

# Navigating Confluences: Revisiting the Meaning of “Wilderness Experience”

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**Abstract**—Concepts of wilderness and “wilderness experience” merge into a grand or metanarrative that describes how “wilderness experience” is and provides a normalized reference point for values, beliefs, actions, and choices. This paper engages and juxtaposes critiques by scholars and authors representing nondominant perspectives with the North American, wilderness metanarrative. The *bricolage* analysis develops a repleteness of interpretation, feeds new visions from the margin to the center, and enhances a particular style of ethical discourse.

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Our concepts of the “wilderness experience” inevitably connect us with the cultural and historical forces of societies. If you live in the United States, the words and images created by John Muir, David Thoreau, Wallace Stegner, Aldo Leopold and Theodore Roosevelt will surface. If you live within the large expanse of Canada, tales of voyagers, scientific expeditions, trade routes, annual climbing Camps, natural history explorations and railroad expansion will spring to mind. For managers of wilderness areas, ecological management, ecosystem approaches, social carrying capacity and conflict management reflect specific culturally-bound facts and values. As outdoor leaders or recreationists, settings such as group dynamics, individual psychological growth, facing risk and developing technical skills will delimit the encounters.

Each of the historical and cultural forces, in their own way, merge into a grand or metanarrative (Lyotard, 1984) that describes how wilderness is and provides a normalized reference point for values, beliefs, actions and choices. A grand narrative structures how we interact with areas entitled “wilderness.” Cultural, historical and individual accounts, management practices and outdoor recreation intersect within a constructed metanarrative that claims, through its use of discourse, to present reality or truth. In the spirit of Thoreau or Muir, a present day wilderness trip is sketched with shades of grandeur, solitude, risk or the images of the first white, male explorers. The spirit of voyagers permeate modern trips through the Canadian Shield as participants learn French songs to establish paddling rhythms or retrace the routes of English and French explorers. The outdoor recreationist or wilderness traveler unites with the wilderness through a metanarrative circumscribed, at a minimum,

by chronicles of nationality, race, human-nature relationships, ethics, power, and activity.

The purpose of this paper is to engage and juxtapose critiques by scholars and authors representing nondominant perspectives with the wilderness metanarrative that we seemingly cannot live without. The metanarrative that structures “wilderness experience” is far more complex than imagined and carries unconscious, sometimes invisible, meanings, which do not disappear simply because we are unaware of those forces or because we did not intend those messages. Using literary and scholarly perspectives, I consider how discourse mediates experiences in the wilderness, calls out for interpreting the experience as constructed, and reveals ethical implications for those of us who gravitate toward, and live within, the dominant, North American wilderness metanarrative. Ethical processes, as argued elsewhere (Fox, 1998; Fox, Ryan, van Dyck, Chuchmach, Chivers, and Quesnel, 1999), begins with multiple and critical perspectives. The juxtaposition of propositions helps initiate and sustain an ethical focus within the discussion about wilderness and “wilderness experience.”

The streams of this discussion are confluent. While the streams flow into one another or contribute to the identity of overall patterns, they do not fuse into one, or melt, but rather retain their separate and unique identities while surfacing and maintaining various analyses, including paradoxical ones. However ubiquitous the dominant, North American grand narrative of wilderness, it is far less culturally defining than the land, the climate and the particular narratives that permeate a region in all of its social dimensions. “Cultural geographies, far more than geological or political ones, give rise to regional definitions of use to human beings, so it seems wisest for readers to think of the cultural dimensions of our “multicultural” spiritual-psychic locations rather than of the geopolitical ones” (Allen, 1999).

## Understanding the Currents: The Analytical Frames

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The analytical frame for this paper represents a postmodern *bricolage* or a blending of diverse perspectives, critiques, disciplinary knowledges, and analyses. First, a description of various components of the North American wilderness metanarrative is presented. These elements are “entry points” into the discussions and analyses; they do not represent an exhaustive analysis of the discourse surrounding wilderness or wilderness experiences. A thorough description of the power, oppressive and resistive forces within the grand narrative of wilderness and “wilderness experience” is left for another day. The brief description is vital for negotiating the critiques developed on the margins.

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Second, the analysis transfigures the scholarship not often associated with concepts of North American wilderness and “wilderness experiences” within the wilderness debates. The relevance of these writings may not be immediately obvious. However, part of the process of *bricolage* is identifying connections between seemingly unrelated items or movements. If we, as people who operate within the wilderness metanarrative, are to initiate and sustain ethical dialogues, we must begin to imagine ourselves as others see us by listening closely to their interpretations and critiques. This analysis of “wilderness experience” is grounded in the works of Native American and Aboriginal women, Native Hawaiian men and women, Chicanas, African-American feminists, and Euro-North American men and women in postmodern discourses. These authors simply make us *see* more, seek a kind of repleteness of interpretation that is only achieved when phenomena are read from multiple perspectives. “Feeding new visions from the margins to the center, the formerly disqualified on the borders are likely to enrich, complicate, and thicken what we construct (without warranty) as the center of all things” (Greene, 1993). Multiple viewpoints support ethical discussion, because they make visible contradictory ideas, enhance and diversify the participation and engage power forces between *whitestream* and alternative voices. *Whitestream* is a term coined by Denis (1997) to indicate that society, although principally structured on the European, white experience, is more than a “white” society in socio-demographic, cultural and economic terms. However, it is also a problematic term, because it leaves hidden the various experiences and margins within a “white culture.” For instance, “poor white Appalachians” were displaced to form national parks during the 1930s, and surely their voices are not usually included within dominant white discourses. However, the term does serve to foreground how race, culture, sexual orientation, class, economics, and ability among others conditions our knowledge and understanding.

