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Rucksack revolution: long-distance hiking as an ecological resistance movement

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Vassar College

Rucksack Revolution

Long-Distance Hiking as an Ecological Resistance Movement

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

by

Jia Min Wu

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Professor Pinar Batur
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APRIL 20TH, 2018

Thesis Abstract

Rucksack Revolution

Long-distance hiking as an ecological resistance movement

In the existing literature, scholars have proposed outdoor recreation and “back to nature” movements as a way of fostering an embodied connection to nature amongst modern urban dwellers (Franklin, 2001) or as a kind of pushback against certain aspects of modernity perceived as destructive. (Eder, 1990; Campbell, 1989; Trentmann, 1994) This paper uses these theories as a starting point to explore the potential of long-distance hiking as an environmental resistance movement in the United States. Drawing on the paradigms of Deep Ecology and Eco-Socialism, I propose that long-distance hiking subculture and practice work in support of four fundamental principles of ecological sustainability: (1) man as part of the larger biosphere, (2) global response to environmental risks and commitment to protecting life, (3) de-coupling from capitalist systems of value, ownership, and accumulation, (4) creating an ethic of environmental citizenship. The research then turns to highlight the limitations and contradictions within long-distance hiking, and examines the ways in which it falls short of these principles. Interweaving theoretical frameworks with on-the-field ethnographic studies and content analysis of hiker blogs, books, and films, the work attempts to capture the diverse and pluralistic meanings, motivations, and implications of long-distance hiking in 21st century America.

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iii. Acknowledgements

“In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks.” (John Muir, Steep Trails)

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Chapter One:
Into the Woods

An Introduction to Long-distance Hiking

“I went into the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life.” (Thoreau, Walden)

Foreword: Some personal reflections

We sat in silence as the van pulled out from the porch of Happy Camper Caravan Park, each of us bracing ourselves for fourteen days spent hiking and camping out in the Australian Alps. As we trundled along an increasingly pot-holed road to the entrance we had chosen for our 130-mile route, I stared out of the window and watched as gentle green farmland slowly gave way to rough, dry hills, scraggly with vegetation accustomed to fending for itself under the harsh Australian sun. Very soon, houses began to disappear altogether, and I bid my silent farewell to phone signal, air-conditioning, good food, the internet, hot showers, beds, laundry machines, and a million other things that have come to quietly define my daily urban existence.

Looking at the seemingly tiny backpack sitting next to me, I couldn’t quite shake off the feeling that I was forgetting something – somehow, I couldn’t quite wrap my head around the fact that literally, everything necessary to sustain life (my life) for the next two weeks could be crammed into a 28-pound bag. Granted, it was a quarter of my body weight, but still – I was used to being surrounded by *tons* of things, things I possessed, things I did not possess but *could*, if I so desired. In the modern urban consumer capitalist world, there was no limit to what one could own or *wanted* to own. There was no concept of there ever being “enough” because there was always more out there to covet. On that trip, though, the backpack was symbolic of this nebulous concept of “enough” – if something wasn’t in there, I was going to have to do without it.

The night before, I had made the executive decision to leave my camera, phone, wallet, and second set of clothes behind. Even the bare essentials felt like too much to carry on my back while walking from sunrise to sunset each day. I figured that under the logic of the wilderness, money meant close to nothing, a phone was useless without electricity, and intangible memories would stand in for tangible photographs. (As for the second set of clothes, well, I was hoping that personal hygiene was an equally dispensable notion.) It was a liberating feeling, to finally feel like I was better off with *less* things than I was with more – and to feel like there were more important things in life than homework or keeping up with popular culture (or even how bad my clothes smelled).

Anxieties about packing slowly coalesced into anxieties about the kinds of physical, emotional, and mental exertions ahead. Were we (was I) truly prepared for long hard treks up and down mountains, cooking with gas stoves, sleeping in subzero temperatures and howling winds, “showering” (in quotation marks because there would be no soap involved) in icy cold rivers, and washing dishes every night with frozen hands? Escaping from the stresses of modern urban life *sounded* romantic, but nothing in my life had actually prepared me for the reality of living out in the wild for two weeks. Needless to say, the first day was brutal. It was perhaps not the best idea to tackle a section of the Alps informally termed “The Wall” for its near-vertical uphill climb on the first day, but in any case, that was what we did. When we finally arrived at the campsite, I felt as though all my muscles had been massacred in the long and bloody war against gravity. The upside was that the badly-cooked pasta we had for dinner tasted like a Michelin-starred delicacy, every sip of water tasted like wine, and curling up in my sleeping bag felt like bliss.

The next day, we struggled out of the tent at 6 a.m. and groggily started brushing our teeth in the dark, only to discover that the water in our bottles had frozen into cubes overnight. We laughed and felt a sense of solidarity with the elements – it seemed like we had all suffered equally from the cold Australian night up in the mountains. It warmed up significantly during the day, however, and

when the morning mist finally cleared, the sunlight broke through the clouds and shone down on the distant mountain ranges in the horizon, each a different shade of blue or green or purple, overlapping like layers of cellophane against a light-blue sky. Over the course of the trip, we walked through some of the most spectacular landscapes in the world. My personal favorite was the “Razorback”, a walking path right on the spine of the mountain, with sheer drops on either side and views for miles and miles in every direction. Another unforgettable experience was the time we spent traversing an incredibly vast plateau at 5,500 ft. above sea-level; we were surrounded by wildflowers and occasionally visited by a herd of wild horses, but otherwise, the scenery stayed the same for two entire days – we walked along this tiny dirt path, so narrow that there was only space for one shoe at a time. It was a trance-like experience; the miles blended imperceptibly into each other in a blurry haze of timeless time.

While we were walking, everything seemed to fade away – it was just us, our body and our thoughts, the land and sky that enveloped us. Sometimes, we would sing or chat or solve riddles or talk about life; other times, we would just walk, each of us enjoying the beauty of the world around us. When we stopped for the night, we would gather around a campfire and eat together, sing songs, play games, tell stories, give each other massages, and just enjoy each other’s company. Every night, we spent what seemed like years just staring up at the inky-black night sky, dotted with more stars than I had ever seen in my life. Back home in Singapore, you could never see any stars because there were lights everywhere. Like they say in clichéd romantic comedies, the stars made me feel small amongst a massive and ageless universe, but it also just made me aware of just how incredibly beautiful the night sky really is – in Singapore, the government spends billions of dollars on constructing a night-time skyline and millions more on laser shows and fireworks displays on special occasions. Really, we could spend nothing at all, switch off all the lights and just look up.

I had been worried about all the things I thought I would miss when we first set off – but over the course of the trip, I realized that life is just as good without the luxuries that we have come to view

as “necessities” in the modern world. People – me included – are always hesitant about making lifestyle changes for the sake of the environment. Turn off the air-conditioning? Walk instead of drive? Use less plastic? Not eat any meat? These sacrifices had always seemed too big for something that seemed as vague, nebulous, and far-flung as climate change. Those fourteen days showed me that these ‘sacrifices’ were not really sacrifices at all, and the true sacrifice was living in a world poisoned and stripped bare by destructive corporate interests and irresponsible state power.

Somehow, we have convinced ourselves that our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being depends upon economic growth on both the individual and national level. Money has become the symbolic manifestation of power, agency, and value – our sole means of attaining material objects and, by extension, happiness. Worse still, in our daily struggle to attain these things that we’ve marked out as pre-requisites to happiness, we have forgotten that they are merely means to an end. For many, they have become the end-goal itself. As American environmentalist Bill McKibbens points out, “Our single-minded focus on increasing wealth has succeeded in driving the planet’s ecological systems to the brink of failure, even as it’s failed to make us happier.” (2007) What we see as means to happiness – wealth, material objects, and so on – are really doing the opposite and *stripping* us of the very sources of life and meaning we hope to achieve. In other words, what we see as a good life had become hopelessly complicated and abstracted from reality.

What *does* make us happy? For me, that answer came like a revelation during that hiking trip. All I needed was fresh tasty food, clean water, a warm (or almost-warm) shelter, deep and intimate human connection, and harmony with the world around me. I felt strong, energized, clean, and most of all, truly *alive*. It was a liberating feeling. Why was I – why were we all – working ourselves to the bone and what did we seek to gain by sacrificing the things that *did* make us happy and fulfilled, like spending time with loved ones, having fun, relaxing and interacting with our community? Most of all, if life was

the highest priority on our lists, and of course it should be, what was the argument for engaging in activities that brought death and destruction? How had our priorities become so warped?

That fourteen-day hiking trip had initially felt like an escape from the real world, from real life. But the more I thought about it, the more I saw that it could instead be a glimpse into what real life *could* be. It seems so natural to view the world in terms of the dichotomies we have been taught, implicitly and explicitly, throughout our lives – for instance, “my things” and “your things”, “human” and “non-human”, “people” and “property”, “self” and “other”. But this has not always been the case, and it does not always have to be the case. There are (and have been) ways of imagining the world that posits human society as *part of* the natural world rather than separate from and superior to it; similarly, there are systems of value that view non-human life as having intrinsic worth, regardless of the price-tags or notions of utility we attach to them; there are modes of viewing the earth as a place we are dependent on and responsible for – instead of just a slab of land we own. There is nothing about the modern relationship to the earth that is inevitable or immutable. We could, if we wanted, seek out a different way of relating to the natural world and to each other.

Back in Singapore, this trip would continue to haunt me. I went back to the life I had always known, the life I had come to love – and, quite probably, the only life I would ever experience. I wondered if it was truly the life I wanted. Was there a way to live more simply, more freely, and more harmoniously with the Earth and the people around us? In the three or so years that have elapsed, I have attempted to come up with some answers to those questions, and some more questions to those answers. These are issues I continue to grapple with today. In some ways, my thesis is a personal tribute to hiking. It was and continues to be an experience that forces me to confront the uncomfortable realities of my own experience of modernity.

Much more than that, I began to extrapolate outward – like a sociologist, I suppose – and I began to wonder if long-distance hiking could be a larger, collective movement toward social and

ecological sustainability. More broadly, I envision my thesis as an exploration of long-distance hiking's potential to spark a collective environmentalist ethos and practice. More concretely, looking at how it offers us a platform through which to re-imagine our relationship with the natural world and, in doing so, re-structure our systems of value, ownership, and land sovereignty. In other words, I want to challenge the hegemonic structures that govern our lives, to dream big, and to ask, *what do I want modernity to look like?*

Background on Long-distance Hiking

Before we delve into these questions proper, I intend to use this chapter to briefly introduce long-distance hiking. The obvious question is: *what is it?* There has been extensive academic literature on environmental movements and, separately, some literature on “back to nature” movements, outdoor recreation activities and adventure sports or eco-tourism. However, very little has been written specifically about long-distance hiking (or synonymously, backpacking and thru-hiking). Thus, before beginning to discuss various elements of long-distance hiking that make it amenable to environmental resistance, I will first devote this segment to giving a general overview and background of long-distance hiking. I hope to provide a glimpse into the rich culture, histories, ideological underpinnings, and personal narratives within this activity, subculture, and identity.

Some loose definitions: “Hiking” often refers to the act of walking for recreation, to explore the land and enjoy the scenery, usually in rural or wilderness areas. It is typically considered an activity that involves physical exertion, which distinguishes it from strolling in the woods. The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2011) defines hiking as “walking a long distance especially for pleasure or exercise.” While ‘hiking’ is the most widely-used term in North America (Canada and the U.S.), it is also used interchangeably with a whole range of other words, particularly in other parts of the world, such as: walking, rambling, backpacking, tramping, and bushwalking. “Long-distance” hiking then, is a specific

subset of ‘hiking’ that entails multiple days and nights on the trail, carrying camping gear, food, and shelter and camping out in the open (sometimes in shelters and hostels along the way). In other words, it is a journey through predominantly non-urban spaces over a significant period of time – though of course there is no strict definition of the length of time that distinguishes a short hike (a day-hike, weekend hike etc.) from a long-distance hike.

Next, long-distance hiking is often location-specific since not many are willing (or lack the technical expertise) to tramp through the wild without proper trail infrastructure (a well-marked and maintained trail, shelters and campsites along the way and so on), and there are limited areas in the U.S. (and around the world) with continuous stretches of trail longer than a hundred miles or so. Hence, most hikers follow the routes set out specifically for long-distance recreational hiking, which include the National Scenic Trails and National Historic Trails. According to the National Park Service (n.d.), these trails are 100 miles or longer, continuous, and primarily non-motorized. They also tend to be found in certain landscapes deemed particularly spectacular or worth setting aside for outdoor recreational use, like the Sierra Nevada or Appalachian mountain ranges. The three most popular long-distance hiking trails in America (commonly known as the “Triple Crown”) are, in order of popularity, the 2,180-mile long Appalachian trail (AT), the 2,600-mile long Pacific Crest trail (PCT), and the 3,200-mile long Continental Divide trail (CDT). These trails are so integral to the long-distance hiking experience that they have their own unique hiking communities, traditions, festivals, and ‘sacred’ sites.

The average long-distance Appalachian trail thru-hiker¹ spends about 8 hours a day walking, covering on average 16 miles per day. For a 25-year-old male hiker weighing 155 pounds, this requires the daily consumption of a whopping 5,500 calories a day. In other words, “a hiker could eat 11 Big Macs throughout the day and still be at an energy deficiency.” (Davis, 2017) This results in a

¹ While this is certainly a specific *subgroup* of long-distance hikers, it does provide us with a fairly representative picture i.e. slice of the general long-distance hiking community

phenomenon known as “hiker hunger,” which Davis defines as a “near-inability to be sated by any amount of food,” (2017) a celebrated aspect of life on the trail.

Demographically speaking, long-distance hikers tend to be young, white, educated, single males. Although the proportion of female long-distance hikers are increasing, data from the Appalachian Trail Conservancy estimates that females make up only a third of all long-distance hikers. Hikers from age 15 to 86 years of age have reported completing the Appalachian Trail, but the mean age of thru-hikers and section-hikers are 32 and 40 respectively (Mariposa, 2017). In addition, corroborating both informal cultural and formal academic literature associating hiking with “white” or western culture, the vast majority (95% of the 2017 AT Thru-hiker survey’s respondents) of long-distance hikers are white. (Mariposa, 2017) Black and Hispanic populations are most significantly underrepresented in long-distance hiking. Finally, long-distance hikers have a significantly higher educational attainment than the average American. Furthermore, 92% of long-distance hikers possessed some college education or more, (Mariposa, 2017) *despite* the fact that approximately 34% of respondents were below 25 years of age. (Mariposa, 2017) In contrast, only 58.9% of the general U.S. population above 25 years of age (and 63.8% of white, non-hispanic Americans) had some college education or more. (Ryan and Bauman, 2015:2)

Generally, a large proportion of long-distance hikers embarked on their trips alone (67%) although some do so with friends (12%), significant others (12%), family members (6%), a dog (2%) or with an organized group (1%). It is a fairly common practice, however, to pick up friends and companions along the way, with 58% of hikers reporting that they spent the majority of the hike with friends made on the trail, and just 18% reporting that they spent majority of the hike alone. (Mariposa, 2017)

Long-distance hiking also often follows a general set of additional guidelines which include: (1) the minimization of vehicular transportation, technology, and material (particularly luxury) goods,

making do with 'less', (2) an ethic of selfless care for other hikers, non-hikers and the land, and (3) participation in various traditions specific to the hiking trail or surrounding communities. Of course, not all hikers subscribe to this notion of long-distance hiking, and not all long-distance hikes look the same or come from the same place. This is encapsulated by the popular adage in hiking culture: "hike your own hike" - in other words, each hike is as different as the millions of hikers who undertake it.

Ultimately, long-distance hiking can certainly be defined and undertaken in many different ways. I am interested not in policing the exact parameters of "long-distance hiking", or painting a simplistic picture of long-distance hiking as a monolithic and homogeneous activity, but rather, allowing hikers themselves to define their own meanings, significances, and definitions of the walks they take in the woods. However, that being said, I argue that there is a common set of beliefs, values, practices, and ideologies connected with, transmitted by, and integral to a unique shared community and culture of long-distance hiking. This view has been corroborated by other scholars writing about long-distance hiking, such as the sociologist Kristi Fondren, who sees long-distance hiking as a subculture defined by its distinctive place and community-based identity. In the next section of this chapter, I will explore this notion that long-distance hiking is not merely an individual lifestyle choice or recreational activity, but a collective subculture, complete with its own traditions, beliefs, and world-views.

Hiking as a collective subculture

Using a sociological lens, long-distance hiking can be analyzed in relation to its "place-situated" and "socially-situated" character. Rather than viewing long-distance hiking solely as an individual activity, we could understand it as a broader societal response to certain aspects of modern life, and an articulation of a unique set of ideologies, values, and practices both on and beyond the trail. In her book *Walking on the Wild Side*, Fondren builds on a growing body of academic literature focusing on the construction of identity from sources such as leisure lifestyles, and suggests that long-distance

hiking can be conceived as one such leisure lifestyle, which provides “hikers with a unique subcultural identity, one that often remains with them after their time on the trail is over.” (2016:11)

Building on her ideas, I propose three main reasons for this: (1) Long-distance hikers live, over the course of their hikes, in isolation from dominant culture, and develop their own culture, set of ideologies, and social structures. It is an intense, immersive, and often transformative experience that has a long-lasting effect on hikers. (2) There is a strong sense of community and belonging amongst long-distance hikers. The close social bonds formed with other hikers facilitate the sharing of ideas, values, and values. (3) Beyond the trail, long-distance hiking is linked to a larger set of sociocultural ideologies, beliefs, and knowledge. I propose also that these distinctive aspects of long-distance culture and community represents a ripe space for a collective environmental movement to be born.

(1) Extensive, Immersive Experience

First, long-distance hikes represent a significant period of time spent separated physically, socially, culturally, and (for the most part) economically, from the rest of American society. This isolation from the dominant culture is certainly an aspect of the long-distance hike that make an indelible impression on most hikers: Bill Bryson, author of the best-selling novel *A Walk in the Woods*, which chronicles his thru-hike along the Appalachian Trail, writes, “When you’re on the AT, the forest is your universe, infinite and entire. It is all you experience day after day. Eventually it is about all you can imagine. You are aware, of course, that somewhere over the horizon there are mighty cities, busy factories, crowded freeways, but here in this part of the country, where woods drape the landscape for as far as the eye can see, the forest rules.” (1998:114) Fondren corroborates this statement in her research, stating: “long-distance hikers live in isolation, for the most part, and have their own ways of acting, talking, and thinking; their their own vocabulary, their own activities and interests, their own concept of what is significant in life, and to a certain extent their own scheme of life.” (2016:11)

Long-distance hiking involves continuous overnight days spent camping and walking through the wilderness or rural areas over the course of a substantial duration of time – usually a month or more. During this time, most hikers have limited phone and internet signal (although this is certainly changing), and spend very little time in commercial or urban spaces like shopping malls, city streets, or entertainment complexes, sometimes going days on end without passing through towns or cities of any sort. Their exposure to mainstream culture, consumer products, and society in general is thus limited. In this way, long-distance hiking serves as an eye-opening glimpse into the possibility of adopting different ways of life, different social structures, different ideological systems. Schellhase, an Appalachian Trail thru-hiker, reflects a common sentiment amongst other hikers: “People say it takes 6 weeks to adjust to something new. To make something a habit. I lived in the woods for almost 6 months. Trail life became my entire life. I adjusted, learned, and maintained that lifestyle for so long that I am now questioning everything this ‘real world’ has to offer.” (2017)

Granted, it can be argued that the temporary nature of long-distance hiking detracts from its ability to influence one’s beliefs and worldviews (and even less, dominant societal structures) on a long-term basis. People enter into a long-distance hike for a determinate amount of time before going back to ‘real life’ or the ‘real world’. A long-distance hiker named Seeker writes: “For six months, I am going to be living as I have never lived before, and likely as I will never live again. I will carry everything that I need on my back. It is a lifestyle that does not last forever (nor would I particularly want it to, I think).” (2015) Many other hikers share his sentiments, viewing their hikes as an experience in a clearly-defined space and time that has no bearing on their ‘real lives’ off the trail. Hence, some believe that the long-distance hike represents a temporary and superficial escape from modern norms and ideologies, and long-distance hikers will inevitably return to a world still dominated by these norms.

However, Ptasznik (2015) shows us how theories of liminality and rites of passage (Turner and Turner, 1978; van Gennep, 1960) can be applied to long-distance hiking. She writes of the long-distance hiker, “[he] disassociates from stable relationships, enters a period of liminality, and then returns to regular life under a new framework.” In other words, hiking is a phase that marks a breaking off from an original state and entrance into a new world, a “magico-religious aspect of crossing frontiers.” (van Gennep, quoted in Ptasznik, 2015:19) The liminal nature of hiking is certainly reflected by long-distance hikers’ own views of their journeys; many embark on these treks during an “in-between” time in their lives, such as after completing their education and before entering the workforce, or between jobs, or after retiring. In this way, hikers themselves see their hikes as a transitional period, one for re-evaluating, abandoning or replacing certain established modes of being and living in favor of something radically different.

Furthermore, long-distance hikers embark on their sojourns with the desire to make permanent changes to their lives, worldviews, and value systems. This creates personal motivation (or at least openness) to experiment with alternative modes of living and thinking, along with a prevailing culture of challenging hegemonic ideologies and structures. Ptasznik writes in her thesis dissertation on thru-hiking, “Like religious practices around walking, namely pilgrimage, thru-hiking is a major undertaking in one’s life.” (2015:5) Most hikers enter into long-distance trips with the express intention of searching for spiritual enlightenment, personal growth, and introspection. Thus, they are already primed to allow the hiking experience to push them towards changing their beliefs and helping them chart a new path forward.

The long-distance hike is a highly immersive experience that isolates hikers from mainstream society and dominant culture, and thus provides a space for alternative structures and ideas to be created. Furthermore, hikers’ commitment to personal and societal transformation provides a strong basis for generating a radical shift in consciousness, behavior, and lifestyles. Lastly, the transformative

aspect of long-distance trips ensure that what hikers learn or gain over the course of their journey will go on to define their long-term worldviews.

