One Canyon, Countless Canyon Stories: Exploring the Narrative Grand Canyon

By Kim Engel-Pearson

Not another Grand Canyon story! That was my thought when I first contemplated writing an essay about Grand Canyon storytelling. Libraries full of texts about the canyon exist. Search engines expose thousands of hits, works as varied as nineteenth-century tourist pamphlets and twenty-first century blog posts. I, too, have Grand Canyon stories—camping at the north rim as a child, hiking at the south rim when I was a college student at Northern Arizona University, taking my own kids to the overlooks. Millions of people can tell similar stories, and millions of people do. Why? Why, after centuries of telling and writing narratives about Grand Canyon, do we continue to read them and add our own stories to the extensive body of work? Have the stories changed over time? Has the method of telling canyon stories changed? This essay is an exploration of the narrative Grand Canyon, specifically the stories written about the landscape and why and how the stories have been created and told.[1]

[1] I define the "narrative Grand Canyon" as all of the stories—oral and written, poetry and prose, from the earliest oral tradition to the most recent online article—that seek to describe, define, and elucidate Grand Canyon. However, out of necessity I have limited this study to the written word and to just a few examples of the countless stories about Grand Canyon. For an extensive Grand Canyon bibliography, see Earle Spamer, *A Bibliography of the Grand Canyon and Lower Colorado River*, available online at grandcanyonbiblio.org. In this essay I use the terms "story" and "narrative" interchangeably. "Canyon" has been spelled a variety of ways over time; here I standardized the spelling to "canyon" in all quotations, but I left the original spelling in titles.

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Humans have always been storytellers. We craft stories to explain ourselves and our places, and we collect stories as a way to understand other people and their places. The more complex the situation, the more complicated the relationship; the more immense or unusual the landscape, the more crucial the stories are to our understanding.

Grand Canyon is this sort of landscape. The chasm existed millennia before humans set eyes on it. It was carved deep in the Earth eons before any person tried to understand it. Its colors blazed and its contours shadowed long ages before one word was ever used to describe or explain it. Grand Canyon has been voiced in Native American oral tradition, written up in U.S. government reports, explained in magazines and newspapers, detailed in historical and scientific monographs, and expressed in words of terror and awe in tourist literature. For many people, especially early in the twentieth century, the only knowledge they had of Grand Canyon and the surrounding areas came from works written about it. Today tourists can consume shelves and websites full of information before visiting the national park, and people who will never experience this environment can nonetheless immerse themselves in Grand Canyon stories.

Most people who experience Grand Canyon attempt to situate it within their personal understanding. Whether an explorer on a nineteenth-century expedition or a mid-twentieth-century geologist evaluating a dam site, a 1930s-era east coast tourist or today's Hualapai tribal member, all arrive at the canyon with their own points of view and leave with new experiences and new stories to share. Each of these stories contributes to an understanding of the place, an individual conception and a broader comprehension of this unique landscape and humanity's position within it.

Scholars have demonstrated how cultural factors influence the way Grand Canyon is perceived, and, as I discuss elsewhere, how an individual's perceptions are framed by life experiences and perspectives, shaped by where the person is standing.[2] No one stands

[2] See, for example, Arizona State University and the Grand Canyon Conservancy website, Nature, Culture, and History at the Grand Canyon, grcahistory.org; Sarah Ruth Gerke, "A History of National Park Service Interpretation at Grand Canyon National Park" (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2010); and Stephen J. Pyne, *How the Canyon became Grand: A Short History* (New York, 1998); Kim Engel-Pearson, *Writing Arizona, 1912–2012: A Cultural and Environmental Chronicle* (Norman, Okla., 2017). I am paraphrasing Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction" (1956) in *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews* (New York, 1978).

in the same place, and when people come to Grand Canyon, they bring their own ground with them. Because we stand in different places experientially, when we view the same landscape we tell different stories about it. However, these canyon stories are often remarkably similar. Like the sediment laid down over millions of years created the plateau through which Grand Canyon was cut, stories about it have been laid down for hundreds of years to create the narrative Grand Canyon. As the stories have been told and retold, and as new stories are continually added, the writing of the stories has often conformed to a pattern. And just as an analysis of the rock layers illuminates geologic processes, examining works written about Grand Canyon over time can reveal an emulative storytelling process.

