

Taking a Hike and Hucking the Stout: The Troublesome Legacy of the Sublime in Outdoor Recreation

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Abstract

As Henry Thoreau noted in the 1850s, the simple act of walking can be loaded with political and spiritual meaning. Today, taking a hike as an act of engaging in outdoor recreation is equally non-trivial, and therefore subject of the following analysis. As this paper argues, outdoors recreation is still influenced by the legacy of the Sublime and its construction of wilderness. This troublesome legacy means that the cultural self-representation of outdoor sports – and the practice itself – lays claim to the environment in ways that are socially and sometimes even ethnically exclusive.

This essay uses William Cronon's critique of the cultural constructedness of wilderness as a point of departure to see how Western notions of sublime nature have an impact on spatial practice. The elevation of specific parts of the environment into the category of wilderness prescribes certain uses and meanings as nature is made into an antidote against the ills of industrial civilization, and a place where the alienated individual can return to a more authentic self. This view then has become a troublesome legacy, informing the cultural self-representation of those uses of "wilderness" that are known as outdoor recreation.

In its cultural production, outdoors recreation constructs "healthy" and "athletic" bodies exercising in natural settings and finding refuge from the everyday alienation of postmodern society. Yet these bodies are conspicuously white, and the obligatory equipment and fashion expensive. Outdoor recreation is a privileged assertion of leisure, often denoting an urban, affluent, and white, background of the practitioner. These practitioners then lay exclusive claim on the landscapes they use.

As trivial as taking a hike or any other form of outdoors recreation may thus seem, they put a cultural legacy into practice that is anything but trivial.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, sublime, William Cronon, wilderness, outdoor recreation.

Introduction

A man gazes from an elevated vantage point over the landscape, is then shown hiking through several spectacular natural settings such as along a cliff face, on a mountain heath, in a sudden blizzard, and encountering a reindeer in an alpine valley, and then leaves the image's frame on a mountain plateau. Meanwhile, a voice addresses the audience:

To all high potentials and key performers, global players and opinion leaders, all deep divers and innovation drivers, to all indoor steppers and power nappers, all urban gardeners and facebook farmers, all treadmill runners and protein-drink drinkers, all insiders and upgraders, to all you miles millionaires: go on without me (Schöffel 2012).¹

Taglined "Ich bin raus," which can be loosely translated as "I'm off" or "I'm out," this TV spot and the ensuing ad campaign commissioned by German outdoor manufacturer Schöffel uses a simple dichotomy, with terms of contemporary global business and high technology juxtaposed against images of nature, a wanderer above the clouds, and his gear. Nature, which in the advertisement shows no signs of recent human activity or habitation, is thus set up as the place to get away from the signifiers of postmodern globalized society that the commercial's voice-over mentions. As I will argue in this essay, this dichotomy of nature versus society not only predates modernity, but is a cultural legacy that can be traced back to the framing of nature through the aesthetic of the sublime, which set up specific ways of seeing and dealing with the environment. These are still at work, having not only inscribed themselves into the representation of landscapes but also in way that outdoor recreation prescribes specific ways of using these landscapes, whether it be in hiking or kayaking.

This essay also argues that the sublime's legacy in outdoor recreation manifests itself in ways that may seem far-fetched at first. In a photo series that, among other pictures, features herself hiking in England's Lake District, Black British artist Ingrid Pollard has explored the way that the landscapes of hiking are still landscapes of exclusion. Pollard experiences gazing over the hills and resting on a small stone wall in a way radically different from the anonymous man in the Schöffel commercial: In her photography project *Pastoral Interlude*, she hikes in the Lake District, "where [she] wandered lonely as a Black face in a sea of white." (Pollard 1988). In her attempt to deconstruct landscapes of British identity, she observes in the text under her photograph that as a black woman "a visit to the countryside is always accompanied by a feeling of unease, dread" (Pollard 1988). Though her work does not provide definitive answers, her landscape photographs deconstruct iconic natural landscapes in Great Britain as places that are inscribed with racial histories and assigned spaces for different ethnicities; her art thus begs the question if nature is still being constructed as a refuge for 'whiteness' (cf. Young 1995, Mitchell 2000: 259-61).

Pollard's playful inversion of the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" explicitly points to one of the sources of such inscriptions and their effects. Her work *Wordsworth's Heritage*, in which she created a postcard that shows black hikers in the Lake District, then further questions Romantic landscape constructions and their implicit exclusion of groups of people. What this work also does, however, is point out that the practice of outdoor recreation and its representation are strongly intertwined, and cannot be cleanly separated. Ingrid Pollard's art thus implicitly shares an assumption that is at the very basis of this essay: cultural representations of nature are "key engines" of very concrete ways of being in the outdoors (cf. Cronon 1996b: 48-49).