Third, *bricolage* is a form of “caring,” that is thinking carefully about our conceptual frameworks, ubiquitous discourses and critiques from “outsiders” is a process of honoring voices not usually attended to, remaining accountable for the paradoxical consequence of all actions and creating discourse focused on ethical dimensions. Like Dewey (Boydston, 1969-1991) and Arendt (1977), Foucault (1984) calls for reflection on the rules that govern discourse at particular moments of time, and on the assumptions that underlie it. So thinking and careful analyses, as Dewey (Boydston, 1969-1991) says, “is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question its meanings, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects upon it as a problem” (Boydston, 1969-1991). Therefore, thinking, as a type of caring, allows for choosing different actions or behaviors, redefining ethical criteria to include multiple standpoints and material interaction and becoming accountable for the harms and benefits associated with every action.

## The Main Current: The Metanarrative of Wilderness and Wilderness Experience

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Wilderness” has a deceptive concreteness at first glance. The difficulty is that while the word is a noun it acts like an adjective. There is no specific material object that is wilderness. The term designates a quality (as the ‘-ness’ suggests) that produces a certain mood or feeling in a given individual and, as a consequence, may be assigned by that person to a specific place. Because of this subjectivity a universally acceptable definition of wilderness is elusive (Nash, 1982).

Nash’s (1982) difficulties with defining wilderness may seem peculiar since wilderness is an apparently natural phenomenon, not dependent on human thought as are obvious human constructs such as experience, recreation or leisure. However, mountains, flora, fauna, land and space are all found in such designations as parks, wilderness, Crown lands, forests, wildlands, protected areas, special places and uninhabited lands. The designations are all based upon the interpretations and needs of human beings and do not reflect a “reality” that is found among the mountains, land, flora and fauna. Wilderness is created from the interplay of thought, language and cultural practices. But while human constructs, such as definitions of experience, are ultimately dependent on human thought, the same is not true of natural objects. As Sylvester (1991) points out, both ancient and modern people could easily recognize that a flat stone that fits the palms of their hands is good for skipping across water. The usefulness of a good throwing stone is not dependent on what we think, but rather on the properties of nature (McLean, 1999). However, designating a stone for throwing is a human construction, and hence the never-ending dynamics of interpretation are once again brought into play.

Although there are entities (potentially physical, abstract and spiritual) that are inviolate and exist beyond human need and justification, the sharing of understandings and knowledges places humans within a discursive world. Floating through an example of our discourses can help explicate how we construct layers of interpretations and reality. For example, ecology offers a very powerful set of metaphors to speak about the natural world. Metaphors such as “spaceship earth,” trees forming the lungs of the planet or marshes and wetlands as filters similar to an animal’s kidneys are part and parcel of ecological and environmental discourses. Ecology claims to present what *is* in the world, not what *ought to be* (Ryan, 1999). The discourses build upon concepts and metaphors of balance, homeostasis, stability and integrity over competition, fluctuation and change. Yet, the metaphors are not “in” the world but are applied based on human understanding through physical bodies (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) and implies certain value orientations. Furthermore, the metaphors have changed over time (witness Kuhn, and his classic paradigm shifts) and are always contested. So, at one time, the commonality at the center of an ecosystem was the focus of wildlife studies, while edges have only recently come to the foreground. The metaphors shape reality in

terms of human bodily awareness and imply what ought to happen (for example, we should keep the marshes healthy). To think we have reached the final, complete understanding of ecological and wilderness metaphors seems to belie the history of science and knowledge.

In this paper, wilderness is framed as socially constructed, and the wilderness and “wilderness experience” metanarrative provides claims about what is and should be as well as implications for ethical behavior. The wilderness and “wilderness experience” concepts are imbued with cultural context including power relationships. For reasons that should not need explanation here, the writings of Muir, Thoreau, Stegner, Leopold and other white Canadian and American males structure the construct of wilderness more frequently and influentially than the writings (Warren, 1996), for example, of women, African-Americans, or Native Americans (Abajian, 1974; Blackett, 1986; Drimmer, 1987; Katz, 1973; Quarles, 1988). The occasional exception or the reclaiming of voice through feminist, Aboriginal, or African-American scholarship serves to emphasize the power of the norm. One example is the lack of identification given to the African-Americans, both individuals (for example, Matthew Henson, James Beckwourth or Estancio) or as groups of slaves, who were essential to the success of expeditions. Their contributions are rarely acknowledged let alone highlighted in the historical accounts. The social construction of gender and race, financial resources, opportunities, and acceptable behavior patterns privileged the experiences, perspectives, and achievements of white male accounts of wilderness. It would be difficult, given the social systems of the period, to imagine women, African-Americans, First Nations or Native Americans with access to such freedom, power, influence and opportunity to lead explorations, publish accounts, or garnish political support. The world of Canadian voyagers and explorers was limited to men especially the men of European descent, while Aboriginal and Metis previous achievements (most areas “discovered” by the English and French were well known to the Aboriginal residents) and involvement within European endeavors were left invisible. Ecology and wilderness management are systems with specific cultural, gender, and power perspectives as demonstrated by critical theorists and feminist scholars (Harding, 1989; Warren, 1996). The preponderance of white, Euro-North American males authors within outdoor recreation and leadership (Ewert, 1989; Ford and Blanchard, 1993; Meier, Morash, and Welton, 1987; McAvoy, 1990; Priest and Gass, 1997; Schleien, McAvoy, Lais and Rynders, 1993) hints at a monogenous approach.