Stories about Grand Canyon have been told to describe an unfamiliar or remarkable landscape, to explain how the landscape came to be, and—for people who have lived within and around the canyon for centuries—to claim a homeland. Some descriptive canyon narratives portray what is seen, often highlighting colors and naming the topography after buildings, things recognizable and familiar. Other narratives emphasize how the canyon is experienced, how the person feels in that landscape. Many more stories contain elements of both, and these descriptions of what is seen and felt are timeless, similar from one decade to the next. Often people respond with a version of "no words can describe," and then attempt to write the indescribable. For most of the time Grand Canyon has been portrayed in writing, Native Americans' stories—in their own words, from their own perspectives—have been absent. This is beginning to change. New narratives intended to highlight environmental factors that threaten the canyon landscape are being added as well.

The narrative Grand Canyon has existed since the first person who saw the canyon told a story about it. While early tourist and park service literature often included drawings, Thomas Moran reproductions, and grainy black and white photographs, words were the primary means by which people discovered Grand Canyon, the images set alongside descriptions of what was depicted. Readers in 1902 could have learned about the canyon from a magazine article by John Muir. "You come suddenly," Muir wrote, "and without warning upon the abrupt edge of a gigantic sunken landscape of

the wildest, most multitudinous features . . . forming a spiry, jagged, gloriously colored mountain-range countersunk in a level gray plain." Tourists examining a guidebook in 1912 could have read similar descriptions, with an emphasis on colors and the rocks labeled as buildings in an attempt to comprehend what the author's vocabulary lacked words to portray: "The sweep of our vision covers hundreds of square miles of the canyon—an infinity of mountains, towers, domes, spires, strange temples and palaces, glowing with every conceivable color. . . . Words can not give any adequate idea of the immensity of the chasm."[3] The "words cannot describe" expression followed this author's attempt at description, indicating his dissatisfaction with his effort.

Tourists' personal stories encompassed similar depictions, layering color and emotion with a sense of unreality. Ray White, an author and preacher, visited Grand Canyon in 1930 with his wife, his mom, a cook, and a driver. White named Grand Canyon "the Great Sensation," and at first sight they "stopped dead still—paralyzed. The Grand Canyon! Books and pictures and tongues had meant nothing!" He implored, "I beg my readers not to expect anything from me now. It can only be felt; it can only be experienced." Searching for words to describe what he saw, and as others have done, White chose something he knew, "circling, storied terraces, and towers and domes, and temples and minarets, intensely colored and infinitely varied in shade and shadow," offering familiar words to depict an unfamiliar scene.[4]

Many writers have similarly described the canyon landscape and evoked corresponding emotional experiences, using words such as "sublime" and "awful" and expressing the fear and wonder Grand Canyon elicits. In his dense yet literary *Tertiary History of the Grand Cañon District* (1882), Clarence Dutton described his encounter on the rim. "Still the Grand Canyon is the sublimest thing on earth," Dutton wrote. "It is so not alone by virtue of its magnitudes, but by virtue of the whole—its ensemble." Fifty years later, the Federal

[3] John Muir, "The Grand Cañon of the Colorado," *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* (1902), quoted in *Mary Austin and John Muir: Writing the Western Landscape*, ed. Ann H. Zwinger (Boston, 1994), 93; Thomas D. Murphy, *Three Wonderlands of the American West: Being the Notes of a Traveler, Concerning the Yellowstone Park, the Yosemite National Park, and the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River, with a Chapter on Other Wonders of the Great American West* (Boston, 1912), 116.

[4] Ray B. White, *The Trail of the Desert Sun* (Zarephath, N.J., 1931), 25. White's mother, Alma Bridwell White, founded Pillar of Fire Church; that is a story for another time.

