Joseph Whitson. 2025. *Marketing the wilderness: Outdoor recreation, Indigenous activism, and the battle over public lands.* University of Minnesota Press. ISBN 9781517915117. $22.95

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In Joseph Whitson's *Marketing the wilderness: Outdoor recreation, Indigenous activism, and the battle over public lands*, the author frames the creation of wilderness as "the outdoor recreation industry's most successful marketing campaign" (p. 3). The premise, no doubt provocative to some, comes into focus in his critical examination of the outdoor recreation industry's portrayal of wilderness, the colonial history from which those portrayals are produced, and its implications for Indigenous communities. Through a combination of social media analysis, digital ethnography, and historical research, Whitson delves into how marketing strategies have historically and contemporarily contributed to the marginalization of Indigenous communities. *Marketing the wilderness* unfolds over six chapters, beginning with a contextualization of the political, social, and environmental exigencies for this project, including a historical analysis of the systems at work in outdoor recreation marketing. This is followed by various applications of his framework toward contemporary conflicts over land and digital tropes often deployed by the outdoor recreation industry.

The book begins with a powerful critique of "public land" (p. 27), the various cultural narratives used to describe this concept as virtuous, and how the outdoor recreation industry has profited from these characterizations. The widely celebrated line from the famous 1940 folk song by Woody Guthrie, "this land is my land, this land is your land," is often evoked in patriotic speeches and by the outdoor recreation industry as well. What is obscured is the fact that public lands in the US, and the political and corporate forces that bring them into being, are also deeply entrenched in their relationship to colonial structures. Further, the concept of public lands sustains the delusion that such land designations automatically protect it, something we are currently witnessing with the second Trump administration.

Central to Whitson's argument is the introduction of the term "wildernessing," the theoretical structure of which he credits as having been inspired by Traci Brynne Voyles' (2015) framework of "wastelanding," a term developed in her book, *Wastelanding: Legacies of uranium mining in Navajo Country*. While Voyles articulated this idea to describe the process by which corporate and governmental entities, alongside legal and rhetorical frameworks, constructed an image of the Navajo Nation—home to the Diné, rich with culturally significant sites and resources—as a wasteland, and therefore suitable for exploitation. In "Wildernessing," Whitson similarly describes the process by which the outdoor recreation industry constructs an image of wilderness as pristine, uninhabited land, which is the perfect backdrop to promote the consumptive experiences of those lands. Wildernessing is "the naturalization of wilderness" (p. 37). This portrayal not only erases the historical and ongoing presence of Indigenous peoples but also facilitates their disenfranchisement from lands that were unjustly taken from them. By promoting these areas as untouched havens, companies perpetuate a narrative that aligns with settler colonialism, effectively sidelining Indigenous histories and rights.

This book offers powerful and important critiques of visual advertising, from historical Abercrombie & Fitch advertisements to contemporary ones from recognizable brands like The North Face, Patagonia, and REI. I found myself particularly drawn to the many wilderness archetypes Whitson analyses and names throughout the book. In his chapter, "#explore" (p. 99), he critically examines the visual rhetoric of the "explorer" archetype that is so ubiquitous in the outdoor recreation industry. A vast landscape that is absent of any human presence outside of the explorer is a portrayal of landscapes that is not radically different from Romantic Era works by Thomas Cole and others. By marketing these lands as recreational paradises devoid of human presence, these companies contribute to a narrative that justifies and perpetuates the displacement of Indigenous peoples. In these images, featured in outdoor industry advertisements and reproduced by settlers on social media: explorers are tiny among towering mountains—the "classic adventure shot"; or their legs point out of an open tent flap to reveal an inviting landscape—the "portal shot"; and a flashlight at dusk illuminating the path ahead—the "light in the dark shot." There are photos in this chapter that the author took himself, which makes sense given that the points he makes are clearly made by someone well-versed in the art of photographic storytelling. I

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appreciated Whitson's decision to implicate himself as a participant in the production of the very archetypes he critiques; however, I wish more scholars were willing to do that, especially in topics like these.