If wilderness is a constructed and bound concept, what is this entity called “wilderness experience?” Can “wilderness experience” exist outside of the cultural and historical forces? How would one delineate a “wilderness experience?” When does a “wilderness experience” begin or end? What counts as a “wilderness experience?” If the “wilderness experience” is over (e.g., a discrete river trip), are the learnings derived from that event, recognized in the future, part of the original “wilderness experience?” Or are they a different experience? Or is it an ongoing “wilderness experience?” The concept or construct of “wilderness experience” is one we seemingly cannot live without, yet it is complex and complicated enough to give us pause.

Although there is no unproblematic theory of experience that philosophically defines what counts as an experience or delineates the components of an experience, there are numerous scholars wrestling with the epistemology and ontology of experience. Experience may begin with what Harding (1989) calls “spontaneous consciousness,” or the awareness one has of one’s “individual experience” before any reflection on that experience or any consideration of social construction of one’s identity. However, Harding suggests that this experience cannot be called “immediate” for it is thoroughly mediated by dominant cultural texts. “It is, however, spontaneous, for it is experienced as if it were an immediate view of one’s life and world” (Stone-Mediatore, 1998).

Dewey’s (Boydston, 1969-1991) theory of experience begins with a learning which bridges past, present, and future. Experience makes a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Arendt (1977) parallels Dewey’s connection between time periods while adding political and ethical ramifications. In Arendt’s sense, experiences are grounded in the world we have inherited from the past, filled with actions we do and do not like. Yet new and creative perspectives can be developed about the inherited past that enrich the present. This process “between past and future,” of constructing new interpretations, interrupts the seeming momentum of history and enables us to envision and work toward alternative futures (Stone-Mediatore, 1998). Arendt (1968) labels this potential “natality:” the power to choose other than who we have been constructed to be, a chance to resist or subvert metanarratives, an opportunity to tease apart the benefits and harms in any narrative and choose new actions and the revision of interpretations we embody as individuals and groups.

Understanding “wilderness experience” requires us to address, at a minimum: how the concept historically emerged and was passed down to the current generations; how the concept is used now to enable protection of flora, fauna and land as well as creating harm; how “wilderness experience” is circumscribed by wilderness history, literature, and concepts; how the concept privileges certain genders, socio-economic classes, races, cultural heritages, and experiential approaches; and how it conditions the future. Native American and Lebanese scholar, Paula Gunn Allen (1999), challenges views of experience that are bound to an individual and the present. These frameworks of experience create exclusions that can be particularly harmful for perspectives offering views outside the dominant paradigms: “For how can one immediately experience the present without regard to the shaping presence of the past? Yet Americans have been, at least in the expressions of their artists and scholars, profoundly present-oriented and idea- or fantasy-centered. Their past has fascinated them, in a made-up form, but the real past is denied as though it is too painful—too opposed to the fantasy, the dream, to be spoken” (Allen, 1999).

If we are to realize Arendt’s (1968) “natality,” we must reassess the wilderness metanarrative, incorporate the contradictory aspects of the historical context and work toward more conscious choices and accountable actions. Although humans can never fully comprehend all cultural and historical forces that impinge on the present, the movement toward understanding, critiquing and material

interaction allows for a deepening and mature comprehension for different ethical processes and decisions. Under such conditions, wilderness experiences are experiments with the world to find out what it is like. The undergoing of an experience becomes instruction or a discovery of the connection of things, perspectives and forces. A world where possibilities for creating harm or benefit (or both simultaneously) are ever-present is an existential package of contingency, responsibility and the possibility of failure. It is also a world in which intelligent participants have to carefully gauge word choices, structures and forces within and without and the consequences of their actions in a world of uncertainty. "Intelligence-in-operation" requires individuals to develop multiple viewpoints so that experience and judgement can lead to authentic and just interactions (Boisvert, 1998).