(2) Strong sense of community

The long-distance hiking community is a tight-knit and (at least during the hike itself), an independent and almost completely self-sustaining micro-society. Hikers spend every day (and night) on the trail; thus, they come into continuous, sometimes daily contact with each other, but have very little social interactions with non-hikers except when they make stops in a nearby town. Furthermore, many long-distance hikers note that the kinds of interactions they have on the trail are far more intimate than those they are used to back at home. Many remark on the remarkable willingness to having deep, honest, and personal conversations with others, often strangers, as well as the ease and relative speed with which hikers forge deep connections on the trail. There is also a strong culture of caring for other hikers on the trail. Acts of unconditional kindness, care, and generosity to those who need it, along with the tendency to give freely of one's time and belongings are defining features of the long-distance hiking community, and create a strong feeling of "togetherness" that made an indelible impression on hikers.

Furthermore, there are also various long-distance hiking traditions and festivals which bring long-distance hikers (both past and present) together as a community. "Trail Days", held every year in Damascus, Virginia, is one of the most well-known events. It resembles a huge reunion, with lots of food, music, film screenings, a hiker parade, talent show, and nightly drum circles, not to mention showers, medical assistance, and gear replacement. (Fondren, 2016:2) Hikers recount instances in which they gathered "at 'sacred' sites... [to] dance, tell stories of adventure, of rituals, and hiker traditions, of trail magic, or talk about the many heroes and legends of the AT." (Fondren, 2016:15) On a smaller scale, hikers often spend their down time at night sitting around campfires, talking,

playing games, and telling stories. Because of the fact that tents are situated so close together in most campsites, it is common (almost inevitable) for hikers to spend a lot of time with each other once they settle down for the night. These events contribute to a strong sense of community among long-distance hikers. Hobo Joe, a 22-year-old hiker from Massachusetts states: “once you’re out here you really belong to this group of people.” (Fondren, 2016:2)

In addition, because long-distance hiking is such an intense and life-changing experience, the bonds forged between people who have gone through it together are particularly strong. As Fondren writes, “such immersed practices lead to a more intense form of social intimacy and bonding as a result of shared experience.” (2016:11) Lewis-Kraus writes about the Camino, “There is community in that shared suffering,” (Quoted in Ptasznik, 2015:27) These feelings of intimacy and camaraderie amongst members of this community, often last long after the long-distance hike has been completed. Many hikers state that the friendships they have made over the course of their hiking trips are life-long. (Fondren, 2016:3) As mentioned earlier, these strong social bonds facilitate the sharing and passing on of a collective set of ideas, beliefs, and values – after all, Fondren argues that “subcultures are best conceptualized and understood as products of social interaction.” (Fondren, 2016:7) She writes, “the relationships that emerge among long-distance hikers while on the AT provide hikers with a unique [community-based] subcultural identity, one that remains with them after their time on the trail is over.” (2016:11)

Thus, separation from the dominant culture occurs alongside a simultaneous immersion into a distinctive community with specific traditions and beliefs and strong social bonds. Fondren writes, “long-distance hikers can be identified through a range of distinctive behaviors such as excessive food consumption, self-discipline, an unwavering trust in complete strangers, a chosen life of poverty, and a rejection of modern day structures.” (2016:14) While some argue that long-distance hiking is “an individual work, not a social enterprise,” (Ptasznik, 2015:27) Turner and Turner argue otherwise,

asserting that pilgrimages – like long-distance hikes – “[take] place within the individual but brings him into fellowship with like-minded souls.” (Ptasznik, 2015:27)

This sense of “*communitas*” is a central part of the long-distance hiking experience, and more than that, represents its potential for inciting broad-based societal change. Within the hiking community, conventional structures are discarded or made irrelevant, and new values are created and adopted and spread. Turner and Turner (1978)’s theories of liminality suggest that long-distance hiking (and the hiking community) are spaces in which hegemonic structures and ideologies such as class or race-based hierarchies, notions of meaning (consumerism and obsession with material objects) and social relationships (mediated through communal bonds rather than money-exchange) are destabilized. In this way, long-distance hiking carves out a unique, de-regularized communal space in which counter-hegemonic ways of thinking, viewing, and relating to the world can be imagined and tested collectively, and subsequently, passed on to other members of the hiking community.

(3) Links to a larger set of values, ideologies, social movements

Finally, it is undeniable that hiking – more specifically, the meanings and motivations attached to hiking – are inextricably linked to and shaped by broader historical movements and sociocultural ideologies and values that enshrine walking in nature as a way of re-establishing an intimate connection with nature, encountering the divine and sacred, and renewing one’s physical and spiritual wellbeing. Historically, the act of walking or hiking can be linked back to Romanticism, an artistic literary, cultural, and intellectual movement originating in Europe in the 18th century that rejected the dominant mode of scientific rationalization and industrial capitalism in favor of ‘returning to nature’ and re-establishing intimate relations with the natural world. The Romantics viewed nature as a source of physical and spiritual renewal, and many poets, thinkers, and artists featured nature as sublime and sacred in their works. Related to (and in some ways inspired by) the Romantic movement is the slightly younger

American Transcendentalist movement, which was characterized by the belief that nature was a refuge from modern industrial society and a bastion of ideals like personal freedom and self-reliance. The values of nature extolled by the American Transcendentalists eventually formed the foundations for the nation's environmental or conservation ethic. Finally, the "ramblers" movement could perhaps be seen as one of the earliest organized instances of nature-walking in an attempt not just to escape from industrial pollution and stress, but also to take a stance against private ownership of woodlands, pastures, and other forms of nature, which restricted one's "right to roam" and enjoy the landscape.

Apart from these historic movements - which have in fact also made their way into the canon of our modern environmental ethics and ideologies – long-distance hiking also intersects with many modern movements. For instance, long-distance hiking has historically been, and still very much *is*, intimately connected to environmentalism and nature conservation. John Muir, one of America's most well-known hikers, was also a fore-father of the conservation movement, fighting tirelessly to protect the beautiful landscapes of the Sierra, places where he spent many decades of his life exploring. Another principle ideology that intersects heavily with long-distance hiking is that of minimalism or anti-consumerism, which emphasizes the ethic of making do with less, minimizing waste and consumption, and reducing dependence on material products.

Long-distance hiking has been embraced by various anti-capitalist groups and movements ranging from the Beatnik culture and Hippie culture to "Freeganism" and voluntary poverty, all of which express a commitment to living the "simple life". Kerouac, one of the leading figures of the American Beatnik movement, which stood opposed to modern consumer culture, was also a huge proponent of hiking and living in the wilderness. Thus, long-distance hiking cannot be seen merely as an individual choice, but rather, one that is informed by a far larger constellation of shared beliefs, values, and ideologies. It is a response to modernity that, as Ptasznik says, "is simultaneously individual and shared." (46) This foundation of counter-hegemonic ideologies and values unifies the disparate

motivations and meanings attached to long-distance hiking as an individual activity. This means that, not only does long-distance hiking possess the potential to push hikers towards change, it also possesses an underlying ideological framework of sustainable ideologies and practices.

Lastly, long-distance hiking as a leisure activity or subculture cannot be separated from its popular culture and media representation, and off-the-trail (sometimes online) community. In recent years, as long-distance hiking grows in popularity as a recreational activity *and* as a part of a certain kind of counterculture, there have been a proliferation of fiction and non-fiction books, movies, YouTube videos, blog posts, Facebook groups, and Instagram pages chronicling these treks. Some of the more prominent examples include *Wild* (Cheryl Strayed's Pacific Crest Trail thru-hike), recently made into a movie, *A Walk in the Woods* (Bill Bryson's Appalachian Trail thru-hike), and TrailJournals.com, a collection of more than a hundred different Trail Journals organized by year. In this sense, the long-distance hiking culture and ideological underpinnings are transmitted and sustained not merely through "face-to-face interaction among members" (Fondren, 13) – which forms just the tip of the iceberg.

In other words, the hiking community flourishes beyond the trail, in the form of connections to broader cultural, artistic, and intellectual movements and also in the form of continued interaction and exchange of ideas between long-distance hikers (and non-hikers) even when they are not hiking. As a result, long-distance hiking's widespread presence in American society gives it a broad base of participation and influence. Compared to many other more radical methods of ecological resistance, it represents a highly palatable introduction to environmental movements that seek to challenge hegemonic structures and processes that exploit and damage the earth.

In summary, I argue that the tight-knit community, transformative nature of the hike, and separation from dominant culture, are all aspects of long-distance hiking that give it the potential to change American beliefs, attitudes, and orientations to modernity and the natural world. Spirit, a 57-

year-old long-distance hiker sums this up by saying: “you may not be religious, but you are going to go through something on this trail.”

Overview of Thesis

Now that we have set the groundwork for understanding what long-distance hiking *is* and how it could offer a compelling framework for transformation with regards to our relationship with the world at large, we can delve into the meat and bones of this thesis. Can long-distance hiking – as metamorphic experience, spiritual pilgrimage, lifestyle preference, collective commitment to change – provide a genuine platform for significant, society-wide adoption of ideologies, practices, and structures that allow for a more sustainable and equitable mode of living? Can it be seen as a viable articulation of (or perhaps an initial step towards?) a critical sociopolitical movement away from the exploitative, damaging logics and structures of our current modernity during this time of immense environmental risk? These are the questions I hope to tackle in the next few chapters.

In Chapter Two, I will be exploring the two faces of “modernity” – first, the hegemonic structures that have come to define it and second, the consequences of these structures, or in other words, what many scientists, activists, and scholars refer to as the global ecological crisis. I intend to draw the links between these two sides of modernity, showing how the dominant structures and ideologies have engendered the exploitation and domination of the natural world (as well as everything within it, be it living or non-living, human or non-human.) In this chapter, I will also explore the various alternative paradigms that exist alongside hegemonic imaginations of modernity, showing that there are and have always been other ways of thinking, being, and living in the world. Perhaps these alternative paradigms can offer us a way of re-defining modernity and re-organizing our societies, economies, and political structures. The aim of this chapter is to sketch out a framework for

revolutionary transformation which we can then use to evaluate long-distance hiking as a mode of social and ecological resistance.

In Chapter Three, I will examine long-distance hiking in relation to the framework for change outlined in chapter two, exploring its effectiveness and viability as a collective movement towards a sustainable modernity (or perhaps post-modern future). This chapter seeks to present long-distance hiking as *praxis*, to use Marx's term, a synergistic combination of life-affirming ideology and practice which leads to long-term societal-wide change. This chapter will be based both on theoretical analysis and primary and secondary ethnographic observations of long-distance hikers and hiking. I hope to disrupt the totalizing, universalizing discourse of modernity, highlight the gaps in this hegemonic narrative, and show how long-distance hiking can be seen as an alternative spaces carved out and filled by individuals seeking out their own personal and subjective definitions of "living the good life".

Subsequently, I devote Chapter Four entirely to highlighting the many limitations and contradictions within long-distance hiking. I look at the ways in which it is complicit with damaging ideologies and practices, and try to determine if these problematic aspects ultimately render it untenable as a revolutionary movement. In other words, I attempt to do justice to the fact that long-distance hiking is a pluralistic, diverse collection of individual experiences and motivations – and hence cannot be viewed as a cohesive, uni-directional movement. Rather, I hope to capture the paradoxes and competing narratives within it by making visible the uglier faces of long-distance hiking. Under the framework of Hegelian dialectics, this fourth chapter represents the Antithesis to the main arguments laid out in Chapter Three.

Finally, in Chapter Five, the concluding chapter, I hope to reconcile these conflicting sides of long-distance hiking by seeking ways to address or overcome its limitations and problematic aspects. More importantly, I hope to connect my work back to larger conversations about the role of outdoor recreation and popular environmental movements in hammering out an alternative definition of

modernity. I want to use long-distance hiking as an entry point into a broader interrogation of the “human capacity for a fundamentally different and profoundly liberating way of life,” (Merchant, 2012:xiv) and how we can shape modernity to reflect these dreams and hopes of building a more sustainable future.

Chapter Two:

All That is Solid

Defining (and Re-defining) Modernity

*“If we think of modernism as a struggle to make ourselves at home in a constantly changing world, we will realize that no mode of modernism can ever be definitive.” (Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*)*

Defining Modernity

In the past three centuries or so, the total world population has grown *twelve*-fold, from just 600 million people in 1700 to 7.52 billion people in 2017. (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina, 2017) To put this into perspective, the *increase* in the total world population in the past seven years -from 2010 to 2017- is equal to the total number of people there were in the world in 1700. In order to accommodate this unparalleled population growth, more than 800 million hectares of temperate forest and 1 billion hectares of tropical forests have been cleared since the 1700s. (Roser, 2017) World Resources Institute research corroborates this statistic, estimating that “30 percent of global forest cover has been cleared, 20 percent has been degraded, and another 20 percent has been fragmented, leaving only about 15 percent intact.” At the same time, there has been “rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth.” (Berman, 1988:16) The proportion of people living in cities around the world has risen from 5.1% in the 1800s (United Nations, 1980) to 54% in 2016. (United Nations, 2014) Furthermore, with the increased ease of urban migration -or migration in general- millions of people have been uprooted from their ancestral homes and flung “halfway across the world into new lives.” (Berman, 1988:16)

These massive demographic shifts have been accompanied by similarly groundbreaking social, political, and economic changes. Nation-states have replaced older forms of governance such as empires, kingdoms, city-states, tribes, and so on. The global exchange of goods, peoples, and ideas now takes place on a level never before possible in the history of mankind. Steam engines to automobiles and airplanes have made travelling from America to Asia, Europe to Africa, Australia to

the Middle East – something that used to be a physical impossibility (or at least a significant endeavor), a matter of weeks, days, and now, no more than thirty hours. The capitalist world economy has supplanted small-scale subsistence economies around the world, driving production, consumption and accumulation of wealth at a massive global scale. Scientific and technological discoveries have completely altered how we view the universe and our place in it.

These changes, or “world-historic processes,” as Berman (1988:16) calls it, have shaped social, political, and economic structures around the world in unprecedented ways. Combined, they exert a powerful and undeniable influence over our lives, our relationships with (and conceptions of) ourselves, other people, and the world we inhabit. Some scholars, for the sake of simplicity, stop here. However, various anthropologists, sociologists, and postcolonial thinkers – among others – have pushed for a more nuanced understanding of modernity that views it as more than just a neatly-partitioned historical period or a uni-linear process in which more traditional (and, in many cases, non-western) societies become more like so-called modern (read: western) societies. The experience of modernity is different for everyone everywhere, and should not be seen as confined to any single culture, society, place, or time period but rather, deeply intersectional. Furthermore, to view modernity as a point of rupture assumes that time can be compartmentalized – into “before modernity” and “after modernity” – and that modernity itself has a clearly delineated beginning and end. A more nuanced understanding of modernity would need to acknowledge it as a process or mode of experience that is porous, fluid, multi-linear, and manifested in different ways, at different points in time, in different parts of the world.

In *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, the American philosopher Marshall Berman defines it as the “struggle to make ourselves at home in a constantly changing world.” (1988:6) While this definition does not seem to give us much to work with, it does point us to a crucial understanding of modernity as a collection of systems and ideologies that seek to deal with or make sense of a “constantly changing

world.” (Berman, 1988:6) This definition of modernity as a collection of ideologies or social, political, and economic structures centered around the intention of bringing order to the world and exerting agency over uncertainty is fascinating. It offers a complex view of modernity as *more than* the result of the technological, demographic, and socio-economic changes – and instead posits these changes as stemming from a collective and pervasive desire to wield control over the external world.

Hegemonic modern structures such as capitalism, scientific rationality, the nation-state built around liberal individualist citizenship and so on – can thus be viewed as both a response to, a result of, and a reason for the changes that have come to characterize modernity. While these modes of understanding the world and organizing human societies do indeed emphasize – and are built around – the principle of individual autonomy and “agency”, the tragic irony is that while they do provide an illusion of personal control over one’s life, they in reality often aid and abet the enslavement of people to dominant or hegemonic institutions. The foundations of sociology have been built around notions of modernity as not merely a set of dates or events but rather, a coercive and hegemonic structure that exerts inescapable force on the individuals who live within it. Weber defines modernity as an “iron cage” that “determines the lives of all individuals who are born into this mechanism...with irresistible force.” (Berman, 1988:27) Alongside Weber’s critique stands Marx’s extensive work on capitalism and its exploitation of the ‘working-class’, along with Durkheim’s study of ‘anomie’, the breaking down of social bonds in favor of extreme individualism (which he traces to various forces).

Building on this sociological canon, I borrow from major postcolonial and/or socialist schools of thought, which indict modernity’s structures and ideologies in creating systems of oppression, both of nature and marginalized peoples. In the next segment of this chapter, I will explore the consequences of these pervasive modern logics and institutions – focusing on consumer capitalism, scientific rationality, and liberal individualism – on our relationships with the earth and the living and non-living creatures that inhabit it. I aim to explore these key dimensions of modernity in relation to

the global ecological crisis that has become perhaps *the* most salient, far-reaching, and utterly devastating consequence of the modern age. It threatens the very foundations of our life and sustained existence on this planet – more than that, it threatens the very planet itself. This is not to say that the implications of modern structures are limited to environmental harm alone – rather, environmental harm is tied up in other forms of harm enacted by the violences of modernity. These are issues that I seek to explore in the following pages.

Ultimately, the aim of this chapter is to highlight the “un-naturalness” of the modern ideologies, values, and relations that are viewed as inexorable parts of our lives and societies. I hope to demonstrate also that the ecological crisis and its roots in damaging modern ideologies and structures is very much *real* and deserves our utmost attention. To use Beck’s vocabulary of denial, apathy, and transformation, acknowledging that our practices and behaviors are fundamentally unsustainable, and that this ecological crisis is a modern problem of epic proportions, is one crucial step towards transformation. In the last section of this chapter, I will sketch out some alternative paradigms that can perhaps form the backbone of a new and more sustainable mode of organizing our communities and lives around caring for rather than using or dominating the earth.

The “Iron Cage”: Hegemonic structures and their consequences

Before we can take concrete steps towards changing the reality in which we live, we need to know what this reality *is*, what is wrong, what we are up against, and what can or cannot be changed. First of all, the extent of damage that we have inflicted upon the Earth in the mere three centuries or so that have passed since modern, industrialized society first began to pick up steam has been colossal. We are entering a sixth mass extinction of plants and animals losing species at 1,000 to 10,000 times the background rate. (Center for Biological Diversity, n.d.) The global surface temperature has risen by about 1.1 degrees Celsius, global sea levels have risen about 8 inches, and the acidity of the oceans

have gone up by 30%. (NASA, 2018) Although this does not sound particularly alarming, these minute changes in climate will result (and in many places, have already resulted) in a whole spate of environmental disasters – to name just a few: contamination of fresh drinking water, destruction of farmland and coastal areas, large-scale habitat loss for wildlife, increased exposure to life-threatening diseases like malaria, and flooding of low-lying cities and towns. (Brahic, 2007)

While some climate-change naysayers continue to argue that the increase in global temperatures is natural, there is now a strong scientific consensus and a large body of work showing that “human influence on the climate system is clear, and recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are the highest in history.” (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2014) Human activities that involve the burning of fossil fuels (everything from electricity-generation to transport) increase the concentration of greenhouse gases that block heat from escaping out of the atmosphere. For instance, carbon dioxide in the air has increased from 280 parts per million to 400 parts per million since 1850 (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2014). Furthermore, the clearing of forest area for agricultural or industrial use has not only led to a loss of habitat for millions of species, but also a reduced ability to absorb these greenhouse gases. (National Geographic, 2017)

The devastating effects of climate change and deforestation are just one aspect of the modern ecological crisis. As Carson (1962) first pointed out in her groundbreaking book *Silent Spring*, humans have also directly poisoned the Earth with toxic (oftentimes carcinogenic) substances. In the name of industry and agriculture, we inject millions of tons of pesticides, insecticides, lead, mercury, and other hazardous chemicals each year into the air, water, soil, and the bodies of all living creatures – including ourselves. This has resulted in an increase in all sorts of health problems – though data has been notoriously patchy in this area, scientific studies have found that bladder, prostate, melanoma, colon, and breast cancer mortality rates have risen since the 1950s, with lung cancer mortality rates registering a six-fold increase. (Hallberg and Johansson, 2002)

Clearly, the modern era is characterized by an unprecedented level of environmental destruction and toxicity. Building on the work of various socio-environmental scholars, I argue that the dominant ideologies or institutions of capitalism, scientific rationality, and liberal individualism have given rise to the modern conception of non-human things or creatures as passive objects or commodities to be known and dominated for human benefit, and that it is this deeply problematic relationship to the natural world that has engendered the host of ecological problems we face today. Arguably, it is this same system that engenders and then retrospectively justifies the other forms of violence enacted upon people are seen as “other”. Finally, these hegemonic systems also tragically prevent people from attaining the meaningful relationships, fulfilment, and overall quality of life they seek. I propose three main aspects of modernity that underpin the domination, exploitation, and de-valuation of the natural world and the dissolution of social solidarity:

- (1) Capitalist system based on utility, money-exchange and ownership
- (2) Alienation from the natural world
- (3) Endless pursuit of individual profit

(1) Capitalist system based on utility, money-exchange and ownership

Marx uses the term “capitalist mode of production” to refer to a mode of production in which capitalists, i.e. private owners of the “means of production” – raw materials and wage-labor – produce goods that are then sold, generating profit for themselves. According to Marx, two basic facts result from this mode of production: first, workers – or the proletariat, as Marx terms them – who do not own the means of production, are forced to sell their time and labor for wages, while capitalists receive the lion’s share of the profits. This process of primitive accumulation of capital, in which capital begets more capital, results in an endless burgeoning of wealth amongst the capitalists, at the expense of all others exploited by the capitalist as labor or raw material for capitalist profit.

Expanding upon Marx's definition, other scholars also use the terms 'capitalist economy' or 'capitalism' to refer to a dominant system in which all things (including human labor) are viewed as commodities that can be privately owned, bought and sold in the market. Thus, objects, apart from having *use-value*, i.e. value as "objects of utility", take on a second dimension of *market-value*, as measured by the amount of money it can be sold for on the market. Money hence becomes a powerful measurement of value *and* the sole mediator of economic relations between owners and buyers of commodities. Although these elements have arguably been around in earlier human civilizations, modernity represents the intensification, spread, and supremacy of the capitalist system. In previous feudal or societies, the economy was largely based upon production and exchange for subsistence – in the modern capitalist economy today, production and exchange is driven by the desire for profit accumulation and the creation of surplus.

