

Trails of Tears: raising awareness of displacement

Ken Whalen

Trails of Tears have arisen to draw attention and give legitimacy to multiple movements for fairness and justice, hoping to create a community of support strong enough to rectify a past injustice or prevent a future one.

Twenty-five years ago, the federal government of the United States agreed to establish the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail which commemorates the forced migration of thousands of Native Americans from the south-eastern US to 'Indian Territory' west of the Mississippi River during the early part of the nineteenth century. The Trail also promotes public awareness of the broader history of American Indian dispossession and displacement carried out by the US government and large numbers of Euro-American settlers moving west.

The trail, which links over 1,300 kilometres of concrete and asphalt roadways, follows the land route taken by most Cherokee Indians who suffered the migration. The name – Trail

of Tears – nevertheless has transcended the historical event and its American landscape by becoming a metaphor used by local and international news media and NGOs to represent contemporary instances of displacement. The representation of this difficult heritage has the potential to influence people to reflect on their own sense of place and on their relationship with the past, both of which can foster concern for those in other regions of the world on the verge of suffering the same plight in the present.

Several countries are beginning to assume the moral obligation to uncover and preserve landscapes of forced migration, which they envisage as gestures of reconciliation, venues of learning and sanctums of remembrance.

May 2013

Some have nominated landscapes for designation as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, following UNESCO's recent acknowledgement of the relevance of preserving historical landscapes of displacement. In 2010, UNESCO assigned World Heritage Site status to Australia's archipelago of convict prisons because they represent a moment in human history that silenced tens of thousands of men, women and children. And the African Slave Route heritage has become a focus of historical preservation for countries such as Senegal, Kenya and Malawi, which have nominated various landscapes of displacement for World Heritage status, including auction houses, stockades, ports, passages and plantations built between the 16th and 19th centuries to serve mainly the Atlantic slave trade.

Of the 53,112 kilometres of National Historic Trails in the US, over 7,000 are now dedicated to dispossession and displacement, reminders of the often violent relationship between Euro-American settlers and Native Americans. Today, the country is home to over two million Native Americans, only a remnant of the population when the first Europeans arrived.

Needless to say, preserving landscapes of difficult heritage is no panacea for preventing forced displacement. And it is no easy matter to rename and recategorise a public space – nor to darken a family's sense of place by signalling a history of atrocity outside their front door. Nevertheless, the steel trail markers which are the most prominent

signatures of the Trail of Tears have arisen to draw attention and give legitimacy to multiple movements for fairness and justice in the US and around the world, all hoping to create a community of support strong enough to rectify a past or prevent a future injustice.

Ken Whalen whalen.ken@gmail.com is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Universiti Brunei Darussalam. More about the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail can be found at www.nps.gov/trte/index.htm



Ken Whalen



Ken Whalen