

**YES VIRGINIA, THERE IS A MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD:  
SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM, POSTMODERN DECONSTRUCTION,  
AND WILDERNESS PRESERVATION**

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

Every summer, thousands of people flock to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) and Quetico Provincial Park in order to have a primitive recreational experience paddling canoes through a pristine environment. On their way to the wilderness, many of these people stop for supplies, gear, and/or information in some of the outlying gateway communities such as Duluth and Ely in Minnesota. There they will find a wealth of literature that celebrates the era of the voyageurs (1600s to 1800s CE) when French (and later British) fur-trappers/explorers paddled and portaged their canoes all over the region. Today's modern visitors can relive this era, have a primordial wilderness experience, and come back refreshed for work in industrial civilization.

This "primordial wilderness experience" is usually mediated by detailed topographic maps that show the precise location of geographical features, which include contour elevations, shorelines, islands, portages, and campsites. The land and waterscapes are interpreted by compasses, global positioning satellites (GPS), altimeters, and binoculars. Following a prepared itinerary, most visitors rely extensively on guidebooks that detail distances across lakes and portages, describe noteworthy natural features, and help prepare them for the kinds of experiences they can expect to have. As they paddle and portage their high-tech, ultra lightweight canoes and kayaks, polypropylene, fleece, Gore-Tex, DEET (diethyltoluamide)

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mosquito repellent, and a whole host of other synthetic materials will keep them warm, dry, and comfortable. High tech tents, sleeping bags, sleeping pads, and headlamps mediate the nighttime camping experience. A whole host of other materials and gadgets from solar showers to freeze-dried wine is available to help lessen the perils of wilderness adventure. How close does this mimic wilderness travel during the classic era of the European voyagers? Probably very little. The fact that almost half of the BWCAW was logged prior to 1978 may be lost on many contemporary visitors who mistake second growth forests for a forest primeval; visitors may also be unaware of extensive management efforts used by forest rangers to maintain the BWCAW as a wilderness area. Many of these visitors may not appreciate that the Boundary Waters *Canoe Area Wilderness* has been marketed as “canoe country” by tourism boosters beginning in the 1920s in order to draw a clientele to the area (Backes 1991). Finally, many of these visitors may not appreciate the fact that the celebrated image of the canoe country of the European voyagers, on which the booster image was modeled, was made possible by the erasure of the Dakota, Anishinabe, and Ojibway inhabitants of the region that began with the European “discovery and exploration” of the region. Because of these extensive human efforts involved in constructing and maintaining the image of the BWCAW as a wilderness canoe area, some may wish to say that the BWCAW is a *social construct*. When we tell contextual stories like this about wilderness areas, we reach the general conclusion that wilderness is socially constructed.

In this paper I examine what this means. I’ll begin by crudely outlining what I will call the social constructivist argument:

#### Social Constructivist Argument Against Wilderness

1. In order for the concept of wilderness to make sense, it must connote the idea of nature as existing independent of human cultures.
2. The concept of wilderness thus presupposes that a meaningful conceptual distinction can be made between human cultures and nonhuman nature.

3. Because wilderness and nature, like all other concepts, are human social constructions (concepts invented by social groups of people), it is problematic to say that wilderness exists independent from human cultures. That is, because the ideas of nature and wilderness are socially constructed, there are no non-socially constructed natural areas that exist independent of human cultures.
4. What the concept of wilderness connotes—the idea of nature as existing independent of human cultures—is non-existent.

Conclusion: Thus, the concept of wilderness is flawed.

Two stipulations need to be made at this point. First, the exact wording of the social constructivist argument stems from my own explication of what other people have said, and, as with any reconstructed argument, there is a danger that the argument I critique in this paper doesn't put things quite right. Second, if this is a good argument, it probably goes beyond the concept of wilderness, or the received wilderness idea as J. Baird Callicott and Michael Nelson (1998a) call it, and is also an argument about the existence of wilderness areas. If the concept is flawed, its denotative referents—wilderness areas that exist independent of human cultures—may be problematic.

I argue in this paper that the social constructivist argument errs by taking us too far into a thoroughly humanized world where there is no meaningful distinction between wilderness and human cultures. This humanized world is problematic for two main reasons. First and foremost, however social constructivism is cashed out, a more-than-human world beyond mere human social practices and discourse will survive. Second, social constructivism can lead to a problematic form of human exceptionalism. In order to make this second claim, I use a strategy in this paper to develop a middle ground position between what social constructivists call naïve realism—an uncritical acceptance of the existence of wilderness independent of all human cultures—and the view that wilderness is nothing more than human social practices and discourse—the polar opposite of what we might call total naturalism.

There is a great variety of social constructivist thought, and in order to get an accurate sense of this in this paper I make reference to a significant number of different thinkers and what they actually say. I begin with some preliminary remarks about social constructivism. There are logical distinctions between the social construction of language, the social construction of knowledge, and the social construction of reality in a metaphysical sense. Social constructivism also operates on a number of different levels of commitment ranging from a historical exploration of the concept of wilderness to a rebellion that consists of removing the concept of wilderness from environmental discourse altogether. I argue that social constructivism in an epistemological sense poses no real threat to the concept of wilderness and the practice of wilderness preservation. Of more substantive worry is the social construction of wilderness in a metaphysical sense. I argue that however we understand metaphysical social constructivism, a more-than-human world will escape attempts to reduce all of nature to mere social practices and discourse. Thus, while the *concept* of wilderness is fully socially constructed, the *place* of wilderness is not. I then explore the social construction of language by examining a postmodern and poststructuralist deconstruction of wilderness. Again, a more-than-human world survives this deconstruction. I conclude by rethinking social constructivism in light of some further attempts to problematize the distinction between wilderness and human cultures.

## **II. THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF WILDERNESS, NATURE, AND ENVIRONMENT**

William Cronon (1995a, 79) argues that wilderness is a cultural invention that obscures its true origin and history:

To return to my opening argument: there is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness. It is entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear, a product of the very history it seeks to deny. Indeed, one of the most striking proofs of the cultural invention of wilderness is its thoroughgoing erasure of the history from which it sprang. In virtually all of its manifestations, wilderness represents a flight from history.

As I am using the terminology, Cronon's designation of wilderness as a cultural invention is equivalent to saying that wilderness is a social construction.<sup>2</sup> This directs attention to the all-important role social discourse and social practices play in the creation of wilderness, namely the discourse and practices of nineteenth and twentieth century ethnocentric Euroamericans and Europeans. When wilderness is called "natural," Cronon claims that this hides its origin in social history. We should note, however, an important distinction between a concept of wilderness and a physical place of wilderness, that is, a distinction between what the concept of wilderness connotes and the place of wilderness denoted by the concept. Given Cronon's argument that the concept of wilderness is a social construction does it follow that *de facto* and legally designated wilderness areas are also social constructions? Cronon—and Callicott—suggests that it does not. Callicott (1995, 64) claims that he is criticizing only the "*received wilderness idea*, the conventional concept of wilderness, not (so-called) wilderness areas." Likewise, Cronon (1995a, 81) claims that his wilderness criticism is not directed at "wild nature per se, or even efforts to set aside large tracts of wild land, but rather at the specific habits of thinking that flow from this complex cultural construction called wilderness." But without a meaningful concept of wilderness that grounds such habits of thinking—that is, a concept I tentatively defined above that connotes a place that generally exists apart from people and has not been significantly developed, inhabited, and trampled by people—it's not clear how a wilderness area differs from a non-wilderness area. More to the point, it's not clear what one is talking about when discussing a certain place of wilderness such as the BWCAW. If wilderness is a problematic or meaningless concept à la the social constructivist argument or if the concept denotes no physical places on Earth, then the practice of wilderness preservation seems to make little sense. Because

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<sup>2</sup> Sociologists, anthropologists, and others might wish to make a distinction between a culture and a society. For my purposes here, however, I will use these terms interchangeably.

of this relationship between wilderness as a place and wilderness as a concept, I believe that a successful attack on the concept generally weakens the place. The destruction of *de facto* wilderness by a bulldozer thus is not entirely unrelated to a social constructivist argument against the concept of wilderness, and Callicott's and Cronon's claims that they can separate criticism of the idea from criticism of the place are disingenuous.<sup>3</sup>

As a way of beginning explication of this argument, some remarks about social constructivism are in order. The social construction of the concept of wilderness and the relationship of this concept to the physical world are my direct concerns here, but narratives about the social construction of the concepts of environment and nature and the relationships between these concepts to the physical world are also relevant. Wilderness is a subset of the larger category of nature, and wilderness areas are local environments. A common target of most social constructivist critiques of the environment, nature, and wilderness is what Phil Macnaughten and John Urry (1998, 1) call environmental realism. An environmental realist believes that the environment, nature, and wilderness are substantive real entities that can exist independent of human experiences and social practices. Within the history of western philosophy, realism emerged within scholastic or medieval philosophy as the position contrary to nominalism. The debate between realists and nominalists concerned the existence of universals—properties predicated of all the individuals within a certain sort or classification of things. The debate over numbers is a classic example of the philosophical problem of universals. Realists believed that numbers had substantial existence independently of being thought, while nominalists believed that numbers had no such thought-independent existence and were instead mere names that represented something within thought. Following this debate, today's social

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<sup>3</sup> In the preface to their anthology *Reinventing Nature?* Soulé and Lease (1995, xvi) concur when they say that “certain forms of intellectual and social relativism [via social constructivist arguments] can be just as destructive to nature as bulldozers and chain saws.”

constructivists can be seen as occupying a nominalist position: the terms ‘environment’, ‘nature’, and ‘wilderness’ are mere names or human constructions and have no substantial existence independent of thought. But because there are no generic persons and people instead are separated by a wide variety of different factors such as ethnicity, race, class, gender, religion, nationality, scientific orientation, personal experience, and other standpoints, many social constructivists claim that there is no common agreement over what the terms ‘environment’, ‘nature’, and ‘wilderness’ mean. Because the meanings of these terms are socially created, social constructivism can be construed as the social signification of the environment, nature, and wilderness.<sup>4</sup> Macnaughten and Urry (1998) title their book *Contested Natures* to stress that there is no monolithic nature; instead, there are many different natures based on the meanings different groups of people ascribe as a result of ambivalent social practices.<sup>5</sup> Thus, as found within the designation “Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness,” the term ‘wilderness’ signifies or means different things to different groups of people. Wilderness preservation advocates supposedly fail to see that their wilderness efforts here—as elsewhere—are misguided because they posit a single meaning entity of signification called “wilderness” that can be preserved.