Writers' Project authors emphasized that "its immensity is awful; the boldness of its contours overwhelming; its immobility terrifying." A United States senator, in a committee report to accompany the bill that would create Grand Canyon National Park, declared, "It seems to be universally acknowledged that the Grand Canyon is the most stupendous natural phenomenon in the world." Senator H. L. Myers's report also stated, "Certainly it is the finest example of the power and eccentricity of water erosion, and as a spectacle of sublimity it has no peer. It would be futile to attempt to describe the Grand Canyon."[5] The canyon's ability to render visitors wordless extended even to members of Congress.

Similar expressions of emotion exposed by the Grand Canyon experience can be found in innumerable narratives. In his Grand Canyon book, naturalist Joseph Wood Krutch explained, "At first glance the spectacle seems too strange to be real," a common refrain in Grand Canyon literature. The tourist White declared, "It is altogether too much for either the mind or the eye to comprehend." White and his fellow travelers looked inward as they stood on the rim. "Stupefied and humiliated we got into our car and drove away," White wrote. "Never again could we be the same. No man or woman with a living soul could look on the Grand Canyon of Arizona without experiencing an enlarging change in his life." Demonstrating that emotional reactions are not relics of the distant past, John Ross, a biographer of John Wesley Powell, proclaimed in a recent article, "Its utter vastness assaults one's senses like a slap in the face. . . . Awe has never been a comfortable emotion, as it contains elements of dread and a touch of fear."[6]

When color photography revealed the visual Grand Canyon in all of its multihued grandeur, stories continued to be told; we still must put ourselves, via our stories, in the frame. Raymond Carlson, longtime editor of *Arizona Highways*, often provided his readers

[5] Clarence E. Dutton, *Tertiary History of the Grand Cañon District* (Washington, D.C., 1882), 143 (emphasis Dutton's); Federal Writers' Project, *Arizona: A State Guide* (Flagstaff, Ariz., 1940; reprinted as *The WPA Guide to 1930s Arizona*, Tucson, Ariz., 1989), 472; H. L. Myers, "Grand Canyon National Park, Ariz.," Committee on Public Lands Report to Accompany S 8250, 64th Congress, 2nd session (February 20, 1917), Senator Carl T. Hayden Papers (1851–1979), MSS 1, Greater Arizona Collection (hereinafter GAC), Arizona State University Library, Tempe, Ariz.

[6] Joseph Wood Krutch, *Grand Canyon: Today and All Its Yesterdays* (New York, 1958), 4–5; White, *Trail of the Desert Sun*, 26, 28; John F. Ross, "The Little-Known Story of How One Man Turned the Grand Canyon into an Icon," *AZCentral.com*, January 27, 2019.

with typical descriptions accompanying Grand Canyon photo spreads. In one article, Carlson anthropomorphized the canyon, asserting, "The Grand Canyon is a living thing, always changing." He described the experience of being on the canyon rim, stating, "It is never the same, and when it casts its spell upon you it is with you forever." Echoing White, Carlson wrote, "You look at the canyon not with the eye but with the heart. You understand it not with the mind but with the soul." He finally retreated to a version of "no words," wondering, "Must we describe it? Why not leave it alone to its gloomy or merry secrets, whatever its mood may be?"[7]

The Grand Canyon landscape seems to do two things concurrently: it brings us outside of ourselves and sets us on the rim of a vast and intricate landscape—where we might feel small, insignificant, a speck on the edge of the great crevasse—and it causes us to look inward, to ponder where we fit in the expanse of that canyon time, and humanity. Grand Canyon narratives reflect this duality. In *Trails through the Golden West*, a 1932 account of national parks and monuments in the West, Robert Frothingham asked, "How it is possible for a thing to be lovely and at the same time terrible," and determined that the Grand Canyon "is like an ancient oracle: it replies to your questions, but the interpretation of its replies rests with you—it depends on what kind of person you are." Three decades later, Joyce Rockwood Muench rephrased the notion for *Arizona Highways* readers, explaining, "Your emotions will depend upon your own backlog of experience and whether your name for the master builder be Allah, God, or just Erosion."[8] A person's reaction to and perception of Grand Canyon depends on the ground they bring with them, where they are standing experientially.