Today, the capitalism has become the dominant mode of economic organization across the globe, and has, by virtue of its pervasive grip on all other aspects of social and political organization, come to form the very foundations of modern life itself. It seems almost impossible to separate the hegemonic – yet sometimes highly insidious – accompanying logics, ideologies, and values enshrined within consumer capitalism from our lives and communities. Indeed, the deep and unsettling implications of capitalism's vice-grip over our worldviews, activities, and social structures are numerous, and have been extensively studied by scholars and activists in a whole slew of disciplines. First, everything (including living creatures and land) is defined in terms of market-value or use-value to humans. Second, all relationships are reduced to a money-relation between the possessors and the desirers of commodities. Third, endless individual accumulation is pursued at the expense of communal wellbeing. Fourth, we begin to view identity, fulfilment, and happiness as achievable only through possession of material goods. Finally, the wage-laborer is alienated from the world around him, from his community, and from his own fundamental 'selfhood'.

Under a capitalist value system, the value of all things, including living organisms, are measured and represented in monetary terms. Money is accorded with supreme power and meaning. Merchant summarizes the situation aptly: “living animate nature died while dead inanimate money was endowed with life.” (58) Everything, ranging from humans to trees, from material objects to the land itself, lose their intrinsic worth and upon incorporation into the capitalist system, become valuable only insofar as their “abstract existence as commodities” (Foster, 2009:23). Nature itself becomes a commodity – every tree, animal, plot of land, river, and so on can be bought and sold, and on the principles of economic supply and demand, are “made valuable by its scarcity rather than its bounty.” (Watson, 2006:260) We see nature as ours to buy and sell, and ours to destroy or deplete. As Watson writes, “ideas of value and possession became the unanswerable master of the material world, and made human masters into owners in simple of the land itself.” (Watson, 2006:260) In this way, older notions of nature as a life-giving Mother, or humans as benefactors and caretakers of the land have given way to capitalist ownership.

As a result, all relationships become embodied economic relations between owners and buyers of commodities (or owners and the commodities themselves) mediated first and foremost by money. Our relationship to the world has become one of object-and-possessor. Thomas Linzy, in calling for a resistance movement that will save the planet, argues that the only way to do so would be to deconstruct the current prevailing notion of ownership over the natural world. He writes: “Nature is property under our system of law. We’ve never had an environmental movement because we’ve never talked about the rights of nature or the rights of ecosystems and what that would look like. We’ve tried to build an environmental movement based on the concept that if you have a ten-acre piece of property, your deed to that property carries with it the legal right to destroy the ecosystems there.” (Jensen and Keith, 2013:116)

Furthermore, the capitalistic mode of production depends upon consumption – in order for there to be profit generated from surplus production, there has to be sufficient demand and consumption of these goods – thus necessitating the creation of needs in others to fuel this desire to consume. McMillan explains the concept this way: “the surplus value, or profit, created in production is locked inside the commodity until the moment of consumption.” (Jensen and Keith, 2013:181) Marx writes, “every person speculates on creating a new need in another, so as to... seduce him into a new mode of gratification and therefore economic ruin.” (1844;xiv) In this way, capitalism simultaneously requires and strengthens the inextricably related system of consumerism (hence the use of the combined term “consumer capitalism”). Consumerism forms the other crucial ideological pillar of capitalism, resulting in the modern obsession with material goods as all-important means to the universally sought-after goals of fulfilment and happiness.

Various aspects of modern life from pop culture to religion promote the idea that our sense of well-being and identity are inextricably linked to and dependent upon the money and material objects we possess. New York Times writer Uchitelle notes that “consumption has become the route to a sense of well-being and identity.” (1998) As the common epithet goes, we are the food we eat, but also, the clothes we wear, the places we go, and the things we do; we are the things that we own. In what Professor Pinar Batur calls the “brand-name life,” we exist no longer as ourselves or even as people, but “merely as representatives of, and, therefore, as owners of, commodities.” (Marx, 1887:60) The material objects we possess have come to stand in for or symbolize important aspects of our beliefs, character, and self-concepts.

In his treatise on the Spirit of Capitalism and the Protestant Ethic, Durkheim writes about the dominant Protestant ideology that salvation comes hand in hand with wealth gained through hard work and thrift. Individual wealth accumulation, in these terms, become a reflection of virtue. Aside from being markers of God’s grace, material objects can also stand in for social prestige. In an era-

defining work by Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, draws attention to the increasingly common phenomena of “conspicuous consumption,” the act of buying and then parading around luxury goods (he gives the example of gold-plated walking sticks) in order to gain or display social status. In this way, we see how complex intangible notions of self worth, moral character, and success have become inextricably coupled to the ownership or possession of material objects.

Because of this, many spend their lives laboring intensely in order to afford the things they believe are essential to these higher needs and aspirations. The more we covet, the more we consume, the more money we need and hence, the more time we have to spend working for wages. Juliet B. Schor, author of *The Overspent American*, cites findings that a vast majority of Americans have begun to spend “more time at work” (Uchitelle 1998), with less time for leisure, because they “needed the extra income to pay for their consumption.” (Uchitelle 1998) Held in thrall to the consumerist notion of material goods as sources of meaning, personhood, and happiness, modern society has become enslaved to an endless cycle of desire, consumption, and labor.

Marx argues that this reliance on excessive labor is tragic because it alienates the worker from the world and his own human essence. Selling one’s labor for wages is, to him, akin to selling one’s life and humanity. He argues, “life begins for [the worker] only where work ceases.” Thus, to extend the previous statement, the more time we spend working for wages, and the less of our lives we actually live. In what seems like a cruelly ironic joke, consumer capitalism has created a system in which we trade our lives and selfhood away for money, which we see as a means of buying our lives and selfhoods back. Depending upon wage-labor to fund profligate consumption habits is hence a paradox in and of itself: overworked Americans, Watson notes, “obtain objects only by surrendering, to some equivalent degree, the self: and they often unthinkingly seek to buy selfhood back, at a mark-up, in the form of branded goods.” (262)

Therein lies the tragic irony of a life spent working for material possessions, which we appreciate merely because of its ability to represent, in material form, life itself. Kerouac, in his generation-defining book *Dharma Bums*, poignantly articulates the ironic futility in this pursuit: thousands of Americans, he writes, are “forced to work for the privilege of consuming all that crap they didn’t really want anyway, such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, and general junk you always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume.” (1958:73)

(2) Alienation from the natural world

Another main aspect of modernity is the widening of the human-nature or human-non-human schism, caused mainly by our notions of the non-human world as inert entities with no agency of their own, subject to the will and whim of the human master. While this is rooted in capitalist beliefs of property ownership, as we have explored earlier, it is also strengthened by the modern desire to know and dominate the natural world through scientific and technological means, which is then used to justify the separation of the human from the non-human on the basis of the fact that nature is viewed as an inert and unfeeling entity, wholly malleable to our wishes and desires as autonomous beings. Hegel uses the term “*verstand*” to describe this tendency to view human society and the rest of the world as mutually-exclusive and diametrically opposed. Echoing his sentiment, the German romantic philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno define modernity as “the moment when humanity overcomes nature.” (Thomas, 2001:16)

This dichotomy of “self” and “other”, “man” and “nature” is an essential part of the modern attempts to create order and impose control over the world. Pellow writes, “a core part of the modernity project has been the separation of “civilized” (human) culture from nature,” (2007:38) The dominant practice of scientific rationality has replaced many other modes of ‘knowing’ or ‘perceiving’

the world. As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, one of the central means through which humanity has sought to assert stability in a period of cataclysmic change is through reducing the “complexity in the universe to a structured order.” (Merchant, 2012:50) This is underpinned by the central belief that the world *can* indeed “be completely known and practically appropriated through science and technology.” (Stone, 2013:41)

The dominant model of scientific rationality posits that everything - from emotions, to humans, to ecological relationships, to the galaxy, to matter itself - can be reduced to its constituent parts, and then analyzed or understood in the form of an objective law or truth. This definition of reality ignores the vastness, incomprehensibility, and dynamism of the universe, reducing it to its apparently dead and inert parts. And yet, the world is very rarely reducible to such rigid terms. Watson puts it this way: nature is “chaos: gorgeous, deeply patterned, but far too intricate to be parceled out or predicted.” (2006:332) Weber theorizes that the disenchantment that has befallen the earth is a result of this obsessive pursuit of objective truth and mastery through scientific and bureaucratic rationalisation. Our modern obsession with “knowing” and understanding the Earth completely, has stripped the world of magic, mystery, and meaning, and, as a result, made it “as inhospitably cold as outer space.” (Watson, 2006:331)

This view that the natural world can be completely “known” by objective and empirical observation and dominated by technological or scientific means alienates man from nature. As Stone writes, “the ideas that the human self is detached from nature, and able to stand outside and comprehensively survey and master nature – are a major strand of the modern, Enlightenment tradition of thought and are entangled with the mainstream of modern science.” (2013:48) In other words, because we see humans as rational, autonomous actors distinct from the rest of the natural world, which is passive, non-rational, and causally determined by a set of objective and fixed laws, we are able to justify our superiority to and dominion over nature. As Stone writes, “since we do not

regard ourselves as part of nature, we struggle to appreciate how our actions and practices are embedded in ecological processes and causal chains.” (2013:43)

Hegel and Marx both propose that to overcome this alienation, and reconcile modern society with nature, we have to begin to view nature not as an alien “other”, but an extended “expression of the human self”. (Stone 2013:46) Only then can nature cease to be seen as threatening or non-valuable. This vision of reconciliation with nature is certainly valuable as it calls for a transformation of human-nature relations from “self” and “other”, defined in terms of diametrically opposed interests, to “self” and “extended self”. However, Stone points out that this act of externalizing the self in nature, altering nature such that it becomes more like the human is in itself an act of domination – or, as she puts it, a “profoundly unethical, even barbaric” (2013:46) form of “philosophical imperialism” (2013:46).

Our attempts to bring the natural world back into our lives have invariably been limited to embracing aspects of nature that we deem valuable, non-threatening, and beautiful – and exterminating the aspects that is inconvenient, dangerous, ugly, or merely uncomfortable. For instance, we incorporate impeccably-manicured gardens and parks into our cities only to also clear swamps and marshlands, spray tons of pesticides onto millions of acres of forests and farmland in order to get rid of the forms of life that we find hostile. This reconciliation that Hegel and Marx call for is not truly a solution because it requires altering nature to fit human standards, values, and desires. Watson suggests that the nature we embrace as “extended self” becomes irretrievably changed: a “second nature created by the mind – where the elements of actuality are selectively admitted, simplified and explored.” (2006:87) This selective incorporation of certain kinds of nature into human society based purely on the basis of what is useful or palatable to humans is, as Stone argues, an act of violence. In this way, the modern alienation from nature and colonization of it as an “other” happens on multiple levels and even when we try explicitly to counter it.

(3) Endless pursuit of individual profit

Capitalist economies, liberal nation-states – these are both committed first and foremost to protecting the inalienable rights of each individual citizen to participate equally in a laissez-faire economy. Both see individual autonomy and personal freedom as central and foundational to societal well-being and justice. While the capitalist system provides the individual with the *desire* and *means* to accumulate profits for himself, the nation-state simultaneously offers the centralized framework of power necessary to *protect* these rights to pursue (and keep safe) this accumulated wealth. We can thus see capitalism and the nation-state as two buttresses in an arch: in this dominant system, people are not only perennially concerned with *adding* to their personal store of “stuff”, but also equally obsessed with *keeping* “their stuff” theirs (as opposed to the community’s, or somebody else’s). These modes of political, social, and economic organization that characterize modernity are thus both a product *and* a reason for the dominant ethic of individualism we see in society today.

In *Suicide*, Weber points out the disintegration of communal bonds in modern societies, arguing that it has resulted from a societal-wide focus on striving towards personal salvation through personal labor (and actions), alongside the breaking down of social rules and limits on individual desire. To him, these factors lead to conditions of anomie, a loss of communal solidarity, and individual desolation. According to him, locating meaning and fulfilment in individual pursuit and attainment of desires results in widespread discontentment – without the social mores placing checks on an individual’s unlimited desires - which Durkheim refers to as an “insatiable and bottomless abyss” (McIntosh 255), people end up desiring more than they can ever possess and are doomed to unending disappointment and unresolved longing for more. In summary, desiring more than they can ever possess, with no clear upper-limits of what is “enough”, people are doomed to unending discontentment.

This also come hand in hand with the capitalist logic of unrestrained and boundless accumulation at all costs. Together, the prevailing economic system and socio-religious structure not

only allows for but celebrates the unending pursuit of ever-more profit. As a result, it is difficult to imagine a way of putting stops to human greed and desire for more wealth. Thomas Traherne, an English poet writing in the 17th century, had already begun to observe the beginnings of this, noting that “men get one Hundred Pound a year that they may get another; and having two covet Eight, and there is no End of all their Labor, because the Desire of their Soul is insatiable. Like Alexander the Great they must have all.” (Watson, 2006:306) Ultimately, this limitless pursuit of wealth over all else chips away at the foundations of communal life and give rise to an ethic of individual profit over communal wellbeing.

Foster gives us the apt analogy of capitalism as an “unstoppable, accelerating treadmill” (2009:48) that runs on the endless and ever-more-hurried conversion of raw materials and human labor into profit and waste. Although this process is obviously unsustainable, it goes on because we prioritize instantaneous, individual gain over long-term sustainability and equitable distribution. As Keynes, a British economist, points out, “the accumulation drive of the system...makes avarice and usury into our gods.” (Foster, 2009:22) With no higher ‘gods’ to answer to apart from the pursuit of individual wealth, there is of course no reason to put tabs on one’s irresponsible or selfish behaviors. Lawrence Summers, the former Chief Economist of the World Bank, issued a statement that speaks precisely to this philosophy of maximum, “free-for-all” extraction of natural resources: “there are no... limits to the carrying capacity of the earth... The idea that we should put limits on growth because of some natural limit, is a profound error.” (Rees, 2013:54) Thus, instead of being geared towards distributing natural resources equitably such that everyone in the community has enough to live on, and using only as much as needed so that future generations will have enough as well, neo-liberal capitalist systems focus on short-term and utterly unsustainable individual wealth.

As a result, Magdoff (2012) contends that “capitalism promotes the processes, relationships, and outcomes that are precisely the opposite of those needed for an ecologically sound, just,

harmonious society.” Bookchin, in much the same vein, bluntly states that “capitalism can no more be ‘persuaded’ to limit growth than a human being can be ‘persuaded’ to stop breathing. Attempts to ‘green’ capitalism, to make it ‘ecological’, are doomed by the very nature of the system as a system of endless growth.” (1990:93-94) Since capitalistic accumulation is, by definition, endless, and our political systems are designed to *protect* this unsustainable process, the depletion of the earth’s finite resources will only end when all sources run dry. In the meantime, we consume with ravenous and unstoppable appetite the very earth that we inhabit and depend upon for survival. As Foster writes, the conflict between our behaviors and ideologies, which are centered around infinite and unrestrained exploitation of the earth, and the reality of the earth as a finite and bounded ecosystem is “an absolute contradiction from which there is no earthly escape.” (2009:15)

Furthermore, capitalist nation-states centered around liberal or laissez-faire economics assumes that in a free-for-all environment in which everyone has the *right* to and (in theory) equal opportunity to compete for their own wealth and wellbeing is the best way to ensure quality of life for everyone. This principle is perhaps encapsulated best by Adam Smith’s concept of the invisible hand of the market, which argues that in a free market economy, self-interested and rational human actors operate through a system of mutual interdependence to promote the general benefit of society at large. This concept is immensely influential, and has become central to various hegemonic economic and political institutions ranging from powerful nation-states like the U.S. and U.K., to international organizations like the IMF. McKibbens writes, “Smith’s core ideas—that individuals pursuing their own interests in a market society end up making each other richer; and that increasing efficiency, usually by increasing scale, is the key to increasing wealth—have indisputably worked.” (2007)

At the same time, however, this philosophy of leaving it to individuals to ensure their own quality of life through accumulating wealth is one that deeply undermines communal solidarity and an ethic of care for others. It further breeds a dominant culture of prioritizing economic wealth over all

else as a means to happiness, thus strengthening the justification of domination and exploitation we have adopted towards other beings in the natural world. Most of all, the correlation between wealth and happiness, which might have been more valid half a century or more ago, simply no longer holds true amongst affluent nations today. McKibben explains why: “Up to a certain point, more really does equal better...a boost in income delivers tangible benefits.” (2007) But past that point (which data pegs at around \$10,000 per capita), happiness is no longer affected by an increase in wealth. In summary, “we kept doing something past the point that it worked.” (2007)

Alternative Paradigms

So what can we do that *will* work? Perhaps the answer lies in looking to the many other ways of living and organizing our societies that have been erased, discredited, or subsumed. After all, modernity is not and has never been a homogenous experience. While modern value systems, modes of economic and social organizations, and ways of “knowing” the world have certainly superseded other (sometimes older) forms of living and being, these have not been rooted out of modern society completely. As in a “palimpsest,” various forms of knowledge, ideology, memory and experience are mapped or overlaid on top of each other but do not completely vanish or replace the rest.

Furthermore, there have been many forms of pushback and resistance against these hegemonic ideologies and institutions. Over the past three or so centuries, there have been various collective attempts to find alternative ways of living. Stone cites Romanticism, American transcendentalism, German nature philosophy, and early Marxian philosophy as examples of such resistance. Thus, these frameworks, both old and new, allow us to envision alternative futures, alternative modernities: ones free from the ‘ills’ of consumer capitalism, disenchantment, alienation from the natural world, dissolutions of social bonds, and systems of exploitation or domination.

In this segment, I will be drawing from two main paradigms that attempt to transform the sociopolitical and material structures of modern society in order to arrive at what Foster terms “social and ecological sustainability”. These are: Deep Ecology, a collective intellectual, ethical, spiritual and philosophical system of orienting humans to nature; and second, Eco-Socialism, a vision of communally-rooted socioeconomic organization that is committed to equitable distribution and care. I chose to focus on these two philosophies because I see them overlapping with each other under Marx’s notion of “praxis” – Deep Ecology forming the spiritual and ethical foundation that constitutes “ideology”, and Eco-Socialism forming the concrete shift in social and political organization that constitutes “action.”

Deep ecology

Deep Ecology is many things at once: it is a guiding philosophy, an ethical code, a call to action, a collection of spiritual practices, and a way of life. Barnhill and Gottlieb refer to it as a “unifying but pluralistic” (2010:5) platform of “basic values that a variety of environmental activists share.” (2010:5) The term was first coined by Arne Naess, who wrote a groundbreaking essay entitled *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement*, in which he distinguishes two forms of environmentalism: namely, “shallow ecology” and “deep ecology”. Deep Ecology provides a philosophical framework for social transformation (Stark, 260) that is centered around biospherical egalitarianism and interconnectedness.

Today, the term “Deep Ecology” has become a short-hand description for a large and diverse collection of values, ideas, and beliefs that converge around the commitment to combatting anthropocentrism in favor of understanding humans as one interconnected node within a larger web of world ecology. Drawing mainly from Barnhill and Gottlieb’s incisive book, *Deep Ecology and World Religions*, the following list is a (non-exhaustive) summary of its key principles:

- *Biocentric egalitarianism*: an affirmation of the equal and intrinsic value of all things in nature. Every organism (and thing) has an equal right to live. This challenges the conventional anthropocentric notion that human beings are more important than other living and non-living beings. As Barnhill and Gottlieb note, “people have asserted that the distinctive human capacity for language, ‘reason’ or property-ownership signify that we alone have rights or ultimate moral worth.” (1990:18-19)
- *Holism*: a focus on wholes – ecosystems, species, the earth itself, rather than single or individual organisms. For the Deep Ecologist, the “ecosystem or life as a whole is the unit of value, and not each particular human or animal taken as an individual possessor of rights.” (Barnhill and Gottlieb, 1990:7) This means that the collective well-being of the ecosystem takes precedence over individual “rights” to do what they want to advance their own individual gain.
- *Interrelatedness*: the belief that humans are not separate from nature, and that all of nature is connected and interdependent. Deep Ecologists stress the connectedness of each and every part of the ecosystem, arguing that “our illusions of autonomy” (Barnhill and Gottlieb, 1990:20) fail to acknowledge the obvious ways in which our lives depend upon “air, water, food, the microbes in our gut, the nitrogen-fixing bacteria in the soil...” and the list goes on. (Barnhill and Gottlieb, 1990:20) As a result, the quality of human life is bound inextricably with the fate of the entire ecosystem.
- *Humility*: a spiritual orientation that views nature as sacred and rejects human superiority or dominion over nature. Deep Ecologists argue for human restraint when it comes to manipulating nature, recognizing the limits to our knowledge (especially with regards to the far-reaching implications of our actions), and curbing our tendency to view the natural world as something that “exists solely to meet human needs” (Barnhill and Gottlieb, 1990:6).

- *Activism*: A call not just for a shift in ideology but an accompanying commitment to tangible action, be it through changing individual behavior, collective practices, or institutional policies.

This call to action is focused on reducing human impact on the natural world.

In this way, Deep Ecology provides a critical set of ideological beliefs that create strong moral, spiritual, and philosophical imperatives to care for and feel responsible for the earth as an interconnected community. However, while it can certainly provide an impetus for shifts in the way we think and conceive of ourselves and our relationship with nature, Deep Ecology does not offer many clear suggestions as to how we should then choose to structure our social, political, and economic lives and societies in line with these fundamental principles.

Eco-Socialism

The other dimension of this alternative paradigm is Eco-Socialism, which presents us with a concrete set of structural goals with which to accompany the ideological tenets of Deep Ecology. In other words, it provides us with a way of putting the philosophical, ethical, and spiritual philosophies of Deep Ecology into action. While there are many other ecological movements that offer us critical ways of re-shaping modern institutions, I choose to focus primarily on Eco-Socialism because I believe that it offers the most compelling and incisive mode of counteracting larger issues of individualism, disenchantment, and capitalist exploitation. In the book *The Ecological Rift*, Foster, Clark, and York (2010) defend this by highlighting the fundamental relation between socialism and ecology. They argue that there can be no true ecological revolution that is not socialist; no socialist revolution that is not ecological.

Thus, restructuring the way that we define our relations to the other humans and non-humans in the world around us is crucial both to overcoming the harm enacted on both people and nature. According to Foster, ensuring a better quality of life for everyone and, above all, long-term

sustainability of the earth as a whole, requires the dual aspects of harmony and equality *within* human communities (what he terms social sustainability) and harmony and equality *between* human communities and the larger natural world (what he terms eco sustainability. His socialist approach to ecology proposes that our relationship with the natural world can only be changed through changing the modes of production and socioeconomic relations within modern society itself.