It may still seem rather far-fetched to claim that a similar cultural legacy is at work in a German outdoor manufacturer's advertisement and in a British photographer's exploration of landscapes of national and ethnic identity. Yet this is precisely the aim of this paper: to claim that German manufacturer Schöffel's *Ich bin raus* campaign, Ingrid Pollard's art, and several examples that will follow draw or comment on a cultural legacy that goes back to the Enlightenment and Romanticism. As I will argue below, the sublime and its construction of nature still reverberate through representations of landscape that in turn are key engines of spatial practice and implicit exclusions in the field of outdoor recreation. The wanderer above the clouds advertising gear – Schöffel is one of many manufacturers using this visual strategy – and the black women experiencing unease in the Lake District are not directly connected to each other; they both, however, deal with the way that outdoor recreation and its spaces are constructed through a gaze and a spatial logic that is a result of the Enlightenment's conceptualization of the sublime.

The following paper will thus – using William Cronon's seminal essay on "The Trouble with Wilderness" as a point of departure – first outline the sublime's spatial logic and its construction of nature as wilderness.² After giving a brief historical sketch of the representation of early outdoor recreation, and of the development of a culture of the outdoors, the discussion will then turn to the contemporary spatial logic of outdoor or wilderness recreation, and its paradox of the commodification of the escape from consumer society. A closer look at the spatial logic of whitewater kayaking will then provide a specific example that shows the salient features of the legacy of the sublime at work, from kayaking's representational aesthetics to its spatial claims and the question of the sport's 'whiteness.' This will not – nor could it – be the single answer to explain the phenomena outlined above, but, hopefully, add to an understanding of the cultural factors that inform practices as seemingly trivial as walking through the woods or putting a boat onto whitewater.

Sublime Wilderness

The sublime's conceptualization as both an aesthetic and epistemological category was the work of Enlightenment philosophers Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. Though their development of the category goes far beyond the scope of this paper, one key aspect of their work was to conceive of nature as the site where the individual could experience an overwhelming sense of transcendence. It is through this understanding that they contributed to a gaze at nature that in Romanticism and then the early conservation and later environmental protection movement would set up still effective categories of nature and codes of experiencing it. As William Cronon has argued, these categories create troublesome ways of thinking about, and dealing with, nature. Several of the salient features of Burke and Kant's notions about the individual in nature thus have become problematic features of landscaping processes.

One way of framing the sublime is to think of it as the "moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated" (Shaw 2006: 3). In this sense, it is an epistemological category that speaks to the impossibility of representation, and is thus a rather popular concept in postmodern theory (cf. Shaw 2006: 5-7, Economides 2005). More important for the purpose of this paper, however, is Immanuel Kant's notion of where to encounter the sensation that Burke had described as that of the absolutely overwhelmed individual (cf. Ferguson 1992: 8-9) that experiences a "delightful horror," as Burke wrote in *A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Burke 1756: 148). This "realm of estrangement, of power seen as greater than our own" (Ferguson 1992: 44), could, according to Kant, be best encountered in natural spaces that were awe-inspiring and even threatening to the extent of confronting the self with a sense of its own mortality (cf. Kant 1790: §28, Ferguson 1992: 23, Hitt 1999: 605-607, Shaw 2006: 10). The sublime is, however, not only an experience in nature, but also a way of experiencing nature. To put it in other words, the sublime framed by both Burke and Kant as an absolutely individual experience (cf. Ferguson 1992: 3) can structure the way those looking for it will experience the natural environment. The sublime is therefore also a gaze, a way the individual seeking an experience of transcendence may transform a 'merely' beautiful sight into something of a different register, attaining a "visionary grasp of infinity" (Byerly 1996: 53). Since the sublime is a way of seeing, and not a quality necessarily inherent in the object of the gaze (cf. Ferguson 1992: 39) the visitor to a spectacular natural setting may thus put the site of the visit into a fundamentally different category than its everyday inhabitant. The quotidian can at best be beautiful, and a sublime experience is thus the privilege of the outsider (cf. Ferguson 1992: 45-47).

Given these salient features, a wanderer's search for the sublime already creates a set of spatial demands following a logic of how this space is ideally set up,

what it contains, and what should be absent for the ideal experience to take place. Not only is the ideal visitor alone, but also not forced to acknowledge that the mountain or waterfall – to use prototypical sites of the sublime gaze as examples (cf. Cronon 1996a: 10, Hitt 1999: 605-607, Sayre 2001: 142-143) – may be part of somebody else’s everyday landscape of living in a place. By categorical necessity new or unusual, such a site can only be encountered while wandering or traveling, thus being, by definition, a space of leisure. Additionally, the Kantian notion of the existential threat that the sublime signifies allows the recurring visitor to find that experience time and again by changing his or her own approach to the site. In a sense, Immanuel Kant thus already prefigured the contemporary extreme outdoors athletes who continuously seek new ways of increasing the difficulty, and thus, risk, of engaging with the natural features that their sports use.