As Bordo and Jaggard (1989) suggest, we can start with experience, but the analysis cannot end there. Analyses must be critical of experiences and prepared to accept, modify or reject any wilderness experience that might contribute to the continuing oppression and destruction of life. The temptation is that, in trying to be sensitive to historically particular and culturally specific experiences, people will equate experience and truth. Experience is neither unmediated nor transparent. Lauretzen (1997) reflects upon the paradoxical nature of experience: "Relying on experience creates a tendency to accept a self-authenticating subjectivity, which does not adequately acknowledge the fact that, far from explaining or justifying particular moral claims, 'experience' may be the reality in need of explanation. On the other hand, thoroughly to historicize 'experience' runs the risk of undercutting the authority any appeal to experience might have in...an argument." Wilderness experiences are vital for our understanding and connection to the natural world, and they are a representation of our cultural history. These same wilderness experiences are always already constructed events that open up opportunities and replicate social forces. Euro-North American wilderness experiences open opportunities for self-development, spiritual experiences, and solitude as demonstrated by the field's research (Driver and others 1996), while replicating patterns of white participation in wilderness areas, glorifying the stories of white male explorers and naturalists and images of self based on autonomy, solitude, and detachment. The structure of trips for small groups who move by "their own power" rather than larger communal or family groups with varying levels of ability excludes a number of cultural heritages. In the long term, working toward concepts of "wilderness experience" that are inclusive or make space for multiple views requires an understanding of limits, accepting critiques and working to subvert, resist, and modify power structures. The foundation is a comprehension of how cultural and historical trends, invisible forces, and group movements condition individual selves, behavior, and knowledge. If we are to choose different currents and hear critiques from other perspectives, we must understand and engage a complexity of narratives.

## Rethinking Who Has a "Wilderness Experience"

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For purposes of discussion, I start with the assumption that selves ("subjects") are socially constructed and limited, and I describe powerful themes of self and wilderness experience. Interweaving Arendt's (1977) concept of natality, I open the possibility that we can choose to be other than what the world, metanarratives and we have made ourselves. My intention is to briefly indicate that within the diverse wilderness literature, the metanarrative surrounding "wilderness experiences" is grounded in only one metaphor of self (that is, masculine, unitary, consistent, rationale and solitary). Such a unitary view has oppressive and limiting implications in terms of accessing the "wilderness experience."

Classically, the Euro-North American tradition has focused on a rationale, masculine, consistent, autonomous self, where the body may not necessarily play an important role. Such a perspective often permeates the narratives associated with wilderness experiences. "*Walden* is the self-proclaimed triumph of the isolated, superior individual. Alone with nature, not in it. Not of it. One can be with it as a scholar is with a book, but as an observer, not a creative participant...Thoreau revealed the most about himself (and his admirers) by saying that he felt that the name Walden was originally 'walled in.' He was most taken by the idea that Walden (or White) Pond had no apparent source for its water, and no outlet. Entire unto itself...A wall to keep its pristine clarity, its perfect isolation. Secure." (Allen, 1999).

Feminist voices from alternative traditions and perspectives (Allen, 1999; Anzaldúa, 1987; Harjo and Bird, 1997; Keating, 1996; Lorde, 1984; Willet, 1995) have theorized self through emphasizing relationships, connections, interdependencies, discursive realities and multicultural identities. Braidotti (1994) explores a politically informed account of an alternative subjectivity that is in transit and yet sufficiently anchored to a historical position to accept responsibility and accountability. Willet (1995) builds on the mother-child experience to describe identity in terms of "proximate others." Butler (1990) develops a theory related to "performativity" and how meaning is inscribed through power and cultural forces on entities. Work by women with Native and multicultural heritages (Allen, 1999; Anzaldúa, 1987; Harjo and Bird, 1997; Keating, 1996; Lorde, 1982, 1984; Lugones, 1990) describe selves that cross borders, hold contradictory images and practices in tension, moves within various and multiple cultural views and choose to work from margins in order to resist oppression and maintain alternative voices.

When these inquiries are focused upon wilderness discussions, new tributaries for explorations emerge. What narrative would come forth when the struggles of Native Americans to sustain traditional relationships to wilderness and succeed within the whitestream world moves to center stage? What stories could we reclaim from the historical writings of women, African-Americans, Chinese-Americans, and Japanese-Americans relevant to the construction and designation of wilderness? How would our ethical frameworks be challenged if we assumed the "proximate other"

was essential for our moral development? What tales of injustice and oppression would seep out as we listen to the realities of the people who supported the famous explorers?

Given the rational, unitary, disembodied, autonomous and separate self within the “wilderness experience” metanarrative, it is not surprising to find that the role of the “body” has been left invisible in most Euro-North American philosophical discussions. Among others, Dewey (Boydston, 1969-1991) rejected such a dualism. Although he did not specifically explore the role of the body, it is implied within his notions of experience and his use of the term “embodied.” Recent work by a variety of scholars (Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1992; Butler & Scott, 1992; Fishburn, 1997; Jaggar & Bordo, 1989; Willet, 1995) has presented evidence and rationale for the necessity of body and embodied processes in philosophical inquiry.

Yet, dominant discourses give scant attention to bodily knowledge as we construct images of “wilderness experiences” and ethical practices. The separation of mind and body, with the body considered secondary, seems to be exemplified in the English language. Fishburn (1997) remarks that most Euro-North American cultures engage with the world through a conceptual construction, and find themselves, the majority of the time, attending to the world and away from their bodies. English sentences structure the experience as “I have a body” or “My body feels pleasure.” Yet, the “I” in these statements is indistinguishable from the body or the senses. The “I,” in these sentences, is not a captain steering a ship. The sadness is not separate from a certain heaviness of bodily limbs, nor is the widening of eyes and bouncing steps distinguishable from the delight. It is only when something goes amiss, that bodies become the focus of attention.

