

“...there is no withering away of the State, only a stripping back of the State to its core military and police functions. In this world, as in ours, ultra-authoritarianism and Capital are by no means incompatible: internment camps and franchise coffee bars co-exist.”^[1]

In the quote above, Mark Fisher recounts Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men*,^[2] in which capitalism, and all its auxiliary functions, coexist in a state of liminality—one in which there is no sharply defined pre- and post-apocalypse—but rather a state in which society “winks out, unravels, gradually falls apart” In Cuarón’s projection: heinous conditions suffered by those existing without a British ID are gravely contoured by business-as-usual humdrum of those living with them.

There is an obligation to introduce any work pivoting around climate with a citation of the latest statistics, organized with the intention of surpassing the previous in their projections of how irreversible, unlivable, and horrible the future will be. Sparing the recital, note that this essay assumes a future in which those projections are materialized. And thus, much like Cuarón’s projections, the increasingly urgent migration imposed by climate degradation on the Global South will be accompanied only by the North’s limbo state of business-as-usual, only governed by an iron-bordered existence and immobilized by its insistence on light reconfigurings to the status quo.

As “green capitalism” increasingly becomes the frontrunner in orthodox political discourse, it is worth analyzing the current nativist sentiments within environmentalism and speculating on how these sentiments could be further deployed by private establishments seeking to exploit a market vulnerable to political promises and conscience laundering through “smart consumerism.”

“Green” private enterprises that sit at the intersection between nature and capitalism are unique, as they paradoxically occupy territory on both sides of an opposition warring for future habitation on earth. And thus, the way that their advertising is currently propelled and received

into culture in the U.S is the foundation from which I based the hypothetical extrusion of Ours. Using this base as a springboard: Ours aims to intercept how green consumerism could be further exploited as a means for radically regressive ideology, as to not be blindsided by its arrival.

Speculating a future where an Outdoor brand extends all of its nativist tendencies to complete, total malignancy has proved to be a process that at times seemed to be speculating a future so remote from reality that it seemed a pointless science fiction caricature, and other times seem to be so close that to reality that it seemed to hardly differentiate itself from it.



[3]

CONSERVATION AND CONSERVATISM

This proximity in which environmental politics and exclusionary politics stand are to me most plainly articulated in the equal proximity between the words “conservation” and “conservatism”; and how “conservation of the environment” quickly can dually mean “conservation of the status quo” and in turn conservation of the current hegemonic.

John Hultgren, author of “Border Walls Gone Green,” speaks on proximity between nature and sovereignty: “nature is increasingly being deployed as a form of walling— providing a subtle means of reinforcing ‘traditional’ territorial borders and national identities without having to revert to racial and cultural logics that are no longer socially acceptable within mainstream political discourse.”^[4]

Hultgren suggests that commitments to nature can be seen as the key unifying force in broadening the traditional nativism to the moderate, uninitiated masses. By temporarily avoiding traditional conditions for exclusionary politics and instead employing a kind of “green” ambiance usually associated with the left, the regressive force is licensed a language that facilitates their propagation of conditions for social exclusion, conservatism and control, while still employing permissible green justifications. This permits traditional nativist logic to extend a guilt-free arm outside of its traditional right-wing audience—converting former enemies into co-conspirators in the mission to conserve ecology in the US.^[5]

Within popular ecological banter in the US, the term “conservation,” while common, is undoubtedly subordinate to its more fashionable competitors: “sustainability” or “green.” Where “conservation” becomes a star is in the discussion of land, especially that deemed suitable for recreation—i.e places where you can hike, ride your mountain bike, go kayaking, backcountry skiing, etc. Within the realm of these outside sports, “conservation” ascends to the undebatable chief linguistic frontrunner. The language utilized within Outdoor (capital O, sometimes paired with Great) is primarily based around the conviction of, for example [“fighting for your right to ride”](#)^[6] In essence to preserve natural land primarily for their use of facilitating outdoor

recreation. This is when the discussion recedes from one concerned with the conservation of the environment as the praxis for the future habitation of the earth, and more towards a myopic, locational environmentalism for the preservation of lifestyle or hobby, doing so while completely evading any traditional language related to the right to ownership of public lands by a certain group. This breakdown can serve as a sort of wedge in understanding the deeply embedded relationship between nature and culture. And yet, this relationship is popularly secured in that social structures and nature occupy a dichotomous relationship, in which nature is received as a borderless entity to which anyone may gain an accessible respite from the unhings of capitalism.