Many environmental scholars have suggested that a world where the capitalistic economic system continues to reign supreme is a world in which this sustainability cannot possibly be found. Such a view contends that the way to save the earth is through overthrowing the capitalist system of market-value, money-exchange, and individual property-ownership. Eco-socialism seeks to construct communities geared towards the fulfilment of everyone's needs. This entails moving away from a capitalist distribution in which a wealthy minority depletes the earth's limited resources at the expense of everything and everyone else. These ideas glean support from Marxism's central principle of equitable distribution of resources within a community, and Chavez's elementary triangle of socialism (which he derives from Marx), which focuses on the social use of nature and satisfaction of communal needs. These ideas form the "socialism" part of the term Eco-Socialism.

However, it goes deeper than that. We also need to define our communities in more cohesive, earth-oriented terms – this involves widening our circle of care; going from an individually-rooted sense of personal autonomy for personal gain to one that is more communally-rooted: behaving in a way that seeks to maximize the quality of life of *every* member of the community. More importantly, it is defining this community to which we belong and are responsible to not merely along lines of race or class or nationality, but expanding it to include everything and everyone in our bioregion. Building on Leopold's land ethic (and overlapping with the principles of Deep Ecology), Eco-Socialists argue that communities must be built around the principles of caring for the larger whole that we are a part of. He writes, "we abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we begin

to see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.” (Foster and Clark, 2012:395)

In other words, we must begin to see the world not in terms of a stock of resources to be exploited or as property to be owned, but as a larger community, even a home or a family that we belong to. Such an ethic of communal responsibility to the land challenges the dominant capitalist notion of individual accumulation of wealth and profit, replacing it with a focus instead on what Foster and Clark call the “sustainable development and the maintenance of the conditions of life for the millions of other species on Earth.” (2012:395) These ideas form the “eco” portion of the term Eco-Socialism.

In summary, Eco-Socialism calls for three things: First, doing away with notions of private property, and moving instead towards *social* use, not ownership, of nature. Second, prioritizing communal needs and well-being – not only of present but also future generations – over individual capitalist accumulation. Third, establishing a land ethic in which each person feels connected to and responsible for the taking care of the land and all its inhabitants.

Where does long-distance hiking fit in?

Together, Deep Ecology and Eco-Socialism form the ideological and concrete-structural basis of a larger environmental movement that offers an alternative to the kinds of destructive logics and practices that have come to define the modern era. Going back to the Marxian framework of Praxis, or social transformation, as defined in the earlier segment of this chapter, I propose the following tenets of a collective environmental movement following the synthesis of Deep Ecology and Eco-Socialism as the twin-foundations for social and ecological sustainability:

- (1) Reconciliation with the natural world, man as part of the “whole”
- (2) Universal commitment to life-preservation, re-evaluation of priorities
- (3) De-coupling from systems of capitalist value, ownership, and accumulation

(4) Environmental citizenship – Community ethic of responsibility and care for others

Here, I pause to pose Foster's question to the reader: "[is] it not possible to create a more decent, more beautiful, more fulfilling, healthier, less hell-like way of living, in which all [has] a part in the share of earth the 'common Mother' and the sordid world of 'profit grinding' [is] at last brought to end?" (2008:65) What are the small steps we can take that will bring us closer to this dream of a better way of life? Can long-distance hiking be seen as one small step towards this dream? In the next chapter, I intend to explore how these four pillars could potentially converge within long-distance hiking, and allow it to become a collective movement that engenders radical change in the way we organize our lives, systems of meaning and relation to nature.

Chapter Three:

Treading Lightly

Long-distance hiking as an Ecological Movement

Close your eyes, let your hands and nerve-ends drop, stop breathing for 3 seconds, listen to the silence inside the illusion of the world, and you will remember the lesson you forgot, which was taught in immense milky way soft cloud innumerable worlds long ago and not even at all. It is all one vast awakened thing. (Jack Kerouac)

Framework for Ecological Sustainability

In the first chapter, I gave a brief overview of long-distance hiking, and argued that it is not just an individual recreational activity but also a spiritual pilgrimage, a subculture, a distinct community, and most of all, a possible tool for social and ecological transformation. In the second chapter, we traced the roots of the global ecological crisis, and sketched out a framework for a collective ecological movement centered around an ethic of care, egalitarianism and harmony amongst all members of the biological community. In this chapter, we will draw connections between the first two chapters and use them as a springboard to tackle the main business of the thesis: exploring if long-distance hiking can be viewed as a viable articulation of (or perhaps an initial step towards) the collective environmental movement we outlined previously.

In other words, this chapter will seek to explore the ways in which long-distance hiking promote the four tenets of ecological resistance introduced previously:

- (1) Reconciliation with nature, man as part of the whole
- (2) Universal commitment to life-preservation, re-evaluation of priorities
- (3) De-coupling from systems of capitalist value, ownership, and accumulation
- (4) Environmental citizenship – Community ethic of responsibility and care for others

I hope to bring this theoretical framework in conversation with the lived realities and subjective experiences of long-distance hiking, allowing the personal meanings and motivations attached to long-

distance hiking to flesh out the backbone of my argument. This involves analyzing and interpreting the interviews, surveys, and written documentations of long-distance hiking that I have collected first-hand or those that I have found in online collections of primary sources such as TrailJournals.com, or research by other academics on similar topics. This will ensure that my research never loses sight of the actual, real-world experiences of long-distance hiking, and that my analysis of it is rooted in actual observations that are true to how long-distance hikers view their own trips.

Reconciliation with nature – Man as part of the whole

Deep Ecology is an umbrella term for various orientations to the earth that emphasize human interconnectivity with the earth *and* the equal and intrinsic value of non-human creatures. Schlegel, a German Romantic, phrases it this way: “we too are part and flower of this world.” (2013:49) In this way, Nature thus ceases to be an “other” to be dominated, but becomes a vast and interconnected whole that encompasses humanity. How do we get people to believe (or adopt) this Deep Ecological orientation to nature? First, we need to reconnect spiritually and physically to nature. After all, if the natural world continues to feel like something distant and far removed, there can be no reconciliation. Second, we need to see and understand the links that tie us inextricably to the rest of the world. We need to begin to recognize the impact of our actions on others, and perhaps more importantly, their impact on us. I argue that long-distance hiking provides a platform for both to happen.

Extended immersion into the natural world

It is certainly easy to feel alienated from nature when one lives most of one’s life moving from one indoor, often air-conditioned space to the next, intentionally separated from the rest of the world by barriers of glass or concrete. We speed from point A to point B in cars or trains or buses, barely paying attention to the scenery that goes whizzing past. Once we reach our destinations, we hurry

indoors away from the heat or the cold (the ‘reality’ of the outside world) into artificially controlled spaces that are meticulously cleared of any trace of the ‘outdoors’. Even when we spend time outdoors, we do so in mostly in intensely manicured, sterilized forms of nature in which anything that could potentially be deemed dangerous or inconvenient or unpleasant (by us), from mosquitos to weeds to poison ivy, have been exterminated.

The implications of this genocidal impulse to eradicate anything that is disagreeable to the human in the spaces where we live, work, and play is the reality that today, the average ‘urban’ resident in what we call “developed” nations is largely confined to abstract or man-made space – a simulacrum of the ‘real’ world, artificially constructed to fit our long list of needs and desires that it is essentially severed from the larger world. The other life forms that share this earth with us are either killed, removed, made invisible, or ‘domesticated’ for human consumption or enjoyment. As a result, study found that for the modern generation, “nature is more abstraction than reality. Nature is something to watch, to consume, to wear, to ignore.” (Louv, 2005:22)

Unsurprisingly, knowledge of or about the natural world amongst many urban dwellers today is almost nil. Last year, the Telegraph (2017) reported that 70% of people in the U.K. felt they were “losing touch with nature” and 13% had not been to the countryside for more than two years. More than half of the people polled could not identify a sparrow, and more than a quarter could not say for sure that they had ever seen a blue tit, two of the most common species in the U.K. Similarly, in America, a study found that the average American kid spent only four to seven minutes a day outdoors. (Sampson, 2015) Adults devote perhaps an even tinier fraction of their time to being outdoors. This lack of exposure to nature and, subsequently, the growing distance between humans and nature is certainly one of the main reasons behind our environmental apathy. Sampson argues, “most scientists say that climate change and species extinction and habitat loss are the most pressing issues, but if

people don't feel a strong connection to nature right where they live, they're not going to change their behavior." (Quoted in Beckett, 2016)

Long-distance hiking, at the most fundamental level, seeks to bridge this chasm by bringing humans back into contact with nature, and re-spark the strong, intimate, and embodied connections that have been lost or eroded. For weeks, sometimes months on end, long-distance hikers live in wilderness areas without the barriers of glass or concrete or technology separating them from the world around them, all senses exposed to the world around them. First of all, walking through the (natural) world creates a sense of being "in" and enveloped by the world. This is in contrast to other forms of transportation, which are often more about going as quickly as possible from point A to point B than about enjoying the space between these discrete points. Hiking allows people to take time to notice and appreciate the world around them. In fact, this is often cited as one of the main motivations of going on hiking trips. As Haber writes:

"These slow movements through a scene do not guarantee comprehension, but they do allow us the luxury of seeing a revealed landscape slowly enough to take it in more fully. I learn more about a place during a slow saunter than I do through a windshield when I am driving at a high speed. The human senses are able to catch more of the subtle detail and small accoutrements of the natural and human world." (2011:156)

Haber goes on to quote Proust: "the voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes." (2011:179) The special significance of long-distance hiking thus does not lie in the fact that it introduces hikers to the "new landscapes" of the un-spoiled wilderness or 'nature'. Rather, hiking gives us "new eyes" to see that the natural world is everywhere, and that we are always embedded within it no matter where we are.

Building on sociological research done on other forms of outdoor recreation such as hunting and angling, I argue that long-distance hiking provides a sensuous and intimate connection with nature that cannot be found in the modern urban industrial world. Franklin claims that outdoor sports are a form of "fully-sensed engagement," (2011:58) or "sensual integration...and spatial belonging" (2011:58)

to nature. This can undoubtedly be applied to long-distance hiking as well. We can thus view hiking as a form of dynamic interaction with the natural world that allows people to be fully present “*in* the landscape, not skirting nervously around its edges as ‘organized’ tourists.” (Franklin, 2011:75)

While the relationship between humans and the larger world is usually limited to sight alone – scenery from a window, brief excursions to parks and small woods on the edge of urban residences, for instance, the extended and immersive aspects of long-distance hiking forces hikers to come into direct contact with the natural world on many deeper levels and through other senses like smell, touch, and hearing. Gary Snyder, writing about Han Shan’s² notion of “being-at-home in the whole universe” (Quoted in Hayes, 2012:51), saw that condition as being in tune with the “rhythms of the natural world” (Hayes, 2012:51) and having a “spontaneous receptivity” (Hayes, 2012:51) to everything that happens in the world. Long-distance hiking can be seen as one avenue through which intense, multi-sensory contact with the natural world can offer up this sense of receptivity and attuned-ness to nature. As Thoreau declared after a grueling and revelatory climb to Mt. Katahdin in Maine, “Think of our life in nature, daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, --rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! *the common sense!* *Contact! Contact!*” (Original emphasis, 1988:95)

Thus, long-distance hiking provides us with an increasingly rare opportunity to encounter the natural world, to be aware of it, feel it, listen to it, and allow it to seep into our consciousness. Jane Caputi makes a good case for “returning to play,” (2013:40) as she calls it. “Go outside,” she tells us, “feel the earth directly through your toes, say hello to the creatures you encounter, send out a song, get to know the beings – flora and fauna and even the spirits, if you will – who live in the same place you do.” (2013:40-41) Hiking and camping restores avenues of communication between humans and nature, and makes us more aware of the impact we have on nature and vice versa. As Caputi puts it,

² An early Tang poet who spent many decades as a mountain recluse.

“little birds really do tell us things.” (2013:40) Before we can be aware of how our actions affect the other life forms around us, or develop an ethic of responsibility to the natural world, we first need to pay attention and *listen*.

Encountering the Sublime in Nature

With this immersion into the natural world also comes an attitude of wonder, reverence, and love for the natural landscape. This spring break, I had the chance to hike in the Sierra Nevada mountain range in California. On one particular hike, we took a long winding trail up to the top of Yosemite Falls and paused at Columbia Rock, a spot near the halfway point. In front of us were sweeping vistas of the valley below, gentle rolling hills covered with oak and pine trees. The spectacular granite cliffs of Yosemite rose starkly above the valley in all directions. Sun glanced off their snow-covered peaks. I felt my heart swell and constrict at once. Time stood still – it was impossible to think of any other time or moment before or after this one – and yet at the same time it seemed to stretch forever in both directions, and I felt as timeless as the granite cliffs, as young and as old as the sun.

The scale of the towering cliffs, sheer drops, open space, was unlike anything I had ever experienced before. It was a world not made or meant for humans; everything was too tall, too sharp, too vast, too old for us. I could not wrap my mind around the mountains, nor could I travel bodily through its dizzying heights. Nothing stayed in my mind’s eye; every time I blinked, I felt the sheer drops and giant cliffs hit me again and again like waves reclaiming the shore. At the time, I had no words for what I was feeling or thinking. I noted physiological changes – paid attention to my heart beating faster, my chest growing tight, my breath getting shallow, as though each mouthful or lungful of air had gotten thinner. Beside me, my friend was tearing up. When I turned to look at her, she explained: “I’m not really thinking: ‘wow so beautiful’. It’s more like I want to wail or scream or something. There’s also this strange feeling, like I want to throw myself off the mountain as a sacrifice.”

(Pengkul, personal communication, March 18, 2018) I understood, partially, what she was saying. There was this complex, contradictory swirl of intense emotion in my chest, both terror and awe, peace and turbulent anxiety.

Later on, we tried many times to talk about what we had each experienced up in Yosemite: after we had made our way back down to the valley floor, again after we had allowed the experience to sit with us, simmering for days; once again back in school, conversing with people who had not been with us. Our conversations constantly looped back to this idea of the sublime. Edmund Burke, an 18th century Irish statesman and philosopher defined the word as a combination of the highest states of terror stemming from the impulse of self-preservation. He writes:

“The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and that astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other... Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect.” (1757:41-42)

To Burke, the sublime is *the* most fundamental and powerful emotion in the human experience. It signifies an interaction or an exchange with the world that engenders feelings of going *beyond* individual experience, beyond reason, being completely filled by the present moment. This, he says, is a “delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror.” (1757:129)

Burke’s definition of the sublime spoke to my own personal experience at Yosemite – of experiencing a moment in nature wherein I had felt so intensely fearful and reverent and astounded, all at once. This also provided a lens through which to understand the trail journals I have read and conversations I have had with long-distance hikers. Almost every narrative recounted some moment during their hikes when they had felt an intense connection to the world that had made them realize that the universe was “an order transcending human understanding” (Worster, 2005:13) – infinitely vast and irreducible rather than passive, inert, and subject to human whims. Keith, quoted by Saunders,

Laing, and Weiler (2013:20) reflects on his emotions during his long-distance hike: “I feel just the tiniest speck of life in a vast universe and yet somehow the fact that I’m able to have feelings of transcendence and sublime feelings somehow enlarge you, make you feel that you expand into the vastness of that universe too.”

One of the most common motivations cited by hikers is that of re-connecting with the spiritual or the divine in nature. Regardless of whether they had categorized their experiences as religious or simply as ‘spiritual,’ many mentioned that they had experienced a renewed sense of the world as an “exciting and sacred place to live.” (Sage, 2009:39) Encountering the sublime in nature forces us to see ourselves as an interconnected part of a larger whole rather than the center of all existence. This eventually pushes us towards a spiritual, ethical, and emotional orientation that sees the natural world as a magical, sacred, and uncontainable whole to which we belong, and challenges the dominant understanding of the world as manipulable, knowable, or possess-able through scientific rationality or capitalist commodification. Thus, long-distance hiking is valuable because it can offer us a glimpse of the vastness and plurality of existence(s) on this planet. The recognition of the millions of other (past, present, and future) existences that intersect and overlap with our own – and that we depend on for our life – allows us to come to a Deep Ecological understanding of our place on this Earth.

Love and Reverence for the Earth – Basis for Environmental Care

Many hikers’ trail journals document the many moments – small and large – in which they were deeply moved by wonder, fear, and joy. They listed, for instance, the crunch of leaves underfoot, the sound of small animals scampering through the undergrowth, the feeling of sun filtering through the leaves of a forest canopy, the tiny rustling water droplets when breeze blows through after a rain, or the brilliance of a sunset from the ridge of a mountain. These moments were accompanied by expressions of rapturous awe, in which hikers felt stunned by the beauty and splendor of the world

and motivated to protect it. Cheryl Strayed, for instance, wrote about how the ecological devastation she encountered along her hike had a profound impact on her:

The trees that remained standing on the edge of the clear-cut seemed to mourn, their rough hides newly exposed, their jagged limbs reaching out at absurd angles. I've never seen anything like it in the woods. It was as if someone came along with a giant wrecking ball and let it swing... ..I was hiking through national forest land, which, in spite of its promising name, meant that I was on land that the powers that be could use as they saw fit for the public good. Sometimes that meant that the land would remain untouched, as it had been on most of the PCT. Other times it meant, that ancient trees were chopped down to make things like chairs and toilet paper. (2012:209)

The deep love and respect that hikers gain for the natural landscape, particularly through forging such emotional ties to nature, particularly the places through which they had walked comes through in many other hiker journals. Ptasznik quotes conversations she had with some long-distance hikers who had felt the destruction of certain habitats as though it were an attack on their own bodies. One said, "it was shocking for us to walk through dense forest one moment and into an almost clear cut section the next. Seeing destroyed forest was incredibly depressing, and North Star started to tear up. In addition to the cut trees, almost all the vegetation had been ripped up by heavy machinery." (2015:41)

Clearly, this powerful love and terror-induced reverence for nature that hikers gain over the course of their trips is a strong motivator for environmental care and protection. The largest means-ends study of the effects of long-distance hiking on the attitudes and ideologies of hikers found that there was a strong link between being outdoors and the development of environmental awareness. (Hill, Goldenberg, and Freidt, 2009:22) Within this study, the authors also claim that the data gathered corroborates Louv's notion of the links between "primary experience with the outdoors and environmental stewardship." (2009:22) Hence, long-distance hiking can be seen as a vital way in an emotionally-rooted connection to the land can serve as the impetus for mobilizing against environmental destruction.

In her book, *The Spirit of the Appalachian Trail*, Bratton also stated her findings gathered from surveys conducted on AT thru-hikers, which suggested that these hikers had *gained* a “very strong concern for the impacts of pollution and for protection of biodiversity and of wildlife and habitats” (2015:121) over the course of their hikes. In the general questionnaire she distributed to thru-hikers, she asked for numerical responses to various statements relating to ethical orientations of all kinds. The statements with the highest scores (highest proportions of people strongly agreeing) were assertions of responsibility to the larger ecological community, such as “humans should do more to protect wildlife and their habitats” – which got a mean score of 4.5 – and “care for nature should be an integral part of my life” – which got a mean score of 4.3. (2015:121) All in all, the responses to her survey indicated that a majority of hikers (2015:130) felt that the hiking experience had increased their awareness of how their behaviors affected the environment, and motivated them to act to protect it.

In conclusion, I argue that feelings of love, reverence, and care for the natural world – encapsulated in the Burke’s notion of the “sublime” – could hold the key to an orientation to nature that is sustainable and just. In a fiery passage in her essay *Liberals and Radicals*, Lierre Keith declares: “You are not the world. And guess what? How you feel will not change the world.” (2013:108) This certainly serves as a critical reminder that such feelings are not and can never be the be-all and end-all of ecological resistance movements. However, while Keith emphasizes the importance of environmental action that goes beyond a focus on one’s individual emotions, she nevertheless concedes that spiritual systems do have a significant role in sparking a change in consciousness that is part of the revolutionary process. She writes, “Spiritual system worth the name must ultimately ... [offer] an experience of love or grace beyond our personal pain and ... [connect] us to the wider world – human, planetary, and cosmic – that must call us to action. (Keith, 2011:108)

Thus, while emotions like love and reverence for the Earth, or fear and recognition of human vulnerability, are certainly not the sole basis for sustainable practices and structures, they can be a

powerful impetus for collective organization *towards* these goals. “Love is a verb,” Keith writes. “We need to let that love call us to action.” (2013:172) Here, I argue that the intense emotions engendered by the long-distance hiking experience, particularly that of the sublime, offer precisely that experience of love and grace that connects us to the wider world. These shared emotions can serve as the foundations for a unified commitment to protecting the land we live on.

Universal Commitment to Life – Global Response to environmental risks

As explored previously, Burke sees the sublime as rooted in the impulse for self-preservation- which he argues is *the* most powerful emotion in the human experience. It is also one that is universal – shared by all humans, perhaps all non-human living beings. This has fascinating implications on Beck’s notion of cosmopolitanism; this shared concern with protecting and preserving life creates a unified foundation upon which to build collective environmental action. He writes, “global risks open up a moral and political space that can give rise to a civil culture of responsibility that transcends borders and conflicts. The traumatic experience that everyone is vulnerable and the resulting responsibility for others, also for the sake of one’s own survival, are the two sides of belief in world risk.” (1992:57) In other words, the sublime that Burke speaks of is this very experience that Beck claims will jolt us into recognizing our shared susceptibility to the dangers that permeate the world, and more importantly, push us to respond on a global level.

This focus on self-preservation may seem contradictory, and perhaps insufficient to promote collective action. After all, the term “self-preservation” often evokes brutal Hobbesian images of “every man for himself”. How then can such an intensely individual or selfish act of “self” preservation be seen as a basis for inspiring the selfless acts of working together to protect the interests of a larger community? How do we extend our concern over our own lives to that of our neighborhood, nation,

and biosphere, especially if these interests will occasionally conflict? How much are we willing to give up in our commitment to these ‘others’?

However, the desire to preserve life does not always stop at the self, and does not necessarily have to. We are capable of extending the same concern over our own lives to a loved one, be it a family member, partner, or friend. We are even capable of extending that concern to our countrymen, our neighbors, people from the same community. As long there is some common threat to rally around, any and all lives can be made to matter. Beck quotes a TV reporter responding to two major earthquakes devastating Turkey and Greece – “two sworn enemies” – in short succession at the end of the 19th century: “who would have thought that tears would become our common language?” (1992:60) He argues that global risks, by virtue of their delocalization and omnipresence across geographical space, serve as the tragedy that will bring us together as a planet. This is the cosmopolitan moment he speaks of, in which “global risks activate and connect actors across borders” (1992:61).

