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A Trip to the Co-op: The Production, Consumption and Salvation of CanadianWilderness

Marie Vander Kloet

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Résumé de l'article

Dans cet article, nous analysons les catalogues de 1987-2007 de la MountainEquipment Co-op (MEC) afin d'examiner la façon dont elle exalte le milieusauvage, invite à la consommation et offre ses produits comme un moyen de sauver lanature ainsi que ses membres. Nous visons à établir des liens entre, d'unepart, la compréhension de la nature et, par conséquent, de la nation et,d'autre part, la production d'une conscience d'écoconsommateur.

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Marie Vander Kloet

A Trip to the Co-op: The Production, Consumption and Salvation of Canadian Wilderness

Abstract

In this paper, I analyze Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC) catalogues from 1987-2007, in order to examine how they produce wilderness, invite consumption and offer up their products as a means of salvation for wilderness and for MEC members. My analysis of the MEC catalogues draws connections between how wilderness, and indeed the nation, is understood through the production of a conscientious eco-consumer.

Wilderness is understood as pivotal to Canadian national identity and has been used to demarcate those imagined within and outside of the nation. I draw attention to shifts in wilderness discourse in order to see how wilderness has been employed for economic, political and social uses. I show that images and texts in the MEC catalogues call on familiar wilderness tropes thus making a consumer subject appear both logical and desirable for its members and for the nation.

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous analysons les catalogues de 1987-2007 de la Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC) afin d'examiner la façon dont elle exalte le milieu sauvage, invite à la consommation et offre ses produits comme un moyen de sauver la nature ainsi que ses membres. Nous visons à établir des liens entre, d'une part, la compréhension de la nature et, par conséquent, de la nation et, d'autre part, la production d'une conscience d'écoconsommateur.

La nature qui est considérée comme étant le pivot de l'identité nationale canadienne est utilisée pour distinguer l'image identitaire véhiculée au sein de la nation de celle véhiculée à l'étranger. Nous prêtons une attention particulière à l'évolution du discours sur la nature afin d'étudier l'exploitation de la nature à des fins économiques, politiques et sociales. Nous montrons que les images et les textes dans les catalogues de la MEC transmettent un milieu sauvage familier et rendent, par conséquent, la consommation tant logique que souhaitable pour ses membres et pour la nation.

Mountain Equipment Co-operative (MEC) is a consumer co-operative that was established in 1971 by a group of climbers and mountaineers who needed a place to purchase outdoor recreation gear that was, at that time, not available through mainstream Canadian retailers. MEC has since exploded into an enormous co-op; it is Canada's largest supplier of outdoor

equipment and, in 2007, had over 2.6 million members in nearly 200 countries. MEC operates a print and online catalogue with web, mail, and phone order services in addition to its stores located in 11 major Canadian cities.

I argue in this paper that while MEC is obviously a place for outdoor enthusiasts to purchase consumer outdoor recreation goods, it is also a place to consume wilderness and nation. Through an analysis of MEC catalogues from 1987-2007, I examine how MEC employs discourses on wilderness and the Canadian nation in shaping a particular consumer subjectivity. Calling on familiar tropes of empty and threatened wilderness and a benevolent Canadian nation, MEC grafts together a subjectivity which positions consumption as a satisfying means of political engagement. To some extent, the production of the MEC subject as a 'conscientious eco-consumer' pre-emptively squelches the possibility of further engagement with environmental concerns. This eco-consumer subject is enticing because of what it allows MEC members to erase from their collective conscience. There remain, however, inconsistencies in the production of the 'eco-consumer'; it is in these moments where the possibility of more politicized engagements are opened up to MEC members.

Mapping the terrain

Canada's wilderness

Nature or wilderness is understood by social nature theorists as constructed or produced (socially, historically, economically, and discursively) (Anderson; Castree; Castree & Braun; Demeritt; Harvey; Moore, Pandian & Kosek). The construction of nature is also conceptualized as inherently political (Cronon, 1996a; Everden). Everden suggests that in order to know ourselves (as humans, in the humanist tradition) we created nature. However, this very process has erased our presence within nature (60; see also Price). It is from this social nature scholarship and from its analysis of the constitutive relationship between nature/wilderness[1] and various subjects that my inquiry into Mountain Equipment Co-op begins.

For Canadians, wilderness has been variously understood as savage, sublime and most recently, as threatened. Wilderness, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, was seen as a place outside of civilization where dangerous beasts and savages lived (Bordo; Cronan, 1996b; Manore; MacLaren; Nash). Contact with wilderness is risky: it opens up the possibility of slipping into savagery (Atwood) but also the potential to reaffirm one's civility and respectability[2] by returning from the wilderness unscathed (Braun; Phillips). In constructing wilderness as savage and dangerous, it is possible to see the corresponding gendered and racialized subjectivities produced through these discursive arrangements.

The shift to seeing wilderness as pristine and sublime corresponds with increased anxiety at the close of the 19th century regarding the mechanization of life in cities and its potential effects on city dwellers (Lacombe; Manore; Nash). This discursive shift corresponded with desires for 'untouched' or empty wilderness spaces which necessitated the removal of Indigenous People from newly significant wilderness sites (Jasen; MacLaren; Nash; Olwig; Spence; Wilson). The push to create wilderness spaces, such as national parks, reflects not simply a desire for sublime wilderness but the development of tourism and sport hunting enterprises (Binnema & Niemi; Loo). It is also worth noting that these newly manufactured wildernesses were constructed as best managed by white men (Adams & Mulligan; DeLuca & Demo; Thorpe). In these projects, wilderness becomes a space to be physically and discursively manufactured to correspond with social, economic, and national imperatives.