Beyond social signification, the social construction of nature typically goes much further than this. Understood within the period of modern philosophy (roughly the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries CE), realism became the position that actual physical objects existed independently of being perceived. A question that followed was whether or not people had

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<sup>4</sup> Related to the social signification of terms is what Kukla (2000, 6) calls semantic constructivism. This concerns the meaning of sentences (or more accurately statements), and semantic constructivists believe that nature itself fails to hook up to language in some requisite manner.

<sup>5</sup> In the introduction to his edited anthology *Uncommon Ground*, Cronon (1995b) claims that the anthology’s contributors are in search of different meanings of nature as naïve reality, a moral imperative, an artifice of self-conscious construction, virtual reality, a commodity, a demonic other or avenging angel, and simply as contested terrain. The theme of Zimmerman’s (1994) book *Contesting Earth’s Future* is that different radical ecologies (deep ecology, social ecology, ecofeminism, postmodernism) wage contests over approaches to, and different meanings of, ecological and related social problems.

direct perceptual access to what physical objects really were.<sup>6</sup> Closing out the period of modern philosophy, Immanuel Kant (1787) argued that we did not have such access and that whatever perceptions we had of physical objects—sense data from the empirical world—were always mediated through the architectonic of human understanding. We never saw empirical objects directly; instead sense data were filtered through the *a priori* intuitions of space and time, as well as through *a priori* concepts or categories given by the mind to make judgments. Our perceptions of physical objects were just that—perceptions. Because of the necessary architectonic of human understanding all we ever saw were appearances of physical objects. Within the realm of human knowledge, attempts to go beyond phenomena to describe objects as they really were (as things-in-themselves or *noumena*) were little more than idle, speculative metaphysics. But even if we couldn't know objects as they really were, could we have objective facts about such objects? Realists today give an affirmative answer to this question, and they mostly focus on scientific knowledge by arguing that the theoretical and/or unobservable entities of science such as genes and quarks really do exist, largely the way scientific theories tell us that they exist. Thomas Kuhn's (1996) now classic book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, originally published in 1962, cast doubt on certain forms of scientific realism. Largely basing his argument on the modern histories of physics and chemistry, Kuhn claimed that the development of knowledge within scientific disciplines consisted of a series of incommensurable paradigms that replaced each other during periods of instability. When research anomalies within a given paradigm became too glaring to be ignored, a scientific revolution occurred, and the paradigm that was best able to explain the anomalies became the new, ruling paradigm. The really novel feature of Kuhn's picture of science was his claim that scientists chose new

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<sup>6</sup> Within the history of philosophy, this question certainly predates the modern period. I locate it in the modern period for pedagogical purposes here.

paradigms (including theories and research agendas) largely for pragmatic reasons that included psychological, social, and cultural values. There was no progression of scientific knowledge guided solely by the truth of objective facts about the world. Science was merely what scientists did, and in order to practice science one had to adhere to a ruling paradigm and all of its presuppositions, biases, and peculiarities filtered through the values that guided the choice of selecting the paradigm in the first place. If knowledge was generated in this way in the supposedly hard sciences of physics and chemistry, the objectivity of all knowledge could be called into question. Many of those working in the social sciences, particularly sociology, ran with this idea. In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) helped set a social sciences research agenda that led others to question virtually everything in social constructivist terms. David Bloor (1976) developed a research agenda of the “strong programme” for the sociology of scientific knowledge (SOK) whereby sociologists studied the causal conditions that brought about beliefs or states of knowledge. He focused on how scientific knowledge is constituted as an effect of contingent socialization—social metaphors, traditions, and practices—and argued that truth existed only as a matter of social consensus and social functions.<sup>7</sup>

An examination of different social constructivist accounts reveals little consensus on what it means to say that the environment, nature, and wilderness are socially constructed. As outlined above, because these terms have different meanings to different groups of people, social constructivism can be construed as social signification. Social constructivism can also be construed as social mediation: all knowledge is mediated through social practices and discourse. Robert Klee (1997, 172) calls the collective filters of the Kantian architectonic of knowledge, the

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<sup>7</sup> In *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*, Latour and Woolgar (1986, 243) claim: “Scientific activity is not ‘about nature,’ it is a fierce fight to *construct* reality.”

Kuhnian account of scientific knowledge, and the social sciences' account of knowledge in terms of socialization the "great filtration/distortion." It is in this sense that Alexander Wilson (1992, 12) claims that nature emerges from culture:

Nature is a part of culture. When our physical surroundings are sold to us as 'natural' (like the travel ad for "Super, Natural, British Columbia") we should pay close attention. Our experience of the natural world — whether touring the Canadian Rockies, watching an animal show on TV, or working in our own gardens — is always mediated. It is always shaped by rhetorical constructs like photography, industry, advertising, and aesthetics, as well as by institutions like religion, tourism, and education.

Our experience of nature is always mediated through a cultural lens, and we have no direct access to nature independent of ourselves (Kant's *noumena*), whether we encounter it in Florida's Disneyworld or Everglades. This is an epistemological thesis focused on the creation or formation of the concepts of the environment, nature, and wilderness and on what these concepts *connote*. A deeper level of social constructivism is reached when we say that what is *denoted* by these concepts is socially constructed. This is a metaphysical thesis about how the existence of the environment, nature, and wilderness are dependent upon social human activities, and it is this form of social constructivism that seems to be inconsistent with environmental realism. André Kukla (2000, 21) makes a helpful distinction between what he calls causal constructivism and constitutive constructivism. In the case of the former, human activity causes and sustains facts about the world, and in the case of the latter, facts about the world are facts of human activity itself. Causal constructivists believe that things like the environment, nature, and wilderness have been created by social human activities, while constitutive constructivists believe that these kinds of things are constituted by and are nothing more than social human

activities.<sup>8</sup> Larry Hickman (1996, 53) wavers somewhere between causal and constitutive constructivism:

Nature is instead a multifaceted construct that has been slowly and laboriously built up over thousands of years of human history by means of various tools of inquiry, including the arts, religion, magic, hunting, manufacture and experimental science, to recall just a few. Nature is a construct, or cultural artifact, but it has not been constructed out of nothing. The raw materials of previous experiences and experiments, unanticipated events, chance insights, moments of aesthetic ecstasy, habits, traditions and institutions have all been continuously reshaped and refined by tools that have included religious rituals, philosophical treatises, novels, poems, scientific hypotheses, television documentaries, and many more.

Hickman problematizes nature—understood as that which takes place without human agency or without human intentionality—when he claims that nature is constructed out of human experiences and tools of inquiry.<sup>9</sup> Does this mean that nature is caused by human activity (causal constructivism) or that nature is nothing beyond human activity itself (constitutive constructivism)? Keith Tester (1991, 46) is unambiguous that it is the latter:

Mary Midgley believed that a fish is only a fish, but she was wrong. A fish is only a fish if it is socially classified as one, and that classification is only concerned with fish to the extent that scaly things living in the sea help society define itself.

This is full-blown constitutive constructivism: fish metaphysically exist only insofar as they are social classifications that help us define ourselves.<sup>10</sup>

As the above preliminary sketch of social constructivism shows, what it means to say that wilderness is socially constructed is a complex issue. The central question becomes “what precisely is wilderness?” Prior to the advent of what J. Baird Callicott and Michael Nelson

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<sup>8</sup> Following Rorty’s (1979) critique of what he calls the mirror of nature, where the human mind is compared to a mirror that reflects nature or reality, constitutive constructivism is the position that nature itself is a mirror of us and our activities.

<sup>9</sup> Larrère (1996, 122) singles out science as a tool of inquiry and claims that nature is “only the name given to a certain contemporary state of science.”

<sup>10</sup> This, of course, seems to fly in the face of contemporary evolutionary theory which posits evolutionary events such as the origin of different species of fish that have occurred long before the evolutionary origin of our own *Homo sapiens* species. Constitutive constructionists might point out that this, in turn, presupposes some form of untenable naïve realism.

(1998b) called *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, there was little such examination of this question, and philosophical accounts of wilderness largely were centered on the question of wilderness values and ethics. Either the question of what it was that carried these values was mostly ignored, or the legal definition of wilderness from the United States Wilderness Act of 1964 was uncritically cited as *the* definition of wilderness. One might say that the existence of wilderness was accepted as a matter of common sense and that it was seen as a natural feature of the world. Ian Hacking (1999, 12) claims that this is precisely the precondition that sets the stage for social constructivist discourse: “In the present state of affairs, X [wilderness] is taken for granted, X appears to be inevitable.” After various inquiries of what X is, Hacking (p. 6) claims that social constructivists go on and argue that the object of their inquiries is “not determined by the nature of things” and that its existence really is not inevitable. Wilderness thus is not a natural feature about the world and instead is reconceived as something that is constructed or produced—semantically, epistemologically, and/or metaphysically—by human activities.<sup>11</sup> Hacking (1999, 19-20) goes on to claim that there are various grades or levels of social constructivist commitments: historical, ironic, reformist, unmasking, revolutionary, and rebellious.

Carolyn Merchant (1995, 153) provides a good example of constructivism as a historical commitment:

Nor are nature and culture, women and men, binary opposites with universal or essential meanings. Nature, wilderness, and civilization are socially constructed concepts that change over time and serve as stage settings in the progressive narrative.

Because wilderness has no essential or universal meaning apart from historical circumstances, it is socially constructed. According to Merchant (p. 137), the idea of wilderness represents a way for western culture to reinvent a fallen Garden of Eden and recover a pristine and virginal land, a

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<sup>11</sup> See also Kukla (2000, 3) on this point.

chaotic wasteland, and an improved nurturing Earth. Wilderness and its supposed binary of civilization come into existence as a result of this historical western narrative.<sup>12</sup>

At the next level of commitment, Hacking (1999, 20) claims that the social constructivist exposes something problematic about how the world is built but ironically is forced to leave the world as it is without rectifying the problem. Such an ironic commitment is exemplified by Peter Dwyer (1996) who uses an anthropological analysis of the homelands of three different primal Papua New Guinea societies to argue that wilderness is an imaginary place invented in western thought. Although these three different societies have different habitation and land use patterns along a gradient from the sparsely used lands of the Kubo people to the more intensely used lands of the Siane people, all three groups (including the intermediary Etolo people) live in a thoroughly cultured landscape (p. 179). Lands of little use and occupation are occupied by what Dwyer calls an invisible (supernatural) realm that is continuous with the visible realm of actual people. For these three groups of Papuan people, there are no wilderness lands beyond their cultural worlds. Westerners who cannot see the inhabited invisible realm erroneously posit the existence of unoccupied wilderness (p. 180). From the perspective of the Papuans such wilderness or nature does not exist. It is little more than a symbol for westerners.