The main argument I put forth in this segment is that long-distance hiking is a vital avenue through which we come to terms with our incredible vulnerability and dependence on the rest of the earth. It is one way that global risks can be made tangible to us. Only by getting out of the bubble of man-made invincibility can we learn to recognize and act in response to attacks on our lives and wellbeing.

Realization of human dependence

Modern life is marked not just by the *physical* separation from the natural world, but also by the seeming detachment of modern activities from the larger processes and life forms that support it. Our food comes in plastic-wrapped, neatly-packaged, sealed boxes and bags – it is hard to imagine that they were once in the soil, in the sea, and *alive*. Meat is served in hunks of pale, hairless, blood-less skinless, sometimes even boneless and fat-less pieces, stacked neatly in rows in air-conditioned

supermarket shelves – were they once animals, running kicking eating shitting feeling suffering loving creatures just like us? Our waste – in both senses of the word – gets flushed down toilets, thrown down chutes or left outside our door and (magically?) picked up and disposed of somehow. Only a very small percentage of people have even a faint inkling of what happens to their waste – for the rest of us, our trash simply disappears to a far-flung landfill or ocean or transported to a developing nation as ‘recyclables’, never to be seen again.

Similarly, we switch on our lights, plug in our computers, fill up our cars with gas, turn up our AC, power up our coffee machines (and so on), and the energy that goes into powering these ‘indispensable’ technological gadgets in our lives is itself an abstract concept. Few know how much coal or natural gas or oil or other kinds of fossil fuels is required for all these simple and commonplace acts, and fewer still are aware of just how many life forms have gone into the making of these fossil fuels, and how many thousands of years it took for these to be converted underneath the soil. Likewise, the things we use and buy – they were most probably made using things that come from the earth in some way or form, but because the processes of producing it are so detached from the consumer and even from producers at different points on the production chain, it is difficult to see these as being derived from the earth.

In other words, for a vast majority of the modern urban population in developed nations like the U.S., “self-preservation” is invariably somewhat of an abstract concept. In these settings, one has to struggle to imagine how our lives are concretely shaped by our interactions with the world around. While long-distance hiking certainly does not make visible *all* these links (an impossible task), it does call for us to pay more attention to the extent to which we depend on the world for our food, water, energy, air, and shelter – the very basis for our existence. Colin, one of the hikers I managed to speak to while hiking in the Catskills over fall break, put it this way: “when you’re living that far away from the nearest gas station or restaurant or house, you really have to think about what you need and how

to get it, and that makes you think about where it comes from. And that makes you realize that if something goes wrong with the Earth, we're essentially dead." (Personal communication, October 11, 2017) Tim, another hiker I met, said something almost along the same lines, noting how the threats to the planet were essentially threats to his life. "You're living so close to the earth, like literally, sleeping on the ground. You're drinking water straight from the streams, you're cooking your food with that water, and you – well, *I* realized that anything that happens to this planet happens to me. There's no escaping that." (October 13, 2017) In other words, long-distance hiking trips make people more aware of the fact that the necessities required to sustain life are derived from the earth, and that we – like every other living creature – are affected by everything that is done unto it.

Reading trail journals online and speaking to hikers in real life, I noticed that besides mentioning moments of awe-inspiring joy and beauty, the other main type of story that hikers tended to recount about their trips were stories about being in highly threatening situations during which they genuinely feared for their lives. This included meeting grizzly bears, being caught in a snow storm unprepared, and not having enough food to complete the trip down a mountain. Many linked these moments to a deep guttural and unforgettable realization that they were at the mercy of the world around them. One hiker said to me: "I had this romantic idea, you know, of what it would be like to be 'out in the wild'. Watched a lot of movies I guess. But once you're out there, you realize, instantly, that this is real. This is nature as it is, not nature as you *want* it to be. And it's beautiful. Terrifying, but beautiful. It made me reflect about the crazy human arrogance, of thinking we're invulnerable. Hiking makes me think, I'm just one person in this whole universe, and anything can happen. At the end of the day, I'm humbled." (Personal communication, March 15, 2018)

Many environmental scholars have criticized dominant modes of reconciling human society with the natural world, arguing that the forms of "nature" that we attempt to embrace is not nature as it *is*, but a "second nature created by the mind – where the elements of actuality are selectively

admitted, simplified and explored.” (Watson, 2006:87) As long-distance hikers have noted, their experiences of hiking and camping, on the other hand, force them to confront nature in its raw and unfiltered form. Exposed constantly to the elements and directly affected by the other living and non-living things in the area, be it bugs or bears or tree limbs or moss, hikers are in constant, sometimes relentless contact with the brutal reality of being mortal in a world that is not designed solely for our comfort. In that comes the realization of the immediate vulnerability and fragility of life – and with this acknowledgement comes the motivation to protect it.

Recognizing the urgency and critical importance of sustainability

As the proportion of people living in cities and working in jobs that have little direct contact with nature continue to increase, the danger of *not* having experiences like these to jolt us into recognizing the delicate and interconnected ecological web we depend on for our survival grows as well. While it may seem trivial, the widespread popularity that long-distance hiking possesses, especially amongst urban communities gives it the broad-based ballast needed to convince a large number of people that their lives are being threatened by their own destructive actions and structures.

Encountering the sublime in nature draws us inexorably into the tangled and universal struggle to live, forcing us to confront the reality that our lives are inextricably connected to the world around us, and hence whatever destruction we wreak upon the earth eventually comes back around to threaten our survival. Through this process of becoming aware of how much our lives is hitched to the collective fate of the earth, we begin to understand that the threats to our life are universal, and hence addressing these become universally important. Thus, when seen through this lens, issues like climate change, environmental degradation stop being abstract and distant (something that happens to somebody else somewhere else) and take on extreme urgency.

Many of the projects of modern rationality, science, and technology has been to try to obscure or denigrate this ‘base’ and animalistic impulse. Our very definitions of being ‘civilized’ or belonging to civilization is predicated upon the *absence* of the need for self-preservation; in other words, not having to worry about satisfying basic needs like acquiring water, food, shelter, reproduction and so on is a badge of pride – many argue that art, culture, music, higher-order thinking (everything that distinguishes us from the ‘other’ living creatures on this planet) is possible because we have moved beyond these simple physiological concerns. Instead, we focus our efforts on the “higher-order” goals of self-actualization and fulfilment in Maslow’s hierarchy.

However, can we really place our needs and desires in distinct categories, and arrange them in a top-to-bottom hierarchy? Our need for clean air, water, food, and shelter is inseparable from our need for belonging, love, and fulfilment – neither can exist without the other. Secondly, in a world where global risks, as Beck puts it, are so pervasive, inescapable, and incalculable, are we truly exempt from these concerns about our lives and wellbeing? Can we really afford not to think about things like where we get our food or how to avoid dangerous substances or when the next rain will come? Climate change scientists and environmentalists argue the contrary. They claim that our access to basic necessities have become more tenuous than ever before. Rather than take these so-called ‘basic’ needs for granted, we need to start asking if our social, political, and economic structures are giving sufficient primacy to protecting these fundamental aspects of our lives and wellbeing. Other concerns, such as economic profit, political interests, industrial productivity and so on need to come *after* (and more importantly, *reflect*) the central and fundamental priority of preserving and sustaining life. By bringing us into direct reckoning with the dangers in the world, long-distance hiking shows us that we have not evolved beyond vulnerability, beyond mortality, beyond the need for self-preservation.

Furthermore, long-distance hiking removes people from a highly abstracted world in which other priorities are given priority over and above this need to preserve life. Put another way, it is

carried out in spaces, environments, and communities in which one's physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing is centered. This is, in fact, one of the main factors that draw people to long-distance hiking: the opportunity to put aside other worries and concentrate fully on living well. As one hiker puts it, "Once I put on my boots and shut the door, I leave everything else behind. All that matters is that I am alive, happy, and healthy. Everything else is secondary." (Personal Communication, February 22, 2018) People engage in hiking with the deliberate intention of paying full attention to satisfying the needs that they have been forced to neglect in their daily lives back at home. The same hiker says:

"I have two kids and a full-time job, so when I'm not hiking, it's just go-go-go for me. I don't sleep enough, I don't exercise enough; it's a constant compromise between what I *have* to do and what is actually good for me. But when I'm hiking, all the other things fade away. I can just concentrate on spending time with my kids and treating myself well. Makes me think: this is what matters in life, you know? Not work, not money, or any of those things." (Personal Communication, February 22, 2018)

She voices a sentiment that gets repeated constantly in other conversations I have had with hikers. More than that, it speaks to the very basis of long-distance hiking culture itself; in hiking, the various 'other' obligations we have in life, either to do well in school or be productive at work or earn enough money are de-centered, hiking allows us the time and space to reflect on what truly matters to us.

In an article McKibben wrote for *Mother Jones*, he points out the destructiveness of our "single-minded focus on increasing wealth," (2007) arguing that "growth no longer makes most people wealthier, but instead generates inequality and insecurity. Growth is bumping up against physical limits so profound – like climate change and peak oil – that trying to keep expanding the economy may be not just impossible but also dangerous. And perhaps most surprisingly, growth no longer makes us happy." (2007) This fundamental realization that the priorities of our structures and institutions are no longer in line with our well-being is sobering. Why should the former not be *defined by* the latter?

Long-distance hiking, through connecting us back to the critical logic of prioritizing one's life above all else – is an important start because it reminds us that preserving life should take precedence.

This should be reflected in the institutions and structures that govern the way we live. Currently, however, these structures are bound instead to other priorities that often run counter to this – ones that destroy rather than protect life. It is ironic and counter-intuitive that we should sacrifice sleep in order to finish a paper, or continue to support a corporation that dumps toxic waste into our water just because it provides jobs, or vote into power a man who actively works to stymie efforts to address global climate change, just because we believe in his other policies. And yet, we make these decisions every day. What needs to be interrogated are not the individual mindsets behind these decisions but rather, the structures that have made such distorted priorities hegemonic. We need to change these structures to reflect a different set of priorities – ones that are centered around the sustenance and protection of life in all its forms.

De-coupling from capitalist systems of value, ownership, and accumulation

The capitalist economy posits all things, people, and land as commodities that can be owned and exchanged using money. This ethic of property ownership allows us to justify the use and abuse of others as long as they are under our possession. It also justifies the reduction of all subjective and qualitative entities to quantifiable monetary terms – inherent meaning and value beyond market value is rendered invisible and irrelevant. This fuels a value system in which money is imbued with ultimate meaning, and taken to be the central means of fulfilment. Those ensnared within this dominant system are induced to depend solely upon consumption for happiness, thereby becoming trapped in an endless system of wage-labor in order to afford their consumption habits. Societies mired in capitalist logic inadvertently views accumulating profit and material objects as the first and most important priority, over and above the preservation of life.

Related to the ideas explored in the previous segment, long-distance hiking provides a space in which this dominant mode of commodification and monetary exchange is de-centralized, and the

notion that material goods are the ultimate source of meaning and happiness is challenged. It presents an alternative to the hegemonic articulation or calculation of “value” in material and market terms, offering instead a way of recognizing the inherent worth of things, people, and living creatures irrespective of money or utility. Furthermore, it represents a deliberate escape from the cycle of desire, consumption, and alienated labor, wherein people re-claim their lives and bodies from consumer capitalism’s dominant imaginings of the human as a machine or tool for production.

Minimalist Ethic of “Less is better”

First, the long-distance hiking or backpacking experience is intrinsically aligned with the minimalist ethic of making do with less. Hiking culture, inextricably tied to the realities of the experience, is also centered around ethics of asceticism and minimalism. because it requires hikers to carry with them as little weight as possible. During a typical long-distance hike, hikers essentially carry everything with them in the backpacks – hence, they are often required to leave behind or forgo many of the material luxuries that have come to be viewed as necessities in modern consumer culture. For instance, hikers give up their comfortable beds, fancy clothes, most forms of technology, make-up and jewelry, automobiles – among many other things. The long-distance hiker’s attitude towards owning stuff departs radically from the mainstream American culture of material excess, luxury, and wastefulness, long-distance hiking culture is centered upon simplicity, thrift, and minimalism. This “ultra-light” mentality on the trail often carries over into life after or off the trail.

Chris Arnott, a long-distance hiker writes, “the lesson of minimalism is something we learn very early on the trail as we shed unneeded items to shave weight. Our priorities begin to change... In the needlessness and simplicity of trail life we find we are far happier than we ever were in the past...” (2015) It is certainly possible that Chris is romanticizing life on the trail, and is speaking only for a subset of hikers who truly do find that many of the things they own back in their home are not

necessary for their happiness – many others see the lack of material luxuries on the hike as a difficult and ultimately temporary experience; for six days, six weeks, or six months, hikers learn to do without the things they would certainly rather have. Once they return to their homes in the city or the suburb, they revert to the very same material-object-laden lifestyles they had before. However, I argue that it is the realization that life is possible and, in fact, *enjoyable* without many of the material objects one is made to desire that counteracts the reliance on consumer products and material objects for happiness. In other words, the long-distance hiking experience serves to inspire a change of consciousness, sparked through radically different lifestyle experience.

In giving up many of the material goods that they have always seen as indispensable to their lives, many hikers come to realize that their happiness is not and need not be pegged to the material objects they own. Bratton quotes a hiker describing “the extended trek as renewing enjoyment of the most basic underpinnings of existence... desire for simplicity, attempt to reduce life to its most essential components.” (2015:76) In many senses, long-distance hiking is both an articulation of the notion that material goods are not essential to one’s well-being, personhood, or sense of fulfilment, and a commitment to seeking out other sources of these important aspects of a good life. The motivations attached to long-distance hiking are primarily linked to wanting to appreciate the intangible beauty of the world. Cheryl Strayed expresses a common opinion amongst long-distance hikers that what comes to ‘matter’ on the trail is not material objects or money, but the intangible experience of being in the wild. She writes that her hike “had nothing to do with gear or footwear or the backpacking fads...it had to do with how it felt to be in the wild...to witness the accumulation of trees and meadows, mountains and deserts, streams and rocks, rivers and grasses, sunrises and sunsets.” (2012:207)

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, long-distance hiking is an experience that often removes or ‘shields’ its participants from the dominant material culture, which – as Marx argues, seeks to incite in

people the desire to consume so as to support the endless surplus generated by over-production. Palahniuk writes about this in his generation-defining book *Fight Club*, “You have a class of young strong men and women, and they want to give their lives to something. Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don’t need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate just so they can buy what they don’t really need.” (1999:110) By loosening the insidious, inexorable grip of advertising, big media, and corporations on their lives, many long-distance hikers often emerge from their trips with notions of what they truly need and want in life.

In this way, hikers are removed from the dominant culture of ascribing their personhoods, fulfilment, and happiness to material objects and possessions, and are free to re-define their sources of meaning in life. Chris says:

“Americans, like cattle, will herd themselves mindlessly through sprawling shopping centers. Consumerism in the United States is a never ending quest for “stuff”, for things we have no need for. We attempt to fill the void in our lives with next hot item. Advertising conditions us. In the normal world we are bombarded by advertisements whose goal is to make us feel a pressing need for their product. From the corporate names of football stadiums to the simple act of checking our mail, consumer culture attacks and entices... On the trail you step away from the material world. In the woods there is no television. There are no billboards. It is simply you, in the woods, with a pack. For six months this is how you live. *On the trail you learn what you truly need to enjoy life. The honest truth of the matter: you don't need much.* That is what is most freeing about the trail. You put away your worldly possessions and spend six months in oneness with nature and good people.” (2015, my emphasis)

Being thrust into a radically different kind of lifestyle – one that is stripped of material excess, waste, and endless pursuit of wealth – often inspires hikers to reflect on how they want to live back in the ‘real’ world. The hiking trip can thus serve as an important introduction to an alternative way of living that counters the intense unsustainability and hollowness of capitalist accumulation, which not only consumes and destroys the natural world but also human life, both used as fuel for endless production. Gary Snyder, a widely known American Beat generation poet and avid hiker once wrote a poem called *Tomorrow's Song*: “...we need no fossil fuel/get power within/grow strong on less.”

(1969:77) This fundamental desire to trim down on the extravagance and nonessential luxuries of modern consumer-capitalist lifestyles is an impulse that could be extremely generative if placed alongside a genuine eco-consciousness.

Many environmental scholars have criticized the wastefulness of wealthy, industrial societies, and argued that the pursuit of endless non-essential “wants” rather than “needs” has led to the over-use and over-exploitation of natural resources. Aric McBay provides us with one extremely salient image of the unequal distribution and use of the earth’s resources – she says: “think about this for a moment. you could supply one quarter of all the energy Haiti uses with the gasoline Americans spill every year filling their lawnmowers.” (2013:216) This is a sobering thought. A lion’s share of the earth’s natural resources is depleted (wasted) by a small fraction of the earth’s population – the wealthy or middle-income folk living in more affluent nations like America.

While it is certainly important to cut down on the earth’s population such that the sheer carbon footprint left on the earth by humans is reduced, it is also crucial to think about the ways in which people, in crude terms, are not equal – and that resources are inequitably distributed along social, economic, and political lines. Aric McBay writes, “the benefit of living in a society that’s incredibly wasteful is that you can trim a lot before you start to get down to the actual necessities.” (2013:216) If more people from developed, wealthy nations learnt to live with less, reduce their energy and material consumption, the speed at which the earth’s natural resources are depleted and landfills are filled up with toxic waste could be reduced. In order to arrive at practices and behavioral shifts that involve a reduction of wastage and non-essential consumption, there first has to be a desire to reduce material excess and wastage on non-essentials.

This is where hiking can serve as a palatable introduction into a life stripped of the material luxury goods and products that people have come to rely on and see as essential to life in modern affluent countries. Coming to realize that life is in fact better (or, perhaps ‘not as bad as we think’)

without these ‘extras’ can only happen if people are given the opportunity to envision and experience life *without* these things.

Breaking the cycle of production, consumption, labor

By forgoing the capitalist drive for accumulation of wealth and endless labor that comes with that pursuit, long-distance hikers see their hiking trips as a form of resistance against the dominant definitions of success and contentment. Long-distance hikers seek to free themselves from the need to work to buy things that are not necessary for their well-being. In line with other minimalist ways of living espoused by movements such as Freeganism, long-distance hikers “strive to make less, spend less, and make the most out of what is available.” (Moré, 2011:52) In this way then, long-distance hiking can be seen as an active choice to break from the conventional definitions of the “good life” – what fulfilment, success, and happiness should look like, and where it comes from. It is a fundamental challenge to the dominant notion that human existence depends upon material objects, and seeks to shift the focus away from economic wealth (and labor) to other kinds of wealth – like that of social and ecological wealth.

A thru-hiker I interviewed argued that working in order to afford things that we consider ‘necessities’ has been enshrined as a fundamental aspect of adult responsibility, but in reality, can become a “kind of drug. You think you need a car and a house, and before long that list grows and grows and you’re constantly spending money on more things and you never have enough. But then you take a step back and you realize you’re becoming dependent on these things that aren’t important.” Arnott also states: “we live in a constant rat race, our only goal to get ahead of the next guy. Society expects us to be productive citizens, to be slaves in the economy. We are expected to work until we are old and there is no joy left in life. We are expected to put ourselves in debt until we die. Hiking is my rebellion.” (2015)

This refusal to commit oneself to the capitalist notion of hard work leading to success (as demonstrated through consumption) also involves rejecting the ideologies that tie human worth and virtue to maximum productivity. This is a central idea in Thoreau's environmental writing, wherein he criticizes unthinking devotion to "lives of endless utility, lives drawn out and drained of vitality through being yoked – sometimes quite literally – to the belief that productivity and labor are the sole means of survival." (Quoted in Dull, 2012:223) He asks, "who made [man] serfs of the soil? Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born?" (Quoted in Dull, 2012:223) This powerful injection to re-evaluate what we are working – and living – for is echoed in long-distance hikers' firm re-prioritization of what matters in their lives.

Linked to this idea of de-coupling human worth from work potential (an idea rooted in capita, long-distance hikers also reject all things, living creatures, and people as worth only as much as their use- or market-value, opting instead to recognize the inherent value of things in and of themselves, irrespective of how they measure up against our arbitrary evaluations of their worth *to us*. In other words, long-distance hikers learn to appreciate nature as more than just a collection of tools for the satisfaction of human needs and desires. Rejecting the capitalist system which "interprets everything in terms of frameworks of utility," (Dull, 2012:229) hikers seek instead to appreciate the things and creatures they encounter on their long-distance hikes as intrinsically valuable, and resist the desire to reduce them to objects of utility.

Long-distance hiking therefore represents an experience that forces hikers to confront and re-think their systems of assigning meaning and value to things, other creatures, and even their own lives. In separating themselves from the dominant capitalist system of consumption, alienated labor, and emphasis on utility (or market-value), long-distance hikers are free to devise alternative modes of living that respects the intrinsic worth of humans, non-human living creatures, objects, and the land as a whole. These ideological shifts come hand in hand with tangible behavioral shifts – in other words, a

set of specific practices – that characterize long-distance hiking, from minimalizing one’s material possessions, doing without various luxury products and services, appreciating the unquantifiable and irreducible beauty and worth of the world around them, to spending less and working less. Ultimately, long-distance hiking creates an opportunity for hikers to experiment with an alternative mode of living that prioritizes temperance and thrift (even if it means sacrifice and some level of discomfort) over profligate consumption.

Environmental Citizenship – Ethic of communal responsibility

As mentioned earlier, new spiritual, philosophical, and ideological orientations to the natural world will not make a difference unless it leads to systemic and structural reform. Keith summarizes it in the following way: “we need to think institutionally, not personally.” (2011:107) I argue that long-distance hiking possesses the potential for serving as a broad-based platform for true social change because of its deep ties to a spirit of community stewardship or, more specifically, civic responsibility to the places, people, and other living creatures inhabiting the land. Secondly, long-distance hiking communities are tight-knit and held together by a strong sense of togetherness derived from a distinct identity, shared experience, and shared beliefs, traditions, and rituals.