There exist significant tensions and debates surrounding how to understand wilderness–as savage and dangerous, as sublime and inspiring, as empty/emptied, as profitable and manageable. Despite these differences, one point of cohesion is the significance wilderness holds for the Canadian nation. Lawrence explores this arguing that:

> Canadian national identity is deeply rooted in the notion of Canada as a vast northern wilderness, the possession of which makes Canadians unique and "pure" of character. Because of this, and in order for Canada to have a viable national identity, the histories of Indigenous nations, in all their diversity and longevity, must be erased. (23)

Canada and Canadians have become intricately tied up in fantasies of a pure northern wilderness. Nature is often used as a nation-building device which operates by invoking particular wilderness spaces in nationalist discourses; these discourses simultaneously construct both the nation and the subjects within it (Berger, 1966; Mohanram; Shields). Mohanram suggests that nation and landscape[3] are closely and intricately linked. She argues:

> [t]he landscape functions as a scribe recording the passage of history of the nation and its people. The emotion attached to the landscape relates to its ability to release memory ... the reference to landscape makes the reader/viewer think of the nation; the nation, in turn, links it to its people. (5-6)

Mohanram articulates the discursive role that nature or landscape play in the making of a national community (see also Olwig). Further, she links landscape and nation with racialized bodies–making plain how imagining the nation is also about the strategic inclusion and exclusion of specific bodies.

In constructing nation through nature, the preservation of wilderness becomes increasingly vital. Cronon (1996b), Harvey, Nash, and Olwig clearly link the material protection of wilderness with the symbolic protection of the nation. Grant states that "for many non-Native Canadians, their wilderness and northern identity myths verge on sanctity" (29); this affects the ways in which land marked as wilderness can be used. Both Lacombe and Manore are also concerned with how wilderness as sacred (national) space to non-Native Canadians will further undermine Indigenous People's claims to and use of land.

Unquestionably, some of the most insightful reflections on Canadian wilderness is found in Berger's (1966, 1970) examination of the connections between north, wilderness and whiteness. Berger assesses the discourse of the 'true north strong and free', exploring how the weather and climate, epitomized in images of snow-capped mountains and icy lakes, have been used to construct Canadians as a certain type of people. Berger does this by drawing attention to how the Canadian climate has supposedly enabled only desirable races to prosper and inhabit the North, ensuring racial purity and the maintenance of northern values. Thus, as a result of the climate, Canada is understood as home to a superior race that embodies liberty, morality and white values. Dyer, in his analysis of whiteness, also points to how certain landscapes specifically mountains, have come to be connected with whiteness. Shields, like Berger, addresses how the North and wilderness are imagined to be instrumental to the making of both Canada and Canadians. He suggests further that wilderness and civilization are gendered and that for Canadian men, the entry into and the return from nature are vital to the production of white masculinity.[4] The connectedness of Canada, wilderness, and whiteness makes clear how this space figures centrally in the construction of subjects and citizens.[5] This vast empty nature allows for a vision of Canada as a nation that belongs to white, respectable men (Bannerji); Bannerji, in describing Canada as an "idyllic construction of nature and adventure" (63), outlines how access to Canadian citizenship and Canada as an 'imagined community', has been seriously restricted on the basis of race, class, and gender: those who were not white, not male and not ruling class are literally and figuratively written out of Canada.

As the wilderness becomes wrapped up in national mythology, expectedly, the protection of wilderness becomes increasingly urgent. Those places which invoke Canadian wilderness mythology most deeply suddenly require protection; recent examples include Clayoquot Sound (Braun, 2002) and Temagami (Thorpe). Increasingly in Canada, wilderness is understood as threatened by human interference. The infamy of books and films which address the destruction of nature, such as Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* and Sauper's *Darwin's Nightmare*, alongside increasingly popular events such as Live Earth and Earth Hour, hallmark a

discursive shift in how nature and wilderness are understood (at least in the global North). Although certainly not new, threats to nature have been articulated repeatedly throughout the 20th century and the transition to seeing wilderness or nature as threatened is increasingly understood as true. Further, conceptualizing wilderness as threatened corresponds with how 'we' must interact with it–which once again points to how particular subjects are imagined within this discursive arrangement. Maniates, referencing Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*, outlines subjectivities which emerge in this discourse. There is the greedy Mr. Once-ler, the righteous Truffula advocate, The Lorax, and lastly, the innocent boy, charged with the task of restoring the forest from a single tree. It is important to note that these figures, in particular The Lorax and the boy, approach their task as knowledgeable, moral, and selfless *individuals* struggling against a selfish and poorly informed Once-ler. Although MEC taps into a variety of wilderness discourses in its catalogues, the shift to understanding wilderness as threatened is tightly connected to the construction of a knowledgeable and moral subjectivity for its members.

I draw attention to these shifts in wilderness discourse for two reasons. First, they illustrate the long-standing and various ways in which wilderness has been discursively produced in Canada and how it has been variously employed for economic, political, and social uses. For Canada specifically, wilderness is understood as pivotal to our national identity and has been used to demarcate those imagined within and outside of the nation. Second, wilderness discourses inevitably shape and validate certain subjectivities. If wilderness is dangerous, there are those who succumb to its savage forces. If wilderness is sublime, there are those who bask in its purifying rays. If wilderness is threatened, there are those who would save it. My analysis of the MEC catalogues finds an intersection of these subjectivities and draws connections between how wilderness, and indeed the nation, is understood through the production of a conscientious eco-consumer. MEC employs wilderness tropes (empty, sublime, threatened) which are already familiar to many Canadians. This activation of the familiar makes its consumer subject appear both logical and desirable for its members.

