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THE CONSTRUCTION OF "WILDERNESS": AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

"Wilderness," loosely defined as pristine landscape free of human civilization, is both a product of civilization and a socially constructed idea (Barry 1999, 22). The human perception of wilderness has changed throughout history in response to the socio-political environment. As movements and revolutions have come and gone our treatment of the wilderness reflects the prevailing ideology of the time and therefore, can be used to understand how society has evolved. In the present day, wilderness is viewed as something to be preserved, protected and cherished, but this was not always the case. There was a time when wilderness was seen as evil and as something to be conquered and destroyed. For several centuries we have defined ourselves and civilization against nature in an "us" versus "them" dichotomy. Thus, wilderness can be seen as the "other" to humans and civilization. How we have constructed the "other" reflects hegemonic ideology in regards to race, class and gender.

This paper explores the social construction of wilderness by examining the historical development of the human perception of wilderness and the implications of those views. The purpose of this paper is to conceptualize the idea of wilderness in order to gain a better understanding of recreational activities and sport that take place in a wilderness context, which will be the focus of my later work. In a time when protecting the environment is of increasing concern a deeper understanding of the "wilderness" and our historical relationship to it is especially relevant.

Conquering “Wilderness”

Historically, in the English language, wilderness was described as savage, desolate, barren, and chaotic which all have a negative connotation (Cronon 1995, 69, 71). European culture perceived wilderness as dangerous, ungodly, and a place in which one risked getting lost. Indeed, European folktales and fairytales portrayed forests as evil places where the hero or heroine could be abducted and led into temptation. In addition, Satanic rituals and witches gatherings were assumed to happen in the deep forest, where Satan was thought to be. Thus, in its earliest construction wilderness was viewed as unsafe and threatening and this perception was brought over to the New World.

Several theorists have pointed to European Judeo-Christian roots as reason for this negative perception. Merchant (2003, 2) argues that the story of the Garden of Eden, one of the first stories about the relationship between humans and the environment, has shaped Western culture. Having defied God and eaten from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden - a paradise where all their needs are met. Adam and his descendants would have to work for food and survival in the unforgiving desert (Barry 1999, 37). The contrast between Eden, which was safe and predictable, and the wilderness, which was dangerous and unpredictable, contributed to negative perceptions of the wilderness and was also motivation to take steps to harness the landscape. In the bible, the Recovery Narrative is the story of upward progress in which humans gain power to manage and control the earth in search of the lost garden (Merchant 2003, 11). The secular version of this Recovery Narrative was paramount during the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century in

which it was thought that the invention of science, technology and capitalism would turn the entire earth into a garden (Merchant 2003, 20). Science would provide the tools to reinvent the garden; technology would subdue and dominate nature; and capitalism would move people from the desert to the garden (Merchant 1995, 136).

Thus, Merchant and her contemporaries link the Recovery of Eden to modernism, a series of historical events and ideas beginning in the 1600s that affirmed the power of humans to “improve” the environment with the aid of science and technology. The reduction of and control over wilderness defined achievement, and the environment was exploited solely for human economic purpose. Forests were logged and burned; native animals were hunted; and wild lands were transformed into artificial cities (Oelschlaeger 1999, 4). There was a gradual shift from a rural, agricultural economy to an urban, industrial economy based on technology and progress (Barry 1999, 4). “Civilization,” a term that appeared in the eighteenth century in the midst of modernism, pertained to the development of an advanced state of human society (Merchant 2003, 68), and made the demarcation between civilization and wilderness, human and nature, order and disorder, humanity and animality more pronounced (Merchant 2003, 69-70).

Control over wilderness represents the idealization of progress and science during the development of modernism which some have argued was motivated by the vision of reclaiming Eden (Merchant 2003, 2). Through modernism human supremacy and domination over the earth was aptly displayed and perceived to temper the threat of wilderness.