The sublime and its expression in Romanticism by writers such as Wordsworth in Britain and later Henry David Thoreau in the U.S. then became one of the key engines in Western societies’ remaking of the idea of wilderness. As William Cronon argued in his 1996 essay on “The Trouble with Wilderness,” it was the sublime and – in the case of the U.S., the frontier – through which Westerners in the 19th and 20th century constructed “wilderness in their own image freighted with moral values and cultural symbols that it carries to this day” (Cronon 1996a: 10).³ Cronon’s thesis is that following the Enlightenment and industrialization, and during the second half of the twentieth century, a cultural reframing of nature initiated new ways of dealing with it. Wilderness, newly imbued with the value of being sublime, was thus made subject to spatial claims by privileged urbanites who remade it into a refuge from what they constructed as the ills of modern civilization.

This change hinged on new concepts, provided by the sublime and Romanticism, and a new spatial reality, as created through industrialization. As Cronon argues, and numerous ecocritics and environmental historians have shown in case studies, the nineteenth century marked a convergence of a reframing of wilderness from wasteland to something sacred, and of urbanites’ desire to find or create spaces uncontaminated by the effects of early modernity (cf. Byerly 1996, Spence 1996, Kerbs & Reulecke 1998, DeLuca & Demo 2001, Sayre 2001, Merchant 2003, Coates 2005, West & Igoe & Brockington 2006, and Young 2010). Yet in contrast to the pastoral longings of elites in earlier centuries, and clearly influenced by the sublime’s privileging of an individual experience of awe, these spaces were now ideally ‘clean’ in the sense of being ‘untouched,’ that is, wild. Thus, spaces defined as sublime were among the first to be legally protected as national parks in the U.S., and quickly became elite tourist destinations reserved for leisure and exempt from all other uses (cf. Cronon 1996a: 14-15).

The utter and complete constructedness of wilderness is evident, as pristine nature created by human fiat is in itself a contradiction, especially since the creation of protected wilderness often resulted in the dislocation of its former inhabitants

(cf. Spence 1996, West & Igoe & Brockington 2006). In the increased access to this form of nature, the sublime purity of the experience became weakened, with the awe-ful in nature giving way to a somewhat more benevolent sense of sacrality as the cultural frame for wilderness spaces (cf. Cronon 1996a: 12). Still, the legacy of the sublime gaze that structures expectations and representations had become entrenched not only in the cultural view on wilderness, but in physical reality. National parks and other areas labeled as wilderness gave material form to an Enlightenment idea, and allowed for the emergence of a form of leisure that became today's wilderness- or outdoor recreation with its attendant spatial logic.⁴

For the following discussion of outdoor recreation, several salient features of this spatial logic bear repeating. Nature – reframed as wilderness – becomes by definition a sphere apart from the individual's daily existence. It is the destination of a flight from the quotidian, and carries the promise of a more authentic experience in contrast to the alienation effected by contemporary civilization. As it claims to offer the chance of leaving the modern world behind, it therefore by necessity excludes those things it considers modernity's symptoms, as evidenced in Schöfel's *Ich bin raus* campaign. In this promise, however, it is a highly privileged activity, and begs the question asked by Cronon: “[W]hy [...] is the ‘wilderness experience’ so often conceived as a form of recreation best enjoyed by those whose class privileges give them the time and resources to leave their jobs behind and ‘get away from it all’?” (1996a: 21). Finally, a sense of risk or danger is welcome, even if the search for the sublime has been diluted in its intensity. The outdoor recreation that is heir to the sublime and the redefinition of wilderness is not by necessity – though examples abound – an exercise in search of reminders of one's mortality, but links bodily risk, or at least, exertion, to authenticity as an antidote against the modern or postmodern condition.

As repeatedly mentioned above, these desires are projected onto a space that itself is a construction. The transformative power of the sublime gaze is such that it can and will ignore the absolute unnaturalness of the nature it terms wilderness. It is a perfect example of what Don Mitchell defines as landscape, which for him

is best seen as both a work (it is the product of human labor and thus encapsulates the dreams, desires, and all the injustices of the people and social systems that make it) and as something that does work (it acts as a social agent in the further development of a place)” (Mitchell 2000: 94).

A key aspect of this understanding of landscape is that it is constantly naturalized, made to seem, at best, like an accidental accretion of traces of its history and human activity. The history of changes of, and conflicts over, its meaning, is, at worst, erased. Even if one accepts the existence of such a thing as an ontological wilderness, it matters little for the issue at hand, as any natural setting that is either spectacular or seemingly wild enough can be subject to the sublime gaze. Any reminder of sublime wilderness' constructedness challenges the authenticity

sought by the outdoor recreationist, and therefore either is ignored or erased and forgotten, or seen as a threat to the purity of the environment.

As discussions within ecocriticism, and especially the reactions to Cronon's essay have shown, it seems necessary at this point to add a disclaimer. It is not the aim of this essay to dispute that certain experiences can be made in nature that are difficult to find elsewhere, nor do I aim to question the existence of a quality of these experiences that goes beyond beauty and includes an element of being awestruck.⁵ The question of how much wilderness can be a useful category is more difficult to answer, as not all natural spaces are equally remote or subject to human influence. Yet it seems overly strained to uphold the notion of utterly untouched and pristine nature in a time when anthropogenic climate change impacts every spot on the planet, and satellite communications have, with a small number of exceptions, made isolation and remoteness matters of financial and technological means. Accordingly, in the usage that follows wilderness always refers to the cultural construct, no matter how much 'wildness' may be a useful category for looking at nature. This is not to say that environmental protection or conservation are pointless acts, but that the categories environmentalism works with are still in need of constructive criticism and deconstruction, even in 2013 (cf. Cronon 1996b; Proctor 1998).