On the production of subjects

Before digging into the analysis of the MEC catalogues, it is necessary to briefly describe and define two concepts that feature prominently in this analysis: discourse and the subject.[6] In this paper, I work with a Foucauldian notion of discourse, where it is "understood as an institutionalized use of language and language-like systems. Institutionalization can occur at the disciplinary, the political, the cultural, and the small group level. There can also be discourse that develops around a specific topic, such as gender or class" (Davies 88). Foucault describes discourse as simultaneously an instrument, an effect, and a means of resistance to power.

Discourses operate in order to produce specific knowledge(s) as truth, while discrediting or discounting others. At the same time, competing discourses resist this production of knowledge, offering alternate truths (Davies; Mills). For instance, there are competing discourses working to shape how to understand the removal of Indigenous People from newly developed national parks in Canada and the USA. While some scholars suggest that the forced removal can be understood as fitting with fantasies of empty wilderness (MacLaren; Spence), others argue that economic interests and tourism explain these practices (Binnema and Niemi). These competing discourses offer divergent ways of understanding both what wilderness is for, and also how to understand the forced removal of Indigenous People. Further, discourse cannot be conflated with its roots in language; its links to power require the consideration of discursive practices. Southgate provides a nuanced description suggesting that discourse is "a theoretical tool that can account for relationships between knowledge, practice, subjectivity, and power" (180). For this paper, I trace which discourses are at work in MEC catalogues and ask how they produce the subjects to whom they are addressed.

Foucault describes the subject as "an effect of discourses and power relations" (Mills 98). In this way, the subject does not exist outside of power relations, but rather is a result. The poststructural subject contradicts and complicates the humanist version of the self and identity. Identity relies on a rational, coherent understanding of the self; it is presumed that an individual makes rational choices, making agency central to identity (Davies). Subjectivity or the subject is thus outside the realm of individual or rationale choice or intention; it is contradictory and complex and an insightful tool for considering how we are made knowable through discourse. Foucault's work is useful for interrogating the MEC catalogues precisely because it attends to how subjects are produced–often outside of individual or rationale choice. Unlike a humanist examination of identity, where it might be useful to consider how individual members engage in and understand their consumption, this analysis traces how particular wilderness discourses come to be understood as true and how a conscientious eco-consumer's subject position is produced as logical and desirable.

Although there are various subjectivities grafted out in the MEC catalogues, the development of the conscientious eco-consumer figures centrally. By first addressing the discursive production of wilderness, I am able to illustrate how a consumer subject is assembled and presented as a logical extension of this discursive arrangement. The conscientious eco-consumer of the MEC catalogue is not coincidental, but in fact a strategic positioning of how MEC members are to participate in environmental initiatives. In my examination of the production of this subject, I also work to illustrate how power figures in. Foucault's work on

discourse and the subject necessitate an interrogation of power; thus, the effects of the production of this subjectivity must be addressed. It is necessary then to consider these questions: What are the consequences of the production of this conscientious eco-consumer? How is the uneven operation of power evident in this process? What is at stake in taking up this subject position? To answer these questions, close examinations of wilderness discourse and the techniques through which the consumer subject is produced are vital.

MEC's wilderness

In a catalogue that features outdoor recreation equipment and clothing, the presence of a consumer subject is hardly surprising. However, for MEC, making consumption tenable to its membership is a daunting task–a conundrum which figures centrally in the catalogues and in this analysis. In my examination, I show how consumption is made palatable by tying it to certain wilderness discourses. For MEC, without a particular understanding of wilderness, there is no space for outdoor recreation and no need for products to use in it. Thus, MEC is invested in structuring how wilderness is understood by its members.

Throughout the MEC catalogue, wilderness is portrayed as vast, breathtaking, and picturesque. There is an abundance of images of pristine, untouched wilderness in the catalogues which is demonstrated in a number of catalogue covers. The cover images from Winter 1987, 1988, 1999, and 2000 all feature impressive scenes of untouched snow and mountain scenes. Each of these covers also features a MEC member entering at the periphery of the image. On the 1987 cover, a sole figure stands on a peak looking out into a sea of clouds and a far-off mountain. On the 1990 cover, a sole skier moves into an untouched snowy space in front of treacherous and precarious mounds of ice and snow. On both the 1999 and 2000 cover images, a tiny solo skier moves slowly through a sea of white snow either in a coniferous forest (2000) or up a mountain side (1999); the small figure is sharply juxtaposed against the impressive and vast white snow. In all of these images, we see the MEC figure moving into an untouched wilderness. There are no signs of previous human interference, no footprints or ski trails, and no traces of development. The entry of the MEC member does little to dismantle the fantasy of this space as empty; in fact, it is the subtle, nearly unnoticed entry of the skiers and hikers into nature that solidifies this space as untouched. In these photos, the moment of contact is made visible, yet the fantasy of empty wilderness remains intact.