A discussion of the role of bodies and embodied knowledge is relevant because of the implied significance of bodily knowledge within the “wilderness experience,” and the possibility that alternative understandings will deepen our awareness of a human-wilderness relationship. The role of the body as an important link to the physical world within the “wilderness experience” may become a more immediate conduit (e.g., smelling the rain or pine needles, hearing the songs of the birds or touching the softness of a feather) and for creating knowledge about the wilderness. “The boundaries are more like membranes than barriers as they define a surface of metamorphosis and exchange” (Abram, 1996). Lakoff and Johnson (1999) provide linguistic and neuroscientific evidence that reason arises from the nature of our brains, bodies and bodily experiences, and they argue that traditional philosophical strategies are not complementary with this evidence. They explore metaphoric structures of language based on bodily orientations (for example, up/down, front/back or in/out) and claim that the very structure of reason is “shaped crucially by the peculiarities of our human bodies, by the remarkable details of the neural structure of our brains, and by the specifics of our everyday functioning in the world.” If, as they argue, “abstract reason builds on and makes use of forms of perceptual and motor inference present in ‘lower’ animals” (Lakoff & Johnson), then reason places us on a continuum with other animals and is universal in that it is a capacity shared by all human beings. What narratives would emerge if we could imagine a dynamic and personal interconnection with nature? What

stories would we draw if we seriously respected “dancing the world into being” or “singing the sun to rise?” What picture would be painted if we could sense the movements of animals outside our vision? The body becomes the very means of entering into relation with all things and participating in the here-and-now of the fathomless and wondrous events of the wilderness.

Whether autonomous or interconnected, abstract or sensual, detached or interwoven, metaphors for self are a reflection of the limitations within the human organism. Orlie (1997) suggests that an embodied, individual living entity is a “limit experience,” that is, the limitlessness of life can only be experienced through the limited. Whatever and whoever an individual is reflects a process of limits. The limits are unavoidable and reflect the contingent aspects of life. “Limit experiences are heady and disorienting. They reveal the contingency of what selves and the world are made to be, and they throw into question all guides for action and the necessity of their effects” (Orlie, 1997). Attending to diversity strengthens and enhances narratives, moves us toward multiple levels of cognition and helps sustain ethical knowledge from differing standpoints.

## The Currents of Postmodernism \_\_\_\_\_

Juxtaposing postmodernism to the North American wilderness metanarrative provides another set of insights and transfigures wilderness discourse. Postmodernism is not a specific theoretical position, but an intellectual trend that touches philosophy, architecture, the graphic arts, dance, music, literature, literary theory and education, among many. As a cultural phenomenon, it has such features as the challenging of convention, the mixing of styles, tolerance of ambiguity, acceptance (indeed celebration) of diversity, innovation, change and emphasis on the constructedness of reality. Within philosophical postmodernism, there are multiple viewpoints and a constant debate about the “true” postmodern approach to life and inquiry. One wonders if there can be an “expertise” in postmodernism, although there are scholars who display a greater depth of understanding or analysis such as Braidotti (1994), Butler (1992), Derrida (1997), Flax (1992), Foucault (1984), and Lyotard (1984). Given the postmodern style and proclivity to disrupt the “givenness” of life, it is tempting to avoid or ignore the postmodern critique. However, the postmodern analysis has resonated with individuals and groups most often outside powerful whitestream forces; hence, the importance of addressing the critique of postmodern scholars. One of the fundamental challenges of postmodernism is its challenge to metanarrative’s claims about straightforward, transparent and accepted ideas and knowledges of existing concepts or powerful bodies. The fluidity within the postmodern construct of reality requires participating in the discussions to expose ourselves and respond to a whole family of related outlooks and approaches (Beck, 1993).

Although I claim no expertise in postmodern perspectives, some major guideposts are relevant. Postmodernism represents an erosion of faith in the so-called “Enlightenment Project,” which linked rationality of human promise and the conviction of ongoing progress (Greene, 1993). A common characterization of postmodernism comes from Lyotard

(1984): "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodernism* as an incredulity toward metanarratives." Postmodernism would deny the possibilities of metanarratives related to "wilderness experiences," and reject as monolithic and hegemonic the ones that North Americans have embraced and see them as creating power forces of oppression, movement, and resistance.

However, "incredulity" is the more fascinating and unexpected word. Incredulity is not denial or rejection or refutation; *it is an inability to believe*. Incredulity replaces notions such as "denial" and "refutation" with notions such as "doubt," "displacement," "instability" and "uncertainty" (Burbules, 1993). Applying a postmodern critique to wilderness and "wilderness experience" leads to doubting wilderness as inevitable, as a given, or as the only way to sustain life in natural areas. The postmodern doubt acknowledges that we must learn to live with the positive and negative consequences of all narratives including, and especially, the North American wilderness grand narrative and become accountable for the material consequences of the metanarrative. Therefore, social circumstances such as cultural diversity, certain dynamics of asymmetrical power that distort and compromise even the best of human intentions, and particular ways that discourse colors and shapes our ways of living and being in the world lead the postmodernist to doubt whether doing more and more of what we are doing, even when it might be a *good* thing, will solve our problems, settle questions of truth or right and wrong or even make people's ways of living better (Burbules, 1993).

