

Excerpt from “Somewhere Touching Earth to Sky”

Conflict on High

Excerpt from “Somewhere Touching Earth to Sky: The Lease of Kitt Peak and the Intersections of Citizenship, Science, and the Cultural Landscape” by Joan April Suwalsky.

These excerpts are from the conclusion of Suwalsky’s Senior Thesis for the A.B. Degree in Urban Studies (Environmental Science and History) at Barnard College, New York, New York.

“Primarily, the lease [in which the Tohono O’odham agreed to let the NSF use their land for the Kitt Peak National Observatory] was negotiated and constructed in 1958—for many reasons, ‘a different time period.’ Multiple facets of the negotiations and terms were constrained by the historical period which was defined by post-World War II, Cold War, racist, and Termination period ideals. The Tohono O’odham entered the contract to demonstrate ‘citizenship’ and show support of ‘American,’ nationalistic ideals that pervaded the era. The technology located at KPNO, for example, was thought to aid in the prevention of an enemy attack. In addition, the tribe was interested in promised economic benefits and employment opportunities, and hoped to prove its political autonomy by negotiating a contract with a large, federal institution like the NSF.

The KPNO has undermined the citizenship of marginalized people. Though the lease was a mutually agreed upon venture, the terms and negotiations usurped political agency from the tribe, and took advantage of the tribe’s weaker position. In this, evidence suggests the Tohono O’odham lacked sufficient legal advising, and did not have adequate political autonomy or organization to go up against NSF on equal terms. The paper also investigated the fallout since the lease was signed, and whether the terms have been upheld.

Generally, terms have been adhered to—at least on paper—however, the lease promises too little, and is embarrassingly outdated. A similar lease extending in ‘perpetuity’ would never be approved today. Also, the language of the lease and congressional legislation would be far more nuanced and specific under today’s standards. The terms of the lease favor the NSF significantly, and allow for a great deal of interpretation which ultimately hurts the tribe. Interestingly, though the NSF could make changes to the lease terms to assist the O’odham—and modernize the lease—it has shown no interest in this, despite complaints filed by the tribe.

Today, the relationship is workable but strained. There is, however, much potential for collaboration and a cooperative relationship. The Tohono O’odham have begun to organize and have acquired significant agency and self-determination, but NSF and other outsiders need to meet them halfway. It is imperative that leaders on both sides seek to find ‘middle ground,’ and engage in productive measures and debates. University of Arizona Professor Joni Adamson relates:

Our Tohono O’odham colleagues did not use the specialized language of contemporary cultural and literary theory, but clearly they understood that in a world of uneven power relations, where certain groups are routinely silenced and disempowered, gaining access to the power to change the story will require them to search for common ground with people from many differing groups—both Native and non-Native.

... The Tohono O’odham cultural consciousness is remarkably different from that of the NSF and KPNO astronomers. Moreover, there are many individual histories, perspectives and experiences involved. Are these numerous, often diverging conceptions reconcilable? Perhaps one common denominator in the experiences is the appreciation of stellar observation in cultural and scientific contexts. Astronomy as a discipline is a complex body of knowledge and very profound; what does it tell us about ourselves? Attorney Marsha Schmidt contends that this may be an open doorway:

What Indians want most is for non-Indians to understand the significance in their own cosmology and to acknowledge the damage done. And if possible to reverse. But my own experience is it is the understanding and acknowledgement that is most lacking and is most wanted. If we just say, we understand it is sacred to you and will do what we can to accommodate you, it would help significantly.”