Colin Fletcher experienced the raw emotional power of the canyon in 1963 as he walked from one end of Grand Canyon National Park to the other. As he rested in Havasu Canyon, flat on his back "at the bottom of the black Red Wall gorge," he reflected on his condition in the vastness. "I was hopelessly insignificant," Fletcher wrote. "Insignificant and helpless. A mere insect. And when we humans feel this way, we are, inevitably, afraid." But after living within Grand Canyon for weeks, he realized he "was no

[7] Raymond Carlson, "Grand Canyon, a Study in Moods," *Arizona Highways*, July 1942, pp. 5–7.

[8] Robert Frothingham, *Trails through the Golden West* (New York, 1932), 61–62; Joyce Rockwood Muench, "We Go Hiking in Grand Canyon," *Arizona Highways*, June 1960, p. 3.

longer very interested in the sheer physical magnificence of the Canyon." Naturalist Krutch described this phenomenon—that the initial impressions of the unconceivable need not be lasting—a few years earlier. "A more sensible procedure for those willing to take the time is to allow the relationship to establish itself gradually," he suggested. "After a few days well but quietly spent, one begins to lose the sense of unreality and to come to terms with a scale of magnitude and of distance which could not at first be taken in."[9]

Krutch's and Fletcher's acceptance of the scale of the landscape has been the exception in Grand Canyon narratives. More common is White's appeal to his readers "not to expect anything." These authors proclaim that they came to the edge of the canyon and were overwhelmed, rendered wordless. They remark "no words" and then write thousands of words trying to capture what they saw and felt. Writers persist in describing something "words cannot describe" because people, places, and events must be dealt with in words to be understood.[10] People must tell their Grand Canyon stories, inadequate as the stories may be to capturing the extraordinary landscape, in an attempt to gain some measure of understanding about this place, or about themselves in relation to what they are viewing and experiencing.

The "no words" expression so common in Grand Canyon literature began early in the Anglo-American relationship with the canyon. In his 1892 chronicle of his walk from Ohio to California, Charles Lummis (of *Land of Sunshine* and *Out West* fame) declared, "I shall not attempt to describe the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, for language cannot touch that utmost wonder of creation. There is but one thing to say: 'There it is; go see it for yourself.'" Then he gave description a try anyway, writing several paragraphs to express what he saw and to detail his experience of scaling one of the canyon walls. In 1919, the year half of Grand Canyon was designated a national park, Lummis penned the introduction for a booklet produced by the U.S. Railroad Association and again asserted "no words," proclaiming, "Ten thousand pens have 'described at' this

[9] Colin Fletcher, *The Man Who Walked through Time* (New York, 1967; 1989), 33, 157; Krutch, *Grand Canyon*, 5.

[10] See N. Scott Momaday's "The Man Made of Words," in *Indian Voices: The First Convocation of American Indian Scholars* (San Francisco, 1970), reprinted in Geary Hobson, ed., *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature* (Albuquerque, 1979).

Indescribable, in vain." He concluded, "It is alone in the world. . . . Words cannot over-tell it—nor half tell." John Muir wrote simply, "The prudent keep silent." Edwin Corle, author of *The Story of Grand Canyon*, suggested, "Try describing the Grand Canyon as an exercise in literary composition. The student who writes, 'The Grand Canyon is the Grand Canyon,' period, and the one who turns in merely a blank sheet of paper, should win the highest grades." The "no words" statements continue into the twenty-first century. "Neither pictures nor words can fully describe the sight," according to a recent guidebook, words very similar to those written over the last hundred years.[11]

However, "no words" is often a foreigner's reaction, the reaction of someone who is a stranger to the landscape. For several American Indian tribes, Grand Canyon is part of their traditional territory, not a landscape they visit but the environment in which they live. Grand Canyon is not a new landscape to them. The Havasupai people have lived in and around Grand Canyon for centuries. Hopi people believe some of their clans emerged into this world, the Fourth World, from a location within the canyon above the confluence of the Little Colorado and Colorado Rivers. The Navajo, Hualapai, and Southern Paiute people have traditional connections to Grand Canyon as well. But these tribes' Grand Canyon narratives have not been widely known. Historically, Native Americans' Grand Canyon stories were rarely written down or were told as part of Anglo stories or filtered through Anglo editors and presses.