Although postmodern analysis focus on discursive or constructed aspects of reality, they do not necessarily deny an independent existence of humans, flora, fauna or land forms. Postmodernists see reality as more complex than we had previously imagined. Reality does not exist objectively, "out there," simply to be mirrored by our thoughts. Rather, it is in part a human creation. We mold reality in accordance with our needs, interests, biological capabilities, prejudices, and cultural traditions. Reality is not *entirely* a human construction. Knowledge is the product of an *interaction* between our ideas about the world and our experience of the world. Therefore, our experience is influenced by our concepts, and we see things (physical and nonphysical things) through cultural lenses. Meyer (1998) through a description of Native Hawaiian epistemology would add the role of the invisible or "spirit world" in knowing. Both positivist and postmodern views do not substantially address the potential for this presence. The influence of the discursive is not all-controlling, for the entities "talk back," and we have been mistaken. We thought the world was flat, for example, but were obliged eventually to change our minds (Beck, 1993). Postmodernists posit the textual or discourse field as powerful with material implications that mediates our understanding of the empirical world. These material implications are bound with who gets the right to interpret whom, who has access to resources and power and what view holds salience.

In the early years, the wilderness movement was a relatively small, active group of people resisting whitestream forest practices that favored logging and industry. Currently, the forces for wilderness bridge differing perspectives. There is a strong current in wilderness management and protection housed within powerful

whitestream institutions (such as, U.S. Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, or Parks Canada) that employ dominant, culturally bound concepts related to Euro-North American culture. Other groups move along a continuum between creating resistive practices and paralleling dominant societal patterns related to socio-economics, white culture, and privileged access. Most of the groups associated with wilderness management, designation, and protection have received criticism from people on the margins (such as African-Americans concerned with environmental racism). In current wilderness organizations, practices and scholarship, the lack of substantial representation from various nondominant perspectives leads to the invisibility of the positions or reinterpretations from the dominant perspectives. In many political and policy arenas, supporting evidence for arguments, policy changes, and management strategies must follow a specific, positivist, Euro-North American process that privileges objective, measurable, and detached knowledge, which is often contrary or inimical to positions on the margin.

Questions related to the interaction between discursive representations and empirical realities are questions yet unresolved even among postmodern theorists. Such differences, contradictions, and tensions demand ethical analysis and decision-making.

Postmodern scholarship has brought into question the "wilderness experience" and challenges "the givenness" of any particular metanarrative from dominant North American discourse. Playing with multiple interpretations and discourses, postmodernism can expose unintended but material forces of society, groups and individuals. Postmodernism as another form of analysis is a process of infusing power into our theories, ethics and understandings of "wilderness experiences," thereby providing more alternatives while acknowledging that all actions create both harm and good, exclusion and inclusion, oppression and resistance. Postmodernism is not a form of resolution, but a process of questioning and analyzing.

## Other Rhythms of the Confluent Currents

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Scholars within traditions aligned with Aboriginal, Indigenous and multicultural heritages are wary of postmodern critiques, partially because of the exclusion of a spiritual or invisible world (that is, postmodern critique remains completely within a rational, Euro-North American tradition). Meyer (1998), in a study of Native Hawaiian epistemology, noted that spirituality is a "domain of experience," and conduct between gods and humans are a part of knowledge. Underwood Spencer (1990) found similar patterns within Oneida tradition. This discussion is beyond the parameters of the analysis undertaken herein; however, it is a perspective that creates an opening for critiquing the absence of an independent, spiritual world and related epistemological processes and structures within whitestream Euro-North American discourses on wilderness. Notice that the form of analysis within the paper holds its own paradox as it critiques but replicates the Euro-North American paradigm (rational, solitary, autonomous, detached, cognitive and empirical) in the critique.

Epistemologies connected with Aboriginal peoples also open another view of human-nature relationships, ethical behaviors and meanings of experience. Many of these traditions are “nature-inclusive” (Underwood Spencer, 1990), view embodiment within a spiritual world and redefine “use” (Allen, 1999; Meyer, 1998; Underwood Spencer, 1990) as an organic, interactive and respectful relationship. Furthermore, authors within these traditions have produced critiques of dominant metanarratives useful for expanding awareness, for understanding positive and negative consequences and for bridging shifting boundaries. Reading, understanding, working along with and becoming open to the critiques of authors along margins and borders spotlight dimensions of a center (that is, the dominant North American view of wilderness experiences) never noticed before, and largely because they are consciously looking from the border.

## The Challenge Within the “Wilderness Experience”

I suggest that “wilderness experience” is a category we cannot live without, because it connects some people to wilderness, is a force within today’s society and carries a constructed historical reality with material consequences. Furthermore, it is typically taken for granted in ways that ought not to be (Scott, 1992). The process of creating and sharing meaning from “wilderness experiences” requires language, metaphors of self, nature, human beings and cultural frameworks. Although “wilderness experiences” and meaning need to be seen as separate but intertwined components, “wilderness experience” and language (and discursive realities) must be seen as integral. “Wilderness experience” is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation. What counts as “wilderness experience” is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political (Scott, 1992).

If we are concerned with ethical action, accept the complexity of the world, and acknowledge that all actions have negative and positive consequences, then ethical decision-making must include multiple perspectives and accountability for the limitations of being human. The North American wilderness metanarrative has nurtured a profound relationship between many white Euro-North Americans and nature while leaving invisible the work of people on the margins or allocating resources away from priorities established by people of other cultural heritages. Engaging other critiques allows us to honor our tradition, look for changes in future action, and address the concerns of others.