Catalogues regularly feature images and quotations submitted by MEC members, and each issue provides instructions on how to submit materials. MEC members describe how they need to create distance between themselves and certain types of technology in order to relish their wilderness experiences. Technology often associated with the city, such as

cell phones, computers, and televisions are marked as distracting, stressful, and inauthentic. In contrast, wilderness technology, such as avalanche beacons and GPS systems, are marked as necessary, even pleasurable trinkets which do not distract from one's experience of nature. In the Winter 2005 catalogue, a member suggests, "I can be free from everything, no cell phones, no contact with the outside world" (40). Similarly, in Summer 2007, a member reflects on his mountain hikes with his wife saying, "hiking gives us a chance to reconnect and talk in a way we can't at home when we're cooking dinner, competing with the TV, or worrying about tomorrow's meeting" (48). In each of these quotes, representative of a larger series, we see that MEC members desire a place that is free of human interference–this is something that untouched wilderness offers them. Further, being in untouched and pristine wilderness allows MEC members to experience their most authentic self. What is heard in these quotes is a desire to be in a real and authentic wilderness, one that is truly empty of humans and human effects. Alongside these quotes and images of MEC members entering the wilderness, we see a proliferation of empty wilderness images: sunsets, rivers, sounds, mountains, snowy forests, icy lakes, endless spreads of tundra, and impressive natural flowers litter the pages of the catalogues. Interestingly, in the most recent catalogues, wilderness images are more sparingly used and are primarily featured in impressive two-page spreads rather than in an abundance of smaller pictures and the use of a backdrop for products. Regardless of small shifts in the formatting of the catalogue, the use of particular images and descriptions of wilderness remains prevalent. Mountains, snow, coniferous forests, and glaciers figure prominently in the catalogue; this is unsurprising, as MEC was founded by climbers and mountaineers. However, the repetition of these images and the language that surrounds them work collaboratively to construct the wilderness as an empty space for MEC members to retreat to.

Despite the impressive number of images of a pristine, mountainous nature, there remains an undercurrent of anxiety throughout the catalogues. It is evident that MEC is concerned with the substantive threats that wilderness faces from human interference. MEC is involved in advocating for particular types of backcountry hiking and camping practices which "reduce environmental degradation, and help conserve the beauty and health of our favorite areas" (Winter 1995, 31). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, we see short notes in the catalogue, such as tips on how to reduce one's environmental impact, in addition to full page articles in The Outsider newsletter.[7] These articles, such as "Decreasing our impact on the wilderness" (Winter 1995), carefully lay out for readers how to set up a tent, have campfires, defecate and interact with wildlife with minimal impact. Alongside this eco-pedagogy, repeat emphasis is placed on the abundance of backcountry visitors who do not adhere to these guidelines and the subsequent effect it has on the aesthetics and health of the wilderness. These

tidbits of information and articles were solidified in 2006 when MEC became a founding partner of Leave No Trace Canada. This program is "committed to maintaining Canada's wild recreational spaces" through a series of 7 principles, including "leave what you find ... respect wildlife ... dispose of waste properly" (Summer 2006, 45). In assembling this environmental ethos, MEC scripts humans out of the wilderness. Although there is a concession for humans to visit, they are clearly not envisioned as part of it. Rather, humans are produced as outside the wilderness, imagined simultaneously as a threat to its sustainability and as its protector.

In addition to providing these tips and educational tools, MEC is also involved in educational and, to some extent, political endeavours which reveal how the wilderness is reproduced as empty and as threatened. MEC participates in several conservation and preservation organizations, educational initiatives, and advocacy projects. Two significant examples of this are MEC's endorsement of the Wilderness Charter and The Big Wild, Canada's wilderness protection movement. In 1991, the MEC board of directors endorsed the Wilderness Charter. This Charter explicitly ties both a vast empty wilderness and its protection with Canadian national identity. Here, the salvation of the nation rests upon the preservation of wilderness spaces. Endorsing the Charter is an interesting choice for MEC, as it speaks both to preservation and to nation building. In 2007, MEC announced that it was partnering with the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society to launch The Big Wild. Included with this announcement was an image of a man with a campsite set up on a roundabout with cars traveling around him. The announcement reads "don't let it come to this...far too much of Canadian wilderness is being dug up, cut down or paved over. Small fragmented areas that are temporarily spared are not enough" (Winter 2007, 35). In launching this initiative, MEC clearly positions wilderness as under threat and in need of protection, a role it nobly takes up.

The very premise of wilderness under threat presupposes a previously untouched space that is now on the path to destruction due to human exploitation. Oddly enough, wilderness can be rescued through human intervention. Even in recreating a pristine wilderness, the fallacy of untouched wilderness is not challenged. By removing litter, treading lightly and preserving space wisely, wilderness is returned to its presumed original state. Wilderness will restore itself, erasing any evidence of human interference and allowing for a forgetting of human intervention. This wilderness fantasy is not unique to MEC; rather, MEC taps into wilderness discourses already familiar to its members. What MEC does differently is shape the sorts of practices that are seen as logical in relation to this understanding of wilderness. Positioning wilderness as threatened might imply that radical change is needed–that members should petition governments for stricter environmental legislation or challenge developers' roles and interests in their communities. Perhaps public

demonstrations and media campaigns should be undertaken to shift public consciousness. MEC does not leave the solution to members to infer: consumption, albeit a very specific form of consumption, is presented as a desirable and logical response to wilderness's threatened state.