Among the first people to make the canyon part of their lives, the Havasupai tribe traditionally lived and farmed within the canyon walls in the summer and lived on the plateau above the rim in the winter. Yet the Havasupai people only entered the written narrative Grand Canyon when Europeans and Anglo-Americans "discovered" the canyon and then only as characters in the Anglo stories. Havasupais' own Grand Canyon narratives are stories of their homeland; of their shrinking territory as the federal government withdrew land for forest reserves, national monuments, and

[11] Charles F. Lummis, *A Tramp across the Continent* (New York, 1892; 1906), 244; Lummis, "A Cosmic Intaglio: An Appreciation of Grand Canyon National Park," in United States Railway Association, *Grand Canyon National Park Arizona*, National Park Series (1919–1920 season), 4, in Description and Travel (1854–2009), CE EPH DG-80, GAC; Muir, "The Grand Cañon of the Colorado," 94; Edwin Corle, *The Story of Grand Canyon* (New York, 1951; published as *Listen, Bright Angel*, 1941), 192; Bill Weir, *Moon Handbooks Grand Canyon*, 3rd ed. (Emeryville, Calif., 2005), 1.

the national park; and of the triumph of finally regaining most of their traditional territories in 1975. This Grand Canyon narrative is unique to the Havasupai people.[12]

The Southern Paiute people describe Grand Canyon in relation to themselves and their history. "The river there is like our veins," an elder explained. "Some are like the small streams and tributaries that run into the river there, so the same things; it's like blood—it's the veins of the world. . . . This story has been carried down from generation to generation." Other tribes share this perspective of Grand Canyon as homeland rather than tourist attraction or nature sanctuary. But complicating this narrative, and complicating the stereotypes of American Indians, are recent tribal projects that embrace both homeland and tourism stories.[13]

In the last fifty years, another kind of story has been added to the narrative Grand Canyon, the story of environmental desecration. For example, in 2016 journalist Kevin Fedarko and photographer Pete McBride completed an end-to-end hike of Grand Canyon, undertaken to document reports they had heard about a new development at the Confluence, increased air traffic within the canyon, and uranium mining. Despite its immensity, the impact of these activities on Grand Canyon could be severe, Fedarko wrote. Roger Clark of the Grand Canyon Trust explained, "Each of these threats is capable of eroding a piece of the canyon's majesty, and together they will strip the landscape of its ability to do the thing that makes it unique, which is to instill humility by demonstrating that human beings are tiny in relation to the forces that have shaped this planet, and that we are not the center of the world."[14] Not only is the canyon threatened, but so is the experience of the canyon that so many have described.

This sentiment is echoed by others who work to protect Grand Canyon from resource extraction and development. Havasupai tribe member Coleen Kaska fears that "outsiders . . . ignore the lessons [Grand Canyon] could teach them of their humanity and

[12] See Stephen Hirst, *I Am the Grand Canyon: The Story of the Havasupai People* (Grand Canyon, 2006), 1, 20.

[13] Richard W. Stoffle, David B. Halmo, and Diane E. Austin, "Cultural Landscapes and Traditional Cultural Properties: A Southern Paiute View of the Grand Canyon and Colorado River," *American Indian Quarterly* 21 (Spring 1997): 229–49; for example, see Grand Canyon West—Grand Canyon Vacations, available online at grandcanyonwest.com.

[14] Kevin Fedarko and Pete McBride, "The Power of Parks: Are We Losing the Grand Canyon?," *National Geographic*, September 2016, on Apple News, February 28, 2019.

connectedness to the world around them," and Steve Martin, former river runner and park superintendent, now of the Grand Canyon Trust, "wants future generations to experience the same sense of humility, awe, and beauty."[15] This narrative will become more common as more stories like Clark's, Kaska's, and Martin's are shared. The dual threats of development and climate change make this an increasingly important story to be told.