If we must adhere to a logic that is digital, then, I shall argue, in the domain of human affairs culture should be taken as prior, nature as emergent. The sad truth may be that the idea of 'wilderness' - that supposed last refuge of nature - is no more than an attempt to represent an imaginary place as a concrete symbol. 'Nature' as Westerners know it is an invention, an artefact. (Dwyer 1996, 157)

Following Dwyer's exposure of wilderness and nature, the social constructivist irony is that westerners will continue to call for the preservation of wilderness and nature and will ignore the experiences of primal peoples.

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<sup>12</sup> See also Merchant (2003). Merchant has also used her largely historical method of inquiry to examine the relationship between women, nature, and the scientific revolution (1980) and the environmental history of New England (1989).

Hacking (1999, 20) claims that the next two levels of commitment—reformist and unmasking—require social constructivists to step beyond merely questioning the inevitable in a historical or ironic sense and urge that the object of inquiry “is quite bad as it is” (p. 6). These two types of commitment are similar in that a reformation can be a kind of refutation, and an unmasking is a kind of undermining. Neil Smith’s (1996, 49) discussion of how problematic structures such as gender, class, race, and sexual preference produce nature might exemplify such a commitment.

In any case, the larger point is that a political theory of nature has to find a way of expressing several things: the inevitability and creativity of the social relationship with nature; the very real project of domination embodied in the capitalist mode of production; the differentiated relationship with nature according to gender, class, race, sexual preference; the implausibility of an autonomous nature; and a strong response to the almost instinctive romanticism which pervades most treatments of nature in bourgeois and patriarchal society. If we take seriously the centrality of labour in the relationship with nature, then we need to begin to think in terms of *the social production of nature*.

When we unmask nature, we discover that our social relationships with it are instead social relationships with ourselves, and there is no separate, autonomous nature. Rather than constructing nature, Smith claims that we *produce* nature through our own social relationships.<sup>13</sup>

Filling out the last two levels of social constructivist commitments, rebellions and revolutions for Hacking (1999, 6-7) require that we step beyond noting how bad something is and seek either to replace this object with something else—revolution—or do away altogether with the object of our inquiry—rebellion. Barbara Lynch (1993, 108 and 109) sets the stage for a constructivist revolution:

The ‘environment’ is a cultural construct which is shaped by shared life experiences and which differs with ethnicity. ... [V]ignettes of Caribbean Latino life remind us that the

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<sup>13</sup> See also Smith (1984). Smith’s position of what we might call social productivism seems to be a variant of constitutive constructivism. The term ‘construct’ is from the identical Latin term ‘*construct*’ which means to heap together or build; prior to a construction, this seems to suggest that something exists that can be heaped together. In contrast, the term ‘product’ is from the Latin term ‘*producere*’ which means something new that is produced or brought forth.

environment is a social construction: a product of cultural responses to specific historical circumstances which give rise to shared sets of imagined landscapes.

Understanding the environment to be something that surrounds us, from which we can distinguish ourselves and with which we can create a field of significance (Dower 1994, 143), Lynch claims that the creation of such a field is a product of responses to historical circumstances (a historical social constructivist commitment). Different groups of people will have different such responses, and she discusses the importance of ethnicity, in this case Latino ethnicity, for developing these responses. There is no pre-given environment that can be separated from the ethnocentric responses of people, and we are not *in* an environment so much as we *have* an environment as a field of meaning and significance (Cooper 1992, 169). Lynch (1993, 109) reveals her revolutionary commitment when she goes on to discuss how non-Latinos have constructed the environment to the detriment of Latinos and offers a Latino alternative of a peopled environment of fishing in an unpolluted Caribbean Sea and gardening in the hills of Puerto Rico.

Steven Vogel's critique of nature (1996) and his argument for moving to a postnaturalist world without the term 'nature' (2002) exemplify a rebellious constructivist commitment that significantly goes beyond all other levels of constructivist commitments. He argues that we should abandon the concept of nature as that which denotes the more-than-human world and abandon the practice of preserving or protecting the more-than-human world of wilderness. Interestingly enough, Vogel (2002, 33) refuses to label his critique as one of social constructivism. He claims the term 'social constructivism' suggests a false separation of human society from the environment. Further, he believes that too much of the social constructivist literature fails to take the idea of construction literally enough and instead focuses only on how language or thought performs acts of construction; in contrast, Vogel believes that all of nature is

now literally constructed by humans through physical processes of transformation.<sup>14</sup> In his book *Against Nature*, Vogel (1996, 35-39) argues that nature is a social category. He develops this idea from a critique of Georg Lukács. Lukács (1968) developed a Marxist analysis of social reality and argued that our social world was characterized by the phenomenon of reification: the totalizing process of capitalism, under which we live, turns both the artifacts we create (second nature) and us—via our labor power—into commodities which take on a life of their own and over which we have no control. Lukács claimed that the only thing which escaped such reification was immediate (first) nature that existed prior to our labor efforts. Vogel (1996, 35) claims that Lukács’ analysis does not go far enough, immediate (first) nature does not escape reification, and nature itself is a social category. Vogel gives four reasons to show the latter. First, all objects that we can point to and talk about have a social meaning. Second, all objects come into existence as a result of socially organized processes of labor; this would include rocks within a wilderness area because they come into existence as rocks *in a wilderness area* as a result of governmental labor efforts of designating and managing the wilderness area. Third, all objects are socially mediated: “even ‘true’ wilderness remains so only by virtue of a complex set of social mediations: the acts required here are Acts of Congress, by which we socially decide to remove areas from the sphere of transformation, thus revealing the extent to which for us wilderness is now founded upon and carved out of the world of the social and not vice-versa” (p. 37). Fourth, all objects are known only through socially organized practices. Vogel concludes that *all* things result from complex human practices, and *all* of nature is transformed by humans. All wilderness areas and everything that exists within them are thus socially mediated categories.

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<sup>14</sup> Following my perusal of Smith (1996) above, Vogel’s position might be more accurately described as one of social productivism.

In “Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature,” Vogel (2002) goes further than merely unmasking nature as a social category and attempts to instigate a rebellion by arguing that environmental philosophers should abandon the term ‘nature’ and all that it connotes and denotes. He accepts Bill McKibben’s (1989) end of nature thesis that nature is coming to an end because human actions now impact all of the Earth. But the problem runs much deeper than this. Vogel suggests that “nature has *always* already ended” (p. 23). He claims that frequent use of the words “natural” and “unnatural” within environmental philosophy creates a false dichotomy between humans and nature. It is inconsistent for philosophers to use these words and at the same time claim that humans are a part of nature who, when they forget this fact, can act arrogantly and irresponsibly toward nature. An antinomy or paradox thus results. If we are a part of nature—a denial of the human/nature dichotomy, then nothing we do is unnatural. If we are not a part of nature—an acceptance of the human/nature dichotomy, then everything we do is unnatural. Thus, we cannot distinguish human actions that are in “harmony” with nature from human actions that violate nature because it is either logically impossible not to act in harmony or everything we do necessarily violates nature. There is an equivocation problem going on here between different senses of nature. Vogel (p. 28) recognizes this and claims that the “*concept of nature is itself so ambiguous and slippery that it cannot actually do the work that many environmental theorists want it to*”—namely serve as a normative foundation for how we ought to treat nature. And when we examine our knowledge of so-called “nature” we find that it is always mediated through our histories, concepts, languages, etc. He concludes:

Environmental theory, it seems to me, must concern itself with *this* world, the only one that exists, and not pine for some nature conceived of as independent of human practices. The world we are in, the world we are always already transforming, might more appropriately be called the ‘environment’ (and not “nature”), precisely because of the (literally) anthropocentric connotations of the former term: it refers to the world that

*surrounds* us, the world in which and on which we engage in our transformative practices. This world, I am suggesting, is the only one we know. (p. 32)

Vogel thinks that once we recognize there is no nature independent of us, we will take better care of our thoroughly anthropocentric and anthropogenic environment of planet Earth, whose existence is mediated through our transformative efforts.<sup>15</sup> Vogel's postnaturalist environmental philosophy posits a thoroughly humanized world, a world with no wilderness to be protected from harmful human actions.<sup>16</sup>

From Merchant's historical commitment to Vogel's rebellious commitment, we move from problematizing wilderness to rejecting it and its preservation. In a minimal epistemological sense, discourses about the social signification, social mediation, social construction, social production, or simply construction of wilderness problematize the idea of wilderness as existing independent from human cultures. Maximally, these discourses lead to the rejection of a more-than-human world of wilderness in a metaphysical sense. This gives us the conclusion of the social constructivist argument against wilderness: the concept of wilderness is flawed.

### **III. REJOINDER TO THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST ARGUMENT**

Before critiquing various forms of social constructivism, I wish to point out that social constructivist claims can be valuable. Many feminists, amongst others, importantly have used different forms of social constructivism to debunk conceptions of gender, sex, and human nature that have cast women as inferior to men in various guises and have cast this inferiority as being "natural."<sup>17</sup> Such "naturalness" is a form of essentialism: there are natural, innate, or essential differences between men and women. Essentialist arguments have been used for millennia in

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<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, Sikorski (1993, 29) argues that we should regard wilderness as something that we build in order to recover "the things that are most ourselves" that we have lost.

<sup>16</sup> Given that Vogel seeks to replace "nature" with an anthropocentric environment, his constructivist commitment also is revolutionary.

<sup>17</sup> There is extensive feminist literature that deals with this issue. For an introduction, see Holmstrom (1998) and Nicholson (1998).

virtually every human society to justify political, legal, social, economic, and moral structures where men have had more power than women and where men have had more access to what societies esteem. Corresponding to Hacking's (1999, 19-20) grades or levels of social constructivist commitments, feminists have argued that women are not inferior to men, patriarchal structures are not inevitable, patriarchal structures are instead bad, and patriarchy should be ended (Flax 1993, 81-82). Social constructivism has been of monumental importance for challenging the "naturalness" (essentialism) of women's subordination.<sup>18</sup>

Related to seeing through and overturning what has been taken to be natural or inevitable, social constructivists importantly remind us that we cannot ignore the human history of both ideas and places. Native American Indians continue to be erased from Euroamerican history when today's Euroamericans traveling through the BWCAW think that they are "exploring" the wilderness and fail to see that their canoe and portage routes have been used extensively by different groups of Indians in the past. When these Euroamericans see a second growth forest as an old growth, forest primeval, the extensive efforts to stop logging in the BWCAW undertaken by twentieth century CE wilderness preservation advocates also are erased from history. And when these same Euroamerican wilderness enthusiasts fail to see how the BWCAW was marketed as a recreational canoe country in the first part of the twentieth century, they fail to see how their recreational experiences are in part a product of what tourist boosters have created. Social constructivism thus alerts us to the dangers of historical naïveté and the failure to see ethnocentric and other biases of wilderness preservation.

