodied within it are not necessarily those of the wider public. By spatializing practices of *social distance,* I view these administrative policies as causing public greenspaces to lose their expected role as a collective space—a role that is made

[10] "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts."
[11] Chicago Park District, "About Us."
[12] For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to both as simply "prairie spaces" as the two are virtually indistinguishable from one another.
[13] Ahmed-Ullah, "Park's Back-to-Nature Look Not Growing on Neighbors."
[14] Ahmed-Ullah.

readily apparent through other forms of urban park planning beginning in the late 19th Century. Because cities in modern America have largely moved away from the town-square model of urban planning, parks, and natural areas now take on a central role in urban landscapes—Grant Park in Chicago, Central Park in New York, the National Mall in Washington D.C., etc. These spaces break up our artificial landscapes and give us something that we hardly ever appreciate: a crossroads or a forum built for all to enjoy. More so than almost any other form of public space (from government buildings to concert venues, etc.), parks are inherently democratic.[15] Fundamentally, anyone, regardless of background, is empowered to use and enjoy these spaces. Embodying this perspective in his work, famed landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted envisioned parks as spaces where all could be equal.[16] As the genius behind landscapes such as Central Park in New York and two of my field sites, Washington Park and Jackson Park, his influence lives on in how the public envisions and approaches their role within urban greenspaces nationwide.

Following from Olmsted's perspective, urban park policy since the beginning of the 20th Century has focused on working to create public parks as a space for public utility. As a dominant regime of public space, over the past century, park administrators have worked to design parks for public use and consumption; creating vast urban meadows, athletic facilities, tracks, etc. for individuals to enjoy. During my fieldwork, each of my field sites was adjacent to a space such as these that that could easily be used and enjoyed (lawns and sports complexes in Lincoln, Washington, and Jackson Park, tourist areas and a bandshell at Millennium Park, and the Promontory Point social area at the Burnham Wildlife Corridor). Unlike prairie spaces, the

[15] Other similar sites are streets, sidewalks, parking lots, etc., however, none of these are specifically constructed for leisure in the same way.
[16] *Frederick Law Olmsted*, pt. 6:25.

landscape in each of these developed spaces acts as a tabula rasa; a space unto which the public is enabled to construct and determine their own use for space—from picnics to pick-up soccer. In this view, the vast majority of urban park spaces are built as democratic forums; spaces that serve this role of prefiguring groups of strangers by dramatically decreasing regimes of alienation between them—even during a global pandemic. This is facilitated via their nature as public spaces that are open to all as well as a physical structure that enables individuals to congregate.

However, this Olmsted-esque approach towards parklands as a crossroads for public use has not always been the case. In fact, in working to reconstruct the prairie, ecologists and park management officials in the Chicago area inadvertently spatialize prior perspectives towards urban park planning; perspectives that once considered these landscapes as one of contemplation and a rejection of the broader public. Before the work of Olmsted and his contemporaries, urban greenspaces were generally constructed to simulate nature; controlled ecologies where one could go to walk alone or sit contemplatively. Moreover, these spaces were generally reserved for private individuals to enjoy and were made inaccessible to all but the wealthiest individuals.[17] In *Urban Parks of the Past and Future,* Galen Cranz remarks that "because these parks were located on the edges of cities, the working class never got to use them. They were too far away; it took an expensive transit ride to get there. These parks became playgrounds for rich people…"[18] In my fieldwork, I found that, by embedding practices of *social distance* into urban landscapes, prairie restoration policies throughout Chicago specialize this historical perspective

[17] Cranz, "Urban Parks of the Past and Future."
[18] Cranz.

into a modern context—relinquishing public control and deferring decisions around design and access to Developers and Conservationists.

Producing Exclusionary Geographies

Although this idea of *social distance* has only recently come into public consciousness through the COVID-19 pandemic, it is a term long used by social scientists as a way to study and understand how individuals and groups interact within shared space. Central to this study is the idea of so-called "stranger sociality"—an area of inquiry first championed by social scientist Georg Simmel in 1908.[19] For Simmel, the stranger is a specific "form of being;" a role characterized by a simultaneous union of remoteness and intimacy within the space of the collective.[20] Central to this notion is the idea of mobility.[21] By physically restricting how the public moves through these landscapes, prairie areas force the public into the realm of the 'other;' unmooring them from a landscape that should hold meaning for them as a space of social construction. In doing so, this physicality of the landscape creates a 'strangeness' that changes the relationship that communities hold with their collective space. No longer a contributor to the construction of that space, local individuals become a stranger on land that they possess a right to contribute towards as collective space.