Taking a Hike: Paradoxical Practice

Over the course of the twentieth century, outdoors recreation came in a multitude of forms. Their approaches to regaining a lost authenticity, to criticizing contemporary civilization, and to encountering the sublime in nature sometimes radically differed, but maintained a construction of nature and wilderness that never shed its indebtedness to the Enlightenment. This essay will not be able to address them in their full variety ranging from woodcraft (cf. Turner 2002), or nudism (cf. Shaffer 2008), to the reform movements of Wilhemine Germany, which featured similar approaches to escaping what they perceived as the ills of industrial society (cf. Kerbs & Reulecke 1998).⁶ What all those practices shared was a spatial logic that saw nature as fundamentally apart from modern civilization and as an antidote to the ills of modernity; in other words, they put the human body in nature because they saw a need to regain a state of authenticity and purity they felt had been lost in urban industrial civilization, and in doing so, created ideas of nature than they then imposed on the real environment.

Ultimately, however, it was hiking, the mode of outdoor recreation already advocated by Wordsworth and Thoreau, which would become the most influential way through which urbanites sought to escape from the alienation of modern life and experience the sublime. Yet hiking would soon create a paradoxical quality of its own, as the spatial demands of the sublime clashed with the popularity of trying to have that experience. Additionally, the logic of exclusion already seen in

Wordsworth remained, and has, at least in the experience of some, remained a troublesome legacy of the sublime in outdoor recreation. The following section will thus briefly sketch aspects of the historical development of hiking and its practice, and give an example of the culture's own diagnosis of its paradoxes, before it addresses the issue raised by Ingrid Pollard's art.

With Romanticism, and in the U.S. in the decades after the Civil War, Western culture began to embrace the outdoors as a space of recreation and escape from the cities and the ills – including ethnically and socially others – associated with them (cf. Spence 1990; Boyer et al. 1996: 724-26; Kay & Whyte 2000; Young 2010: 122). Technological advances that made getting to the sites of outdoor recreation easier brought more mass appeal to such activities before and especially after World War One, and with it, more spatial conflicts (cf. Klinge 2007: 161-170), which increased with rising living standards and new modes of experiencing nature through hiking (cf. Mittlefehldt 2010). Especially in North America, the clash between the reality of hiking's mass popularity and the supposedly pristine character of outdoor spaces necessitated new modes of engaging in outdoor recreation. The solution that first emerged there was – given the spatial logic of the sublime and its privileging of solitude, surprisingly – not a system of privilege that allowed some hikers in on basis of merit or knowledge, but the ethic of 'Leave No Trace' (cf. Turner 2002: 469-73). Commonly abbreviated as LNT, it aims to change the environment as little as possible, and instead requires the hiker to bring the requisite gear that allows them to prepare food or have shelter. LNT has since become the predominant ethic of most kinds of outdoor recreation worldwide, and a method that allows a relatively higher number of visitors to have smaller environmental impact. It also, significantly, allows maintaining illusions of solitude and purity in nature, thus defusing the paradoxical situation created by the popularity of outdoor recreation. At the same time, however, it creates yet another challenge to the idea of escaping from modernity, as the increased need for gear has brought the consumer culture that nature is supposed to be a refuge from back into the sanctuary (cf. Young 2010).

With the feeling of authenticity so desired by outdoor recreationists under assault from so many sides, codes of behavior and possessing the right gear have become a way to assert wilderness as indeed wild and uncontaminated. As Samantha Senda-Cook's study of the rhetoric of outdoors practice shows, "specific outdoor recreation practices perpetuate the construction of authentic outdoor recreation experiences for park visitors. And when people or situations violate such practices, park visitors understand that as experiential degradation" (Senda-Cook 2012: 130). Given the high expectations visitors bring to bear onto those sites, they thus bring notions of appropriate behavior – staying on trails, leaving no trace, displaying sufficient reverence –and outfitting. The right shoes thus mark the insider who has acquired the necessary knowledge and material to behave correctly and show the necessary respect in the face of potentially dangerous nature.

Other visitors not following these rules serve as a reminder that wilderness might not be that wild and that the gear that marks the insider is not needed, for the trails on which insider and outsider meet are not a sanctuary, but an extension of the very civilization they claim to be an escape from (cf. Senda-Cook 2012: 140-42, 145-46).