A significant portion of the book focuses on the contentious debates surrounding Bears Ears National Monument, in San Juan County, Utah, USA. This site has been at the center of public land advocacy, symbolizing the complex relationship between the outdoor recreation industry and Indigenous communities. Whitson examines how corporate interests, political decisions, and Indigenous activism intersect in this context, shedding light on broader themes of land commodification and cultural erasure. Despite the pervasive influence of corporate marketing, Indigenous and decolonial activists are actively challenging these narratives. Whitson highlights how these activists utilize various platforms, including social media, to subvert traditional marketing strategies. By sharing stories, histories, and perspectives, they introduce new narratives that emphasize the deep-rooted connections between Indigenous communities and their ancestral lands. Whitson shows how this Indigenous activism serves to counteract the dominant portrayal of wilderness and advocates for a more inclusive understanding of these spaces.

It is no coincidence that my book, *Recreational colonialism and the rhetorical landscapes of the outdoors,* has been published in the same month and year as Whitson's book; I view them as complementary in several ways, but the historical moment in which these books were published is worth lingering on. The dramatic rise of the outdoor recreation industry during the years leading up to the publication of these works has been characterized by a massive increase in participation in outdoor recreation, with the outdoor recreation industry now valued at a staggering US$1.2 trillion. During this time, half of the US states have established offices of outdoor recreation, and nationally, federal legislation such as the EXPLORE Act has been signed, which is aimed at expanding access, among other details. And the formation of many new organizations designed to strengthen inclusion in the outdoors and environmental education has made significant gains in the last few years. Given this context, a productive cultural and historical analysis of outdoor recreation like this is timely and necessary. There is certainly some overlap in our historical contextualization and how the outdoor recreation industry draws on the narrative history of the frontier and other concepts to curate expectations and experiences on so-called public lands. Whitson draws our attention to the fact that this period is further characterized by representations of wilderness as they have cohered to cultural identifications across the social media landscape and industry branding efforts.

Whitson demonstrates the value and applicability of wildernessing as an analytical concept, specifically in the ways it illuminates the rhetorical tactics of the outdoor recreation industry, exploiting the visual frontier tropes that have historically appealed to settlers. Wildernessing also effectively illustrates how marketing strategies erase Indigenous presence and reinforce exclusionary conservation policies. The term, however, is limited in how it invites readers—specifically settler readers—to engage with settler colonialism, not just as the structure that it is, but also through the identity it produces: settler. In *Settler: Identity and colonialism*, Emma Battell Lowman and Adam Barker (2015) take head-on the idea that the structure of settler colonialism produces the personal and political identity of "settler" that one can either "claim or deny," but "inevitably live and embody" (p. 2). Whitson refers to wildernessing as "a strategy of settler colonialism," a process "invested in the settler colonial agenda" (p. 6). Wildernessing is quintessentially a colonial process, produced and sustained by settler people, embodied in the thoughts, actions, and feelings of settlers each time they enter whatever they believe to be wilderness. Further, wilderness is, outside of its specific legal application in designating places as such, a concept, an idea that has changed over time and is often associated or conflated with other terms like nature, environment, etc. Whitson expertly unpacks this early in the book. In short, wildernessing connects settler readers to the structure and processes of settler colonialism. It doesn't, however, do enough to implicate settlers directly, as settlers actively engaged in sustaining settler colonialism. Moreover, I fear that funneling this important identity through an already elusive term like wilderness obscures the personal connections Whitson wants readers to make.

Ultimately, Whitson urges readers to reconsider the ethics surrounding recreational land use, from industry to individual participants. He advocates for a more engaged approach that acknowledges issues of cultural representation and appropriation, informed by Indigenous perspectives. This involves recognizing the historical injustices faced by Indigenous communities and ensuring that their voices are central in discussions about land use and conservation. *Marketing the wilderness* is a vital contribution to critical studies of outdoor recreation, particularly at the intersection of environmental justice, environmental humanities, and American studies. As a scholar of rhetoric and composition, I can say with certainty that this text will be valuable to those

with an interest in visual environmental rhetoric and media studies as well. I also think the book is quite accessible and should be required reading for anyone working within the increasingly large orbit of outdoor recreation.

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