We expect public lands to be open, we expect them to serve as a crossroads of sorts for our multivalent urban geography. Within prairie landscapes, physical practices of *social distance* are especially noteworthy because they exist as an outgrowth of this specific form of space utilization. In producing *social distance,* prairie geographies become a form of *hostile design*

[19] Simmel, "The Stranger."
[20] Simmel, 144.
[21] Simmel, 145.

within collective space. Fundamental to this claim is the recognition that urban ecology is never an accident—rather, the parks, boulevards, etc. that we enjoy are all the result of decades of urban planning and development. We must acknowledge that urban ecology is not *conserved,* rather, it is *developed.* In the process, these landscapes transfer from one created by nature to one crafted by individuals—individuals with their own drives and intention for the space. As a society, we bend nature to our whims whenever we carve out areas for public ecology. Despite Latour's insistence that, in forcing nature to our whims, we also expose ourselves to the whims of nature, at the end of the day, the environments that we create are attributable to us alone.[22] Although prairie reconstruction policies are a far cry from nature as an origin for human pestilence, the outcomes here are no less prescient. Nature may have its whims, but human action is what fills urban spaces and directs nature's spread—the outcome of those actions is attributable to us alone. Oftentimes, when a park is created, it comes on the heels of destruction—the razing of private homes, businesses, roads, etc. Because of this active role of human intervention in creating these ecologies, they are enabled to be examined via this perspective of intentional design.

On a functional level, when producing prairie space, one of the first steps is to remove high-density ground cover such as trees. Because of how prairie ecologies develop, removing trees is the only way to ensure the landscape's success. Too many trees and the prairie will lack the nutrients and sunlight that it needs to grow. This action, as highlighted in the quotation above, is what produces the greatest conflict around these spaces. Yet, each group has its reasons for opposing or advocating for this work. For preservationists, these landscapes are a return to what *was*; the restoration of native landscapes in Chicago that had long been lost to the tides of

[22] Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, 273.

colonization, industrialization, commercial agriculture, and city planning. As mentioned previously, for city park officials, prairie restoration as an administrative policy decreases maintenance costs while promoting ecology as a policy priority to the public.[23] And finally, for local critics that met these prairie restoration work with resistance, these projects represent governmental overreach into the community's land resources and the marring of an existing ecosystem.

Quoting from a 2007 article on prairie restoration in the Chicago Tribune, "Even though our native landscape is open prairie, people living in Chicago have never seen that… People like trees, big trees like in an unbroken forest. When they see people cutting down trees, it's a call to arms."[24] When most people think of nature, the image that comes to mind is that of a forest, a mountain, or even a body of water. In the Chicago area, this generally holds true. Although forms of public nature across the city are incredibly varied, the majority of parks are built around a prototypical model of trees, grass fields, and the occasional lake or sports infrastructure. In contrast, prairie spaces are often referred to as "a wild tangle of overgrown weeds," by individuals opposed to their construction.[25] Although crude, this criticism is remarkably accurate. Through their construction, prairie spaces resist engagement through their physical formation—a 'tangle' of vegetation that discourages the types of community sociality usually encouraged by public space.

Take the Burnham Wildlife Corridor on Chicago's lakefront for example. During my fieldwork, I primarily accessed the site from Chicago's lakefront trail; a system of two paved pathways, one to the west for bike traffic and another to the east for foot traffic. In visiting the

[23] Ahmed-Ullah, "Park's Back-to-Nature Look Not Growing on Neighbors."
[24] Ahmed-Ullah.
[25] Ahmed-Ullah.

Wildlife Corridor, visitors generally experience the prairie as a glance while running, biking, hiking, etc. along the trail. For most visitors, this was the only means to access the space. In my field sites, the landscape itself discouraged access either through artificial means such as fencing or as a natural effect of plant volume and density. In the first, the reason for this is simple: because of the fragility of the plants used in these landscapes, when they are growing, they must be closed off to grow and remain healthy. In the second, the plants themselves are planted so densely together that moving through prairie space causes discomfort. To counteract this effect, built trails or elevated platforms allow for indirect access across my field sites. The only exception that I found to this were artificial trails made by various members of the public to access these spaces directly. Where the city has avoided developing artificial infrastructure, its citizens made their own. Although they are a non-sanctioned use of this space, these informal trails reinforce the state of the prairie as one that discourages access. To gain access to the space, one must act contrary to the space's prescribed use. At the Burnham Wildlife Corridor, once you enter via one of these trails, there is generally nowhere to rest until coming to an outlet on the other side of the wildlife area—generally above the artificial seawall overlooking Lake Michigan. As an aside, in my participant observation, my attempt at doing so resulted in scratches and an unfortunate foray into a patch of poison ivy.