We write canyon stories for varied reasons, but many of the narratives share a common storytelling pattern. Narratives as different as a guidebook written for tourists at the turn of the twentieth century and a twenty-first-century article about Grand Canyon history often share characteristic features, or touchstones. These touchstone stories can be found in the narrative Grand Canyon's foundational texts, works that have become "canon." The canon narratives include the translations of Garcia Lòpez Càrdenas's exploration of the plateau area and Padre Francisco Garcés's entrada, the reports of Joseph Ives's Colorado River ascent and Powell's expeditions, Dutton's work, and Theodore Roosevelt's speech on the rim.[16]

Touchstone stories are the words within these texts that are quoted over and over, pieces of those narratives that are retold and incorporated into other narratives, and that often become shorthand for the larger stories. For example, the Ives report is the narrative of his exploration of the river to assess its navigability. Part of that story includes these words: "The region explored after leaving the navigable portion of the Colorado—though, in a scientific point of view, of the highest interest, and presenting natural features whose strange sublimity is perhaps unparalleled in any part of the world—is not of much value. Most of it is uninhabitable, and a great deal of it is impassable."[17] These words are often woven into other Grand Canyon stories and they have become a touchstone story, recognized by readers even if they know nothing of the original report.

Included in the Grand Canyon canon are Spanish exploration stories, which were woven into reports by American explorers.

[15] Andrew Nicla, "At Grand Canyon, Threats Remain both Inside and Out of the Park Despite Protections," *AZCentral.com*, March 26, 2019.

[16] I intend this definition of touchstone: "a fundamental or quintessential part or feature" (Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2019); I am using "canon" as in "a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works" (Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2019).

[17] Joseph C. Ives, *Report upon the Colorado River of the West: Explored in 1857 and 1858* (Washington, D.C., 1861), 5. This quote is from Ives's transmittal letter attached to the report.

The story of Càrdenas's men failing in their attempt to reach the river from the canyon rim was entered in Ives's report. "They had accomplished one-third of the descent," Ives explained, "and from that point the river looked very large. They averred that some rocks, which appeared from above to be the height of a man, were higher than the tower of the cathedral of Seville. This was the first description of the famous Big Canyon of the Colorado."[18] Ives included this history as edification for the readers of his report; his recounting became a touchstone of the narrative Grand Canyon

Garcés enters the Grand Canyon canon in the English translation of the diaries he wrote as he journeyed to the Hopi villages by mule. Per Elliott Coues's translation, Garcés wrote, "I traveled four leagues southeast, and south, and turning to the east; and halted at the sight of the most profound canyons which ever onward continue; and within these flows the Rio Colorado." Frederick S. Dellenbaugh, who joined Powell's second expedition, included the story in his book. "Garcés arrived among the Havasupai . . . by following a trail down their canyon that made his head swim," according to Dellenbaugh. "At one place a ladder was even necessary to complete the two thousand feet of descent to the settlement," he wrote, where "Garcés was well treated and rested here for five days." Then Dellenbaugh quoted Garcés, via Coues: "Soon after leaving this retreat he 'halted at the sight of the most profound canyons which ever onward continue, and within these flows the Rio Colorado.'"[19] Like the Càrdenas story, the Garcés story has been repeated in Grand Canyon narratives countless times since.

The Ives report includes the "not much value" touchstone quoted previously, and this familiar passage: "Ours has been the first, and will doubtless be the last, party of whites to visit this profitless locality. It seems intended by nature that the Colorado River, along the greater portion of its lonely and majestic way, shall be forever unvisited and undisturbed."[20] This passage, especially the "last party of whites" sentence, is ubiquitous in Grand Canyon

[18] Ibid., 19–20. Ives spelled Càrdenas as "Cardinas."