Shopping for Wilderness

The MEC Environment Fund is one of the first instances in the Co-op where issues of environmental degradation were addressed. The MEC Environment Fund is the result of member interest in developing a more environmentalist identity for the Co-op. Rather than simply supplying gear for participating in outdoor recreation, members were interested in protecting the places in which outdoor recreation took place. The board of directors, described as "somewhat conservative and cautious" (Summer 1990, 41) was reluctant to undertake this. At the 1987 Annual General Meeting, member survey results indicated overwhelming support, with few objections from urban centres (Vancouver, Toronto, Calgary), for MEC to become involved both politically and financially in environmental projects (Winter 1988). It is this set of survey results that motivated the board to alter their position. The environmental initiative was originally intended to focus on the preservation of wilderness spaces and educating MEC members on the safe and environmentally sound use of MEC products (Winter 1988, 22). It was determined that a fraction of a percentage of sales[8] would be put towards the Environment Fund in order to fund preservation organizations whose environmental ethos was matched by MEC's. One of the earliest funded projects was the preservation of Smoke Bluffs, a popular climbing spot in British Columbia. There was a concern that the Smoke Bluffs might be shut down due to environmental damage and liability concerns from landowners. MEC funds were used to provide amenities such as toilets and picnicking areas and to assist organizations seeking to purchase the land for preservation (of both the natural space and its use for climbing). Other early initiatives include funding organizations involved with wilderness research (with the intent of advocating preservation), repair of trails and outdoor recreation amenities, and land acquisition. By 2006, the fund had provided over seven million Canadian dollars to a vast array of projects and initiatives (Summer 2006, 4). In 2007, the fund was organized into four distinct areas: research projects, land acquisition, education, and advocacy projects.

The launch of the Environment Fund marked the arrival of a variety of 'environmental' products in the catalogue, including printed t-shirts, maps, books, and clothing. Beginning in 1988, a number of print screened t-shirts with 'environmental' messages were featured in the catalogue. Included in these are products featuring the Stein River, the Smoke Bluffs, Temagami, and Carmenah Valley. Each of these natural spaces is positioned as under threat from either industry (Carmenah Valley, Temagami), road

development (Stein, Temagami) or sale of private property (Smoke Bluffs). Interestingly, these nature spaces are represented as holding particular significance for the nation. The Stein River Valley is described as "the last significant wilderness watershed in southwestern B.C. A priceless heritage for all Canadians..." (Summer 1989, 44). Similarly, a proposed road extension in Temagami is said to be "endangering a wilderness canoeing haven of unspoiled beauty, a region that contains some of the tallest white pines in Canada. Every day logging roads encroach deeper and deeper into this wilderness of tremendous cultural, archaeological and scientific significance" (Winter 1990, 51). In each of these descriptions, threatened sites are imagined as important national sites. These initiatives point to both the urgency of protecting wilderness, particularly sites with national significance. Interesting, both the Stein and Temagami descriptions also emphasize that nature is a part of culture for Canadians; positioning nature as culture might seem to disrupt the fantasy of pristine nature, but in fact it further solidifies the urgency of keeping nature 'intact'. With wilderness intricately woven into national mythology, its protection becomes increasingly urgent. Wilderness, functioning as a site through which Canadians can ascertain their claims to whiteness and respectability and which is said to reflect on their national character, must be protected. Thus, the preservation of wilderness as empty and pristine is central to sustaining Canada's national mythology.

Through this exploration of wilderness, we arrive at the question of consumption. How does consumption get tied into the discourses of wilderness and nation in the MEC catalogues? The development of the Environment Fund was intended to address concerns and critiques of members; one founding member outlines this suggesting that

> We felt the Board should become more representative of the outdoor community, and this environmental issue was simply a part of that. As well as environmental advocacy we wanted some consumer advocacy, more democratic involvement, and more recognition of our roots–of the importance of mountain climbing and back-country skiing as opposed to the selling of trendy clothing. (Summer 1990, 41)

In responding to these concerns, MEC seems to position consumption as a way to meet members' needs, to shape how they are understood. Although there may have been a call for improved democratic involvement in the Co-op, the answer provided has resoundingly been one of consumption. It would seem that consumption is made tenable to members by positioning it as a means to convey who they 'really are', something that was at risk of being lost if MEC became just another sporting goods store.

Returning to the catalogue, it is possible to see how MEC members are invited to see consumption as a means of participating in environmental initiatives. The purchase of explicitly political t-shirts, such as the

Temagami "The Last Wild Stand", includes descriptions of how purchases will aid in the "battle to save this precious heritage" (Summer 1990, 50). Similarly, the Carmenah Valley shirt raises funds to build a boardwalk in a heavily visited area (Summer 1990, 50). In descriptions of various books, pamphlets, and other t-shirts, this is echoed. Purchasing these items is a way of participating in the environmental projects; in a few instances, other means of participating (through donations directly to wilderness organizations) are offered. Aside from financial contributions, there is little space carved out for MEC membership in these projects. In addition to offering members the temporary 'feel-good' euphoria of their philanthropy, these products offer a way to discursively produce oneself as a particular type of subject. Dressing in 'environmental' t-shirts and littering one's home with posters, books, and maps on threatened wilderness spaces construct the MEC subject as a conscientious consumer and environmentalist. These products are not like other products, just as MEC consumers are not appealed to as other consumers are; in purchasing these items and displaying them on bodies and in homes, the MEC subject is marked as critical and caring. Furthermore, the MEC consumer subject is aiding in wilderness preservation by consuming, as well as through the promotion of various initiatives by wearing and displaying these products. Using the scripts laid out in the catalogue, the MEC consumer can educate fellow consumers about the difference this t-shirt is making.