When we claim that wilderness in a metaphysical sense is *nothing more* than a human social construct, however, we might conclude that there is no more-than-human wilderness that can be

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<sup>18</sup> Essentialism, however, creeps back into feminist theory when universal claims are made about the nature, gender, sex, or subordination of all women (Spelman 1988; Butler 1999).

preserved. We reach this conclusion by overstressing and misconstruing the roles of human social practices and discourse in wilderness preservation. While I agree that wilderness and its preservation is in part a social construction, we need to clarify what this means, be careful that we don't completely deconstruct the idea of a more-than-human world, and be careful that we don't try to physically reconstruct all areas on Earth as thoroughly humanized landscapes.

Consider first the epistemological thesis of social constructivism and the claim that wilderness is socially mediated. When we examine the issue of what we can know about wilderness in terms of its social mediation, we should note that we can be talking about two different things: the concept of wilderness and the physical place of wilderness. Causal and constitutive constructivists might wish to deny that these are two different “things” in order to resist a metaphysical distinction between human social practices/discourse and an outside world of wilderness. However, unless we are willing to subscribe to some form of metaphysical idealism—whereby the physical world turns out to be nothing more than mental concepts, I believe that a logical distinction is possible between the concept of wilderness and a place of wilderness such as the BWCAW.<sup>19</sup> Consider first the concept of wilderness. Concepts allow us to distinguish between groups or classifications of objects, and we have concepts only when we can use or understand a portion of some language. As methods of communication, languages are necessarily social. Thus, to say that the concept of wilderness is socially mediated tells us nothing new because concepts necessarily are socially mediated. Things get more interesting when we discuss what the concept of wilderness means—its social signification. If this concept has a number of different meanings for different groups of people, then difficulties arise when this concept is used to ground a single practice called wilderness preservation. Because there is

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<sup>19</sup> Total naturalists might deny a distinction between a concept and a physical place by reducing concepts to endocrine and neural responses and genes. I argue elsewhere that we should resist such a reduction (Woods, forthcoming).

more to say about the social signification of the concept of wilderness under the rubric of postmodernism, I defer discussion of social signification until the next section below.

Beyond the concept, when we say that a place of wilderness such as the BWCAW is socially mediated, what we mean is that from an epistemological standpoint, any knowledge we can acquire about the BWCAW will be mediated by social practices and discourse. Certainly the concept and the place are not unrelated because how we think about the concept of wilderness will affect and help determine what we can know empirically about a place of wilderness, and as I argue below, the physical world does impose *some* constraints on how we can experience it. Recall that Kuhn (1996) argues that our most celebrated form of acquiring knowledge—science—is necessarily a social practice and discourse. Less scientific forms of acquiring knowledge such as paddling and portaging through a series of lakes in the BWCAW will also take place through social practices and discourse. Consider a person named Michael who is canoeing through the BWCAW by himself. Regardless of whether Michael is an unemployed factory worker or a college professor, anything that he observes on his trip will be filtered through a web of background beliefs he previously has acquired through social discourse. What he comes to know about the BWCAW will be determined in part by previous social discourse, even if he speaks to no one during and after his canoe trip about the BWCAW.<sup>20</sup> What he comes to know will also be determined in part by previous social practices: his ability to use a canoe, navigate, cope with changing weather, set up a camp, etc. Because his knowledge of the BWCAW cannot be separated from social practices and discourse, the place of wilderness he experiences in the BWCAW is socially mediated. Like the social mediation of the concept of wilderness, the

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<sup>20</sup> Within the philosophy of science, this is known as theory-ladenness: observational judgments are influenced by or dependent on hypotheses *and* a system of concepts or background theories that an observer must rely upon for describing the world.

epistemological thesis that the place of wilderness is socially mediated tells us nothing new because everything we experience and everywhere we have experiences are socially mediated.

Things get much more interesting when we talk about the metaphysical question of *what* it is we experience when we experience a place of wilderness. Recall the two forms of metaphysical social constructivism identified above. Causal constructivists believe that human activity causes and sustains wilderness, while constitutive constructivists believe that wilderness is constituted by human activity itself. Both types of constructivists believe that wilderness areas exist as a consequence of human activity. But while causal constructivists believe that wilderness came into existence as a result of human social practices and discourse, constitutive constructivists believe that wilderness was nothing more than such practices and discourse all along. For the former, because wilderness is not itself constituted by such practices and discourse, there remains a presence of something that is *not* just human activity. Constitutive constructionists such as Steven Vogel deny the existence of this presence. Causal constructivists tend to downplay this presence and, many times, overplay the significance of human activities. This problem emerges at the end of William Cronon's (1995c) anthology *Uncommon Ground* when the anthology's contributors engage in a roundtable discussion and conclude that nature is *not just* a cultural construct or an artifact of human language.<sup>21</sup> The remarks of Anne Spirn are illustrative:

Our discussions deepened my awareness of how nature is and has been culturally constructed, but now more than ever I feel it crucial to reassert the reality of nonhuman features and phenomena. I hope our book doesn't overemphasize the cultural construction of nature to the extent that readers come away with the impression that nature is *only* a construct. (p. 448, italics added)

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<sup>21</sup> The strongest statements of social constructivism in the anthology are found in the essays by Cronon (1995a), Merchant (1995), Olwig (1995), Spirn (1995), and Slater (1995).

Even Cronon (1995a, 87) himself acknowledges this nonhuman presence when he claims that we must “recognize and honor nonhuman nature as a world we did not create, with its own independent, nonhuman reasons for being as it is.”

The forgetting of this nonhuman or more-than-human presence by causal constructivists and the denial of it by constitutive constructivists is the source of much of the trouble with social constructivist critiques of wilderness, nature, and the environment. For a number of causal constructivists it is probably more accurate to say that they simply refuse to say much about it, as it might sit uncomfortably within their social constructivist discourse. Consider several examples of this. In *The Social Construction of the Ocean*, Philip Steinberg (2001) develops a history of the world-ocean (collectively, all of the world’s oceans) in terms of how it has been constructed and managed by different people’s perceptions, social practices, and social discourses. The presence of a more-than-human ocean comes almost as an afterthought at the very end of the book when he reminds us that we “should not forget that the sea, besides being a socially constructed space, is also a material space of nature” (p. 209). William Chaloupka and R. McGreggor Cawley (1993) begin an article on nature and wilderness as heterotopias (politicized spaces) by acknowledging that things like wildernesses, volcanoes, and earthquakes are “certainly ‘real’ phenomena in the sense of a physical presence” (p. 4) but quickly move on to say that “nature, like everything else we talk about, is *first and foremost* an artifact of language” (p. 5, italics added). The rest of their article consists of a discussion of nature and other natural phenomena as linguistic entities.

Although seemingly reluctant at first to talk about a more-than-human world, in *The Social Creation of Nature* Neil Evernden (1992) importantly arrives at a more-than-human world through social constructivism. Much of what Evernden is up to in this book is a historical

exegesis of the idea of Nature within western discourse from the Renaissance to the present. By Nature (with a capital 'N'), Evernden means the idea of the nonhuman world purged of humans. Although he admits that before the idea of Nature was invented in western human discourse “entities and phenomena we now attribute to nature” did in fact exist, Nature was invented as a conceptual container to signify collectively the entire nonhuman world (p. 89). This created a problematic human/nature dualism. Being no fan of this dualism, Evernden says the following: “[I]f we want to prevent the realm of humanity or history becoming a subcategory of Nature, we are going to have to admit to ourselves that Nature is in fact a subcategory of Humanity or history—that we are, after all, the authors of the system we call Nature” (p. 94). He suggests here that if we wish to end the human/nature dualism, the only alternative to “becoming a subcategory of Nature”—what we might call total naturalism—seems to involve accepting some version of a social constructivist account of Nature. So far Evernden makes two typical causal constructivist moves. First, he admits that a more-than-human presence exists prior to the construction of Nature but seems unwilling to say much about this. Second, given three choices between a human/nature dualism, total naturalism, and metaphysical social constructivism, he rejects the first two. His social constructivist account of nature now takes a different turn.

As should be apparent from the preceding discussion, the entity which we take for granted as an objective reality has, in fact, a complex origin as a social creation. The fact that it *seems* obvious is a function of its absorption into our very expectations of the world, and a function of our willingness to dwell in the world of symbols and abstractions. But when we accept that this “nature” of which we speak is an *interpretation* of our worldly experience, we become open to the question, “what then, *is* our experience?” What *do* we encounter before we discover “nature?” Surely some *uncaged* experience of otherness must still be accessible to us? (pp. 109-110)

This “uncaged experience of otherness” is a “return to things themselves,” and when we react to this otherness with a “childish, radical astonishment,” we encounter something that is uncanny and wild (pp. 100-112).

Wildness, however, lies beyond the objects in question, a quality which directly confronts and confounds our designs. ... Wildness is not “ours”—indeed, it is the one thing that can *never* be ours. It is self-willed, independent, and indifferent to our dictates and judgments. An entity with the quality of wildness is its own, and no other’s. When domestication begins, wildness ends. (pp. 121, 120)

Evernden finds it difficult to talk about wildness. Because it ultimately is “not ours,” talking about it within human discourse can be an attempt to turn it into something which is ours—a social creation. The moral of Evernden’s social constructivist story is that a quality of *noumenal* wildness exists in nature that is beyond our grasp.<sup>22</sup> Far from being a mere social construction, and far from being some nonhuman presence that warrants only a brief mention, the wildness of things such as wilderness importantly retains a more-than-human presence.<sup>23</sup>

Causal and constitutive constructivists might be worried that discourse about what is more-than-human lapses into something incoherent when people such as Evernden make claims about an “uncaged experience of otherness” and a wildness that cannot be fully expressed by language. Kant, after all, claimed that we can’t talk about *noumena*. We seem to remain caught in a social constructivist trap whereby all discussion of nonhuman things such as wilderness necessarily becomes talk only about ourselves. In order to get out of this trap we need to recall a distinction between a concept of wilderness and a place of wilderness. When we think about the latter, we can make another distinction between a place that is socially mediated and a place that is literally constructed by human activity. Similar to the fact that all concepts are literal social constructions, many places also are socially constructed in a literal causal manner. Contrast Disneyland in Anaheim, California with the Chuckwalla Mountains Wilderness several hundred miles to the east in the Colorado Desert. The former and much of what lies within it are literally

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<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to note that Rolston (1997, 42) misreads Evernden as saying that nature is only a category or conceptual container and criticizes Evernden for failing to see that “[n]ature is what is *not* constructed by the human mind.”