It must first be acknowledged that most long-distance hikers today go on solo trips, and only a small proportion of the millions of people who use outdoor recreational trails ever dedicate any time to maintaining them – their sole contribution to these places is money; in a modern consumerist version of the old Roman mantra *veni vidi vici*, hikers pay, experience the wilderness, then leave. The systems of nation-state jurisdiction over public land, coupled with the pervading structure of consumer capitalism, have a lot to do with this shift. First, the state claims full sovereignty and jurisdiction over all land within the nation’s boundaries. It then parcels out some parts of the land to private owners (for a fee), and reserves some portions for public use. Taxes are collected from each individual citizen

in exchange for maintaining and protecting public land. Thus, under this system of land control and ownership, each individual citizen is entitled to using and consuming the land only after paying their monetary dues. In this way, a sense of long-term, reciprocal relationship between people and the land they live with is eroded and replaced by a simple owner/consumer relationship.

In Chamberlin's words, "Americans came to expect the government to provide accessible trails as a taxpayer-financed service, the volunteer ethic that had defined the hiking community for more than one hundred years was lost. New hikers believed that they were entitled to clean, well-maintained trails. Why, they wondered, should they be asked to do more?" (2016:161) He expands on this later on, saying, "Millions of hikers passed over trails with little concern for how they were created or by whom. They approached the trails as consumers – willing to pay taxes for trails and perhaps mail a membership fee to an environmental organization – but not to make hiking club membership or trail work an important part of their lives." (2016:190-191) In this sense, the nation-state's complete bureaucratic control over national land thus results in individual citizens relinquishing their accountability over it.

However, while it is true that a large majority of hikers today see themselves as individual users or consumers of publicly-owned wilderness spaces, which they expect the state to maintain (through tax contributions), there once was a vibrant and flourishing culture of large, organized hiking groups that were built around a collective commitment to not just enjoying publicly-owned park land, but also to protecting and maintaining it. Chamberlain writes, "this culture of hiking, which emphasized communal, volunteer service and a commitment to the social aspects of club life, served the hiking community well through the 1950s." (2016:192)

The "citizen" hiker – environmental stewardship over shared lands

Chamberlin uses Lizabeth Cohen's term "citizen hiker" to refer to members of long-distance hiking organizations who devote a large chunk of their time and energy to amassing and conveying information about the trails (including but not restricted to maps, natural and cultural history, scientific research on geology, meteorology, etc.), planning outings, and maintaining trails. This is a fascinating use of a term that echoes Dobson and Bell's (2005) concept of environmental citizenship. I argue that the communally-based land ethic of past and present hiking organizations are an important step towards fostering grassroots responsibility for all land. What makes this so powerful is its clear rejection of the dominant logic of liberal individualism, which espouses an attitude to the world that is centered on individual interests and *entitlements* to shared resources provided by the state. Instead, the emphasis is placed on individual moral/ethical *obligation* to protecting these shared resources for collective enjoyment.

Before we dive into hiking organizations, let us first examine this concept of environmental citizenship. This idea leans on Rousseau's concept of the social contract between the state (here, the term stands in for a centralized power governing a collective body). Under this sociopolitical system that Rousseau conceptualizes, individuals are required to give up some of their personal freedoms, rights, and also desires in order to preserve the collective interests of the state – the community – to which he belongs, and in return, he receives collective benefits shared by all. This give-and-take relationship between the individual and his community undergirds the fundamental notion of environmental citizenship. Using this conception of citizenship to extend not just to one's relationship with the state, but also to the larger ecological world, an individual is expected to uphold to certain responsibilities as a member of the ecological community, even if it means incurring some personal costs (such as time, energy, etc.) Rather than simply pursuing self-interest alone, people must be made to adhere to a moral code that emphasizes environmentally responsible behaviors as *moral obligations* to the ecological community one belongs to.

I argue that organized hiking clubs and the notion of the “citizen” hiker are concrete ways in which long-distance hiking promotes or cultivates this sense of *duty* to the environment. Chamberlin highlights the significance of large organized hiking clubs in the earlier half of this century. These clubs were committed not just to creating an open and inclusive community of hikers, but also to building and maintaining trails and even environmental conservation. He writes, “Hiking generally was a group activity. For members of hiking clubs, meetings, dances, meals, and simple companionship were almost as important as the act of walking itself.” (2016:111) He also describes the the spirit of volunteerism that went behind the thousands of man-hours put into creating the early trails: “Long days of shared labor were required in scouting, clearing, building, and maintaining the trails, and a shared philosophy of trail construction ensured at least a minimal level of uniformity. The result was a close-knit community of men and women with a shared culture of hiking and trail building.” (2016:137) This spirit of collective environmental stewardship over the land is an important articulation of these ideologies of environmental citizenship.

Aside from these early hiking organizations, there has also been many other historical ties between hiking and civic ‘reclaiming’ of land, and current hiker-conservancy groups that espouse this ethic of collective environmental care. The European Rambler movement, for instance, was a response to private land enclosures that threw up barriers of entry to certain parts of the country. In Germany, the Wandervogel movement had taken off even before the 20th century; “young people wandered around the German countryside taking over abandoned buildings...They were the anarchist vegan squatters of the age.” (Keith, 2013:157) These Wandervogel youth had direct ties to the 1960s counterculture in America, where there was a similar push to conserve larger tracts of the American countryside for public or communal enjoyment. Even before than that, influential American hikers and naturalists had campaigned for the conceptualization of national park land as wilderness areas set aside for public use.

Today, there are still large hiking organizations like the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, which commit thousands of work-hours each week building and maintaining trails, clearing trash from the area, making educational pamphlets, and lobbying to protect wilderness spaces from incursion by destructive commercial interests (e.g. building dams, deforestation, or dumping toxic waste). Similarly, the Pacific Coast Trail is maintained free of charge by volunteers and donors, many of who are thru-hikers themselves. I asked Georgette, a member of the ATC, what drove her to volunteer her time to the club. Her response was, “Somebody has to take care of this land. I go hiking a lot, so I thought I should give something back to this place and this community.” (Personal Communication, March 3, 2018) Her reference to a mutually dependent and reciprocal relationship with the land, as well as her belief that there was an obligation to “give something back” echoes the spirit of voluntary environmental stewardship embraced by earlier hiking organizations.

Barry summarizes the concept of environmental citizenship in this potent statement: “If one accepts the argument for sustainability, one does not just have the right to demand changes to create a more sustainable society, but one also has the obligation to do so.” (2006:33) In other words, we are not merely entitled to the enjoyment of beautiful, pristine wilderness areas but, as a citizen of the earth, *duty-bound* to protect these areas and ensure that they continue to exist. We can see this ethic reflected in the long-distance hiking organizations that are committed not just to organizing hiking trips and providing equal access to the outdoors, but also to preserving and ensuring these areas continue to exist for future generations.

The forms of vibrant social and political organizations that once flourished in American long-distance hiking culture and still exist to some degree today are hugely important steps towards challenging dominant notions of one-off ‘consumption’ of the natural world and shift instead to a long-term, reciprocal relationship to nature.

Tight-knit hiking communities and “Trail Magic”

The shared experience of long-distance hiking, extended social interaction in hiker-specific locations, along with common characteristics, beliefs, and rituals promotes a general feeling of *communitas* or camaraderie amongst hikers on and off the trail. Thus, in addition to the formal hiking organizations that Chamberlain talks about, there is also a strong cultural and place-based identity and informal community amongst long-distance hikers. These strong social ties form the basis of the remarkable care and compassion extended to other members of this defined community and its surrounding areas (e.g. the towns that the trails pass through), which is widely recognized as one of the main defining characteristics of the long-distance hiking community in America.

The hikers and non-hikers who belong to the “trail community” of hotel owners, restaurant workers, town residents, religious and non-religious community members, and of course the hikers themselves, frequently drop everything to help others in need. This phenomenon has been affectionately termed “trail magic”. I have read detailed accounts of hikers giving their food, fuel, and gear to others who needed it more, town residents surprising hikers with food at the bottom of a mountain, hotel managers offering hikers a free ride into town for refueling, medicine, or to post a letter, among others. For instance, an Appalachian Trail thru-hiker named Chuck McKeever (2017) wrote: “a group I was with teamed up to feed, give medicine to, and share trekking poles with another hiker we’d just met who’d fallen in a creek and lost most of what he had. He was no friend of ours; he met no requirement for our resources other than that he had less and we had more. It was never even a question: we helped.” In another account, he mentions a hiker who “gave two of his three liters of water to a struggling dude who had misread the water report and was going to be without a drop for the next 18 miles of desert otherwise.” (2017)

Bratton describes and analyzes this desire to give freely of one’s time and belongings to others in the trail community, even at the expense of one’s own personal interests. When she asked them *why*

they did so, many said that they simply saw that others needed help, and that “it seemed natural to assist.” (2015:65) According to her, some interviewees were in fact “surprised to be asked why they helped hikers, and shrugged their shoulders and made replies such as: ‘because they are hungry and tired and need food and a place to rest.’” (2015:71) While she notes that it is certainly true that many of these acts of kindness are bound up with notions of hospitality and ‘good service’ – and hence still inextricably tied to commercial interest and capitalistic structure, “trail magic” and the care hikers show each other often go beyond commercial exchange.

This unconditional extension of help and generosity to those who need it is a frequent occurrence on the trail, and has become a defining feature of the long-distance hiking community. Chuck McKeever states, “these incidents are a microcosm of the thru-hiking community as a whole, one which is predicated on communal living, communal success, and communal care.” (2017) Of course, these are big claims, and it can definitely be argued that these acts of “trail magic” are more a manifestation of basic human decency than a demonstration of socialist principles of communal wellbeing and care. It can also be said that these acts of kindness do take place in many other tight-knit communities in America, such as small towns or religious groups. In fact, it is also certainly the case that these acts are rooted in some form of religious or spiritual morality, which have nothing to do with communal responsibility – for instance, Christian groups who set up free hostels for hikers or provide them with a spread of food, are acting in accordance with the Christian value of hospitality to one’s neighbor rather than a prioritization of community.

However, I argue that the various overlapping motivations behind such acts does not take away from the overarching focus on social bonds and unconditional care for others over and above the transactionary relationships created by dominant modes of capitalist exchange. Rather, they all add to and strengthen this alternative vision of civic responsibility to other members in the community. Chuck says: “the thru-hiking community is a unique amalgamation of people from every walk of life,

and the approaches to completing a thru-hike are as varied as the hikers themselves. But at the core of the community is a sensibility that seems to run counter to our national culture of cold, utilitarian Protestantism. It is one, fundamentally, of taking care of one's fellow hikers on trail, no matter what." Jake, a thru-hiker commenting on Chuck's ideas, concurs: "The culture of caring that thrives among thru-hikers is proof that there are other options for America — we do not need to be bound so viciously to the cutthroat capitalist existence that destroys so many lives and so much of this wonderful land." (2017)

Ultimately, I argue that these sentiments are indicative of hikers' attempts to shift their focus to community welfare and away from unrestrained pursuit of individual and commercial profit. These tight-knit hiking communities, in other words, are examples of how group solidarity and community spirit can counteract the destructive logics of individualism espoused by dominant modern structures. Alongside formal frameworks of large hiking organizations, these informal subcultural focus on caring for others in the community represent a radical prioritization of reciprocal relationships between people, land, and other non-human beings *over* the transactionary, capitalist relationships between owners and commodities.

In conclusion, hiking clubs represent a strong grassroots movement to reclaim civic jurisdiction and responsibility for shared outdoor areas (which could eventually extend to larger categories of land, such as public space in cities and so on). The sense of *communitas* within long-distance hiking communities both on and off the trail also contribute to a sense of shared responsibility for communal interests. Combined, these aspects of hiking can form the foundations for moving towards sustainable communities that are committed to an ethic of civic and communal responsibility. If we expand upon these seeds of environmental citizenship within long-distance hiking, the movement could mature into what Keith terms a "true culture of resistance" (2013:161).

Chapter Conclusion

As explored in this chapter, long-distance hiking can be seen as a collective ecological movement encompassing four dimensions of ecological sustainability:

- (1) *Reconciliation with the earth*- hiking fosters a deeper and more intimate connection with nature that is founded upon love, reverence, and humility. This involves a re-enchantment of the world, imbuing it with magic, sacredness, and meaning.
- (2) *Shared commitment to life-preservation*- hiking makes people aware of their interdependence on the earth; this forms the basis for a unified global response to various threats to the world's ecosystem. Institutions and processes that are not aligned with this priority of sustaining life can thus be interrogated and changed.
- (3) *Moving away from systems of capitalist value, ownership, and accumulation*- hiking communities emphasize organic or reciprocal relations between things, people, and other living beings instead. Hikers also challenges the ideology of consumerism and commodification through an alternative ethic of minimalism and thrift.
- (4) *Community ethic of stewardship over the land*- hikers come to view their own *responsibility* to protecting shared resources and caring for other members. Shifts the discourse towards environmental citizenship (sustainability as a moral obligation) rather than exploitation or entitlement of the natural world.

These four dimensions of long-distance hiking serve as strong pillars for building communities that are “compassionate, equitable, participatory, pluralistic, ecologically responsible, and spiritually satisfying.” (McDaniel, 2012:93) Riki Ott writes, “right now our economy is structured to prioritize making money at all costs, which works if you don’t have to breathe the air or drink the water. What we need to do is build an economy that sustains and nourishes environmental wealth first. We must account for social wealth, and factor in our relationships with each other, our health, and quality time

with our children.” (2013:55) As I have argued in this chapter, long-distance hiking represents a significant step towards valuing these other forms of wealth and subsequently, altering our structures and institutions to reflect a global commitment to prioritizing social and environmental wealth.

Chapter Four:

Moving Backwards

Limitations to Long-distance Hiking

“It’s not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves.” - Sir Edmund Hillary

Beginnings of an *Antithesis* – Contradictions and Paradoxes

After a long afternoon of revising this thesis, I had decided to take some time off to attend the weekly political science forum. I had plopped down on the soft green couch, hoping to sit and simply absorb by osmosis other people’s smart ideas. Within seconds, I was disabused of this naïve notion. I no longer remember what had been said to prompt this particular line of conversation, but Maynie Yang, a friend of mine, slaps my arm excitedly and says, “That’s your thesis! Colonizing the wilderness!” (Personal communication, April 3, 2018) For the next hour, we end up talking about how hiking and other forms of eco-tourism end up doing exactly what they claim to challenge: i.e. “colonize the wilderness”, as Maynie put it, and keep the engine of capitalist exploitation and commodification of nature running. These arguments, along with many others, have haunted me ever since I started writing this in October last year. Some nights, I lie awake in bed thinking about the many glaring contradictions, limitations, and loopholes that plague the argument that long-distance hiking can be a step *towards* ecological sustainability and social equity rather than against it.

I believe that long-distance hiking, like the experience of modernity, is pluralistic - overlapping in many aspects and yet wildly divergent in others, especially when shaped by intersecting structures of class, race, nation-state, gender, and so on. Relationships with the natural world are equally varied – because the alienation from nature manifests itself in myriad ways and to different extents, responses to this perceived rift caused by modernity likewise range from person to person, community to community. Long-distance hiking is one example of this. Despite its links to a larger community, subculture, and ideological foundations, it nonetheless takes on many different forms and meanings

for each individual. I do not dream of making the supercilious and unbelievable claim that long-distance hiking will inspire everybody to care more about the world and spur them to take concrete steps towards restructuring their lives and communities.

As such, long-distance hiking is not a single, coherent movement, and does not claim to be. It would be remiss, I feel, to make big generalizations about it without also addressing the instances in which it falls short of the lofty goals that some (but not all) segments of the hiking community claim to be working towards. Thus, in this chapter, I hope to make visible the many instances in which long-distance hiking works to harm the environment rather than protect it, or is complicit with certain hegemonic systems and ways of thinking, or fails to attack the larger structures in its embrace of “green” individual lifestyles. The aim of this chapter is thus to flesh out more dimensions to this conversation about long-distance hiking, adding depth to what has already been said by paying attention to how the line of argument carried through the first three chapters can be flipped on its head, how it can be challenged and re-imagined. I intend for this to be a beginning of a larger conversation about the contradictions and flaws within other popular environmentalist movements – especially because one chapter is nowhere sufficient to address all facets of this discussion.

Undoubtedly, I could write a whole other thesis to counter everything I have written in this one. There is no telling why I chose to write this thesis rather than the other. The act of writing is invariably, an act of calling into existence some possibility instead of many others, perhaps all equally valid. Schrodinger’s theory of quantum superpositions argues that it is possible (at the subatomic level at least) for things to exist in multiple, contradictory states simultaneously. The thought experiment he devised to illustrate this is that of a cat, locked in a steel chamber, in the presence of radioactive atoms. One hour later, the atoms could have either decayed, killing the cat, or *not* decayed, with equal possibility. But before the scientist opens the steel chamber to ascertain which scenario has occurred, the cat is both alive and dead. When he does, however, the cat will cease to exist as a superimposition

of states and become either one or the other. Writing about long-distance hiking is in some ways akin to the act of opening the steel chamber that houses Schrodinger's cat. In the attempt to pin down certain meanings and implications of long-distance hiking, I will invariably leave others out.

This fourth chapter will attempt to flesh out some of these problematic facets of long-distance hiking that were not addressed earlier. First, long-distance hiking as a community, culture, and activity is often highly exclusionary. On the trail, certain bodies are presented or absented, made visible or invisible, thereby reflecting the same power differentials and inequalities we see in the larger world. Long-distance hiking is also founded upon specific beliefs about nature and narratives told about our relationship to the environment – these are often limited to a white (or western), urban, upper-middle-class experience. I am interested in discussing how certain narratives, communities, ideologies, and bodies are privileged or – on the flip side – excluded from long-distance hiking, as well as the implications of these absences.

Second, I want to explore how long-distance hiking is complicit with damaging and destructive ideologies ranging from that of colonialism to consumerism. In many senses, the very imagination of hiking as a foray into the untouched wilderness is in itself an act of violence and/or exploitation, and upholds the dichotomies of civilization/wilderness that widen the rift between human societies and nature. More literally, the massive physical impact and destruction wreaked upon natural habitats by hikers cannot be ignored as a fundamentally ironic result of so-called 'green' lifestyle choices.

Finally, I hope to interrogate the limitations inherent to social movements that seek to address complex and systemic problems such as climate change, environmental destruction, and capitalist exploitation through individual action. Long-distance hiking mobilizes the rhetoric of individual choice in order to galvanize people into taking action. While this is often a powerful first step towards collective sociopolitical organization, long-distance hiking – along with many other 'green lifestyle' movements – falls short of achieving true progress because it does not go beyond its emphasis on the

individual. As mentioned previously, Beck terms this “tragic individualization” (1992:62). As a result, long-distance hiking remains confined to a myopic and short-term focus on changing personal lifestyles and values, rather than on mounting a joint and systematic attack on the larger structures that restrict and shape individual choices and lives.

I hope that by exploring and accepting the duality and inconsistency of long-distance hiking, we might be able to come to a fuller, richer understanding of our complex and often ambivalent relationship with the natural world. Long-distance hiking is a fraught and ironic act, containing both the potential for social and ecological transformation and, also the power to hold up hegemonic structures and processes of destruction. In his timeless poem *Song to Myself*, Walt Whitman writes: “Do I contradict myself?/Very well then I contradict myself,/(I am large, I contain multitudes.)” One of the most difficult aspects of this thesis was learning to sit with these multitudes within long-distance hiking, and accept that it is impossible to capture fully all faces and facets of even something as seemingly concrete and specific as hiking.

Exclusionary in its practice, vocabulary, and ideologies

The caricature of a long-distance hiker as a young, white, highly-educated, upper-middle-class (often bearded) male does hold some kernel of truth. These demographic categories are disproportionately represented in long-distance hiking. This highlights the reality of long-distance hiking as an activity that is invariably shaped by and bounded by one’s class, race, gender, and nationality. While long-distance hiking has long been lauded as an ‘all-American’ activity, and the wilderness has likewise been touted as the ‘great equalizer’, the truth of the matter is very different. As mentioned earlier, of the hikers who thru-hiked the Appalachian trail (the most well-known long-distance hiking trail in America) in 2016, 88% have some college degree or more (as compared to the American average of 58.9%), and 95% were white. (Mariposa, 2017)

Clearly, the claims that nature is equally accessible to all is fallacious. There are severe barriers to entry that prevent many segments of society from engaging in long-distance hiking. First of all, long-distance hiking requires taking a long break from work in order to embark on a continuous overnight trip away from home (the Appalachian trail takes around 5-7 months and the Pacific coast trail 2-5 months). This is a luxury that not many people have – especially since it means time spent not earning any money.

Furthermore, the capital outlay for gear and food on an extended, highly demanding trip presents additional economic constraints. Targan writes: “the only people who chose to go camping were those who could afford it, and they were not many. It was an expensive proposition on all counts.” (1974:4) Although he is referring to the pre-World War I era, this observation holds true even today. Approximately 60% of those who thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail in 2016 spent between \$4000 and \$6000 in total, and more than 20% spent more than \$6000, with the bulk of it going to food and gear. (Mariposa, 2017) For many, forking out enough to cover these substantial costs for what is essentially a leisure activity is simply unthinkable or impossible – and for others, the money is simply better spent elsewhere. Clearly, long-distance hiking is restricted to those with the time, job flexibility, and money to go on a long wilderness sojourn.