Tying products to particular wilderness projects is one of the ways in which the MEC membership is invited to critically consume. Two other examples illustrate how MEC constructs its products and their consumers as fundamentally different from the mainstream consumer culture it claims to loathe. For the MEC subject hesitant to wear an explicitly political t-shirt, the MEC heavyweight canvas shirt offers an alternative. This shirt features buttons made from the Tagua nut; this nut was "once common for button production before World War II, it fell out of favour with the introduction of cheap plastics" (Summer 1991, 20). The revival of this button industry was undertaken in conjunction with Conservation International and the Tagua Initiative in order to offer an alternative industry in Ecuadorian rainforests that might otherwise be destroyed (Summer 1991, 20). Additionally, a percentage of the funds from the sale of these shirts is allotted for education and training for local communities. With this shirt, consumption makes possible the revival of once thriving industries, saves rainforests and sustains the economies of local communities. Similarly, in 2001, MEC transitioned to using organic cotton in its clothing out of concern for the environmental damage done to the earth by the cotton industry. Organic cotton is positioned as a logical, sustainable, and affordable alternative to conventional cotton; the price difference for consumers (at MEC) is approximately an additional 10%. In a small article about the introduction of organic cotton to the MEC line, MEC indicates that they "hope you will partner with us in this environmental initiative, which you can support by

voting with your dollars through your purchases" (Summer 2001, 102). Further still, with minimal price difference and comparable texture and wear, MEC suggests that "about the only difference you might imagine you notice is a slight increase in warmth, but that'd just be your glow of virtue" (102). Here, the MEC membership is invited to view their consumption as a part of this project and to relish the moral rewards of participating in it. Through consumption, the MEC subject is produced as caring, conscientious and critical, not easily tempted by the vices of over-consumption.

However enticing the products might be, both the ones explicitly marked as environmentally sound, and all other items which, when purchased, support the Environment Fund, consumption must be made tenable to the MEC membership. In reading the catalogues, it is clear that members are portrayed as suspicious and critical of mainstream consumption and hesitant to buy into its traps. In a Summer 1995 article entitled "An Environmental Quandary", MEC acknowledges that some of its products are produced in environmentally damaging ways and cannot biodegrade, for example nylon climbing ropes. However, MEC circumvents the conclusion that outdoor recreation and the production of its gear should be halted by advocating the 'reduce, reuse, recycle' adage. By offering limited colour selections in clothing, they reduce the amount of dyes used. By promoting gear swaps, they encourage reuse of equipment, and by purchasing recycled fleece and later by developing a polyester recycling program (Winter 2007, 70-71, 84), they are able to produce new products from old, worn-out ones. This article is one of numerous catalogue pieces which emphasize how consumption at MEC is carefully thought through and nearly always out of necessity. Alongside these formally structured articles, features such as 'Retro Gear', which exhibit MEC clothing that has been in use for many years, emphasize how MEC members, who are unlikely to head out to buy a new item simply for a more current fashion, are primarily looking for function. In this discursive arrangement, consumption for MEC is positioned as always out of necessity rather than an uncritical desire for new things.

Beginning in 1999, the catalogues raise renewed attention to the quality products designed and manufactured by the Co-op.[9] These features entitled "MEC products Made for the Wilds" (Winter 1999) and later "MEC Brand Products Made for Wild Places" (Summer 2001), emphasize the "intelligent design ... superior materials ... uncompromising attention to detail...[and] a clear conscience" (Summer 2001, 4). The focus is on producing quality products which do not need to be replaced and which inspire confidence. Equally important to the development of superior quality products is the need for socially and environmentally responsible production[10] which offers the MEC subject "a clear conscience" (Summer 2001, 4) about their consumption.

Repeated calls for careful, rational, and nearly scientific forms of consumption shape how the MEC consumer is raced and gendered. The MEC consumer is invited to *consume* on the basis of critical and careful evaluation unlike a feminized consumer who irrationally *shops*. This consumer resembles the engineer (Mohanram 8-10): a subject who, using scientific knowledge evaluates, compares, and reaches conclusions through carefully thought-out and analytical processes. This subject is also clearly understood as white and male (Mohanram 10). Similarly, the MEC subject, through the forms of consumption he engages in, lays claims to whiteness and respectability.

Unsettling consumption

Despite the abundance of invitations to consume, the production of this conscientious eco-consumer is occasionally interrupted. There are two features of the catalogue and the Co-op that speak to this which I take up here, in order to see what alternate arrangements might be possible. I first examine a contest that holds, if only temporarily, the MEC subject accountable. Beginning in 1997, MEC held a self-propelled adventure contest.[11] Members were encouraged to write in about their self-propelled adventures directly from their front door. The call for submissions emphasized how often outdoor recreation requires an incredible amount of resources as MEC members often drive or fly incredible distances just to get to the start of their adventure. Members are encouraged to start their adventure recreation closer to home. This contest is an exciting disruption precisely because it unsettles the comfortable position that much of the catalogue offers to its members. Rather than positioning environmental destruction as something that others do, this contest directly implicates the MEC membership in their recreational pursuits. Further, it challenges MEC members to rethink how they define outdoor recreation and to imagine alternate ways of getting out into the wilderness. Although in many ways the winning responses to the contest actively reinforce some troubling assertions about masculinity and Canadianness, there remains the possibility of doing outdoor recreation differently. More urgently, this contest does not let members off the hook for their involvement in environmental degradation; it points to a critical examination of outdoor recreation practices. In contrast to the invitation to consume, the call for submissions urges members to reflect on and to participate in the construction of alternate discourses on wilderness and recreation.