<sup>23</sup> Graber (1995, 124) uses different terminology to make a somewhat similar claim: “[t]he ecosystem is defined in its own terms, but this wilderness is a social construct.”

constructed by intentional human activity. Can we say the same thing about the wilderness area and much of what lies within it? I have my doubts.

But a more empirical concept of ‘nature’ and ‘naturalness’ is also essential to both a means of distinguishing between what is culturally processed and what is more literally ‘constructed’; as a means, that is, of demarcating between the matter we transform, and the artifacts that we bring into being and that have existence only in virtue of that productive activity. Neither bodies (human or non-human), nor raw materials, nor wilderness, nor rural landscape are produced in this sense, and to that extent it is valid to refer to them as ‘natural’ entities and to recognize their dependency on causal laws and processes we cannot seek to overthrow. (Soper 1995, 42)

As Kate Soper notes, the entire physical world is not literally constructed by people.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the vast majority of the universe is not. While the concept of wilderness is socially constructed, and while the materials that constitute this paper you are reading right now literally have been put together by human productive activity, most of the physical objects that we can find in any designated wilderness area are *not* socially constructed by intentional human activity. Further, the fact that talk about wilderness is mediated through social discourse is not the same as a fact about the physical existence of what is more-than-human in wilderness (Soper 1996, 31-32).

Discourse about a place of wilderness can denote some of the more-than-human world, much of which has not been constructed in a causal manner by human social activities.

Beyond discourse, causal and constitutive constructivists might be worried that developing an account of what I am calling a more-than-human presence in wilderness is a sneaky way of letting in some form of metaphysical realism through the unguarded back door of social constructivism. While straight-forward realist accounts of wilderness (Rolston 1997) and realist accounts that can be applied to wilderness (Searle 1995) certainly are possible, a number of people argue for a middle ground position between social constructivism and realism, and I wish

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<sup>24</sup> Hacking (1999, 21-24) distinguishes between objects, ideas, and “elevator words” (such as facts, truth, reality, and knowledge) that can be socially constructed. See also Kukla (2000, 3) who says that something is “constructed if it’s produced by intentional human activity.”

to carve out such a position here. Social constructivists correctly show that human discourse mediates what we experience, all concepts are socially constructed, and a significant portion of the Earth's landscapes are causally constructed by human activities. Realists correctly show that there is a physical world beyond language, and some of the Earth's landscapes are not causally constructed by human activities. That is, human social practices and discourse *do* play important roles in helping define a more-than-human world that *does* exist to some degree independent of the human world. N. Catherine Hayles (1995, 53) calls such a position constrained constructivism; Anna Peterson (2001, 209-212) calls such a position chastened constructivism; and Kate Soper (1995, 4) identifies such a position as lying between nature-endorsing (realist) arguments and nature-sceptical (social constructivist and deconstructivist) arguments. Mick Smith (2001, 121) calls such a position contextual constructivism.<sup>25</sup> Smith importantly identifies a reciprocal relationship between nonhuman nature and human culture:

Similarly, we may have no direct epistemological access to nature but it is equally the case that we have no unmediated access to the reality of society, of culture, or the economy either. We may not be able to grasp nature except through the mediation of society but nor can we claim to understand society without taking into account the medium of nature. Once we recognize that there is no ontological dispute here, that both nature *and* society are *for real*, then epistemological debate is also seen to work both ways. Contra the naturalists, there is no master discourse that can assure agreement about nature. Contra the constructivists culture is not the only medium of our existence and the only thing that is constitutive of discourse. (p. 128)

Positing a mutual shaping of both culture and nature is contrary to much of the causal and all of the constitutive social constructivist discourse in which there is only a one-sided shaping (or creation) of nature by culture. Although Smith doesn't call it this, I will refer to the nature side of this relationship as a form of more-than-human agency that both limits and plays an active

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<sup>25</sup> Another middle ground position is developed by Proctor (1998) who combines pragmatism and critical realism.

role in how we (culture) come to shape and construct nature.<sup>26</sup> As Peterson (2001, 73) correctly notes, failure to acknowledge this active role of the more-than-human world makes culture “both a human invention and the basis from which everything else is brought into being.”<sup>27</sup> In a more-than-human world, humans cannot be both the sole cause and end-all of all worldly existence.

Causal constructivists who downplay this more-than-human presence and constitutive constructionists who simply deny this presence seem to be working with an assumption of human uniqueness—human cultures have an ability to create the world through social constructivist acts, an ability not found outside of human cultures. There is a worry here that constructionists are attempting to defend what Dale Jamieson (2000) has called human exceptionalism—the view that humans are unique and fundamentally different from all other things. Human exceptionalism goes back to antiquity but was effectively laid to rest by Charles Darwin (1859, 1871). Social constructivists who deny a more-than-human presence in the world seem to be denying the basic tenets of evolutionary biology. Vogel’s version of constitutive constructivism discussed above seems particularly troublesome in this regard. When Vogel (2002, 23) claims that “nature has *always* already ended,” and when Vogel (1996, 35) claims that nature itself is nothing more than a social category, he gives us a world created by and constituted through and through by nothing more than human social practices and discourse.

Because he denies the possibility of anything that is more-than-human, anything and everything

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<sup>26</sup> Similar to my distinction between human and more-than-human agency, Hay (2002, 22) argues that we need to make an important distinction between natural processes and cultural processes. Preston (2000, 235) discusses human embodiment and argues that the physical environment—through evolutionary processes beyond our control—shaped us into “upright, bipedal, terrestrial mammals with bilaterally symmetrical sensory equipment.” In this sense, nonhuman nature plays an important and often neglected role in human knowledge construction. See also Preston (2003).

<sup>27</sup> Ingold (1996, 119-121) calls this a paradox because culture seems to create both itself and nature; he argues for a way out of this paradox by developing what he calls an “ontology of dwelling” from hunter-gatherer societies that dwell in a world with no cultures, no nature, and no separation of cultures from nature. Kukla (2000, 68-79) identifies this as an infinite regress problem: constructivism itself is constructed, there is a metaconstruction of this construction, etc; he argues that this problem can be addressed by showing that there is a pragmatic limitation of what actually can be and what actually is constructed. Part of this pragmatic limitation is, of course, determined by the more-than-human material world.

we find on Earth is a product of this unique human agency. If a Darwinian denial of human exceptionalism is justified, Vogel's case for constitutive constructivism is not. Further, we should be careful when we claim as Vogel does that everything we find in nature literally has been created by human actions. This is simply not true. Much of what is in nature, especially within wilderness areas, has not come into existence as a result of human actions.<sup>28</sup> Vogel's constructivism is more accurately a project of *reconstruction* which has the effect of giving legitimacy to the continued radical transformation of the shrinking more-than-human world into what Vogel (2002, 32) calls the anthropocentric environment.<sup>29</sup> Given a planet that is rapidly being transformed into humanized landscapes, we should question such a project and recognize that there is a more-than-human world that can be the denotative recipient of wilderness preservation.<sup>30</sup> In an epistemological sense, wilderness advocates cannot help but preserve wilderness as it is socially constructed. Wilderness advocates, however, rightly seek to preserve a non-socially constructed, metaphysical, more-than-human world.

Let me pause here to summarize what I've said so far in this rejoinder to the social constructivist argument against wilderness. The claim that wilderness is socially constructed can be a social signification thesis about the meaning of the term 'wilderness', an epistemological thesis about either the term 'wilderness' or a place of wilderness, or a metaphysical thesis about a place of wilderness. Because all terms are socially constructed, and because knowledge of all places is mediated through human social practices and discourse, the epistemological thesis says nothing that is controversial. There are two forms of metaphysical constructivism: causal and

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<sup>28</sup> Vogel (2002, 27) claims that because human actions affect the entire planet, there is no wilderness left. This assumes that once humans touch something, it is no longer natural (p. 25). I identify this and refute it elsewhere as the no-wilderness argument (Woods 2001, Woods forthcoming).

<sup>29</sup> Kidner (2000, 346) argues that social constructivism is a project that reconstructs the nonhuman world "according to an industrial blueprint."

<sup>30</sup> The central theme of Lee's (1999) book *The Natural and the Artefactual* is that we are increasingly reducing the natural world to human artifacts, and there is a worry that we might end up with a thoroughly artifactual, anthropogenic world.

constitutive. Causal constructivists should accept that a place of wilderness is not fully constituted by social practices and discourse and that there is a more-than-human presence that exists independent of such practices and discourse. Constitutive constructivists problematically occupy a position of human exceptionalism that should be rejected. Constitutive constructivists are also wrong to say that wilderness areas are constituted by nothing more than social practices and discourse and that everything we can find in wilderness is a product of intentional human activity. A more-than-human presence of wilderness thus escapes both constitutive and causal metaphysical constructivism.

Having defended the denotative referent of the term ‘wilderness’ in this section, the connotative referent of this term still remains problematic because I have yet to respond to the problem of the social signification of wilderness. I turn to this problem in the next section.

#### **IV. POSTMODERNISM AND THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICATION OF WILDERNESS**

Recall the problem of the social signification of wilderness I raised above. Because there are no generic people and because people occupy many different standpoints based on social, political, economic, and other factors, there may be no common agreement over what the terms ‘wilderness’ and ‘nature’ mean. This problem of meaning also stems from the supposed fact that there is no single entity that we can call nature or wilderness (Macnaughten and Urry 1998). As Michael Bell (1998, 213) says, our different perspectives from social life will determine how we see nature and wilderness, and because these perspectives change across time and place, the meaning of nature and wilderness shifts. Wilderness preservation advocates supposedly fail to see this problem of the social signification of wilderness—that it has no fixed meaning across different periods of time to different groups of people. And if the concept of wilderness

connotes no fixed meaning, it is less than clear why wilderness preservation—the practice of preserving the same wilderness areas across time—should continue.