[19] Francisco Garcés, *On the Trail of a Spanish Pioneer: The Diary and Itinerary of Francisco Garcés (Missionary Priest) in His Travels through Sonora, Arizona, and California, 1775–1776*, vol. 1, trans. Elliott Coues (New York, 1900), 347; Frederick S. Dellenbaugh, *The Romance of the Colorado River: The Story of Its Discovery in 1540, with an Account of the Later Explorations, and with Special Reference to the Voyages of Powell through the Line of the Great Canyon*s, 3rd ed. (New York, 1909), 92.

[20] Ives, *Report upon the Colorado River of the West*, 110.

narratives. These words have been included in works for over a hundred years and often seem to be used merely for effect, to say, "See how wrong he was!"

Powell's expedition journals and the subsequent publications of his report and Dutton's geological treatise depicting the canyon from the rim are also part of the canyon canon. These works brought Grand Canyon to the reading public and their importance makes them essential to the narrative Grand Canyon. The texts also contain touchstone stories that have been quoted repeatedly. Powell's Grand Canyon story is one of stone, the layers of sediment as seen from the river. After describing the vertical walls and the horizontal cut of the river, streams, and washes, Powell described Grand Canyon in a way that became a template for future writers. "The wonders of the Grand Canyon cannot be adequately represented in symbols of speech, nor by speech itself," Powell wrote, in possibly one of the first instances of "no words." He continued, "Language and illustration combined must fail. The elements that unite to make the Grand Canyon the most sublime spectacle in nature are multifarious and exceedingly diverse." Powell described color and sound as well, writing, "Besides the elements of form, there are elements of color, for here the colors of the heavens are rivaled by the colors of the rocks. . . . But form and color do not exhaust all the divine qualities of the Grand Canyon. It is the land of music. The river thunders in perpetual roar . . . All is music of the waters." Powell attempted to give words to his experience in an effort to understand, just as people who have come to the canyon in the century and a half since. Dutton's work is equally acclaimed, a text of geological explanation written in literary form. But one passage—"The earth suddenly sinks at our feet to illimitable depths. In an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, the awful scene is before us"—has been quoted so often that it has become separately well known and detached from the original text.[21]

In 1903 President Theodore Roosevelt spoke at the south rim of Grand Canyon, and several of the lines have become touchstones, requoted innumerable times. "In the Grand Canyon, Arizona has a natural wonder. . . . Leave it as it is," Roosevelt said. "You can not

[21] John Wesley Powell, *Canyons of the Colorado* (Meadville, Pa., 1895), 394. See also Powell, *The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons* (New York, 1961); Dutton, *Tertiary History of the Grand Cañon District*, 139.

improve on it. The ages have been at work on it, and man can only mar it. What you can do is to keep it for your children, your children's children, and for all who come after you, as one of the great sights which every American if he can travel at all should see."[22]

The oppositional nature of these remarks has enabled the speech to be quoted by environmentalists—"Leave it as it is"—and developers and tourism officials—"a great sight every American should see"—with equal sincerity.

Other touchstones include the expressions of "words cannot describe" followed by lengthy descriptions, almost a requirement in Grand Canyon storytelling. Variations on this theme have also become touchstone stories, such as J. B. Priestley's thoughts on his Grand Canyon experience in his 1937 memoir *Midnight on the Desert.* Priestley's oft-quoted "the Grand Canyon is sort of landscape Day of Judgment" appears in many Grand Canyon narratives. "If I were an American, I should make my remembrance of it the final test of men, art, and policies," Priestley declared. "Every member or officer of the Federal Government ought to remind himself, with triumphant pride, that he is on the staff of the Grand Canyon."[23] This statement has been requoted many times as well.

For more than a century, storytellers have situated themselves within the Grand Canyon canon, and they often have drawn upon these touchstone stories. Historians writing in the present reference the canon and the touchstone stories as they add to the narrative Grand Canyon, writing about the canyon specifically, and Arizona and the West more generally.[24] Many other writers have incorporated the canon into their canyon stories. In an early example, George Wharton James referred to the Càrdenas expedition, told a brief version of the Ives story—including the "last party of whites" quote—and dedicated the book to Powell and his "never

[22] Theodore Roosevelt, Address of President Roosevelt at Grand Canyon, Arizona, May 6, 1903, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, available online at https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record?libID=o289796, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University.