Much more promising than this isolated contest is the structural organization of MEC itself. MEC is a remarkably successful consumer co-op. It has an enormous membership and the financial and political influence to shape outdoor recreation in Canada. Although there have been struggles along the road for MEC to become the co-op it is today, there has persistently been enough motivation to resist the temptation to become a

strictly commercial organization (Winter 1990). This is surprising in many ways given MEC's middle-class roots (Winter 1990) and its powerful position in the outdoor recreation equipment market. It is debatable how significant MEC's co-op status is for the vast majority of its membership. The MEC catalogues frequently feature articles which explain what a co-operative is, how it works, the co-operative movement, and MEC's history as a co-op. The frequency of these articles, and the lines of questioning that are often responded to, could convey that, for most members, the fact that MEC is a co-op is mostly irrelevant. Perhaps MEC is, for much of its 'membership', just a good place to shop. Nonetheless, there remains a substantive commitment to MEC functioning as a co-operative. Tremendous effort is put into encouraging members to vote in elections and many member-driven initiatives have transformed the Co-op, even if only subtly.[12] The co-operative structure of MEC, although perhaps not utilized to its full potential, holds real possibility. As a co-op, MEC is not driven exclusively by profit; thus, there exists the possibility for the membership to engage with the Co-op through means other than consumption. Although the consumer subject produced by the catalogues may seem fixed, the co-op structure undermines the stability of this subject position. By placing substantive emphasis on more politicized, critical engagement, MEC could open up possibilities for transforming how we understand wilderness and nation, not just how we consume.

What was lost in the construction of the conscientious eco-consumer?

The caring and critical consumer subjectivity that is assembled in the catalogue, although temporal and contingent, is not without consequence. In these invitations to consume, it is vital to see what is offered to the MEC subject. In the consumption discourse that snakes through the catalogue, what is temptingly offered is a position of innocence.[13] Through consumption of its products and ethos, the MEC subject is positioned as outside of environmental degradation, unethical production, and unreflective over-consumption. Maniates, in his critical analysis of consumer responses to environmental degradation, refers to this as the "*individualization of responsibility*" (33, emphasis in original). Maniates argues that the shift toward conceptualizing environmental degradation as the result of poor choices and the moral bankruptcy of selfish individuals rationalizes individualized responses. Subsequently, individual choices–such as conscientious consumption–are positioned as logical and effective reactions. Clearly reflected in the MEC catalogue is Maniates's concern with the growing 'green' industry and the failure to develop politicized critiques aimed at institutional rather than, or alongside, individual practices. What perhaps developed within the Co-op as a concern about environmental degradation and a desire for ways to collectively resist was translated into individualized choices between conventional and organic cotton.

Although it might quickly seem evident why MEC's conscientious consumer can do little to tackle environmental degradation, how it also becomes understood as a position of innocence requires further discussion. Lury draws our attention to the risks of using consumption as a way to build political solidarity, illustrating how in the making of a 'consumer', discourses of race, class, sexuality, gender, dis/ability, and citizenship are construed as peripheral, even inconsequential. The MEC subject, when produced as a consumer, becomes understood as unmarked (Mohanram; Razack). The conscientious eco-consumer seems unmarked in terms of responsibility for environmental degradation as well as who is able to take up this subject position. The consumer subject works under the artifice of being open to all; in its production, it appears as though all MEC members will be able to evenly participate in this subject position. However, the call for critical and evaluative consumption functions to script this subject as white and male. Further, the uneven distribution of power and access to resources in Canada suggest that consumer politics and consumer subjectivities are clearly inaccessible to many. It is perhaps the illusion of being accessible to all, in addition to claims to being 'green', that make this subject all that much more tempting. It appears as though consumer activism is feasible for all MEC members; therefore those who undertake it are best understood as responsible and respectable. Consuming conscientiously quickly becomes the extent to which members are challenged to engage with questions of environmental justice; broader interrogations of power (in both the context of the Co-op and environmental issues) are pushed aside in lieu of well-thought-out purchasing practices.

Although there are certainly compelling reasons to be troubled by the production of a consumer subject as a way of dealing with environmental degradation, it is necessary to also query what discourses on wilderness and nation MEC members are invited to buy into by taking up this subjectivity. The MEC catalogues take considerable time to demonstrate wilderness as a pristine and empty space. It is this wilderness which, when threatened, warrants protection through consumption. It is this same wilderness which affords Canadians the opportunity to understand them/ourselves as what Bonita Lawrence describes as "fundamentally 'decent' people" (23). The protection of wilderness is not simply a selfless goal but a strategy to ensure that certain national myths are kept intact. Securing a claim to innocence and respectability for MEC members rests on wilderness as empty nature; the destruction of wilderness threatens these claims. Inviting consumption on the basis of this understanding of wilderness is doubly concerning–not only for the limited political engagement that consumption offers, but also for the reification of wilderness as desirably empty. In mounting this examination of MEC's consumer subject, I posit that not just the call for consumption, but also the discourses on wilderness are of central concern. The invitation to shop for wilderness simultaneously reproduces it as

desirably empty and secures a position of innocence for the conscientious eco-consumer.