Jon Krakauer, the most prominent contemporary writer of the outdoors, in 1999 wrote an article for *Time Magazine* in which he showed an awareness of this paradoxical character of outdoor recreation. Though having an image of wilderness that resides fully within the sublime tradition, he clearly sees how nature can hardly remain untouched, refuge for solitude seekers, and wild all at the same time. When Krakauer writes about wilderness and the value of seeking out the most remote places, the voices of his literary predecessors are strongly present, as for example in this excerpt from his introductory paragraphs, in which he starts by describing a mountaineering expedition in Antarctica: “My back hurt, and I had lost all feeling in my toes. But as my eyes wandered across the frozen vastness of Queen Maud Land, a sense of profound contentment radiated from somewhere beneath my solar plexus” (Krakauer 1999). The rhetoric of the sublime, laced with its critique of civilization is also on full display in his closing remarks, which seem both aware of the constructedness of wilderness, yet also essentializing the value he sees in it:

Empty places have long served as a repository for a host of complicated yearnings and desires. As an antidote to the alienation and pervasive softness that plague modern society, there is no substitute for a trip to an untrammelled patch of backcountry, with its attendant wonders, privation and physical trials. (Krakauer 1999)

Yet, in Krakauer’s view, this antidote has become commodified, and the large numbers of recreationists mobilized by the outdoors industry – of which Krakauer himself has become part through his books – are threatening the very spaces they would seek to protect. Any limitations imposed on access to wilderness, however, would mean management, which goes against the idea of wildness, resulting in what Krakauer calls “a toothless simulacrum” of wilderness.

While Krakauer, as someone who has ascended Mount Everest and more technically challenging peaks, speaks from a position at the extreme end of outdoor culture, his sentiments are mirrored by casual recreationist James Somers. Writing for *Outside Magazine*, the publication that first ran the Jon Krakauer article that would become *Into the Wild*, Somers represents the broad mass of solitude seekers who encounter wilderness with expectations determined by cultural representations of it. And indeed, Somers intersperses his musings on the “Paradox of Going Outside” with Thoreau quotes, and speaks of the need to at least sometimes escape his postmodern urban existence as a web developer. Yet the gear fetishism of outdoors culture comes “at the worst possible moment: right when you’ve become sufficiently fed up with the local civilizing forces to grope for wildness, there you are at a store again, playing customer again” (Somers 2012). Even when

he finds himself in Glacier National Park, Somers is confronted with the nigh impossibility of finding the authenticity and sublime experience that he has come to expect. Though perceiving the setting he hikes in as stunningly beautiful, he ends up disappointed at the lack of a transcendental experience that he had been culturally primed for. For Somers, the commodification of the sublime has indeed wrecked the promise, making him state:

That's the paradox. In a culture pervaded by artifice, by self-awareness and advertising, the grand gesture away from it all – “Fuck it, I'm going into the wild” – is just another trope. We've seen that movie. In fact it was called *Into the Wild* and for the parties involved it was sort of a pathetic catastrophe. (Somers 2012)

The condition both Somers and Krakauer write about thus reflects the increasing effort needed to not see the constructedness of sublime wilderness. They do not call it the legacy of the sublime, but their analyses as outdoor recreationists speak to the same desires that were first expressed by Enlightenment philosophy, popularized by poets and writers, and made mainstream in the twentieth century. Yet these desires threaten to undo the very image of nature at their core, forcing practitioners of outdoor recreation to constantly negotiate between wilderness as sublime refuge and nature as a playground of commodified leisure culture.

The valuing of wilderness as a space of escape also is where the troublesome legacy that Ingrid Pollard pointed out in her art comes to the surface. The impulse to leave urban spaces for an ostensibly purer nature, and the logic of exclusion built into the idea of sublime experience, both of which can already be found in Wordsworth's poetry, were a major force in the hiking culture that emerged in the late 19th century and reverberate to this day. Ethnic exclusion was an implicit desire of those urbanites seeking solace in nature, and factual part of the establishment of protected wilderness. Though the ills of modernity as diagnosed by contemporary culture may have changed from ethnically different masses in the cities to the alienation of the postmodern economy, the examples below show that the effects still reverberate through hiking culture.⁷

Hucking Some Stout: The Case of Whitewater Kayaking

The paradox of mass culture and commodification in the sacred space of nature is of course not limited to hiking, but has its repercussions in any form of outdoor recreation that seeks to offer an intense experience of nature. The analysis will therefore now turn to one further specific outdoor sport, whitewater kayaking, which so far has not been as exhaustively discussed in scholarly literature as hiking has.⁸ Though the sublime's aim of individually experiencing danger in nature is easily achieved in an unstable one-person craft on whitewater, kayakers have to deal with spatial paradoxes and problematic cultural legacies that are very similar to those of hikers. Whitewater kayaking is thus instructive as it shows that the cultural legacies discussed above reverberate even in activities that Burke and

Kant, or Wordsworth and Thoreau could barely have conceived of. In the following discussion of kayaking's self-representation, its sacralization of nature, its spatial logic, and the question of ethnicity, the reach of the sublime's cultural legacy shows clearly; the impact of ideas on the spatial practice of recreationists thus can be argued to be at work in any form of recreation that draws on a conceptualization of nature debated by Burke and Kant more than two centuries ago.