[23] J. B. Priestley, *Midnight on the Desert: Being an Excursion into Autobiography during a Winter in America, 1935–1936* (New York, 1937), 285. Perhaps a visit to Grand Canyon should be mandatory for everyone in all three branches of government, at both federal and state levels; see Senator H. L. Myers's previously quoted report regarding the canyon's ability to render even members of Congress wordless.

[24] To use myself as an example, in Writing Arizona I reference all of the canon texts mentioned here, as well as touchstones from Dutton (the "illimitable depths" quote, 16), Roosevelt (48), and Priestley (76).

sufficiently lauded trip." Naturalist Krutch utilized touchstone stories in his Grand Canyon book and called attention to writers who proclaimed "no words," stating, "Those who write about the Canyon generally begin by saying that it is indescribable; then they undertake to describe it." *Arizona Highways* introduced readers to canon and touchstone stories as well: in 1929, M. R. Tillotson, then-superintendent of Grand Canyon National Park, began an article with Ives's "last party of whites" quote, and a letter writer to the magazine referenced both Priestley and Garcés touchstones in response to one of the magazine's Grand Canyon issues in 1954. Fletcher also quoted Ives's "last party of whites." Most recently, Ross (the Powell biographer) referred to Priestley's "Day of Judgement," while an article promoting Grand Canyon centennial events opened with lines from Roosevelt's speech.[25] Over time these touchstone stories have become so well known that the complete narratives from which they are drawn need not be told at all.

This brief exploration into the narrative Grand Canyon reveals that while there are countless canyon stories, many of them are similar and reflect a pattern of storytelling that includes a Grand Canyon canon and familiar touchstone stories that have been quoted and requoted. Absent, however, from the Grand Canyon canon and touchstone stories are narratives from Native Americans' perspective. The well-known narrative Grand Canyon includes stories *about* Indian people but few stories *from* them. It is not that those stories do not exist. Though their stories now are available in venues more accessible to the reading public and have become part of larger conversations about Grand Canyon, their narratives have not yet entered the realm of touchstone stories, oft-quoted and recognized by general readers.

Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has discussed the "danger of a single story," warning that misunderstanding can occur if we know only a single story about a person or place. Grand Canyon is so vast—its physical size and geologic timespan—it would seem there is no danger of a single story. Yet the narrative Grand

[25] George Wharton James, *In and Around the Grand Canyon: The Grand Canyon of the Colorado River in Arizona* (Boston, 1913), xv, xvi; Krutch, *Grand Canyon*, 48; M. R. Tillotson, "Grand Canyon National Park, Its Development and Growth," *Arizona Highways*, May 1929, p. 27; Victor R. Stoner, "Yours Sincerely," *Arizona Highways*, May 1954, p. 40; Fletcher, *The Man Who Walked through Time*, 93; Ross, "The Little-Known Story"; Violet Bauske, "Grand Canyon National Park's 100th Birthday Bash Is Open to the Public," *AZCentral.com*, February 22, 2019.

Canyon has been dominated by a story with a single encompassing theme, the theme of European and Anglo-American discovery and development. Grand Canyon is threatened because of the encompassing narrative that the value of land is based primarily on how it can be used for profit. This is not generally the story told by Native Americans, environmentalists, or even within the expressions of "no words" over the last century. Adichie has said, "I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person."[26] Accordingly then, our understanding of Grand Canyon will be incomplete until we engage in telling all of its stories.

We tell Grand Canyon stories in order to understand the landscape, to understand humanity and its position within the landscape, and to understand ourselves. No one holds the same story or inhabits the same place experientially. As more Grand Canyon narratives are told and begin to encompass as yet lesser-known and newer stories, the narrative Grand Canyon becomes more complex, perhaps facilitating a greater understanding of the place. Rather than lamenting another Grand Canyon story then, this essay is an argument for more, and more diverse, canyon stories.

[26] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," TEDGlobal 2009 (July 2009), available online at https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story (accessed July 2018).