Therefore, the metanarrative and constructed realities of “wilderness experiences” become the tools of analysis; they are not fixed or universal patterns that prescribe or determine what a “wilderness experience” ought to be. The wilderness grand narrative becomes an obstacle to moral and meaningful interaction if it *presumes to replace individual and contextual reflection about the meaning of “wilderness experiences.”*

We cannot rely solely on the theoretical use of intelligence to construct rules or frameworks that will obviate the need to re-re-examine the meaning of “wilderness experiences” in a changing, contingent world. Experience-oriented writings

about “wilderness experiences” are valuable, not because they provide direct access to truth, but because they bring into public discussion questions and concerns about the metanarratives of “wilderness experiences,” including those usually excluded in dominant ideologies (Stone-Mediatore, 1998). We must engage in processes that nurture critiques from those who have been harmed; we must find avenues for material interactions with people who have different priorities; we must negotiate and adjust so the field itself includes those who will be most critical.

Even though the experience of “others” may not seem present or relevant (that is, African-Americans did not write specifically about wilderness), Morrison (1992) suggests that the act of enforcing racelessness in discourse is itself a racial act. Morrison (1992), in *Playing in the Dark*, explores how language powerfully evokes and enforces hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony and dismissive “othering” even when the theme is not devoted to any of these aspects. Using American literature, Morrison (1992) explores questions such as: When does racial “unconsciousness” or awareness of race enrich interpretive language, and when does it impoverish it? How do embedded assumptions of racial (not racist) language work in the [wilderness] enterprise that hopes and sometimes claims to be “humanistic?” An analysis of literature and scholarship associated with wilderness and “wilderness experience” is much needed given the recent advances in African-American, Native American, First Nations, and feminist scholarship.

Morrison (1992) challenges the validity or vulnerability of a set of assumptions conventionally accepted by scholars and critics and circulated as “knowledge.” This knowledge holds that traditional, canonical literature and information is free of, uninformed and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of Aboriginal, First Nations, Native Americans, Africans, African-Americans or Black Canadians (among others) in North America. It assumes that this presence—which shaped the body politic, the laws, and the entire history of the North American culture—has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture’s literature, scholarship, politics (the controversy over the role of Riel and Confederation is an excellent example) or leisure movements. Moreover, such knowledge assumes that national characteristics emanate from a particular “Americanness” or “Canadianness” that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence. The contemplation of this nonwhite presence is central to any understanding of our wilderness understanding and should not be permitted to hover at the margins.

Another factor for race as a marginal actor within wilderness is the pattern of thinking about racialism in terms of its consequences on the victim—of always defining it asymmetrically from the perspective of its impact on the object of racist policy and attitudes. Very little time or energy is directed toward the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it. There is no escape from racially inflected language. There are ethical problems with omission as well as commission and race receives a kind of willful critical blindness from whitestream scholarship and practice in wilderness and “wilderness experience.”

Morrison (1992) then intersects race, freedom and slavery which is relevant to the concept of freedom inherent within concepts of “wilderness experience” and autonomous selves.

The concept of freedom developed in North America was described as “beginning anew,” exploring unbridled nature and creating new lives; this freedom also brought a fear of boundarylessness, fear of the absences of civilization and the terror of human freedom. The fear and terror, within North American literature, scholarship and psyche, becomes intimately connected to people who are black. “The ways in which artists—and the society that bred them—transferred internal conflicts to a “blank darkness,” to conveniently bound and violently silence black bodies, is a major theme in American literature...The concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom—if it did not in fact create it—like slavery” (Morrison, 1992). Cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation’s literature, and that what seemed to be on the “mind” of the literature in North America was the self-conscious but highly problematic construction of the North American as a new white man (Roosevelt, 1909). Even when texts are not “about” Africa, African-Americans, Black Canadians, Native Americans or First Nations, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation. An analysis of the literature, scholarship and practice surrounding wilderness and “wilderness experience” would make visible the harm and benefit of the development of wilderness.

We cannot forestall the loss of strict definitions or move to diverse narratives, and we cannot do much better than strive for some reciprocity among incommensurable ideas and points of view (Greene, 1993). Whether it is Welch’s (1990) “material interaction,” Arendt’s (1997) “public arena,” Orlie’s (1997) “living ethically and acting politically,” or Dewey’s (Boydston, 196-1991) “democratic processes,” *the emphasis is on certain ways of interacting with others in the world, certain kinds of communities and certain kinds of communication. The moral agent is conceived as a participator in a network of relations in situations* (Pappas, 1998).

However, participating or working materially with others, especially those with alternative and challenging positions, does not guarantee the emergence of critical knowledge. Critical knowledge from a perspective grounded in Euro-North American rationality develops only with the struggle to be accountable for both the harm and good of our actions, to address mechanisms of oppression and exclusion and to resist or consciously choose social and cultural norms. It is the arduous and creative process of remembering, reprocessing and reinterpreting lived experience in a collective, democratic context—and not the mere “substitution of one interpretation for another”—that transforms experience, enabling one to claim subjecthood and to identify the material consequences of decisions imbued with power, to claim ethical purchase, and to support oppositional struggles (Stone-Mediatore, 1998). For instance, stories of wilderness experiences and protection need to include more attention to how African-Americans have been harmed by the designation of wilderness areas, how the definitions of self and wilderness experience undermine Indigenous ways of knowing and interacting with natural areas, or how nature can be defined to include humans and their artifices.