This problem of the social signification of wilderness constitutes at least one deconstructive postmodern or poststructuralist worry about wilderness. I should note that until now I have deliberately avoided referring to postmodernism and poststructuralism because of the different connotations these movements signify and because much of the postmodern and poststructuralist criticism of wilderness can be reduced to the problems of social constructivism discussed above. Postmodernists and poststructuralists are social constructivists of sorts, and my rejoinder so far to the social constructivist argument is also a rejoinder to postmodern and poststructuralist worries about wilderness.<sup>31</sup> In this section I explicate worries about wilderness that I believe are peculiar to postmodernists and poststructuralists and provide rejoinders to these worries.

Let's begin with postmodernism. Arran Gare (1995, 1) begins his book *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* by citing a definition of postmodernism from the *Modern-day Dictionary of Received Ideas*: “This word has no meaning. Use it as often as possible.” When one surveys the term ‘postmodernism’ within self-styled postmodern literature, this ironic non-definition might not be so far off base.<sup>32</sup> If there is a literal starting point for defining the term, postmodernism means something that comes after modernism. Max Oelschlaeger (1991) characterizes modernism as a conjunction of the European renaissance, scientific revolution, enlightenment, rise of capitalism, and rise of the industrial revolution. The defining features of modernism for Oelschlaeger are its completion of and intellectual divorce of humans from nature

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<sup>31</sup> Many postmodernists and poststructuralists seem to be constitutive constructivists. Klaus Eder's (1996) *The Social Construction of Nature* is illustrative of this. Eder (p. 31) claims that social constructivism is composed of cognitive descriptions and moral symbolizations which in turn depend upon symbols of nature. Nature itself is only a signifier, and “[t]he ‘signified’ in the descriptions of nature is society itself.”

<sup>32</sup> Consider for example what two environmental philosophers say about postmodernism and its predecessor of modernism. Smith (2001, 1) defines modernism as a “Promethean striving to go beyond all given limits” whereby we consume all of nature. Gare (1995, 6) defines postmodernism in part in terms of global corporate capitalism in its attempt to go beyond all limits and consume for the sake of consuming.

(p. 96) and the sanctioning of a “profound homocentrism” (p. 69) or the human domination of nature. Albert Borgman (1992, 25) defines modernism as a conjunction of the philosophies of Francis Bacon (1561-1626), René Descartes (1591-1650), and John Locke (1632-1704) who fused together “the domination of nature with the primacy of method and the sovereignty of the individual.” Jean-François Lyotard (1984, xxiii) defines modern discourse as that which legitimizes itself by making reference to a metadiscourse or grand narrative. Within philosophy, examples of grand narratives might include the liberal idea that all humans have moral rights, the Marxist interpretation of history as class struggle, and the epistemological story of knowledge as justified true belief. Lyotard (1984, xxiv) singles out the quest for objective conditions of truth within the sciences as being particularly problematic in light of deconstructive postmodern critiques of grand narratives, and he defines postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives.” Incredulity toward metanarratives also involves a loss of belief in the idea of human progress (Gare 1995, 4-6). Postmodernists tend to be sceptical that the natural sciences such as physics and biology will give us objective truth about the natural world, that political philosophy and political science will help us emancipate ourselves from oppressive social and political structures, that our economic standards of living will keep getting better, etc.<sup>33</sup> Deconstructive debate problematizes the justification and goals of all grand narratives.

How does wilderness preservation fit into this? Wilderness preservation advocates in the United States assent to belief in the idea that relatively unspoiled tracts of nature do in fact exist and can be preserved indefinitely across time within the National Wilderness Preservation System. The justification for wilderness preservation stemmed from nature writers such as

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<sup>33</sup> Zimmerman (1994, 11) defines postmodernism as our contemporary historical condition which is unstable because the progressive ideologies and basic assumptions of socioeconomic structures are being challenged from a number of different directions, especially from the radical ecologies of deep ecology, social ecology, and ecofeminism.

Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, Aldo Leopold, and Sigurd Olson who argued for the preservation of wilderness to protect its aesthetic, recreational, spiritual, scientific, and other values. This is the received wilderness idea that is now under attack by a variety of people including Callicott and Nelson (1998a).<sup>34</sup> The received wilderness idea, the justification for wilderness preservation, and the practice of preserving wilderness are called into question. Wilderness preservation is unmasked as a grand narrative that champions an idea, values, and a practice that have a problematic history, an unstable present, and an uncertain future. In a sea of radically changing philosophical, scientific, social, political, and economic structures and practices, wilderness preservation advocates supposedly cling problematically to the progressive environmentalism of wilderness in which the world becomes a better place with each new wilderness area preserved.

In addition to this grand narrative problem, postmodern critiques of wilderness problematize the meaning of wilderness. It is here that poststructuralism emerges as an undercurrent of postmodernism. While postmodernism may be construed as a general movement that involves a variety of different disciplines and concerns ranging from art to war, the subset of poststructuralism may be construed as more of a theoretical, philosophical critique of thought, writing, and subjectivity (Best and Kellner 1991, 25). Poststructuralism is defined in relation to structuralism, namely the structuralism of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Saussure analyzed language in terms of how it operated without reference to its evolution and historical properties. He argued that a language is composed of linguistic signs, each of which in turn is composed of a signifier—an acoustic or visual image such as the term ‘wilderness’ before the reader—and a signified—the concept connoted by the signifier, such as the idea of a place

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<sup>34</sup> It is important to note that deconstructive postmodernism itself plays little if any role in critiques of wilderness found in Callicott and Nelson’s (1998b) *The Great New Wilderness Debate*.

unoccupied and relatively unaffected by humans. There were two important properties of language that Saussure stressed. First, the significance of a word is in terms of its meaning, as part of a larger system of meaning, and a word is significant in reference to what the word is not (e.g., wilderness is not civilization). Second, a linguistic sign is arbitrary—there is no natural link between the signifier and what is signified. This means that words have no necessary connection to the world independent of language, and the arbitrariness of language supposedly leaves us with a sort of linguistic relativism, which in turn problematizes a notion of objective truth between the meaning of language and the non-linguistic “real” world. Poststructuralism began to make an appearance, most notably in France, beginning in the 1960s when people such as Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Jean Baudrillard took discourse beyond Saussurean linguistics in order to destabilize language, meaning, social institutions, and human subjectivity (the notion that each person is a unified self). This destabilization is often referred to as poststructural or postmodern deconstruction. Derrida (1973) claims that linguistic meaning can never be fully present—what has been characterized as an “indefinite referral of signifier to signified” (Best and Kellner 1991, 21)—and that when the meaning of a word is examined a seemingly endless series of meanings will emerge. Thus when we examine terms such as ‘nature’ and ‘wilderness’, we find that these terms have seemingly endless meanings, none of which is the “correct” meaning. Because of this feature of language, and because none of us has unmediated access to reality (the social constructivist epistemological thesis), Derrida (1976) rejects any foundationalist, epistemological approaches that posit a metaphysical reality or a “metaphysics of presence” that exists beyond language. More specifically, Derrida claims that western philosophy since Plato has been dominated by “logocentrism” which is a prioritizing of the spoken word over the written word.

The spoken word is an original, immediate access to the world of reality and truth invoked by western philosophers, while the written word is used to record, imitate, and copy concepts such as reality and truth.<sup>35</sup>

Following Derrida's deconstructionism, what remains of wilderness? We supposedly cannot posit what I am calling a "more-than-human presence" because there is no "metaphysics of presence." There is no original, primordial nature that we can call wilderness, and wilderness preservation seems to be a hopeless logocentric project. Any language used to talk about wilderness leaves language users with a seemingly endless number of wilderness subtexts, none of which have any fixed meaning. There is no essence of what wilderness is, and it is illegitimate for environmentalists to define wilderness using essentialist categories such as 'natural' and 'wild' (Quigley 1992).<sup>36</sup> Abandoning the grand narrative of wilderness preservation and belief in a more-than-human natural and wild world of wilderness, poststructural/postmodern deconstruction leaves us adrift in a linguistic swamp where any attempt to excavate ourselves by grasping onto a floating wilderness text seemingly keeps us forever stuck in discursive muck. Further, if we attempt to determine how we got lost by retracing the route into the swamp on our deconstructed map, Baudrillard (1983) would say that there is no swamp beyond our map, and instead we should recognize that the organizing principle of our postmodern world stems from simulation: codes and models from computerization, information processing systems, electronic media, and cybernetic control systems. Living in this simulation era, Baudrillard (p. 2-4) claims that we can no longer make

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<sup>35</sup> Another way of understanding logocentrism is to think of it as a system of thought which is self-legitimizing and defined in relation to an authoritative center (a rational—*logos*—centered account). Logocentrism can also be understood as a hierarchical system of dualisms: the spoken word is privileged over the written word, reason is privileged over emotion, culture is privileged over nature, etc.

<sup>36</sup> Quigley (1992, 303) claims that we should use poststructuralist deconstruction "to relentlessly tear down" the structure of logocentric thought and its dualistic hierarchies of domination.

clear distinctions between reality and representations of reality, and we are left with what he calls a precession of simulacra or hyperreality where there is nothing beyond simulated appearances. Disparagement for our meaningless world of hyperreality leaves us suspended in a kind of nihilistic melancholy.