Idealizing "Wilderness"

By the 1800s civilization was intact, wilderness had been dominated and exploited and humans perceived themselves to be masters of the earth. The Romantic Movement, an artistic, literary, and intellectual movement originating in the mid-18th century in Western Europe, influenced a discernable shift in the perception of the wilderness. Romanticism argued against scientific rationalization and idealized imagination, aesthetic, and emotion. This movement, coupled with the realization that natural resources were finite, prompted a shift from the perception of nature as raw material to a perception of nature as divine inspiration (Nash 2001, 44-45). To gain such influence, wilderness was associated with core values of the culture that created and idealized it. During the Romantic Movement it was rationalized that if Satan was in the forest, then so was Christ. Wilderness gained a religious connotation in which God's handiwork was displayed through its untouched trees, lakes, and mountains. According to Nash (2001, 343) a society must be technological, urban and crowded before a need for wild nature makes economic and intellectual sense, and so the shift in perception of the wilderness is fitting with the state of society at this time (Nash 2001, 343).

The idea of the sublime, developed during the Romantic Movement, was one of the most important concepts associated with the change in perception of the wilderness. Edmund Burke, the Anglo-Irish author and philosopher, popularized the idea of finding sublimity in nature (Brown 2007, 8). In 1756, Burke wrote *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (Merchant, 2003: 87), in which he describes sublimity as when people "have an idea of pain and danger without being actually in such circumstances. Whatever excites this delight, I call sublime (Farrar

Hyde 1990, 17).” The popularization of the sublime meant that wild, harsh, and barren landscapes gained aesthetic value, and were less threatening. One could feel God’s omnipotence surrounded by natural wonders like waterfalls, mountains and canyons. By the nineteenth century, modernism was intact in the Western world meaning society was increasingly urban, industrial, and technological. With the help of the Romantic Movement, the perception of wilderness had changed from wasteland to temple, and as a result, wilderness became something of value to be protected and appreciated (Farrar Hyde 1990, 18; Cronon 1995, 75).

The religious connotation of the wilderness, coupled with the crowds and chaos of city life, prompted many urbanites to feel a need to get away from the city for a short while. As the antithesis of civilization, wilderness offered the perfect destination. In a world increasingly dominated by rapid technological change and artifice, the “untouched” wilderness offered a tangible source of meaning and moral authority and an appealing contrast to the pressures of industrial capitalism. By the mid-to-late nineteenth century, an outdoor recreation movement had begun. Hiking, canoeing, and camping became popular outdoor pursuits and remote lodges and youth camps began to spring up, especially in North America. By this time, the idea of the sublime was reworked to comfort and sentimentality. It was still sacred, but the religious sentiment evoked was more pleasurable, than inspiring awe and terror as Burke had originally purported (Cronon 1995, 75). Concern about health and afflictions, such as nervous exhaustion and consumption, at this time also made wilderness appealing. A long stay in a healthy climate became the standard cure for many illnesses plaguing urbanites (Farrar Hyde 1990, 109-110). Nature became a place that offered health, relaxation,

recreation, and moral regeneration. In turn, wilderness was idealized and people flocked to the wilderness to escape their chaotic, modern, industrial realities (Stutter 2002, 21-23).

Following the Romantic movement and the subsequent outdoor recreation movement of the mid-to-late nineteenth century wild country lost much of its repulsiveness. It was not that wilderness itself had changed, but that it was viewed in a new context in which the "natural" and aesthetic became coveted qualities (Nash 2001, 44-45). Wilderness had been the antithesis of what was orderly and good and now it likened itself to paradise (Cronon 1995, 69, 71). However, it was only when civil society gained an upper hand over wild nature that the appreciation of wilderness was possible (Merchant 2003, 86). When people realized that wilderness could help them, the idea of appreciating and protecting the wilderness came to the fore.