Yet, as seen in the push for a more environmental identity, MEC is malleable. The co-operative structure allows for a shift in collective identity, the framing of consumption and understandings of wilderness. The possibility for a more accountable approach to consumption, as well as to wilderness and nation, is kept within reach. Considerable discursive shifts in how wilderness and the Canadian nation are understood are necessary. Further, corresponding subjectivities must address the uneven distribution of power, calling for accountability and collectivity rather than innocence, respectability and individualism.

Notes

1. The social nature scholarship refers, often interchangeably, to 'nature' and 'wilderness'. Although to some extent distinguishing between these two terms might seem near impossible or possibly futile, in this paper, the term wilderness will be used. Wilderness is perhaps most accurate for this discussion of Mountain Equipment Co-op because of the focus in the catalogues on the large, uninterrupted, uninhabited landscapes that the term wilderness evokes. Further, as the catalogues repeatedly reference 'wilderness' rather than nature, it seems most accurate to use this term in my analysis.
2. Respectability has been described as "how the dominant group secures its position of dominance through the margins. How groups on the margins are positioned in relation to one another on the disrespectable...the degenerate side of the divide" (Fellows and Razack 336). Further, respectability is about the maintenance of unmarked categories, such as whiteness, hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity through the Other (Fellows and Razack). Additionally, respectability is anchored spatially on bodies and sites, thus particular spaces and bodies become understood as respectable even when crossing the boundaries between degeneracy and respectability (Fellows and Razack; Razack).
3. Although landscape might at times be understood to be developed or productive land, Mohanram is referencing "hills, mountains, rivers, oceans and deserts...geographical features" (5) in her discussion and analysis. Her use of the term landscape is best understood as referencing untouched nature or wilderness rather than productive land altered for agriculture, resource extraction, suburban and urban development.
4. See also Braun (2003) for discussion of how nature functions as a "purification machine" for whiteness (197).
5. Citizen-subjects can be understood as subjects scripted by and produced through national discourses on citizenship and belonging, including national mythologies. All citizens of Canada may not necessarily have access to the position that is produced. Arguably, this is the intent of the production of citizen-subjects (See Razack).
6. Although the nuanced differences between subjects, subject positions and subjectivities could be explored at length, in this paper, I use the term subjects, as conceptualized in poststructural thought to encompass these three possible terms. For a further exploration of how the subject is understood in humanist or poststructural theories, consult Davies.

7. The Outsider is the Co-op newsletter. Beginning in the late 1980s, it is featured in both the summer and winter catalogues, is typically 4 pages in length, and focuses on board news, reports from the AGM, discussion of what a co-op is, product design and manufacturing information, Environment Fund reports and general discussions of outdoor recreation culture. In the mid-2000s, the Outsider was replaced with a 2-page section entitled 'News from your Board'; this new section is substantially shorter and contains less content. Currently, news is most often conveyed to membership through the Co-op website rather than in the catalogue and newsletter.
8. In 1987, .2% of gross sales went to the Fund. In 1995, this amount was increased to .4%; a vast majority of this increased funding went to Jedediah Island land acquisitions to transition the island from private property to park (national or provincial). Currently, the fund receives 1% of gross pre-tax sales.
9. Numerous previous catalogues have focused on the superior design of MEC products and have worked to educate the membership on the superior design (Summer 1989; Summer 1997), manufacturing (Summer 1990; Summer 1997), and gear testing (Summer 1989; Summer 2007; Winter 2007) undertaken by the co-op.
10. It is not possible to fully explore the ways in which social and environmentally responsible manufacturing and production is understood by MEC. A push for social and environmental manufacturing processes has been a central focus in MEC discourse from its inception, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, MEC worked to put in place measures to ensure their goods are 'ethically produced'.
11. This contest was held for a few years as the self-propelled contest. It was later transitioned into an adventure recreation contest with little focus on how one arrived at the start of one's recreation experience. No rationale was provided for the shift. Self-propelled recreation is prioritized by MEC and is central to the MEC charter. Self-propelled refers to outdoor recreation such as mountaineering and hiking (Our MEC Charter, MEC Mission and Values). Outdoor recreation activities such as water-skiing and snowmobiling are clearly not endorsed as MEC appropriate activities. Downhill skiing and heli-skiing operate in a 'grey-zone' for MEC (although acknowledged, these activities are not fully endorsed).
12. A clear example of a member-driven initiative that has structured how the Co-op works is the continued focus on social and environmental responsibility in the manufacturing of MEC products. This initiative continues to be a top priority, with MEC putting considerable energy into communicating to its membership what steps have been taken to ensure that MEC goods are not manufactured in 'sweatshop' conditions. Recently, MEC has partnered with the Fair Labour Association, produced an Accountability Report and begun an ethical sourcing blog for members (MEC Ethical Sourcing, MEC 2005 Accountability Report). A lengthy discussion of how the Co-op has chosen to conceptualize and insist on ethical sourcing over the last two decades is very much needed, however not possible within this examination of MEC. It is, nonetheless, a compelling example of what the co-operative structure of MEC can enable.
13. Innocence can be understood as a way of positioning oneself as powerless as a result of experiencing oppression. To claim a position of innocence is often to ignore the various positions of privilege one holds in order to script oneself as always already outside of power. Innocence is often employed as a way to grasp at respectability (Fellows & Razack). White, middle-class North American

feminists have been critiqued for asserting positions of innocence (of racism, heternormativity, classism) on the basis of patriarchy (Fellows & Razack; Flax).

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