A brief look at whitewater kayaking's representation in writing indeed shows that the sport holds up the same image of wilderness and notions of purity that have been discussed above. *The Last River: The Tragic Race for Shangri-la* – an account of a fatal whitewater expedition to the Yarlung Tsangpo, once thought to be the mythical Shangri-la valley, and at the time one of the last major rivers unexplored by Westerners – is a clear example of writing sublime wilderness. In the book, author Todd Balf repeatedly employs the rhetoric and logic of the sublime, seeing in nature the antidote to the ills of modern civilization, and bemoaning the fact that commercial interests have entered outdoor sports. Describing the recent divorce and business problems of one of the expedition's participants, Balf writes: "If there ever was a good time for a wilderness experience, as Tom euphemistically termed his death-cheating epics, now seemed the time" (Balf 2000: 20). This notion of escaping the mundane and experiencing transcendence in nature pervades the book, with the author writing about "the questing soul [that] needs nourishment in places where the human feels speck-sized" (150). Yet Balf sees the purity of the endeavor threatened by the commercial aspects of an expedition that, sponsored by National Geographic, competes with others for being the first to successfully navigate or otherwise explore the Yarlung Tsangpo Gorge. For Balf, even Shangri-la does not offer sanctuary anymore, as sponsor money and the commercialization of sports in general undermine the "idealistic, vigorously anti-commercial ethic" (61) he sees as central to whitewater kayaking's spiritual value.

Today's self-representation of kayaking, however, would not be possible without advanced technology, and sponsorships play an important role in the ongoing professionalization of kayakers' self-produced videos. The increased affordability of small waterproof cameras has made online videos a highly popular way through which kayakers promote their sports and compete for online audiences and potential sponsors. In fact, filming and editing one's activities – that is, producing cultural representations – has become an integral part of the sport. This form of self-representation has also created global codes and signs within the culture, so that German paddlers on Slovenian rivers will 'throw the brown claw,' a hand sign popularized by a North American group of whitewater kayakers. How much this culture of online videos has in fact changed the behavior and expectations of younger kayakers is a matter of debate in online forums and discussions between paddlers; the rhetoric and spatial logic of these videos is, however, a direct successor of earlier articulations of the sublime.

Rush Sturges' 2010 video of Tyler Bradt's world record in kayaking down Palouse Falls in the U.S. state of Washington, for example, employs a sublime gaze: it emphasizes the sheer size of the waterfall using slow motion, panoramic shots, and a bombastic score. Indeed, 'hucking the stout' – kayaking down waterfalls – has, together with representations of 'carnage' – paddlers in potentially or actually dangerous situations – become the most popular subject of kayaking videos. The falls are often filmed from several angles, including the helmet-camera perspective of kayakers and that of cameras mounted to the stern of the boat. Increasing effort is made by the producers of those videos to show waterfalls from a perspective that emphasizes their sheer size and the force of the water. Other central aspects of the sport are given much less emphasis, and though paddlers often find it necessary to portage their boats around natural obstacles or un-runnable waterfalls, this process is fully absent from online videos, even in the case of a film specifically concerned with safety on a multi-day whitewater trip (cf. 7 Finger Media 2012). Even those videos not focusing on the force of nature and the visual qualities of falling water construct nature as a transcendent experience, depicting it as a sanctuary from the cares of modern civilization (cf. The Banks Mag 2010).

The notion of whitewater rivers as sanctuary and cathedrals of nature is also featured in a video by kayak film producers Bomb Flow TV. With videos that feature extreme kayaking on rivers worldwide, Bomb Flow's visual aesthetics focus on the individual paddlers and their adrenaline-fueled experience of jumping waterfalls. At first sight, their videos lack the aspect of reverent fear in the face of the sublime that other kayaking videos try to elicit. *Bomb Flow TV Episode 9 "Go to CHURCH"*, however, starts with the following narration: "A wise man once said, 'not all churches have roofs.' In this episode, watch as the Bomb Flow crew finds their own meaning of 'church' amidst huge waterfalls and flooded rivers in the mighty Pacific Northwest" (Bomb Flow TV 2012), and follows with the spiritual song *Down in the River to Pray* as soundtrack. Though the episode then treats the theme of nature as church as a humorous framing device, it expresses a spiritual undercurrent and the pervasive sacralization of nature in whitewater kayaking culture. As religion studies scholar and kayaker Whitney Sanford has found, language borrowed from religion is widespread in whitewater literature and terminology – since Sanford's essay has been published, boat manufacturer Jackson Kayaks has produced whitewater boats named "Zen" and "Karma" – speaking to the value the sport puts on a "nexus of interconnected themes, including intimate connections with immensity or perceiving something greater than the self, mindfulness, and finally, risk and fear" (Sanford 2007: 881). While Sanford attributes the way paddlers use a spiritual framework to qualities inherent in the sport's demands on mind and body, the relevance for this paper lies in the cultural tradition that shares the same notion of the sacrality of nature. Sanford's statement that "[t]he river and its consequences embody the terrifying aspects of the divine" (884) is thus not only a theological insight, but a clear expression of

the sublime as an interpretive template for experiencing nature. Also, in keeping with a cultural dynamic that has been repeatedly observed above, this sacralization of nature results in a strong ethic of wilderness conservation (cf. Sanford 2007: 878).