Drawing from a more formal framework, in engineering the separation of individuals through physical impediments, prairie spaces create formal modalities of *social distance*. Drawing from Edward T. Hall's *The Hidden Dimension,* the proxemics that prairie space creates are, at a minimum, encapsulated by the "far stage" of social distance (7 to 12 feet of separation). While minimal, separation at this distance "can be used to insulate or screen people from each

other."[26] Moreover, this ensures privacy for each actor by deterring individuals from interacting with one another.[27] Especially in the pandemic context, the physical structure of prairie space elicits separation and encourages movement to maintain culturally appropriate degrees of distance (both for the prevention of contagion as well as general privacy). The only exception to this rule is for those individuals who arrive and depart together (such as close friends, family, partners, etc.); individuals that are privileged to enjoy what Hall regards a *personal distance*—a sphere necessarily limited to no more than two or three people at a time.[28] Regardless, *personal distance* is not the place for the public to inhabit. Because prairie spaces create physical barriers to congregation through a physical form that restricts interpersonal relations, the ability of the public to use these spaces as one for the collective is ultimately limited.

Quoting William Cronon, a professor of environmental history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, "The tree in the garden is in reality no less other, no less worthy of our wonder and respect, than the tree in an ancient forest that has never known an ax or a saw—even though the tree in the forest reflects a more intricate web of ecological relationships."[29] This underlines the basic nature of manufactured geographies. While the elements within them are fundamentally shared with non-hostile geographies, their intentional construction within urban communities is what produces them as hostile. However, the *social distance* that this design creates is also supplemented by entrenched forms of meaning—ones that are subaltern to physical forms within the landscape.

[26] Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, 123.
[27] As would be the case in forms of "Public Distance." Hall, 124–25.
[28] Hall, 119–20.
[29] Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," 87.

Subaltern Forms and Visions of the Frontier

Beyond discouraging access and producing physical distance within themselves, prairie landscapes create subaltern practices of *social distance* by orienting visitors towards specific narratives within shared greenspace. Drawing from Sara Ahmed's assertion that, by orienting individuals in this way or that, "other things, and indeed spaces, are relegated to the background; they are only ever co-perceived," In my fieldwork, I found that narratives within prairie space champion specific formulations of history while erasing others.[30] Furthermore, by orienting visitors toward specific narratives within this landscape, prairie spaces necessarily become embodied with the subaltern meanings conveyed through them.

To be clear, as with all public spaces, prairie natural areas are ostensibly open to public access by anyone, however, by spatializing specific historical narratives over others, these spaces privilege certain groups over others, creating alienation for some individuals of the public. By constructing these spaces around vocabularies of what is "native," administrative policies of prairie restoration uplift Euro-American narratives of settler-colonialism. In doing so, they create regimes of stranger sociality within this shared space by selectively retelling the constructed past of the city's white colonizers while minimizing the history of Native American populations remaining in Chicago. By constructing the prairie as a space that is "native" or "natural," administrative policies promote this ecology as a pre-human environment; a glimpse of "Eden" untouched by human hands. This understanding of the prairie echoes that of the early frontiersmen who colonized the American west; a view towards the exploitation of natural resources while overlooking the presence or input of native persons upon the landscape.

[30] Ahmed, "Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology," 547.

Fundamental to understanding the production of *social distance* within prairie spaces in Chicago is an understanding of the city itself and the place of tallgrass prairie within the legacy of the American West. In the United States, the frontier has always been synonymous with progress narratives and proclamations of expansion and American exceptionalism. Looking west, the doctrine of manifest destiny transformed the course of the country; domesticating the insurmountable vastness of the North American continent into a space that could be (and would be) colonized. When the first American settlers looked west in the early 19th Century, they bore witness to a landscape that, in their minds, was untouched by the hand of man. As that hand swept across the continent, space and nature would ultimately be transformed through mechanisms of extraction and regimes of market value.

To newly arrived Americans traveling west from the East Coast, the frontier was a blank slate from which the future could be built; the rolling hills and plains of the prairie concealing history as well as future farmland. Anthropologist Rebecca Solnit writes of this perspective as an "Adamic act which transformed explorers and invaders into discoverers, at least in their own minds. The newness of the hemisphere, like the emptiness of the landscape, had to be manufactured, and it was made by painters, photographers, writers, namers, and gunslingers equally."[31] The frontier, for those that could imagine it, was a place for future extraction and exploitation; the wealth of the west ready to be unlocked for those with the tenacity to see the task through to completion. In thinking about the role of the prairie in the regimes of value within subaltern settler-colonial claims on space in modern-day Chicago, this perspective must be at the forefront of any meaningful consideration.

[31] Solnit, *Savage Dreams*, 311.