This also takes on a dimension of age and gender, where young men are far more likely to have the ability to take off for weeks or months at a time, while those who are older or female (with a family to support and take care of), would not have the same privilege. This is especially true for women; the societal censure and internalized notions of gender-specific responsibilities to one’s family prevent women from leaving their family in order to go on an extended hiatus in the wilderness, or make such trips undesirable or unappealing in the first place. This is reflected in the relative absence of women with families on long-distance hiking trips, as indicated by hiker surveys and research. Roseanne, a friend (or perhaps ‘aunt’ is a better description?) of mine, is turning sixty-seven this year, said to me:

“I stopped hiking as much when I had my children and especially when my husband got sick. But now that they’re all grown up and taken care of, I’m looking forward to getting out more.” (Personal communication, February 24, 2018)

Putting all these practical constraints aside, there is also the issue of interest, motivation, and energy. These factors intersect in many ways with class, race, gender and culture or dominant nationalisms. First, walking long distances and ‘returning’ to rural areas appeals only to those who come from cities, and who lead mostly sedentary lifestyles. If one *already* lives or works in the rural countryside, or already spends a significant amount of time walking to and from places of employment, leisure, education, home out of necessity or lack of other transport options, one is far less likely to romanticize the long-distance hiking experience. Targan writes of hiking before it gained widespread popularity in the U.S.:

“America was still too close to its immediate pioneer history to see anything pleasurable about living in a tent in the woods. Much of the nation in 1900 lived in nearly approximate conditions anyway – in sod-roofed trenches in Nebraska, in adobe hogans in the far southwest, in unchinked yellow pine cabins in Georgia – and fished and hunted out of graver necessities than the gentlemen adventurers of the Adirondacks could imagine. And the thousands and thousands of immigrants who had been pouring into the nation, even if they could have imagined or afforded a vacation, would have been appalled at the idea of spending it eating food around an open fire, of using a shakily built privy, of washing in cold water, of chasing away black bears, and so on.” (1974:4)

This still applies to populations of lower socioeconomic status or of immigrant background that might still feel the same way about the hardships of hiking. One of my friends recounted that her parents could not understand why she was intentionally seeking out conditions they had worked so hard to escape from. (Personal communication, November 18, 2017)

Secondly, because hiking has historically been – and still is – limited predominantly to upper and middle-class white Americans, people of other races or classes feel out-of-place in spaces that seem “#so white”, as the popular social hashtag puts it. As mentioned before, hiker demographics tell a racialized tale of exclusion; people of color – especially Latinos and African Americans, are severely

underrepresented on the trail. Kropp writes, “That Americans of the upwardly mobile, city-dwelling sort took to the hills for tourist camping in the late nineteenth century should not be surprising. This was, after all, the era in which a growing set of elites adopted a cultural taste for wilderness and nature appreciation as well as political interests in conservation.” (2009:5) These cultural tastes that figure so prominently in white culture are noticeably absent in other cultures. This has been widely observed and examined. There is a plethora of articles written about “the unbearable whiteness of hiking,” as the Sierra Club author puts it (Vestal, 2016). Questions on online forums abound - “why is camping or hiking an activity primarily enjoyed by white people,” and more bluntly, “white people can you explain hiking?”

The racial inequities present in long-distance hiking are by no means invisible. While this is no doubt in part due to the economic constraints explored previously, it could also be due to the Euro-American centric vocabulary, ideologies, and narratives that permeate long-distance hiking. In her article entitled *Hiking While Black: The Untold Story*, Carolyn Finney poses an interesting and critical question for researchers working in the intersection between social and environmental issues: “why is the American story of nature and conservation is so white?” The narratives that surround and underpin long-distance hiking are hugely important in that they go on to shape the way we delineate who hikes, and who does not, who ‘belongs’ in the wilderness and who does not. These then go on to determine how different groups of people view and orient themselves to nature and environmental conservation. As Taylor (1995) puts it, “we tell and hear stories. They awake feelings in us... The stakes are high in battles over narratives. These battles, and the stories themselves, shape our individual and collective identities, and thus our character. They tell us how we should live and how we should relate to others.”

One of the main narratives within long-distance hiking is that of the American pioneer or ‘frontiersman’, whose acts of traveling through the ‘virgin’ wilderness is seen as emblematic of the core American values of rugged individualism and bravery that built the nation. This narrative certainly works to strengthen the ties between hiking and mythical constructions of white American masculinity. Long-distance hiking, in other words, serves as a metaphor for (or continuation of) the original acts of nation-building. Kropp writes, “camping evoked those emblematic frontier moments when men and families had first begun to hew civilization out of the wilderness...Camping thus embodied acts of memory – national, cultural, personal, or corporeal.” (2009:24) But whose histories and memories are being highlighted and celebrated through hiking? These narratives of state-building and triumph over the harsh landscape are also stories of pain, relocation, slavery, and genocide. Thus, the ‘frontiersmen’ narrative within long-distance hiking continues to link it to histories of violence against marginalized communities in America.

Furthermore, the narratives and values of masculinity and martial physicality embedded in dominant long-distance hiking culture forms an additional dimension of exclusion on the basis of gender. As Chamberlin notes, long-distance hiking only began to explode in popularity after World War II, embraced as an outlet for the honing of masculine strength and indomitability. We still see these resonances today, in the vocabulary that underpins long-distance hiking, from “conquering” mountains to proving one’s “toughness” out in the wilderness. Even women who find themselves on the trail are subject to the hegemonic imagination of hiking as a gendered act of pitting oneself against nature – which is itself a problematic reproduction of the notions of dominance over nature. Cheryl Strayed, author of *Wild*, writes, “I made it the mantra of those days; when I paused before yet another series of switchbacks or skidded down knee-jarring slopes, when patches of flesh peeled off my feet along with my socks, when I lay alone and lonely in my tent at night I asked, often out loud: Who is tougher than me?” (2013:90)

Like Strayed, many hikers who decide to go on long-distance hiking trips cite motivations that reflect age-old patriarchal traditions of equating time spent in the wilderness with *male* strength, and civilization with enervation, weakness, and emasculation. Recalling the American frontier myth explored earlier as one of the main ideological and mythical underpinnings of long-distance hiking in the U.S., the first pioneers, explorers and settlers (invariably remembered as predominantly male) were celebrated for eking out a living in the unbroken “virgin land” of the American west. This narrative of conquering and ‘breaking in’ the inhospitable wilderness recurs in long-distance hiking today, which is similarly envisioned as a testament to one’s victory over nature. In this way, long-distance hiking not only promotes damaging patriarchal philosophies of nature-dominance, but also perpetuates imaginations of nature as a masculine space in which women are out-of-place.

Finally, the narratives of long-distance hiking as a journey of the ‘civilized man’ back into the wilderness – particularly the act of entering and making the wilderness inhabitable through hiking is uncomfortably reminiscent of the “white man’s burden” narratives used to justify colonialism. Again, this prioritizes violent colonial histories and promotes once again, the dichotomous conception of man and nature rooted in western or Euro-centric ideology. Such a view of hiking ends up perpetuating the view of human society as separate from and antithetical to the natural world.

In summary, the underlying ideologies and narratives that surround long-distance hiking culture privilege certain images, traditions, and bodies while simultaneously excluding others. Not all forms of working, living, and traveling through the wilderness are considered ‘hiking’ and ‘camping’ – depending on the class, race, and nationality of the bodies taking part in these actions, some are lauded as important environmentalist interventions, while others are simply ignored or made invisible by dominant narratives. As a result, white bodies in nature are easily seen or identified as out-of-place and hence progressive – a ‘reconciliation’ of sorts; on the other hand, non-white bodies in nature

become merely part of the backdrop, associated with their natural ‘backward’ habitats of the wilderness and hence insignificant.

The fact that long-distance hiking is restricted to privileged socioeconomic classes, races, genders, and nations in the first world casts doubt on the claim that it is a collective movement that engages and involves all segments of society. How valuable can long-distance hiking be, and how desirable is it as a vision for the future, if it systematically excludes certain communities, bodies, and narratives, while privileging others?

Complicit with hegemonic ideologies

While some forms of long-distance hiking do indeed serve as a radical challenge to certain dominant structures and ideologies, many other aspects or practices work to perpetuate or strengthen them. First and foremost, as explored briefly in the previous segment, long-distance hiking upholds the problematic socio-historic and ideological distinction between civilization and the wilderness. Instead of serving as a means to reconcile both entities, and embed the human world *within* the natural world, long-distance hiking culture and practice often reinforces notions of the wild as being separate from and antithetical to human society. After all, the very definition of hiking itself relies on this distinction between the urban and the wild. It is rooted in a desire to escape the modern, industrialized world of cities and suburbs.

Hikers take to the mountains and forests as a way to seek solace from the perceived stresses and discontents of human civilization. Kropp states that hiking is seen as a fairly straightforward process in which “anxiety about over-civilization [was] answered directly by self-renewal in wilderness.” (2009:6) The problem with such a neat model lies in the presumption that there is an ontological and material separation between wilderness and civilization. As a result, long-distance hiking ends up reproducing and possibly even widening the rift between human society and nature.

Conversations with hikers, along with their written accounts of hiking, indicate that many view the pristine wilderness as being different from (and more valuable than) the forms of nature they encounter in their daily lives back at home. An example of this ideology can be seen embedded into the founding story of American National Parks system itself; John Muir, one of the original advocates for the National Parks system campaigned tirelessly for the conservation of picture-perfect “wilderness” sites such as Yosemite and the magnificent Redwood groves in Northern California. He said nothing, however, about the damage enacted on many less spectacular, more commonplace sites in rural or countryside areas, which he clearly did not consider to be worth protecting. Such a view, so deeply entrenched within long-distance hiking, promotes the conservation of nature only when it suits us – i.e. when they fit our human-centric conceptions of what is valuable, beautiful, and worth saving. This directly contrasts with the Deep Ecological principle of taking responsibility for the protection of the environment as a whole, not just the areas that we enjoy.

If hikers view the landscapes in which they are immersed during their extended trips as separate from the places they call home or interact with on a daily basis, or if most see themselves as temporary tourists rather than inhabitants of the natural world, then long-distance hiking cannot be said to be a successful way of reconciling the rifts between man and nature. The concern for the environment that some hikers develop over the course of their long-distance hike are limited to an abstract and narrow imagination of nature as spectacular mountain ranges or famed wilderness spots far from home.

In *Spirit of the Appalachian Trail*, Bratton found that “many AT hikers did not glean an in-depth understanding of environmental cause and effect while trekking, and treated the immediate AT landscape as unique and disconnected from the greater Appalachian ecosystem.” (2015:130) While 57 percent of hikers responded that it was true or very true that the AT experience was increasing their awareness of how their own behavior could affect the natural environment, only 26 percent gave similar ratings to becoming more aware of environmental concerns in their home region. (2015:129)

According to Bratton, this implied that “about half of hikers who were gaining environmental wisdom were not consciously transferring what they had learned to other terrains.” (2015:130)

In other words, long-distance hiking fails to truly inculcate the deep ecological principles of viewing the earth’s ecosystems as intricately connected and interdependent. Instead, it promotes a largely superficial environmental ethic that does not consider the many ways in which human actions affect the land and other living creatures, and focuses instead on setting aside and protecting specific ‘natural areas’ with arbitrarily-drawn borders, all the while turning a blind eye to the toxic and destructive processes that take place elsewhere. Additionally, because long-distance hiking immerses people in a very specific set of landscapes meant to inspire awe, it is perhaps inevitable that these areas are the only ones that matter in conversations about environmental protection. The ecological ethics that result are thus restricted to the care and protection of a small subset of wilderness areas deemed valuable because they can be used and consumed by humans.

Furthermore, this dichotomy of civilization and wilderness is also reinforced in damaging ways through the attempts of hikers to recreate semblances of home or civilized comfort in the wilderness. These acts often take its toll on the natural habitat and the other living creatures who share the space with hikers and campers. Thus, the act of entering, using, and converting natural areas becomes very much akin to the processes and narratives of environmental colonization and exploitation for human benefit. Kropp writes, “campers imagine themselves as creating little islands of civilization in a wilderness... the domestic work required to transform one into the other, generated much of the satisfaction of camp. Yet it also presented a paradox; while campers expressed a desire to escape civilization, they also set themselves the task of reproducing it.” (2009:10) He points to the irony of the hiker-camper’s simultaneous desire to venture into the wilderness and to his or her desire to *transform* it into ‘civilization’. These acts of transforming the wild into a ‘home’ fit for civilized humans are intrinsically acts of domination which echo the colonial impulse to bend and shape what is

perceived as ‘external matter’ to man’s will and whim. This reflects and perpetuates the dominant view that nature is a passive and inert entity to be exploited for human comfort.

Another way in which long-distance hiking is sometimes complicit with dominant ideologies is in its focus on consumerism – both in terms of paying to consume the landscape or experience of hiking, and the obsession with purchasing gear. On the most fundamental level, hiking is facilitated by and possible only through the capitalist economy. It necessitates the purchase of tangible objects for hiking, such as food, tents, boots, lightweight gas stoves, and appropriate clothing. Less obvious are the parking permits, camping permits, reservation fees, park entrance fees, transportation costs (cars, plane tickets), that nevertheless require money. Although many national parks are free for public use, particularly those surrounding the long-distance hiking routes such as the Appalachian or Pacific Coast Trail, the large and elaborate retail and service economies built around hiking all around the world clearly illustrate how such an experience is very much sustained by the global capitalist structure.

Many hikers argue that their trips represent a way of drastically reducing their consumption and hence participation in the capitalist economy. In some ways, this is true in the cases where hikers do end up spending money *only* on necessities that they require to live. However, this is not often the case, with many hikers obsessing over their backpacking gear and attire, spending many months researching and many more dollars purchasing the best ‘stuff’ in the market. There are multiple websites, blogs, videos, and forums dedicated solely to recommending and reviewing hiking gear, and huge outdoor brands such as REI, Patagonia, Columbia, Timberland, and so on exploit the flourishing consumer market for ever-more lightweight, fashionable, insulated, compact hiking equipment.

For instance, ultra-lightweight backpacking has been extolled for its apparent anti-materialist underpinnings (and central belief that ‘the less stuff the better’), but the truth is that this backpacking ethos simply trades quantity for quality – and is no less hitched to consumerism than other forms of hiking (or recreational subcultures in general). There is a whole market exploiting this desire to “go

light”, providing tents, camp chairs, clothes, bottles, camera tripods, phone chargers, gas stoves, and many more gadgets that weigh as little as possible and cost much more than they should. Arguably, this goes to show that long-distance hiking culture is at heart still very much part of a larger society driven by and addicted to material consumption.

In addition, long-distance hiking is also part of a system of consuming the landscape for enjoyment, particularly when we pay attention to the destruction and degradation that hikers wreak on the environments when they walk through and camp in these areas. A vast majority of hikers take more from these natural landscapes than they give anything back. The hiking trip is no different from any other one-off, fully paid vacation to an exotic locale. Anyone who has walked a popular hiking trail can see the extent of damage produced by hiker traffic. There has been extensive research pointing to the stresses exerted on the environment by hiking. Some of the main ecological impacts of outdoor recreation are listed below:

- Littering, and irresponsibly dumping human waste contaminates the area - especially water bodies, and poisons wildlife. (Durham, 2017)
- Going off the trail causes soil erosion, soil compaction, disruption to wildlife, and long-term damage to the vegetation and ecosystem. Alpine vegetation, for instance, may take 300-500 years to recover once trampled. (Grand Teton National Park, n.d.)
- Gathering wood and building campfires sometimes strips an area of valuable nutrients for wildlife, or even removes what might be a living creature’s home. Campfires that go out of control have also often caused wildfires that destroy large tracts of land. (Durham, 2017)
- Human interaction and even presence alone results in noise, motion, and behavioral disturbances to wildlife. (Jordan, 2000) For instance, unwanted intrusion may lead to adult species abandoning their young, interruption to the mating season, and cause animals to flee, “taking time away from feeding and expending valuable energy.” (Durham, 2017)

In this way, the assumption that hiking is environmentally responsible and compatible with conservation does not always hold true – instead, it might even be causing more harm than good. Once again, the landscape becomes an expendable entity for human enjoyment.

Even amongst responsible hikers and hiking organizations that are committed to protecting the outdoor recreational trails, the focus is placed primarily on preserving the land's capacity for human recreation – there is a significant distinction between caring for the land as it is, and on the other hand, maintaining only the portions aside for human use. Furthermore, devoting time to building and maintaining trails differs from environmental stewardship in that it is not actually an act of caring for and protecting the natural habitat, but rather, an act of human intrusion upon it.

On a more global scale, hiking and other forms of outdoor recreational tourism that take place in less developed parts of the world are charged with questions of privilege and power – who is able to purchase the natural landscape as a one-off commodity to use and enjoy, and who bears the environmental costs of outdoor recreation? While there are definitely local forms of immersing oneself in the natural environment which are not restricted or limited to long-distance hiking as imagined by the western or Euro-American world, there is a large and growing global economy built around enjoying the 'unspoilt' wilderness in nations where these spaces supposedly still exist. Such global commercial imaginations of nature or the landscape as a commodity to be exported and consumed bring in thorny issues of global capitalist exploitation. While masquerading as a "green" lifestyle choice, long-distance hiking as it is practiced is inextricably tied to the commodification and destruction of land in the global south.

Tragic individualization – “Alternative” Culture

Keith declares, “there are no individual solutions to political problems, ever.” (2011:108) She argues that there cannot be true systemic change in the ways we relate to the natural world and the

other members of our community without changing – often dismantling – the structures of power that bring these social, ecological, and political realities into being. In other words, individual lifestyle changes can only bring us part of the way there because they “do not challenge the systems of power that are actively dismembering our planet.” (Keith, 2011:108) Keith classifies such movements under the umbrella term “alternative culture,” and contrasts it to “oppositional culture”, which target concrete institutions and engage in *collective* social, political, or economic resistance.

Arguably, long-distance hiking, with its explicit focus on individual lifestyle choices and on emotions and ‘consciousness’ rather than tangible action and organizing, falls under the category of “alternative culture”. First, hiking culture is very much connected to larger traditions of liberalism, individualism, hippie culture, and American transcendentalism that value individual liberty (above all else) that has been problematized by environmental scholars like Keith. Furthermore, long-distance hiking subculture is very much centered around superficial rebellion against societal norms and casting aside all responsibilities. In a blistering article about the author’s hypocrisy, snobbishness, and moral sanctimony, Schulz (2015) argues that Thoreau’s work appeals to many of us because “we read him early...you could scarcely write a book more appealing to teenagers,” she explains. “Thoreau endorses rebellion against societal norms, champions idleness over work, and gives his permission to ignore their elders.” (Schulz, 2015) The fact that Thoreau is such a celebrated figure in the long-distance hiking community must suggest to some extent at least that many go long-distance hiking for the same reasons – rebellion against social norms, being idle, and rejecting traditional social obligations.

Indeed, Thoreau is a controversial figure who serves as a potent symbol for the similarly contentious environmental ethic of long-distance hiking. Not only does he envision ideal adulthood as “an idyll of autonomy, unfettered by any civic or familial responsibilities,” (Schulz, 2015) but also writes extensively about the “unrestrained liberty of action,” (Kropp, 2009:8) and “proud self-reliance” (Kropp, 2009:8) to be found in the wilderness, where people could live unencumbered by what he

saw to be burdensome human company. In a famous phrase from *Resistance to Civil Governance*, Thoreau sums up his view by declaring that “the only obligation that I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right.” (1849:6-7)

We see this focus on the individual over and denigration of moral and social responsibilities within mainstream long-distance hiking community. Returning to the wilderness was seen as a form of liberation for the “independent self that was buried in the bonds of society.” (Kropp, 2009:8). First of all, echoing many of Thoreau’s libertarian or individualist beliefs, today’s long-distance hiking culture is most often imagined as a form of solitary pilgrimage towards personal growth. This is reflected in the overwhelming number of hikers who stated that their main motivation for undertaking a long-distance hike was to reflect and deal with certain events and transitions in their personal lives. The community-building, environmental values that are occasionally picked up over the course of long-distance hikes are merely incidental and secondary to this emphasis on individual growth. This is perhaps also a result of the fact that long-distance hiking is ultimately a personal endeavor that is often taken alone or in loose groups of strangers. As reflected in the mantra “hike your own hike,” long-distance hiking is rarely envisioned as a collective movement by the people who actually engage in it.

Furthermore, the sense of identity amongst long-distance hikers rarely extends to concrete action – reflecting Keith’s criticism of the emphasis on “who you are” rather than on “what you do” (2013). For instance, while members of this hiking community often purport to care deeply about the environment, adopting a “tree-hugger” position in society without actually committing to any real action either before or after their hikes. In her extensive study of long-distance hiker values, Bratton found that while a large majority strongly believed that “humans should do more to protect wildlife and their habitats,” (2015:121) and that “care for nature should be an integral part of [their] life,” (2015:121) these beliefs were not converted into tangible environmental activism or organization. Her data shows that only a very small percentage of these hikers extolling the importance of caring for

nature stated that they would be willing to join groups like the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, which protected and maintained hiking trails and other wilderness areas.

In addition, the ethic of minimalism and voluntary poverty that surrounds long-distance hiking fail to systemically address the unequal wealth distribution created by capitalist accumulation. As explored in Chapter Three, long-distance hiking culture is largely centered around a campaign of minimalism and anti-materialism; many hikers attempt to decouple their sources of happiness from material objects and consumerism and drastically reduce their spending both on and off the trail. Hikers argue that by cutting down on waste and over-spending, they are able to do the things that make them happy and fulfilled with a bare minimum of work. Illustrating the widespread embrace of this philosophy, the term “hiker trash” is commonly used as a label used to describe long-distance hikers – and stems from the stereotype of hikers being unkempt and unwilling to work for a living. Today, many hikers have re-claimed or appropriated the label with pride.

These long-distance hikers argue that the privilege to release oneself from the chains of alienated wage-labor and dissatisfying living and working conditions is open to anyone who rejects the dominant notion of ‘hardwork’ as the path to salvation, happiness, and success. Deep discontentment with modern life can be tied to an endless yearning for material luxury regardless of one’s socioeconomic class; arguably then, long-distance hiking can be a means to curb these otherwise boundless desires by shifting the focus to other forms of fulfilment. However, it remains clear that those such acts of inciting individuals to curb their spending and cut out the ‘non-essentials’ in their lives fails to systemically address the structures of unequal wealth distribution that result in certain segments of society possessing the agency to *choose* whether or not to pursue material luxury and affluence, while other segments of society simply have no choice in the matter.

Put simply, middle or upper class people can choose to work less by forgoing certain indulgences they could otherwise afford, or by restraining their spending, while those from lower classes simply

do not have such an avenue open to them – they are forced to sell their labor just in order to afford the bare necessities. Thus, the ethic of ‘minimalism’ is very much restricted to certain classes who already have more than enough, and not one that allows for a society-wide, systemic breaking down of the structures that bind others to excessive labor merely to survive. While long-distance hiking does indeed inspire many people to confront their unthinking, often frenzied pursuit of material affluence, it is also predicated upon privileges conferred by structural inequalities that may be rendered invisible by this dangerous rhetoric of individual choice (to spend and work less).