Before we abandon preserving areas such as the swampland wilderness of the Florida Everglades and seek refuge in endless readings of texts (Derrida) or remain adrift within a hyperreal map of Florida (Baudrillard), let's look more closely at poststructuralism and postmodernism. I see at least three problems. First, consider the worry voiced above that constitutive social constructivism is a form of human exceptionalism. If this worry is well founded, I also worry that much of poststructural/postmodern deconstruction takes itself to be the *sine qua non* of human exceptionalism. Following my discussion of social constructivism above, it's not clear that wilderness is nothing more than a human sign endlessly signified and that human signification in and of itself creates all there is in the world (Peterson 2001, 58).<sup>37</sup> While most environmental problems, including wilderness loss, are caused by humans, these problems cannot be reduced to mere human discourse and language. Soper (1995, 151) concurs: "it is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer; and the 'real' thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier." Baudrillard might respond to Soper by questioning what's beyond our map of the ozone layer, as this map is composed of hyperreal observations and measurements made from machines such as the Total Ozone Mapping Spectrometer satellite. Baudrillard also might say that what we take to be reality cannot be separated from fiction, especially given that the British geophysicist who first measured the ozone hole over Antarctica in the 1980s thought that his spectrophotometer was

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<sup>37</sup> More specifically, in relation to human subjectivity and what we can know about the world, Peterson (2001, 58) says: "Poststructuralism's demolition of the Subject remains peculiarly blind to the imperial assumptions of human uniqueness."

broken and sent this instrument back to England for repair. The spectrophotometer, however, was *not* broken. Much of the international political community responded by phasing out the use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), worried that death by skin cancer—exacerbated by “hyperreal” ozone holes—was not fiction. Mincing no words about French poststructuralism and Baudrillard, Verena Conley (1997, 2, 38) responds:

Ecology can be the subject of a *persiflage*, the untranslatable substantive (registered somewhat ponderously as “mockery” in many English dictionaries) that connotes everything so disgustingly arrogant and even castrated about French salon culture, the area of debate that Claude Lévi-Strauss ... long ago called “une tabagie intellectuelle du Café de Commerce” (stale intellectual tobacco smoke of the Commerce Café), in which Parisian intellectuals draw attention to their voluble, if indeed real, argumentative brilliance that leaves the environment out of sight and out of mind. ... The “real” world is much *farther* from Baudrillard’s pen than he would like us to believe. He does not begin with real facts or detail, with concrete objects or the type of thinking they require, as do biologists, botanists, cartographers, feminists, and ecologists. It may be that Baudrillard takes leave of the world in order to regain ... the party at the Parisian press, the *salon*, the hour of the *apéritif*, the dens where wit, fascination, simulation, pure language, and *persiflage* constitute the raw material of a micro-environment that lives on nicotine and alcohol.

Hyperreality and an endless deconstruction of signifiers further our historical legacy of human exceptionalism and the domination of nature.

The second problem I find with poststructural/postmodern deconstruction is that it incapacitates concern for the more-than-human world and seems to leave us powerless whereby we can do nothing in response to our continued domination of nature (Gare 1998, 97-99).

Patricia Hill Collins (1998, 124) acknowledges the potential for postmodernism to provide a powerful critique of modernity and existing hierarchies of power relations but claims that disappointingly, postmodernism fails to actualize this potential within the realm of academic theory (p. 134). Collins examines the political implications of deconstructive postmodernism for Black feminist thought and activism and concludes that it is insufficient for three reasons (pp. 139-143). First, deconstructive postmodernism tends to go nowhere beyond endless

interpretations; it remains nothing more than critique and offers no constructive explanations of social phenomena. Second, deconstructive postmodernism tends to remain focused on gaining authority, legitimacy, and credibility through clever theoretical techniques and seemingly endless citations that often result in little more than confusion. Third, extreme localized relativism tends to be the destination of deconstructive methodologies that serve to undermine any group identity and authority African-American women might have. Collins' insights about postmodern deconstruction can be applied to wilderness preservation. There seems to be nothing beyond texts and signifiers that can be preserved, postmodern literature remains beyond the reach and understanding of most people who might be concerned about wilderness, and groups of people concerned about wilderness are made out to be primitivists who have little more than some theoretically problematic, naïve desire to return to a pristine nature that never existed.<sup>38</sup> Robert Frodeman (1992, 315) argues that much of postmodern critique remains too focused on deconstructing metaphysical certitude and misses an opportunity to help establish a "foundation of conversation and action" that can be used by human communities in practical and political ways. He concludes:

No critique is complete until it offers at least a sketch of what should replace the status quo. It is at this point that postmodernism too often has failed. Postmodernists have seldom offered a program for bettering society. The insistence upon respect for differences embodies only the negative goal of *freedom from coercion*. (p. 318)

Robert Hood (1998, 189) goes further and argues that postmodern deconstruction can serve to legitimate the very power structures it seeks to deconstruct by leaving little room for any open-minded discussion about what we can do to solve environmental problems. Thus, while the

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<sup>38</sup> For this last point, see van Wyck (1997). In regard to the second point, a personal experience is illustrative. In August 1999 I participated in a three day workshop on wilderness management in Montana put on by the United States Forest Service for field rangers who worked in wilderness areas. Many of the rangers, particularly those in upper management positions, were already familiar with Callicott's and Nelson's (1998b) book *The Great New Wilderness Debate*. They were aware that wilderness was under attack from postmodern writers, but most of the rangers I spoke with confessed that this attack was impenetrable because of its academic jargon.

modernist project of the domination of nature can be deconstructed textually, the actual social, political, and economic power structures that constitute this project remain intact.<sup>39</sup>

Beyond the problems of incapacitating concern for wilderness loss, collusion with the domination of nature, and human exceptionalism, the poststructural/postmodern deconstruction of wilderness also presupposes a wilderness that cannot be fully deconstructed. Much poststructuralist and postmodernist literature is directed toward deconstructing the wilderness/human cultures dualism (or nature/human cultures dualism). Such deconstruction, however, can only go so far because a prerequisite for understanding ourselves as cultured beings capable of performing acts of textual deconstruction is an understanding of ourselves in a negative sense of what we are not. That is, human cultures seem to presuppose nonhuman nature (Oelschlaeger 1991, 8-9). Oelschlaeger and others tell stories about the transition from Paleolithic hunter-gatherers to Neolithic herder-farmers. This transition supposedly led people to believe that they were no longer a part of nature, as they distinguished themselves, their lands, their animals, and their crops from nonhuman wilderness lands full of non-domesticated animals and plants. In opposition to the wild, humans became civilized. Soper (1995, 38-39) concludes:

An opposition, then, between the natural and the human has been axiomatic to Western thought, and remains a presupposition of all its philosophical, scientific, moral and aesthetic discourse, even if the history of these discourses is in large part a history of the differing constructions we are asked to place upon it. Whether we are asked to view nature as an external realm, or ourselves as belonging within its order; as vitalist or mechanistic; as the mere object or instrument of human purposes, or as dialectically shaping us as much as we shape it; all such thinking is tacitly reliant on the appreciation of our difference from nature or 'the rest of nature', and would have no purchase on our understanding without it. ... Arguments that would assimilate nature to culture by inviting us to think of the former always as the effect of human discourse presuppose the humanity-nature dichotomy as the condition of their articulation.

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<sup>39</sup> One of Conley's (1997) central arguments in her book *Ecopolitics: The Environment in Poststructuralist Thought* is that while the Parisian revolts of May 1968 helped bring forth a new and important French consciousness and concern about the environment, some of this consciousness and concern was lost and co-opted by later French poststructuralist thought and reactions to that thought.

Poststructural and postmodern attempts to deconstruct the nature or wilderness/human cultures dichotomy or dualism thus presupposes this very dichotomy or dualism as a distinction. It is misguided to reduce the more-than-human world to ourselves in an attempt to eliminate this dichotomy or dualism. While the entire world certainly can be occupied physically by humans and thought of as belonging to different human cultures, something must first exist that in turn can be occupied or assimilated.

The hope of wilderness preservation advocates is that a complete assimilation of nature into human cultures will continue to be foiled. But is this hope just another grand narrative toward which we should extend postmodern incredulity? Much of Oelschlaeger's (1991) project is devoted to showing how wilderness preservation can serve as a foil to the grand narrative of the modernist human domination of nature project. Although he develops what he calls a postmodern wilderness philosophy in the last chapter of his book, he does not embrace postmodernism wholeheartedly. Instead, he envisions wilderness preservation in terms of a posthistoric primitivism that somehow cuts between both modernism and postmodernism (p. 285). In support of postmodernism elsewhere, Oelschlaeger (1995, 10) cites Jim Cheney's (1989) essay "Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative" as "the most catalytic essay in postmodern environmental ethics." In this essay, Cheney (p. 118) champions postmodernism as an attempt to deconstruct western culture's dominant, privileged, and totalizing language and discourses. In place of this language and these discourses, Cheney offers contextual bioregional narratives in which nonhuman nature plays an active role in helping tell stories about landscapes.<sup>40</sup> I believe that the preservation of wilderness today can be viewed in a similar vein as contextual stories about human efforts to protect the more-than-human world and the active roles the more-than-human world play in creating and continuing to sustain what we

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<sup>40</sup> See also Cheney (1999).

call wilderness. The stories I tell elsewhere about wilderness preservation efforts in the BWCAW, the Green Mountains of Vermont, the Florida Everglades, the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, and the Mojave and Colorado deserts of California *are* contextual stories that involve both human and more-than-human actors (Woods, forthcoming). Just as human social practices and discourse have shaped all of these wilderness areas, the more-than-human actors that exist independent of human social practices and discourse have also shaped the human actors in these wilderness stories. In comparison to grand narratives deconstructed by poststructural and postmodern discourse, narratives of wilderness preservation are grand only insofar as they give voices to what is more-than-human.

The voices of this more-than-human presence of wilderness remain resistant to poststructural/postmodern deconstruction. These voices constitute a more-than-textual ground that can resist the human exceptionalism and practical incapacitation that goes along with such deconstruction. While the concept of wilderness has a social signification, this signification thus should not lead us to conclude that wilderness connotes nothing more than a series of endless meanings.

## **V. SOME FURTHER RETHINKING OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM**

The social constructivist argument—in its postmodern/poststructural social signification, epistemological social mediation, and metaphysical guises—is important because it forces us to reexamine the wilderness/human cultures relationship and to begin to explore the question of what wilderness is. A failure to take critical stock of how social practices and discourse shape the concept of wilderness and an uncritical acceptance of the concept of wilderness as nonhuman nature beyond the reach of cultural meanings leaves wilderness proponents vulnerable to a number of different problems that emerge in social constructivist discourse. When such

discourse is examined, however, a non-textual presence of the more-than-human world survives even the strongest forms of social constructivism.

In this final section, I consider two last positions that problematize the more-than-human world: French ecologies and Donna Haraway's cyborgs. Both of these positions deny that there is a more-than-human world independent of human cultures and problematize the issue of more-than-human agency. As I argue below, a sense of more-than-human agency is important to help make sense of wilderness preservation.

In *Divided Natures: French Contributions to Political Ecology*, Kerry Whiteside (2002) discusses a variety of French environmental thinkers that include systems theorists, political theorists, human personality theorists, ecosocialists, liberals, environmental activists, and other people who defy clear categorization. Whiteside (p. 12) claims that all of these different men ultimately offer a common interpretation of the reciprocal relationship between humanity and nature in terms of decentered ecologies.<sup>41</sup> He contrasts these different decentered ecologies with what he calls the centered ecologies of most American environmental thinkers.