In this confluence, wilderness and “wilderness experiences” are viewed as resources for confronting and re-narrating the complex forces that constitute the experiences, individuals, groups, material consequences and cultural structures. The tools of analysis require that historical

accounts and scholarship remember and rewrite specific lived experiences, including particular painful experiences of cultural confusion throughout academic, institutional, political, literary and cultural interactions. The process requires the courage to confront the forces weighing choices and actions, and the initiative to contribute to forces of change, resistance, and subversion. As “wilderness experiences” are rewritten as part of a common understanding across diversity, they begin to contribute to the collective memory that honors, respects and protects wilderness, sustains political communities, highlights multiple themes or limit experiences, brings into relief paradoxical forces, and allows us to navigate the confluences (Stone-Mediatore, 1998).

## Final Remarks for Entering Confluences

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The insights from scholars in the currents of postmodernism and seldom heard perspectives open space for viewing dominant discourses related to “wilderness experiences” from various and multiple perspectives. These commentaries highlight the partiality of the metanarrative, the material consequences from the inherent power of dominant discourses, and the alternative strategies for beginning anew. A notion of “wilderness experiences” inspired by Mohanty (1991) facilitates oppositional discourses and consists of tensions among experience, language and situational knowledges. These tensions are endured subjectively as contradictions within “wilderness experiences.” Stories that reckon with and publicize contradictory, hitherto muted aspects of “wilderness experiences” are “between past and future,” enable us to envision and work toward alternative futures. As an individual committed to human rights, I am acutely aware that I have never shared a wilderness experience with someone of a non-Euro-North American heritage. I practice minimum impact camping in the wilderness but am part of the one-third of the population that uses two-thirds of the world’s resources.

Returning to the concepts inherent in the original Greek and Roman Cynics, cynicism is related to the pursuit of happiness. The cynics argued that genuine happiness must involve critical self-knowledge, virtuous action and a deep mistrust of external goods like wealth, reputation and social convention. As Kingwell (1998) states:

They were sharply critical of ignorance, however, blissful, and favored the literary genres of diatribe and polemic to shock their listeners into an awareness of society’s many somnambulant features. Radical, satirical and iconoclastic, the Cynics believed that lasting satisfaction was to be found only in overcoming the cheap temptations of the cultural marketplace and in calling society to moral account. They were prickly, yes, but not dismissive. They advocated self-mastery and reform, not destruction or hopelessness. They were happy.

Looking more closely at wilderness and “wilderness experience” grand narratives, engaging in feminist and critical commentaries, embracing racial analyses or applying critiques from the margins will lead to explicating invisible and complex forces with material consequences. Changing the frames of reference to something more eclectic, redefining



the entities we identify as subject and devising methods of reasoning moves us toward enhanced understandings about wilderness experiences. Connecting knowledge with power, Aboriginal peoples, African-Americans and Black Canadians, and many other voices on the margins have sketched the responsibilities attached to knowledge and power. Honoring this insight, we may begin to understand how our actions will have repercussions far beyond the merely psychological, personal or social, because everything may be infused with the sacred. Responsibility of power requires living differently from others in our community, and for people who place great value in a homogeneous community, this demand can make life difficult, if not painful (Allen, 1999). The cynic posits that it is in the self-mastery and reform that allows happiness to bloom.

Wisdom arises from “wilderness experiences” and thoughtful reflection when we consciously blend experience, knowledge, critique, choice, and understanding. Allen (1999) sees knowledge, understanding, and choice as dependent on two characteristics: autonomy and honesty. Autonomy and honesty depend on vulnerability, on fragility.

If the metanarrative of wilderness and “wilderness experiences” is problematized and set adrift among other currents, what is the point of narratives? Because they’re ours. But what if such an answer becomes less and less convincing.

Pondering risk-taking, he says that you cannot change humanity, you can only know it. “Pride makes us long for a solution to things—a solution, a purpose, a final cause; but the better telescopes become, the more stars appear. You cannot change humanity; you can only know it (Barnes, 1985).

This, for me, is a postmodern ending, articulated by someone whose narrative I somehow achieve as meaningful against my own lived life and through reading, and participating, is forever incomplete. I am saddened with the changes and loss of earlier traditions and narratives, for they have given much meaning to my personal “wilderness experiences.” On the other hand, I am also saddened with the loss of the voices of Native Americans, First Nations Peoples or African-Americans, among others who contributed to my privilege related to wilderness, and I am committed to highlighting their visibility in my scholarship, classrooms and political participation. The life, health and survival of the flora, fauna and land now requires moving into the confluences and leaning into the currents. How compelling are the stories of people and groups who take responsibility for all of the values they bring to their stories and actions. How stunning is the achievement of those who have searched for and mined a shareable language for the words (Morrison, 1992). I make this a tale of a search for meaning while navigating powerful confluences, trying—in a flow without eddies—to keep moving, to keep asking, to keep trying to create an identity, to resisting thoughtlessness, and to renewing wilderness experiences.

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