This option of ‘cutting down’ on non-essentials is not open to everyone, particularly those who are already subsisting on the bare minimum. The romanticization of poverty as an example of a ‘minimalist’ lifestyle does not recognize the full realities of what it means to live on the fringes of the capitalist economy. There is a vast difference between long-distance hikers voluntarily constraining their spending, and those who are genuinely unable to afford anything beyond the bare minimum necessary to get by. When long-distance hikers ‘play-act’ being in poverty – not shower for days, eat cheaply, always be on the edge of hunger, stop using automobiles, eschew luxury items and activities, and live out in the open, they receive and subsequently, transmit an inaccurate picture of what it really means to live *involuntarily* in poverty. Their trips are temporary, and their deprivation self-imposed; at the end of the day, (or at any point if they so desire), hikers can and will strip off the ‘skin’ of poverty that they wear. Since most hikers are – demographically speaking – from affluent or middle-class backgrounds, they can always turn back to their fat bank accounts or cushioned lives at home should they get sick of the asceticism on the trail. Such ‘outs’ are not open to those who truly live in poverty.

In this way, the act of imitating or play-acting a state of poverty allows long-distance hikers to enjoy the so-called pleasures of life decoupled from consumer capitalism (and claim superficial moral distance from it) while simultaneously avoiding the systemic inequalities that come with marginalization from this economy – disadvantages that include lack of access to quality education,

inability to get high-income or professional jobs, exclusion from certain spaces, and/or implicit or explicit social discrimination. Hence, extolling the wonders and joys of material deprivation fails to do justice to the true horrors that it also entails, thus running the risk of de-politicizing class struggle and trivializing the importance of fighting for economic equality. In other words, by presenting poverty as a *tolerable* or even *desirable* state of being, long-distance hikers shift the focus from ensuring equitable and humane distribution of resources to a false and superficial embrace of minimalist individual lifestyle choices.

The very ability to go hiking is predicated upon prior involvement in the capitalist system of labor – the money one uses to afford such an experience is made through capitalist profit accumulation. The irony here is that people seek to distance themselves from the capitalist system only *after* they have already reaped its benefits. In other words, by claiming to reduce their involvement in the capitalist economy only upon earning enough to live comfortably, hikers obfuscate the ways in which their ability to refuse wage labor is granted to them *through* capitalism and capitalist exploitation. A lot of hikers I met said that they were looking to live life more fully now that they had “made enough money”. Instead of lending force to the fight to dismantle the capitalist structure, long-distance hiking might be a way of leaning away from that struggle through the less effective means of limiting one’s visible or apparent participation in the structure while hiding or ignoring the ways in which they benefit from it. In other words, long-distance hiking could be doing the exact opposite of what it claims to do with regards to combating capitalist structures by giving privileged individuals the ability to absolve themselves of their responsibility to work towards a more equitable system of wealth distribution.

In other words, calling for the reduction of spending, wasting, and working incessantly for material affluence and ‘non-essential’ enjoyments ignores the more important question of *how* this excess is created in the first place, and *who* gets to enjoy (or refrain from enjoying) these forms of excess. Put simply, this ethic of minimalism is very much restricted to certain classes who already have

more than enough, and offers no true solutions for those who do not – social movements built around the act of voluntary deprivation like long-distance hiking are simply inadequate in dealing with the larger, systemic structures that create and reproduce inequalities that mean cutthroat competition for limited basic necessities on one end of the spectrum, and the agency to ‘forgo’ a *surplus* of luxury goods on the other end of the spectrum.

In conclusion, long-distance hiking’s narrow and largely shallow commitment to combating multi-faceted and complex issues like climate change, environmental toxicity, and economic inequity through so-called ‘green’ or progressive personal lifestyle changes alone seriously limits its effectiveness in mounting a systematic attack on hegemonic structures and institutions. By emphasizing individual choice and simultaneously denigrating moral obligation to others in the community, long-distance hiking’s links to “alternative culture” ultimately means that it undermines rather than builds a platform of collective action. It fails to mobilize people in a sustained and systematic way, and ignores (or even supports) the underlying structures that result in exploitation and environmental destruction.

Beck refers to the failure of popular social movements like long-distance hiking and other ‘green’ lifestyle movements as “tragic individualization” (1992:62). He argues that the nature of global risks as delocalized and omnipresent requires a unified, pre-emptive, response to mitigate or address these issues. In his own words, issues that affect the entire world cannot be “dealt with solely through the concerted actions of individuals” (Beck, 1992:62), and requires a “civil culture of responsibility that transcends borders and conflicts.” (1992:57) Tragically indeed, long-distance hiking does precisely the opposite in its nihilist abandonment of communal responsibility.

Chapter Conclusion

Clearly, there remains a lot to do before long-distance hiking can truly be hailed as a true ecological resistance movement. The question remains: What do we do to get there? Looking more broadly at all popular ecological resistance movements, how do we make sociopolitical action that is *not* intrinsically radical (of which long-distance hiking is a prime example) still work in support of progressive ideals? Instead of hailing long-distance hiking as a unilaterally beneficial, progressive movement (nor condemning it as a completely destructive and neo-colonial/capitalist exercise), we need to pick up on and strengthen the aspects that work in favor of abolishing harmful ideologies and structures while addressing the aspects that are complicit with these institutions. This is the focus of my fifth and final chapter.

Chapter Five:

Going Home

Hiking as next step: What's next?

"Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home." (John Muir, Our National Parks)

Moving forward – Guiding principles

As I attempted to capture with the juxtaposition of Chapter Three and Chapter Four, long-distance hiking is a diverse and contradictory practice that can be seen as both colonial and post-colonial, inclusive and exclusive, constructive and destructive, sustainable and unsustainable, individual and communal. Taylor begins his book on environmental resistance movements by arguing that there are never simple and clear-cut narratives where "good triumphs over evil and communities of humans and nonhumans find their way back to an Edenic harmony." (1995:25) Trying to mold the ever-evolving, pluralistic, and always-complicated man-nature relationship into simplistic dichotomous of good and bad is counter-productive. Similarly, trying to force long-distance hiking, along with the larger category of outdoor recreation or green tourism or even 'popular' environmental activism, into neat boxes does not do justice to the complexity of these movements. Rather, what matters is constantly working to shift these movements further along the spectrum towards social and ecological sustainability.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, we need to find a way to navigate the push and pull of these contradictory aspects of long-distance hiking, and expand upon the positive, progressive aspects of long-distance hiking while simultaneously addressing its negative implications. There are several main questions that I hope to delve into in this concluding chapter. First, how do we de-colonize long-distance hiking, and shift the focus away from destructive or hegemonic strands of thought? How do we open up space for alternative paradigms, narratives, and vocabulary to guide and shape our efforts

at environmentalism – what can we learn or take from other models of relating to the natural world that are currently not part of long-distance hiking? Second, how do we ensure that the movement goes beyond pushing for superficial individual lifestyle changes, and becomes instead a collective movement towards building structures and communities centered around sustainable values?

In line with the theory of dialectics originally conceived by Fichte and further refined by Hegel, I view this fifth and final chapter as a way of synthesizing the original thesis I put forth in the first three chapters with the antithesis explored in the fourth chapter. This process relies upon putting two conflicting sides of an argument together and overcoming the contradictions between the two in order to arrive at some new concept or truth. There are many points of departure from long-distance hiking, simply by virtue of its multiple incongruous aspects – some lead us further down the path of destruction, exploitation, and inequality, while others bring us closer to the goals of social and ecological sustainability. Following Hegel’s thesis-antithesis-synthesis model, this conclusion is an attempt at navigating through these contradictions within long-distance hiking, and finding a way forward. In other words, this chapter is focused on guiding principles we can use to pick out a tenable path for the future.

1. *The Skin as a Map*

A poem we read in my Native American literature class recently made me pause and think. It is entitled *A Map to the Next World* and is written by the renowned poet Joy Harjo. “I will never forget you,” Harjo begins. “Your nakedness/haunts me in the dawn when I cannot distinguish your/flushed brown skin from the burning horizon, or my hands.” In this bittersweet poem, Harjo blurs the boundaries between lover, self, and land. Just as bodies touch, slide, intermesh, and set each other on fire, the same can be said of the interaction between people and the world. In another one of her poems, Harjo revisits this concept of “erotic contact” (Warrior, 2009:347) between humans and nature:

“[H]er skin/responds” to the beauty of the natural world “like a woman/to her lover”. (Harjo, quoted in Warrior, 2009:347) This conception of the intense, lingering, sensual bonds between people and the land is a central theme in Harjo’s work.

For Harjo, the sky, the lover’s body, her own body, are one and the same – she cannot distinguish between them; each form an indelible part of the awakening dawn. Here, as in other Harjo poems, the skin takes on significance as the site where the boundary of the ‘self’ bleeds and blends into the boundary of the ‘other’ – in Warrior’s words, it is through the skin that we “immediately touch and relate to the rest of the world around us” (345). The skin is thus the locus at which pain, joy, hope, tragedy, can be transmitted between bodies; the skin is the site at which we let go of our selves and melt into the entirety or the whole that is the world. In *Motion*, Harjo writes, “I tremble and grasp/ at the edges of/myself; I let go/into you.” (Quoted in Warrior, 2009:341)

In the context of reconciling what Foster calls the metabolic rift between humans and nature, the skin becomes a bridge, an intermediary entity, a way of navigating this difference and allowing each entity to blend and bleed into the other. These Native American poets and theorists offer us a concept of *thinking* through and from the skin – in other words, paying close attention to the connection we have with the world around us, and allowing that connection to be embodied and deeply sensuous. In this sense then, theorizing *through* the skin is a way of softening the hard edges between the seemingly antithetical, and letting our connection with the world guide our actions.

Harjo’s intriguing concept of using one’s skin as a “map into the next world,” speak to the kind of future that long-distance hiking could take us. First, long-distance hiking has been, is and continues to be a way of “thinking through the skin”; while hiking and camping in the wild, one’s body is used as a medium through which the world (and threats to this world) can be felt and understood. Beck talks about a traumatic experience that incites us to shared acknowledgement of global risk – long-distance hiking, because of its physicality and because of the primacy of the human body situated *in*

nature, certainly serves as one such experience. In other words, hiking's *presence-ing* of the body in nature allows us to make real and tangible connections between man and nature which have been obscured or eroded by dominant structures of modernity. Even more than simply listening to (Caputi, 2013:40) the natural world, "thinking through the skin" through hiking allows us to *feel* the natural world *in* our bodies, and encourages us to see nature as an unseparated or inseparable self.

2. *The Erotic as a Compass*

It is interesting also to think about the sensual and the erotic as powerful dimensions of this connection between humans and nature. Harjo draws on Lorde's use of 'erotic' here - for both women, the term also encapsulates a feeling of intense joy and fulfilment, or spiritual transcendence, perhaps even the sublime - looping back to ideas brought up in the previous chapters. Lorde defines the erotic as: "the fearless underlining of my capacity for joy, in the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, harkening to its deepest rhythms so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, or examining an idea." (1984:56-57) Thus, to be guided by the erotic is to embrace one's affective connection to one's self and to the world. In this way, Harjo and Lorde call for us to take seriously the unimaginably deep wells of emotion that tie us to the rest of the world, and to value – even *demand* – this connection with ourselves, with the world, and in all that we do and all that we interact with.

Lorde writes passionately:

For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe. (1984:57)

To her then, the erotic is an indictment, a call to action, a way of saying not just that we deserve more, but that we have an obligation to ourselves and to the rest of the world to work actively to achieve what we *do* deserve – be it a clean and safe environment free of threats to one’s wellbeing, or a sense of equity, self-respect, and belonging, or a life that is enjoyable and fulfilling. In the same way, prioritizing “erotic contact” with the world, as Warrior (2009:347) puts it, involves taking responsibility for fostering intimacy with the world – rather than accepting alienation as an inevitable or tolerable state of being.

In *Silent Spring*, Carson (1962:12) asks, “why should we tolerate a diet of weak poisons, a home in insipid surroundings, a circle of acquaintances who are not quite our enemies, the noise of motors with just enough relief to prevent insanity? Who would want to live in a world which is just not quite fatal?” In many ways, we tolerate our lives because we often feel as though it is impossible to imagine any other kind of life. Even if it is stressful, ecologically damaging, toxic in multiple senses of the word, our ways of life seem set in stone. This is ideological and material hegemony at work. Lorde argues that we have to allow the “erotic” – our capacity for intense joy – to drive us towards challenging this hegemony and changing the social, economic, and political structures that deny us this joy and fulfilment. She incites us to aspire for more, for what we know we are capable of, and continue fighting for change until we live in a world that is not merely “not quite fatal”, as Carson says, but truly safe, beautiful, and equitable.

This is precisely the role that long-distance hiking can play in our lives – just like building a bookcase, or writing a poem, it opens our eyes to our capacity for joy (which we have been deprived of), shows us what we desire but are taught not to value, and inspires us to take action to change our lives and make it look a little more like the lives we want to have. Early last year, I told Professor Muppidi from the Political Science department at Vassar that instead of writing my senior thesis on post-colonialism or Singapore, I was going to write about hiking. He laughed. Then he thought about

it for a while. “Okay but when you hike,” he said, “what are you escaping from?” Even as I begin writing this concluding chapter, I am still not sure how to respond to this. What does hiking mean to me? Was ‘escape’ a good way of thinking about it? In reference to Lorde’s erotics, however, I am starting to think that long-distance hiking is not so much an escape as it is a way of opening one’s heart and soul up to the depth of joy possible in this life, or perhaps even more than that - a search for fullness and connection with the world around us.

3. *The “Citizen Hiker”: Civic defense of public land*

Human societies hinge upon the delineation of the “local”, or the “self”. Each level of organization, be it the local community, the city, the nation, or the pan-national racial category, relies upon the definition of some bounded territory or shared identity. In this way, our loyalties are rooted first and foremost to those who, physically or figuratively speaking, fall within the boundaries of this local community, however it is defined. Writing about sustainable communities in modernity, Powell notes that under the dominant political system of democracy, this idealized community is located in the classical Greek institution of the *agora*, a site of political assembly in which mass civic society expresses its interests. Quoting McKee, Powell defines it as “a place where individual citizens work out what the community thinks about an issue.” (2009:143) He also notes that because of the incursion of corporate interests and power, the political sovereignty of civic society is undermined – he quotes Reich, who declares in his book *The Greening of America*:

“this apparatus of power [referring to civic democracy] has become a mindless juggernaut, destroying the environment, obliterating human values, and assuming domination over the lives and minds of its subject...the corporate state has added de-personalisation, meaninglessness, and repression, until it has threatened to destroy all meaning and all life.” (Quoted in Powell, 2009:144)

In other words, the possibility of active citizenship in this “transformed political climate” (2009:144) has been eroded in favor of a neo-liberal capitalist system that encourages hyper-

individualism, political disengagement, and fragmentation. As a result, not only have we become emotionally and spiritually detached and alienated from the land, but also stripped of political and social agency over it. Citizens must go through an incredibly complicated and bureaucratic state system in order to have a say in how the land is used. We have seen in recent years the proliferation of radical or grassroots protests and movements like the Dakota Access Pipeline protest, in which citizens attempt to contest the state's control over national land. While these movements are certainly starting national conversations about reclaiming citizen rights to protect the land they live on, many (if not all) also point to the ultimate coercive power of the state in shutting down these attempts – at the end of the day, corporate clout wins out.

These movements thus demonstrate that environmental stewardship over the land cannot happen without a change in the economic and political structures that seek to monopolize control over public and private land. Thus, we have to move towards emphasizing active citizenship and participation in decision-making in order to achieve the goals of de-emphasizing corporate interests, distributing natural resources equitably, mitigating environmental risks and toxicity, and promoting sustainability. Taylor argues that this is precisely what popular ecological resistance movements – and I argue, long-distance hiking included – seek to do. According to him, these movements seek to “wrest concessions from [nation-states], to protect or reclaim access to and control over the land, and then to secure government compliance with such concessions.” (1995:341)

Long-distance hiking, as we have seen before, can be an avenue through which citizens exert their commitment to long-term and sustainable relationships with the land and challenge the hegemonic control that corporations and governments have over determining how the land is used (or abused). Large hiking organizations do this explicitly, through volunteer care and maintenance of outdoor areas *and* rallying for protection of these national park areas. Hiking undertaken individually also has a part to play in fostering intimate personal ties to nature and cultivate a *desire* to assert civic

responsibility to the land. More simply, hiking is a way of fighting for national land to be set aside and conserved. By asserting the critical importance of conserving wilderness areas from destruction by urbanization, industrialization, or more specifically, the construction of transportation infrastructure, or for natural resource extraction, hikers are a part of a larger struggle to determine what the priorities are in deciding how land should be partitioned.

Some of the most vociferous land-protection activists have historically been (and still are) hikers. Today, in an American political climate wherein the state administration looks increasingly to drastically reduce the amount of land set aside for environmental conservation, the grassroots environmental activism borne out of hiking is perhaps more important than ever before in demanding the right to decide how the land is parceled out. President Trump's recent move to slash the size of two national monuments, Bears Ears and Grand Staircase, by 85 percent and 50 percent respectively sparked heated public resistance, particularly amongst indigenous nations and outdoor conservation groups. (Turkewitz, 2017)

This battle over the extent to which the government has control over creating and cutting national parkland is part of a broader national (and global) conversation about who should, ultimately, have the last say on land-use decisions that affect the entire nation and the larger biosphere. Long-distance hikers and organizations, along with other outdoor conservation and recreation groups, are an important part of this struggle to assert citizen land sovereignty rights. As Taylor says, popular environmental resistance movements are essentially “a call for a fundamental reordering of land uses, and thus of many political and economic relationships. In this sense, these movements are radical in orientation.” (1995:343) Thus, building on the concept of the “citizen hiker” as pushed forth by Chamberlin in his book, we need to expand upon long-distance hiking as a grassroots movement to fight for public stewardship over national land. This would serve as an important step towards strengthening participatory democracy in determining our relationship to the land we live on.

Afterword: Hiking as Re-Creation

We began this thesis by talking somewhat about modernity and the structures that define it, like consumer capitalism, the nation-state, and scientific rationality among others. Let us now return full circle to where we first started. Modernity is characterized on one hand by constant fluctuations and de-stabilization of the status quo, and on the other, by rigid and unfeeling systems of capitalism and scientific rationality. Nietzsche bemoaned the death of God, and Weber the death of the sacred. So-called human liberation or ‘progress’, it seems, has been brought at a terrible price.

Many scientists have shown that a 2°C increase in global temperatures indicates a “point of no return” (Foster and Clark, 2012) at which the vast changes in the earth’s climate that will be irreversible and “apocalyptic”, to use Foster and Clark’s (2012) bleak wording. There is now a near-consensus amongst scientists, environmental scholars, and some economists that we are looking at a global temperature increase of around 2°C to 4.9°C by the end of this century, given recent trends. Of course, this does not sound like much, especially in the age of air-conditioning and heating, where the same can be achieved with click of a button in one’s home. But on a global scale, this increase is mind-boggling. It will cause or be accompanied by ocean acidification, destruction of the ozone layer, fresh water shortages, and a mass extinction of a scale as large as (or perhaps larger) than the one that killed off the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. What this rhetoric of a planetary tipping point does is that it highlights that the time has come to confront our relationship with the earth. If we do nothing to curtail the pace at which we are consuming the earth’s finite resources, the literal, figurative, existential mess we have made will be too huge and too terrible to clean up.

Clearly, we stand on the brink of an ecological catastrophe of unimaginable severity. Beck terms this the “cosmopolitan moment of world risk society.” (1992:331) According to him, this “crisis” point forces us to choose between three possible responses: “denial, apathy, or transformation” (1992:331). A great majority of people living in urban or industrialized nations (arguably, the main perpetrators of

ecological destruction) are aware of the extent of human damage upon the earth. True ignorance of the disastrous consequences that befall our actions is thus no longer (or very rarely) possible. We can thus only live in denial of this reality, choose to treat such a reality with indifference, or seek to transform it by any means possible. Foster equates this to being in a “burning house” (Stark, 2009) and refusing to leave – this serves as a visceral metaphor for what inaction truly means in a time like ours. It seems irrational, *unthinkable* even, that we continue to cling hopelessly to this burning house of fundamentally unsustainable ideologies and practices, watching motionlessly as the flames lick the walls and singe our brows.

Jon Krakauer writes in his best-selling book *Into the Wild*: “So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservation.” (1996:56-57) Indeed, modern hegemonic structures and ideologies like consumer capitalism and scientific rationality and individualism have become so entrenched in the ways we organize our lives and societies that many of us cannot even begin to imagine a different system, a different way of life. These forces have become so relentless, so pervasive, as to be everywhere at once and yet invisible. As explored in this thesis, one way we can break free from these ways of thinking and demand a shift towards ecologically and socially sustainable communities is through embracing an embodied connection with the earth, fighting for what we want, and most importantly, doing all these things *collectively*. I argue that long-distance hiking is an important starting point.

Many environmental scholars and activists preach for an all-or-nothing approach to transforming the structures and ideologies of hegemonic modernity, arguing that there is no way that capitalism or science and technology (for instance) can be made sustainable. While I agree, I wonder if we are shooting ourselves in the foot by pursuing such a black-and-white notion of change and progress. Sometimes, destroying everything that we know is too colossal, too mind-boggling for

people to imagine, let alone throw their support behind. Just as Rome was not built in a day (as the saying goes), it cannot be dismantled in a day; the same goes for the massive and seemingly inexorable institutions that have come to characterize the modern experience. Change has to start from somewhere, and the leap from apathy to transformation is a big one. We need to take small steps. This is not to say that we should be satisfied with half-steps or compromises. Taking measured steps toward a big dream is in no way selling out. Rather, it is prioritizing actual action – no matter how seemingly insignificant – over grand idealistic visions that are not converted into concrete, tangible change.

In the previous chapters, I have explored four main dimensions of ecological sustainability within long-distance hiking: First, it facilitates the re-establishment of an intimate and embodied connection to the natural world and helps hikers realize just how interconnected we are to the rest of the world; Second, it is part of a broader global move to re-prioritize of life and other forms of wealth besides economic wealth; Third, it is a deliberate movement away from capitalist notions of productivity and worth as defined by market-utility; Finally, it provides a platform for active civic participation and allows for the reclamation of citizen responsibility and sovereignty over public land.

If we allow it to, hiking can be more than just a walk in the woods – it can be a walk towards freedom, towards liberation, and towards the feeling of profound fulfilment that we have begun to give up on. If we allow it to, hiking can spur us to fight for a better future, and give us the strength and imagination to envision one that is more than just ‘good enough’. It may be recreation, but it could also be *re-creation*. If we allow it to, hiking can pull us back to the world we have cut ourselves from. In the immortal words of John Muir, hiking can bring us home.

Appendix I:
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