Exclusionary "Wilderness"

The popular conception of wilderness in the last century is that it is the purest and most "natural" part of our world. However, on closer examination, one finds that it is not natural at all. Instead, it is a social construction that has been moulded by human ideology to serve our needs, and as such, wilderness is a reflection of societal ideologies including those surrounding the subordination of certain groups.

When European explorers "discovered" the New World they came upon Aboriginal peoples who had inhabited those lands for thousands of years. As Europeans settled into the areas, Aboriginals were exposed to European disease and conflict that gradually reduced their numbers. The eventual colonization of North

America and Australia meant that Aboriginal lands were taken and used to benefit white European settlers. This was not seen as wrong as to the Europeans Aboriginals were regarded as a form of wilderness and their perceived “savageness” consistent with the character of wild country (Merchant 2003, 69-70; Nash 2001, 7). As Europeans in the New World became more civilized, they distanced themselves further and further from nature and, in turn, the Aboriginal peoples (Nash 2001, xiii).

The popular conception of wilderness dictated that it be free of people, which left Aboriginal peoples in a state of limbo (Nash 2001, 7). With their land colonized Aboriginal peoples were removed from the land and protected parks created. These parks were reinvented places, redefined as positive new wilderness areas in which wilderness encounters were predictable and within certain parameters. The removal of First Nations from parks illustrates that wilderness was not represented in its natural state (Merchant 2003,152), but was constructed to suit the needs of one particular group at the expense of another. This not only speaks to the manipulation of the wilderness, but also to the treatment of non-hegemonic groups in the nineteenth century.

Indeed, when the idea of experiencing sublimity in the wilderness first became popular, access to wilderness was only possible for wealthy urbanites, which is another indication of wilderness construction. As a result, elite urban tourists and wealthy sportsmen created wilderness in their own image. Only those with money could afford the train journey to remote parks and the room and board at high end lodges, in addition to the leisure time to spend away from work. Lower classes did not have the available funds or time to find divine inspiration in the wilderness. Wilderness was packaged as

an accessible commodity for the upper class's exclusive use. Catering to their specific needs meant the removal of "perceived" dangers, like the Aboriginals, who would interfere with their sublime experiences (Cronon 1995, 78-79).

Gendering "Wilderness"

Not only has the construction of wilderness discriminated by race and class, but it also represents gender dualism. Western patriarchal culture is based on the separation of culture from nature in which male attributes are associated with culture, and female attributes are associated with nature and inferior to male attributes. This hierarchical gender dualism has its roots in Judeo-Christianity (Barry 1999, 108-109). Merchant (1995, 133) argues that the gendering of the Eden story has influenced our conception of nature and gender in society. As the story goes, Eve "tempted" Adam to disobey God and eat from the tree of knowledge. The fall from Eden was caused by a woman, and Adam, an "innocent" bystander, was forced to pay the consequences. Subsequently, resourceful Adam invented tools and technology to restore the garden, whereas temptress Eve, likened to nature, had to be tamed into submission. Women and nature are portrayed negatively, while men are perceived as saviours through which the lost garden can be recreated.

When examining the concept of wilderness, it is important to consider the association between gender and nature, especially since nature is still cast in a female gender. Indeed we still use gendered term such as "virgin land" and "mother earth" to describe nature. Merchant highlights three forms of gendered nature portrayed in the Edenic Recovery Story: "Original Eve" in which nature is virginal, pure, light and pristine.

Although the land is barren, it has the potential for development. “Fallen Eve” is seen as disorderly and chaotic nature, where wilderness is a wasteland and desert requiring improvement. “Mother Eve” portrays nature as an improved garden which provides nurturance for the earth and bears fruit. In contrast, “Original Adam” is the image of God as creator; “Fallen Adam” is the agent of transformation; and “Father Adam” is the image of God as patriarch. Thus, a male hero is needed to cultivate and dominate the land as women cannot be trusted and need to be controlled (Merchant 1995, 137). The qualities portrayed in Adam and Eve show a distinct inferior-superior complex between women and men, and these patriarchal conceptions continue to be significant today (Barry 1999, 110). Nature’s historic connection to women means that examining our conception of the wilderness can be revealing in our study of gender construction and gender relations.