Similar to hikers, whitewater boaters have a strong interest in maintaining the ostensible ‘wildness’ – and water quality – of the rivers and creeks they use. Kayaking video makers Five2Nine, for example, have created a series of videos “which uses white water kayaking as a means to educate a broader audience about the risks threatening the world’s rivers and to help highlight the intrinsic value of preserving rivers in their natural state” (Five2Nine 2011). As much as their video about Québec rivers threatened by dam-building makes a substantial part of its argument for environmentalist reasons, the video’s showcasing of the province’s waterfalls, rapids, and massive standing river waves, and the interviews with representatives of paddling associations betray a spatial logic of privileged use.⁹ However sacred, wilderness also is made into a leisure space through outdoor recreation, to the detriment of other potential uses. Also, kayaking, even when adhering to the principles of Leave No Trace, does have an environmental impact – the need for motor vehicles in shuttling boats and their riders has given rise to the joking remark that whitewater paddling is half a motorsport – especially if the sport becomes increasingly popular.

Indeed, the paradox bemoaned by Jon Krakauer – too many recreationists endangering the very thing they seek – can be seen at work on rivers, too. In an essay titled “Style,” kayaker Louis Geltman ponders the case of a YouTube video that engendered long and vicious discussions on one of the eastern U.S.’ most important whitewater discussion boards. The problem identified by Geltman – boaters entering stretches of water that they are not skilled enough to safely run – is on one hand perceived as a safety issue, as whitewater culture requires paddlers to rescue each other when problems occur. Yet on the other hand, Geltman also sees the problem of increased numbers of boaters in general, and considers hypothetical solutions to the question of access, ultimately calling for more attention to matters of ‘style’ on the river, that is boaters’ ability to run clean lines across and down rivers and thus proving their skills. Matters of safety on whitewater notwithstanding, the discussion brings to mind the challenge to authenticity that outdoor recreationists perceive when encountering those they consider insufficiently skilled or equipped, and thus wrongly sharing or even taking away their space (cf. Senda-Cook 2012). It speaks to the importance of sublime wilderness and its associated value of encountering risk and a more authentic experience that the comparatively safer option of boating on artificial whitewater courses is at best considered a matter of pragmatism, if not frowned upon for being inauthentic and against what most paddlers consider the value of engaging in outdoors recreation (cf. Igleman 2008: 30).

Interestingly, artificial whitewater courses are suggested as a solution to a different issue that is discussed in outdoor recreation. In “The Color of Whitewater,” Jack Igleman, conflating skin-color and geographical location, thus argues that the underrepresentation of African Americans may be due to the spatial separation of wild rivers and the inner cities of North America. This argument is problematic in itself, as several U.S. metropolitan areas – Californian cities and Washington D.C come to mind – have comparatively close access to whitewater. The paddlers and outdoor program leaders Igleman interviews in search for more answers ultimately all fall back to cultural explanations as to why urban minorities may be so underrepresented on whitewater. As African American kayaker Lamar Sims states “‘A city kid may look at paddling and say, ‘This is not my world.’ There is safety staying in your comfort zone [...] That’s a universal truth’” (quoted In Igleman 2008: 30). As this essay would argue, this understanding of an ethnically connoted comfort zone is less of a universal truth, but instead yet another instance of a cultural legacy dating back to a philosophical conceptualization of nature from the Enlightenment.

Conclusion

As this essay has shown, this observation by an African American kayaker, similarly to artist Ingrid Pollard’ experiences can be read as a statement about minorities in outdoor recreation. And though there may be many reasons for this, my analysis suggests that the troublesome cultural legacy of the sublime plays a role. While this essay’s investigation of exclusions in outdoor recreation has been confined to examples of black hikers and kayakers, similar arguments could have been made on the basis of class or body image. The salient point is that exclusive spatial claims still divide those natural spaces explicitly constructed by those seeking them out as outside of, and unmarred by, society. William Wordsworth’s escape from the cities and the people in them created a conception of experiencing wilderness that still gives some groups a feeling of being excluded from this experience.

Clearly, today’s stereotypical wanderer above the clouds, as he can be seen in the Schöffel commercial, seeks solace not from the ethnically- and socially-other urban masses, but from digital culture and global business. Paradoxically, however, both hikers and kayakers mark the return of culture to precisely those spaces where they hope to leave culture behind, as their expectations themselves are culturally determined. It will be the rare casual hiker or riverrunner who explicitly sets out to encounter the sublime, as motivations to engage in outdoor recreation are manifold, and since there is not one fixed and unambiguous definition of the sublime in any case. The way hikers, kayakers, and the businesses catering to them represent these activities, and what they expect from the wilderness they make their playground, however, speaks to the lasting power of a conception of

nature that back to Burke and Kant. The reasons why outdoor recreationists seek solace in nature may have changed, as has their notion of authenticity. The basic conception of what wilderness offers, however, has not. Neither has the rhetoric employed in its cultural representation, which still employs a vocabulary of sacrality and transcendence. The sublime's legacy still reverberates, whether recreationists take a hike or huck the stout.