The frontier in the urban context is the result of legacies that stretch across time and reimagine the urban as a site of natural change and ecological reimagining. Chicago in particular is a natural nexus for this type of consideration. As a primary beneficiary of economies built via frontier landscapes, Chicago is a place where the frontier and the urban meld together to create the city's modern reality. Moreover, through the mechanism of City parklands, that nature and that frontier come into contact with the diverse set of communities and peoples that ultimately occupy those spaces. However, mere presence means little without the substance of human inputs and the culture that once defined this land for millennia.

Drawing from the Chicago Park District's website, natural areas in parks across the city are described using the following language:

> "In Chicago's backyard awaits a nature oasis. Lagoons, dunes, prairie, grasslands, savannas, woodlands, and wetlands not only attract more than 250 migrating bird species but also invite adventurers to explore the beauty of native plants and flora. Exploration and relaxation are offered from all natural areas, but the featured natural areas listed below are ones that are well worth visiting. Many of these featured sites offer breath-taking views, unique nature-based activities and most importantly, a break from our busy lives."[32]

Through this marketing language, the city reduces prairie landscapes to just their botanical contents; an Edenic perspective that eschews any consideration of its past or the role of human intervention in its development. Via this mechanism, the landscape is necessarily made to be intrinsically voyeuristic—a landscape in which city dwellers can escape their daily lives and revel in the untouched and the ancient.

Ultimately, however, reproduced prairie ecologies throughout Chicago are no more "native" than the flowers in your garden. Despite covering the region for millennia, most pre-

[32] "Natural Areas."

contact tallgrass prairie in the Chicago area was obliterated over a century ago to make room for the city to grow and for its industries to flourish. In returning prairie areas to parklands across Chicago, the city uses heritage flora to signal frontier regimes of value while being entirely new. As a landscape once lost to the tides of industry and urbanization, in restoring these landscapes, urban ecologists and volunteers go further than just restoring prairie space. Truly, these projects would be more authentically framed as "prairie creation areas" than "prairie restoration areas"—the former acknowledging the machinations of manufactured geography in bringing these landscapes to reality.

Historical Narrative in Prairie Restoration

Through their creation, prairie restoration policies create subaltern forms of alienation through *social distance* by selectively promoting a very specific narrative of the city's history; a narrative that welcomes certain communities while alienating others. Fundamentally, I found that narratives around prairie restoration policies work to erase the legacy of Indigenous groups while promoting the above legacy of the American frontier. By presenting the prairie as this tabula rasa, modern narratives around restoration policies construct a facsimile of "native" ecosystems while ignoring the violent realities faced by indigenous peoples throughout Chicago's history

Of course, the aforementioned narrative of tabula rasa or Eden that was so fundamental in the formation of frontier space was never true. Yet, by orienting visitors towards this understanding, prairie spaces legitimize this framing of history. Before Europeans arrived in North America, and before Americans began claiming the land for themselves, native tribes had spent thousands of years taming the landscape and shaping it to their needs.[33] In the course of

[33] Anderson and Moratto, "Native American Land-Use Practices and Ecological Impacts," 193.

this, they set fires to clear brush, irrigated land for farming and sowed seeds.[34] Even today, many of the "native plants" that we think of as critical to the identity of the American West were selected and nurtured by those tribes. The west was never just a space of nature, but a multispecies process of selection and cultivation as well.

More than simply a space for white expansion, the frontier, and the tallgrass prairie that once covered it, was home to Native American tribes forced out by the westward tide of frontier colonialism. This was one of the distinctive traits of Anglo-American colonialism—while the Spanish and Mexican colonialists had always integrated native peoples into their societies (albeit at the bottom), the Americans and the English colonized the west by forcing Native Americans further and further away from the bleeding edge of their new society.[35] As a historicized ecology within this legacy of the frontier, prairie landscapes carry forward memories of the region's colonial past. As a starting point, Chicagoans would be wise to remember the roots of the city's naming. Although it's well known that the word "Chicago" is derived from either the word "Shikako" meaning "skunk place" or "Chigagou" meaning "wild-garlic place" in the local dialect (both owing to the noxious scent of prairie plants in the area), we've long forgotten of those that once spoke that dialect.[36] This is analogous in many ways to the naming of Tanaya Lake in Yosemite National Park as discussed by Solnit in *Savage Dreams.* As it is today, Tenaya Lake is a site of contradiction—named after a chief whose people were driven from their land by the American Mariposa Battalion.[37] Although that past is absent from prevailing narratives of Yosemite, through etymology, traces of what happened in that space and violation of its people's

[34] Anderson and Moratto, 193.
[35] Solnit, *Savage Dreams*, 271.
[36] Allard, *"*Chicago, a Name of Indian Origin, and the Native Wild Onion to Which the Indians May Have Had Reference as the *'*Skunk Place,*'"* 29; Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, 23.
[37] Solnit, *Savage Dreams*, 220.

culture remain preserved through time. Likewise, in Chicago, the city carries the name of a species of prairie garlic named by a people who are no longer recognized in any substantive way. Places of nature have a purpose, they have meaning, and above all, they have a past. As part of the construction of these places across city parks, prairie landscape reconstruction projects hold onto this legacy while existing in a very different present within urban space.