In a centered ecological theory, the center is the fixed point. Everything else gets relativized to it. Either humanity is the center and nature is made to accommodate itself to human well-being or nature is the center and humanity has a moral duty to adjust its actions to make room for the flourishing of natural things.

What I will call the *centeredness assumption* that runs through so much English-speaking ecology obscures another option. There is a possibility that thinking about our ecological predicament might best be developed by avoiding the very habit of "centering" or attention. Rather than focus on how to adjust relations between two presumably distinct entities, one might open up ecological theory by examining how the *identities* of "nature" and "humanity" get constituted—together, reciprocally—in the first place. I call such theory *noncentered*. (p. 46)

For Whiteside, to have a center is to have some kind of fixed metaphysical identity where value can be located. Decentered ecologies shun a metaphysical identity fixed on either nonhuman

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<sup>41</sup> Because the term 'ecology' tends to imply scientific thought about nature, and because many of the French thinkers Whiteside discusses are not ecological scientists, he uses the terms 'ecology' and 'political ecology' to connote a theoretical position about the nature/human cultures relationship.

nature or human cultures, and any value that might be ascribed to such ecologisms is supposedly found in the reciprocal relationship between nonhuman nature and human cultures. This lack of a metaphysical identity might sound like a postmodern or poststructuralist move, but Whiteside is careful to distance French ecologisms from postmodernism because the latter is human-based (i.e., as human exceptionalism discussed above) and thus still “centered.” For French ecologism thinkers, in contrast, “‘human’ characteristics are so interwoven with ‘natural’ ones that such an assertion [of human based theory] is no longer deemed meaningful” (p. 114). Whiteside rejects nature-based (non-anthropocentric) value for the same reason he rejects the human-based (anthropocentric) values of postmodernism. This bodes ill for wilderness preservation because this practice is centered on the fixed identity and values of wilderness as that which are distinct from human cultures and that must be protected from such cultures. Because most of France exists as thoroughly humanized landscapes (p. 47), and because French thinkers avoid the centering of identity and values, wilderness preservation is a mistaken way of conceiving of the nature/human cultures relationship. For French liberal thinkers who specifically problematize wilderness preservation, “ecological debate can only be about choosing among various models of a humanized ‘nature’ and among the corresponding types of society—ruralist or ‘modernist’—that produce them” (p. 236).

One response to Whiteside is to say that he is talking about only France and French thinkers, and because of cultural and general landscape differences between France and the U.S., wilderness proponents in the U.S. can safely ignore him. I believe that this is the wrong response. Whiteside’s comparison of French to English-speaking environmental thinkers is both an explication of decentered French ecologisms and a criticism of centered (mostly) American thinking about nature. His rhetorical point is that American environmental thinkers might

benefit by reconceiving the nature/human cultures relationship along the lines of decentered French ecologisms.

Such a reconception, however, is problematic because, contrary to what Whiteside would have us believe, decentered French ecologisms seem to be centered on human cultures and subsume the more-than-human world to human cultures. Whiteside makes a number of problematic social constructivist moves I have discussed above: the existence of nature cannot be separated from its social signification for people (pp. 3, 236), the metaphysical existence of nature can be reduced to epistemological claims people make (pp. 134-135), and the existence of nature independent of people is presupposed but is subsumed into human social practices and discourse (pp. 71, 161, 182-183) or confounded with human projects (p. 3)—causal constructivism. Although Whiteside claims that French ecologisms go beyond an anthropocentric/non-anthropocentric divide, French environmental thinkers consistently call their ecologisms a “renewed conception of ‘humanism’” (p. 48). There is much discussion of the roles humans and human cultures play in shaping and constituting nature, but there is virtually no discussion of the roles nature has in shaping and constituting humans and human cultures. This is because humanism and the humanization of landscapes are presupposed. What is nature “shifts in relation to epistemological, social, and political-ethical changes” wrought by humans (p. 3), but the contrary is not true because “[n]ature is not an agent in any ordinary sense” (p. 284). The relationship between nature and human cultures is *not* reciprocal because Whiteside presupposes human agency but denies meaningful agency to (nonhuman) nature. His use of French environmental thinkers that problematize the nature/human cultures distinction by defining it away into some kind of reciprocal relationship (between entities—humans and nonhuman nature—that supposedly have no real existence independent of each other) defines

away any kind of a more-than-humanized world by presupposing there is nothing beyond the humanized world. The natures of Whiteside's *Divided Natures* are divided among French men, each of whom centers his nature on human social practices and discourse.

In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Donna Haraway (1991) problematizes the nature/culture dichotomy by collapsing it altogether. Chapter Eight (“A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century”) is an ironic political myth about cyborgs.<sup>42</sup>

A Cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as creative fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. ... The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion. (p. 149)

Cyborgs are made possible by the breakdown of the boundaries between humans and animals, animal-human organisms and machines, and the physical and non-physical (pp. 150-153). Haraway breaks down these boundaries as a way to go beyond untenable dichotomies—including the nature/culture dichotomy—and to problematize forms of hierarchical domination that have mutated in the postmodern twentieth century into what she calls “informatics of domination” (pp. 161-163). She also breaks down these boundaries as a socialist feminist response to the fractured identities of postmodern women's politics in an attempt to champion the cyborg as a new myth of political identity that embraces contemporary science and technology. In short, the cyborg is a new model of feminist political consciousness.

I am not concerned here with whether or not Haraway's cyborg is a good feminist model.<sup>43</sup>

My concern is what her cyborg myth does for the more-than-human world. If the cyborg myth is

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<sup>42</sup> This chapter was originally published as “Manifesto for cyborgs: science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s” in *Socialist Review* 80 (1985): 65-108.

<sup>43</sup> The literature on Haraway's cyborg myth is extensive. For a mixed assessment that gives some flavor of friendly and critical readings of Haraway, see Cuomo (1998, 82-87).

restricted to humans, I have no truck with it. Haraway's postmodern social constructivist myth of cyborgs, however, collapses the boundary between nonhuman nature and human cultures and seems to problematize the preservation of wilderness as nonhuman nature.<sup>44</sup> It is important to note that in another article Haraway (1992, 313) claims that what I have called constitutive constructivism is wrong-headed because it reduces everything to human representations and language. Haraway (1992, 297) claims that "technoscientific practices by particular collective actors" make natural objects, but she does not restrict the category of actors to human actors. She appears to be leaving the door open for the possibility that a more-than-human world exists and can be its own agent independent of human actors. But calling the actions of the more-than-human world "technoscientific practices" seems to close the door because natural objects *qua* natural objects are not technoscientific. Haraway, of course, may claim that there is no door to be closed or left open because there is no meaningful distinction between nonhuman nature and human cultures.

It's difficult to know what to make of Haraway's cyborg.<sup>45</sup> It is, of course, only an ironic political myth. Yet such a myth seems to make a mockery of the current practice of wilderness preservation. The danger is to move from using cyborgs as a model of political consciousness for feminists to a reconception of the entire world in cyborgian terms. If everything on Earth is the product of technoscientific practices, we end up with another version of a thoroughly humanized world, in this case a visionary world of mixed and matched nonhuman nature, humans, and machines. One of the main points of the practice of wilderness preservation, I believe, is to resist and hold at bay such a fully humanized vision, however much nonhumans are mixed within it. If Haraway really means to resist constitutive constructivism and is willing to

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<sup>44</sup> Sessions (1995, 13) claims that Haraway's 1991 book was the inspiration for the project that led to Cronon's (1995c) anthology *Uncommon Nature*.

<sup>45</sup> For a thoughtful critique of Haraway and the difficulties of interpreting her, see McCormick (2000).

grant agency to a more-than-human world, a fully cyborgian world seems to make little sense.

Haraway's notion of agency seems to be askew.

[T]he spirit of the epistemological *jouissance* which is suggested by the images of Cyborg, Trickster, the metaphors of dance, and so forth, also obscures the located, limited, inescapably partial, and *always* personally invested nature of human "story making." This is not merely a theoretical point. Deconstructionist readings that enact this protean fantasy are continually "slip-slidin' away"; through paradox, inversion, self-subversion, facile and intricate textual dance, they often present themselves (maddeningly, to one who wants to enter into critical dialogue with them) as having it any way they want. They refuse to assume a shape for which they must take responsibility. (Bordo 1990, 144)

Susan Bordo points to the difficulties of attempting to assess Haraway's shifting argument or, rather, lack of an argument. In the end, perhaps the proper response to cyborgian irony is ironic human laughter.

Haraway and Whiteside reveal the danger of attempting to collapse the distinction between what is human and what is more-than-human because they both collapse the distinction into what is human, as opposed to something between or beyond the distinction. Similar to other social constructivist critiques that deny there is a more-than-human world, they end right back up in a fully humanized world. If my critiques of various forms of social constructivism in this paper are correct, and if we wish to make some sense of the concept of wilderness, we should resist constructivist journeys that only lead us back to ourselves.

Whiteside's journey through the French conceptual landscape leaves out more than just a more-than-human world. There is no discussion of the ecologisms of French women—all of the primary French environmental thinkers he discusses are men—even though the term '*ecofeminisme*' ('ecofeminism') was coined by a French woman (d'Eaubonne 1974). Whiteside argues that wilderness preservation is an alien notion in French environmental thought. Apparently it is not so alien in nearby French-Belgium thought, as Andrée Collard (1988)

dedicates her book *The Rape of the Wild* in part “to the wonder of this Earth, the wilderness.” Whiteside’s failure to discuss ecofeminism is particularly interesting given what some ecofeminists have said about wilderness. While there is no monolithic ecofeminist position on wilderness, and indeed no single ecofeminist position on anything perhaps beyond identifying connections between the human domination of nature and patriarchal sexist subordination (Warren 1990), several ecofeminist thinkers have argued that we need to conceive of wilderness in more active sense as the *presence* of nature as opposed to a more passive sense in terms of the *lack* of humans (Gaard 1997; Plumwood 1998; Plumwood 2002). The term ‘more-than-human world’ expresses this presence of nature, and I believe that it is better to conceive of wilderness in this positive manner rather than by using the negative term ‘nonhuman nature’—a simple lack of humans. Negatively defined nonhuman nature is an empty place that exists only in relation to what it is not. The more-than-human world has a positive presence and importantly can connote a sense of agency found in nature.

An active more-than-human agency stands in contrast to a world of human agency and passive nonhuman nature that waits to be acted upon or left alone by people, produced by cyborgian, technoscientific practices, or socially constructed by human practices and discourse. I conclude that the concept of wilderness can withstand what I have broadly construed as the social constructivist argument.

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