Present State of “Wilderness” and Conclusions

Today, the wilderness continues to be idealized and protected for the use of people. Our interest in experiencing wilderness stems from the same desire felt in the late nineteenth century - to connect to the natural. Recently, the wilderness has even been branded and used as a profit-making vehicle. Television shows such as “Survivor” and “Eco Challenge” capitalize on our interest in the interaction between humans and nature, and the appeal of the age old concept of the conquest of nature. Intrepid eco-adventure tours and travel are becoming more and more popular for tourists. However, due to our expansive civilization and exploitation of the wilderness, natural landscapes are diminishing rapidly and environmental issues have become a central concern. In the

past, the reduction of and control over wilderness defined achievement, whereas now protecting vanishing wilderness and making “green” decisions is our focus, illustrating how our perception of the wilderness has evolved (Nash 2001, 8-9).

In his seminal work *Wilderness and the American Mind* first published in 1967 Roderick Frazier Nash laid the foundation for American wilderness history in an attempt to understand the roots of environmental concerns. Nash (2001, 388-389) contends that the majority of Americans maintained an anthropocentric view of the wilderness and in order to ameliorate environmental concerns, people would have to move away from this view. By the 1990s, a growing number of historians argued for different interpretations of the wilderness. Among these wilderness revisionists, none has been more influential than William Cronon. In “The Trouble with Wilderness; or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” he argues that “wilderness leaves no place for humans then by definition it can offer no solution to problems confronting us (Cronon 1995, 81).” Because of this, Cronon believes that people need to focus on wildness that blends human and natural to interpret present environmental problems, not “pure” wilderness.

Recently, alternative approaches and theories have come to the fore. In his 1999 book *The Idea of Wilderness*, Max Oelschlaeger argues for a postmodern perspective to the problem of wilderness. He explains that if people are the culmination of God’s creation and God created a perfect world that humans could know and control, postmodernism questions whether humans are a failed experiment or a viable project (Oelschlaeger 1999, 348-349). Oelschlaeger contends that whether salvation is possible for the environment or whether we have completely lost our chance must be answered by the postmodern mind “for only though that exercise of consciousness can

our modern dilemma be transcended (Oelschlaeger 1999, 353).” Ecofeminists, another fairly recent scholarship, argue for a rediscovery of ancient and pre-modern ways of thinking about the natural world as intrinsically female. They believe that present day environmental malaise is due to shift from thinking of nature as mother to the masculine idea of conquering (Oelschaeger 1999, 312).

Wilderness scholarship is growing as environmental problems become more and more pressing. As we have seen, there are several different interpretations of and approaches to the “problem” of wilderness. Our relationship to wilderness has evolved and changed in response to trends and ideas idealized in certain times throughout history. Though we presume the wilderness to be natural and untouched by human influence, this is not the reality. The wilderness has been moulded in our own image and created to serve the needs of hegemonic groups at the expense of others. The construction of wilderness has discriminated by class and race, and gendered meanings have implied the dominance of men and subservience of women.

Now we have come to another crossroads when our relationship with nature will change once again. Centuries of ill-treatment of the wilderness and the environment has finally caught up with us and, it seems that, if we do not change our ways soon our lives may be threatened. I would argue that the current talk about going “green” and protecting the earth has little to do with genuine concern for the environment, but for the safety and maintenance of life as we know it. Thus, an anthropocentric view remains. Because we have constructed a definitive dichotomy between “civilization” and “wilderness,” few will be motivated to change their ways until their day to day lives are actually threatened. Gaining an understanding of our evolving relationship to the

wilderness and our treatment of the “other” provides a lens through which we can evaluate human nature and societal constructions.

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