In addition to naming, prairie landscapes in Chicago also hold on to the history of exploitative settler colonial property claims beginning early in the city's history with its initial settlement by Euro-Americans. Beginning with Jean Baptiste Point du Sable in the 1780s, settlers came to what would ultimately become the Chicago area in order to establish a trading industry in the region[38] In 1803, Fort Dearborn (the first formal US settlement at the mouth of the Chicago River) was established on a tract of land ceded by local tribes to the United States by the Treaty of Greenville in 1795.[39] After the fort was built, successive treaties with Native American tribes would go on to claim all of the lands upon which the city of Chicago now sits. These treaties were problematic for many reasons, (they were typically produced under duress, oftentimes they were signed by individuals with no claim to the land themselves, etc.), however, the most significant form of exploitation in these documents was their forcing of western understandings of real property upon native peoples.[40] For Native Americans living in the Chicago area before European contact, land was never conceived of as something that one could physically own—or, for that matter, sell. This view is visible in the following quote from Chief Black Hawk:

[38] Reed, "Jean-Baptiste-Point DuSable (1745-1818)."
[39] "Treaties."
[40] Snyderman, "Concept of Land Ownership among the Iroquois and Their Neighbors," 18; Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, 28.

> "My reason teaches me that land cannot be sold. The Great Spirit gave it to his children to live upon and cultivate as far as necessary for their subsistence; and so long as they occupy and cultivate it, they have the right to the soil--but if they voluntarily leave it, then any other people have the right to settle upon it. Nothing can be sold, but such things as can be carried away."[41]

By exploiting this difference of understanding around real property, Euro-American settlers were able to quickly buy up land and force out native populations.[42] In 1833, the last of native land in Chicago was sold to Euro-American settlers.[43]

As the site of this exploitation, frontier narratives of what is "native" and what is "natural" in prairie space take up the violence of this colonial process. This framing is what creates subaltern realities of *social distance* within urban space; leveraging Euro-American historical perspectives to craft exclusionary narratives within shared urban space. As of 2018, more than 65,000 Native American-identifying individuals in 175 different tribes reside in the Chicago Metropolitan area.[44] By erasing the history of this community and the violence enacted upon them via the frontier as a settler-colonial project, narratives around prairie space create it as an exclusionary landscape. This dynamic then affects its ability to prefigure groups within the public. Although ostensibly open to all, prairie spaces cannot be a constructed element of urban space while disallowing for the involvement of all persons within the public. If we are to imagine urban greenspaces as a crossroads, this creation of exclusionary space for some individuals causes the prairie to lose many of the collective traits that we expect from urban ecology.

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[41] Snyderman, "Concept of Land Ownership among the Iroquois and Their Neighbors," 16; Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, 27.
[42] Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 12–13.
[43] Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, 25, 29.
[44] Hautzinger, "We're Still Here."

Effects of Social Distance: The Developer and The Conservationist

In creating practices of *social distance* within urban space, prairie restoration policies create geographies that force the urban public into a role that is not entirely dissimilar from that held by tourists. Returning to Simmel, the stranger is a specific "form of being;" a role characterized by a simultaneous union of remoteness and intimacy within the space of the collective.[45] In most walks of urban life, the tourist exists within this formation of stranger sociality; an outsider existing within public spaces while never being a constitutive part of it. Because of how prairie spaces create *social distance* between both individuals and the landscape itself, the public is made to be constantly unmoored while moving through these areas. Far from a landscape that exists as one of collective input and construction, through design, prairie spaces ultimately become one of consumption. By reorienting urban greenspace away from its expected role as a crossroads for the collective, prairie landscapes embrace this consumption-based orientation of public space; posing the question of: "who are these spaces truly for?"