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Notes

- ¹ This is my translation of the German original: “An alle High Potentials und Key Performer, Global Player und Opinion Leader, alle Deep Diver und Innovation Driver, an alle Indoor Stepper und Power Napper, alle Urban Gardener und Facebook Farmer, an alle Laufband Läufer und Protein Drink Trinker, alle Insider und Upgrader, an alle euch Meilen Millionäre; macht erst mal ohne mich weiter.” While it could be argued that the massive use of English terms sets a nationalist tone, I would rather argue that the main connotation used here is that of the modern or postmodern workplace and its jargon.
- ² Cronon's essay sparked a vociferous debate, and he had to defend his thesis from the outset (cf. Cronon 1996b). An early collection of arguments, edited by J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, was published as *The Great New Wilderness Debate* in 1998. The gap between constructivists – among whom Cronon is, at most, a moderate – and self-described realists is still at work in ecocriticism, and may color what Serpil Oppermann described as a “phobic relations” of some ecocritics with theory (cf. Oppermann 2010). Also see Leo Marx's 2008 essay on “The Idea of Nature in America,” in which he covers the larger intellectual debate.
This essay sides with James Proctor's 1998 approach of “[c]ritical realism [which] is a sort of acknowledgment that direct access to a preordered reality is impossible and that knowledge is always fallible and incomplete, coupled with an optimism that this admission need pose no fatal blow to the project of finding better explanations for reality” (Proctor 1998: 361). This essay does not, however, see the necessity to engage in an overly theory-bound approach to the issue of the sublime and its use as a category for looking at nature (cf. Economides 2005 for an example of such an approach).
- ³ Also see Byerly 1996, Proctor 1998, McQuillan 2000, DeLuca and Demo 2001, Sayre 2001, and Coates 2005 for similar arguments about the aesthetic construction and corresponding consumption of nature, and the spatial practices that have resulted from cultural representations following the tradition of the sublime.
- ⁴ Though arguing that “wilderness” and “nature” are primarily cultural constructs, this essay takes physical space as such as a given. Philosophy and cultural representations then create coherent systems of conceptualizing space, i.e. a spatial logic, or sets of expectations, i.e. spatial demands, that then may find their way into legal demarcations of space. Yet spatial practice remains a physical reality, and thus in this essay refers to how it is dealt with materially.

- ⁵ As somebody who has worked in outdoor pedagogy and shares the enthusiasm of many ecocritics for hiking (and in my case, the adrenaline rush of kayaking) it would be disingenuous to claim otherwise. It would, however, be equally problematic for me to claim that my own experiences in hiking have not also been influenced and structured by reading mountaineering literature from an early age, and being constantly exposed to romanticizations of nature in the Boy Scouts.
- ⁶ Though this essay primarily uses examples from the U.S., a look at the meanings given to wilderness in both Europe and Canada reveals the same underlying dynamic. In continental Europe, partisan politics may have played a bigger role in dividing up natural spaces, yet, regardless of ideology, “nature” was still seen as the site for escape, and the location of “authenticity,” even if the precise meaning of that concept was struggled over. See Thomas Lekan’s 1999 essay on “Regionalism and the Politics of Landscape Preservation in the Third Reich” for an example of competing notions of “natural” and the resulting different approaches in dealing with nature. For specifically Canadian discussions about wilderness see Francis 1997, pp. 146-147, and Sandlos 2001, pp. 8-14.
- ⁷ See DeLuca & Demo 2001, Merchant 2004, and Worster 2005 for analyses of the ethnicized view of wilderness as a white leisure space in the 19th and early 20th century, and Spence 1996, Sandlos 2001, and West, Igoe & Brockington 2006 for more detailed studies of how non-whites were forcibly excluded from newly established national parks in the U.S. and Canada. For explorations of the ongoing ‘coloring’ of nature at work in hiking culture, see Farrell 2000 for an interview with a black hiker who is identified by *Backpacker Magazine* as extraordinary based on the combination of the color of his skin and his track record as a hiker, and who recounts experiences of being made to feel out of place on hiking trails. Similarly, see Underwood 2011 for a comedic exploration of the potential reactions of white hikers encountering an African American in a wilderness recreation area.
- ⁸ One reason for choosing whitewater kayaking as an example was that I, myself, occasionally engage in it and know some of the sport’s codes of behavior and its spatial logic. See Samantha Senda-Cook’s essay (2012) for a discussion of the role of a scholar’s own experience and the analytical benefits and possible problems.
- ⁹ For a study that details the conflicts between different groups of wilderness seekers and their claim to experiencing ostensibly unpeopled nature, see Michael J. Yochim’s 2005 essay “Kayaking Playground or Nature Preserve? Whitewater Boating Conflicts in Yellowstone.”

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