Returning to Olmsted, the construction of prairie areas is something that occurs through the intent of those in power for developing a given space. One of the earliest examples of prairie development exists in the history of my Washington Park field site. Designed in 1869 by Olmsted's landscape firm, Olmsted and Vaux, Washington Park was built before any significant development on the city's south side.[46] In fact, the Chicago Tribune stated many years later that the undeveloped prairie on which the park was established "would in any ordinary city have been condemned as unfit for park purposes, but with the people who made no bones of building a metropolis in a mud-hole, and when destroyed, rebuilt it in two years, the seeming impracticality

[45] Simmel, "The Stranger," 144.
[46] Grossman, "Washington Park Long a Site of Change, Controversy."

of the subject only served as an incentive."[47] Although this quote is grandiose, similar in form to hero narratives surrounding the construction of the Chicago World's Fair or the city's recovery after the Chicago Fire, it does provide illumination into how the prairie was considered within public imaginaries. Far from being the "native landscape" or "Eden" expressed through modern policy narratives, when the city was first growing, the prairie was perceived as a "mud hole;" a space necessitating human development in order to hold any public value.

In 1853, two decades before Washington Park was developed, a real estate speculator by the name of Paul Cornell purchased 300 acres just south of Chicago, naming it "Hyde Park" after the one in central London.[48] It was Cornell that approached Olmsted to design Washington Park to draw wealthy Chicagoans to the community. In 1889, Hyde Park was annexed to the city, however, Cornell's vision for the area remains in the form of Jackson Park, Washington Park, the University of Chicago, and the surrounding neighborhoods.[49] More than just an urban greenspace, through this genesis, Washington Park was an attempt to re-create the prairie in order to make the area appealing for prospective residents. In carrying out this project, Olmsted designed Washington Park with a "prairie theme in providing a hundred-acre meadow surrounded by ninety acres of open groves threaded by carriage drives and walks."[50] To him, this meadow would convey a sense of simplicity, a respite from daily city life.[51] Of course, for Olmsted, the creation of a prairie in Washington Park was never a project of restoration—modern conceptions of conservation hadn't been developed yet. And while the prairie area in Washington Park is relatively more open than elsewhere in Chicago parks—making it more

[47] Grossman.
[48] "Paul Cornell- Founder of Hyde Park."
[49] "Paul Cornell- Founder of Hyde Park."
[50] The Frederick Law Olmsted Papers Project, "Frederick Law Olmsted in Chicago."
[51] Julie Bachrach, CPD Historian and Preservationist, in *Frederick Law Olmsted*, pt. 2:08-2:12.

physically accessible (depending on the extent of the frequent flooding from the adjacent lake), it still embodies the subaltern realities present throughout natural areas elsewhere in the city. Moreover, the role of wealth and power in developing this landscape shows how private individuals can coopt this ecology in the pursuit of their individual goals—meaning that, while it may force the public into a space of stranger sociality, that effect is not universal.

Despite Washington Park being developed over a century and a half ago, similar processes continue to shape how contemporary prairie landscapes are built. Momentarily remaining with this archetype of 'Developer,' nowhere is the role of intentional design clearer than in Chicago's Millennium Park—the most central of my field sites and the only one specifically constructed to cater towards a tourist's gaze. Unlike my other field sites—each of which is spatially located within one of the various residential communities throughout Chicago, Millennium Park is located in the city's main business district; surrounded by white-collar office buildings and museums such as the Art Institute of Chicago, the Field Museum of Natural History, and the Shedd Aquarium. Because of its location within this urban geography, Millennium Park serves as a nexus for the city's cultural apparatus—a jewel box to exhibit the city for outside observers. On the southern end of the park, near the corner of Michigan Avenue and Monroe Street, is the Lurie Garden, "5 acres of Millennium Park dedicated to eco-friendly botanical landscaping with city views."[52] Insofar as the physicality of Millennium Park operates as a window into how the city wishes to show itself to the outside world, the production of this prairie area works to promote conservation narratives city-wide.

The city's development of prairie space in this way makes it similar to Paul Cornell's initial intent with regard to Washington Park. Because of how it is built and where its located,

[52] "Lurie Garden - Location Description."

Millennium Park operates to message and lure tourists to the city. Immediately adjacent to the Lurie Garden is the Cloud Gate or "Bean"—one of the city's most popular symbols and tourist attractions. For city residents, myself included, the park has never been a space for locals—with massive crowds even during the pandemic, and expensive parking/concessions/etc. Moreover, although Millennium Park is ostensibly a public space, overseen by the city's Department of Cultural Affairs, the businesses within and below the park (i.e. the parking garage[53], restaurants[54]) are owned and managed by private entities. The more people the city attracts to the park, the more profitable those businesses become; an arrangement that causes these public spaces to operate as a shuttle for private wealth. Even when the park does earn money—largely from private events and film/television shoots, that income does little to affect the city's debt incurred from building out the space.[55] In answering this question of "who are these spaces truly for?", Millennium Park provides an extreme example of how developers cause the urban public to be made distant from their collective space.

For a less extreme example, across the majority of my field sites, I argue that the archetype of the 'Conservationist' takes on a place that is analogous to that of the 'Developer.' In creating *social distance* between urban geographies and the public, prairie conservationists across Chicago parks often work in direct opposition to the interests of the communities around them. In designing landscapes via this policy, conservationists act in a manner similar to that of the developer by creating a space that is hostile to the interests of the public around them. Through removing public input from the design of these spaces and working in contravention to

[53] "AMP Capital and Northleaf Close Deal to Acquire Chicago's Millennium Garages for US$370 Million."
[54] Paulson, "City Hall Lawyers Claim Park Grill Owes More Than $8 Million To Taxpayers From 'Sweetheart Deal.'"
[55] Dardick, "Millennium Park Built 'the Chicago Way.'"

community desires, I found that conservationists create regimes of stranger sociality while working to produce these ecologies. In the course of creating this separation, this dynamic becomes most visible within the controversies that arise when the city or county attempts prairie reconstruction policies.

In the 1990s, prairie restoration projects in Chicago were frozen during a debate on the value of restoring these fragile ecosystems. While conservationists advocated for the intrinsic ecological value of restoring these geographies, residents resisted attempts to introduce what they viewed as "a wild tangle of overgrown weeds."[56] This view largely stems from park policy in the 1940s. After the city's expansion phase, when city/county parks were initially being created, the Cook County Forest Preserve District had planted high-density tree species throughout parks in the region, thinking that it was the best use of the land.[57] This introduction of trees ultimately worked to shape how the public came to imagine urban green space in Chicago. Moreover, because the trees were non-native, they quickly became invasive, blocking sunlight for lower-density ecosystems such as the prairie.[58] In repairing the damaged prairie, ecologists and prairie conservationists needed to remove these non-native tree species to create spaces in which prairie flora could thrive—a reverse bio-colonialism of sorts.

When community members saw trees being removed and replaced by the prairie, it caused an uproar largely due to competing regimes of aesthetic value, even going so far as to label these conservationists as "rogue lumberjacks, clear-cutting forests to create their prized prairieland."[59] Despite some successes in active prairie management within forest preserves—

[56] Ahmed-Ullah, "Park's Back-to-Nature Look Not Growing on Neighbors."
[57] Buckley, "In Illinois — the Prairie State — Little Prairie Land Remains. But Work Is Being Done to Save What's Left in Cook County and Restore More."
[58] Buckley.
[59] Kendall, "Trouble in Prairieland."

such as reviving populations of the mountain blue-eyed grass and the woodland blazing star that were once thought extinct—community members overwhelmingly opposed these restoration projects on the grounds that they were either a.) destructive, or b.) unsightly.[60]

In the first, community members witnessing the restoration of prairie habitats cried foul when witnessing the removal of trees. This resistance was, in large part, due to a perception that human intervention was unnecessary in ensuring the continued health of this ecosystem. Even though these ecosystems were originally planted with trees through human intervention in the 1940s, community members continued to protest their removal because this ecology matched their perceptions of how public parks should appear. According to one critic's judgment, "4.5 billion years can't be wrong."[61] However, because of human corruption in the prairie's evolutionary development, the ecosystem itself is now dependent on human support for survival.[62] Without this conservation and the frontier imaginaries that guide it, prairie sites would spiral into "ever simpler habitats dominated by a few of the most aggressive species."[63]

In the second, popular complaints of the prairie also relied on aesthetics—a line of criticism that unearths underlying perceptions of the prairie via its relation to other forms of public space and urban community. Fundamentally, the prairie does not begin as a space of beauty under prevailing aesthetics of greenspace. Unlike grass or other typical forms of groundcover, tallgrass prairie requires 3-5 years to reach maturity (as much of its initial growth is underground), followed by routine burning every 3-5 years in perpetuity to maintain soil health.[64] Because of this, prairie landscapes are more often barren than other forms of natural

[60] Kendall.
[61] Kendall.
[62] Kendall.
[63] Kendall.
[64] Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, "Establishing Prairie Grasses and Wildflowers."

space. In his ethnography on this conflict over prairie development, Reid M. Helford writes: "For restoration stewards, recently burned woodlands are beautiful sites, 'finally opened up so that the native understory could return.' For critics, they are 'virtual wastelands where the soil is sterile and nothing but charred stumps remain.'"[65]

In developing prairie geographies, conservationists create urban ecological space in a manner that is similar to that of the 'Developer.' However, to answer the question of "who are these spaces truly for?", instead of creating public space as a place for private enrichment, conservation creates geographies existing in contravention to the desires of the communities around them. This happens, not as a form of "green gentrification," but as a way to remove local input from the design of urban greenspace. Returning to the role of urban parks as a prefigurative space for constructing the public, this imposition of non-local perspectives interferes with the ability of individuals to have a voice in how their local geographies are constructed. Moreover, in developing prairie landscapes, this perspective of the 'Developer' and the 'Conservationist' creates a landscape of distinction—one that forces acts of *social distance* into how this distinct environment affects individuals and communities of the public.

Conclusion

On a personal level, I appreciate prairie spaces throughout Chicago. As an introvert, spending time outdoors has always been an outlet for me to clear my head and prairie nature areas in Chicago have provided me with a contemplative space to understand myself and think through issues in my life. This is to say that I do not believe prairie restoration policies are intrinsically bad. Quite the opposite, I believe that there are many benefits to this specific form of

[65] Helford, "Constructing Nature as Constructing Science: Expertise, Activist Science, and Public Conflict in the Chicago Wilderness."

space. However, in this paper, what I am arguing for is a holistic and multivalent approach to urban park development policy that accounts for the sentiments and types of usage produced within constructed greenspace. At its core, ecology and conservation are noble policy goals; one that makes our cities a better place to live. But at the end of the day, within urban space, plants cannot be just plants because they exist within multispecies geography. Because public spaces operate as a nexus for cultural life in the city, the elements within those spaces need to be carefully considered with an eye towards how they interact with and contribute to threads of collective life existing within and around them.

Amongst forms of urban ecology across Chicago, prairie spaces stand apart from alternative compositions of space in that they create *social distance* between themselves and individuals that use them. As an intentional space, public areas within urban geographies should exist as a place for cultural creation, however, because of this landscape, that process is impeded and no longer supports the formation of society in the ways that we expect it to. On a physical level, prairie restoration policies encourage stranger socialites within collective space—their physical structure affecting how individuals overlap and create group identity. On a subaltern level, the historical legacy of these ecologies works to spatialize settler-colonial narratives in a way that erases the experience of native groups in the region's evolution from the frontier to metropolis; a narrative that creates semiotic distance through regimes of exclusion. By creating spaces that promote these forms of distance, prairie developers and conservationists eschew regimes of utility and express this space as one unintended for democratic utilization of urban geography.

Insofar as this paper contributes to ideas of administrative policy in public greenspace, I argue for an understanding of these consequences of ecology within constructed geographies.

Prairie spaces are not intentionally created as hostile geographies, but by overlooking their past and their present role within urban society, they are made into this reality. Yet, insofar as human action works to create hostile geographies, it can also work to unmake them. In pursuing a future equitable approach to land policy in Chicago, structures of intentional design that produce alienation must be considered via a multivalent understanding of how they operate and the many sentiments that they generate. Even small changes such as an acknowledgement of violence against indigenous peoples in frontier history and the creation of areas for congregation within these ecologies would change the narratives that prairie spaces promote. Moreover, community engagement in a way that the city and county have not yet embraced would change the role of the public from one of consumption to one of contribution vis-à-vis these spaces. By introducing a wide diversity of community voices into how these spaces are constructed, I hope that these natural areas may ultimately return to Olmsted's aforementioned ideal of urban space as one of social construction.

Disciplinary Contribution

Anthropology: As the primary discipline of this work, my aim in considering *social distance* within significant landscapes is to build upon the established theory by anthropologists such as Anna Tsing, William Cronon, and others to expand their application in this specific case. Moreover, by reframing their work in conversation with theorems of *social distance* and stranger sociality, I aim to show how, in producing sentiments and forms of usage, these spaces affect how the public interacts with collective space. While my scope in this piece is necessarily limited, the applications for extending this perspective through ethnographic research are far

more varied—from environmental racism á la Rob Nixon[66] to the role of constructed landscapes in agriculture, suburbia, etc.

Law and Public Policy: Good administrative law and policy generally rest upon an understanding of how that policy operates on the ground and what outcomes it produces for those affected. While I spent little time discussing the outcomes of prairie redevelopment policies due to a lack of first-hand interviews, what I hope I've shown through this work is that, even when policies are enacted with the best of intentions, without a full understanding of their historical or cultural implications, those policies are liable to produce unintended sentiments or reactions. My aim is that, via greater communication between communities and policymakers, these sentiments can be mitigated and responded to—ideally producing improved outcomes concerning environmental justice and the dismantlement of historical forms of environmental racism.

Environmental Studies: My aim is that this project works to open up new perspectives into the formulation of ecological space and the role of historical trauma in producing significant space. In developing public space, I hope that this paper gives reasons to consider ecosystems as multispecies entities—filled with flora and fauna, but inclusive of human actors as well. In doing so, I hope that, in developing these spaces, cultural elements are considered at parity with the biological.

[66] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

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