THE US AND THE PASTORAL

To understand the ways in which the concept of nature is being deployed in the service of territorialization and stratification, one must seek to grapple the contemporary American concept of nature, which although varied, largely pivots around the concept of “The Outdoors.”

The Outdoors: referring to the natural space—preferably remote and completely undominated by infrastructure or farmland—where objects sold in an REI can be put to good use. However, these activities, deemed so cardinal to the contemporary experience of the natural outside, are often ones that presuppose the environment as a place of leisure and activity, relegating it to an experience that may be realized only by an audience eligible to meet its demands of leisure time and location. Necessary to the practice of camping, mountain biking, and skiing, one must be within a practical distance and access to “The Great Outdoors”: The National Park, the Ski Area, a remote public trail system, or extensive private land. Within the American vernacular, the 21st century “Outdoors” speaks wholly of unbridled organic nature, as opposed to an urban public park, and it is generally attributed to the zones above.

The practice of Outdoor pastimes is mediated not only by the access to remote locations but also access to the equipment necessary: if an “Outdoor Experience” is contingent on recreation, then that recreation is contingent on the necessary equipment. Recreation is inextricable from popular

models of nature– the act of walking within a space deemed The Outdoors is considered not the everyday mosey, but rather the act of hiking, which, once deemed as recreating, now requires a system of gear and apparatuses in order to function properly. The presence of Outdoor gear starts at the hike and extends outwards to the most decadent forms: mountain bikes, split-boards,, stand-up paddleboards, ATVs, and all of the complementary gear to facilitate the safety and function of the initial apparatus. Outdoor practices, largely gatekept from an audience that cannot access these requisites, have become a sort of luxury practice, which is reflected in both the price of equipment and advertising.

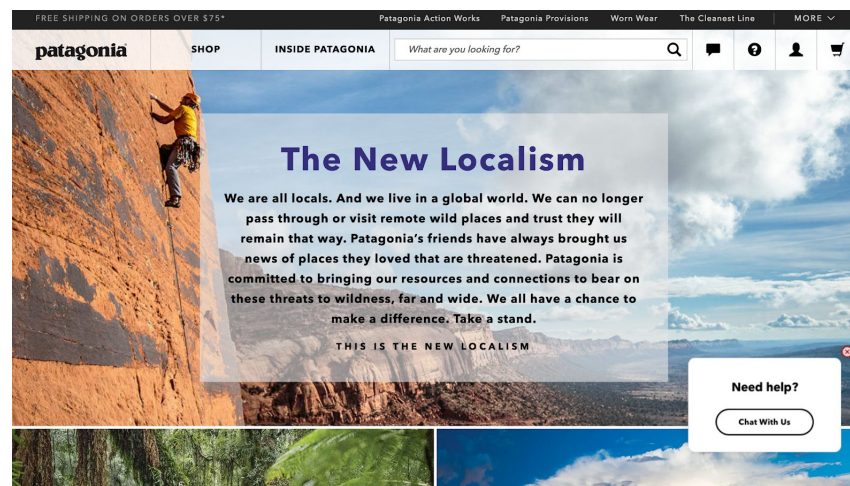
In turn, nature, which is commonly thought as a space of accessible hiatus from structural forces and stratification, has been absorbed as a fairly concrete marker of status and social delamination. Thus, when a relationship to nature is employed within a political realm, or even within the realm of advertising and branding, it's in direct conversation with exclusion. From this lens, The Outdoors is restaged as a sort of Upper-Middle-Class-Largely-White Great Outdoors.

The Outdoor brand, so weaved into the raw practice of the occupation of both nature as space and The Outdoors in the American conscious, becomes a sort of mediator between the public and nature. In other words, in the US, The Outdoor Brand ennobles itself the middle-man between nature and human, physically: by facilitating endeavors into nature, and psychologically: by maintaining the popular imagination of nature via the dominance of images in its advertising and branding in its depictions of The Outdoors.

This overlap, between nature, person and product is further broadened by the crucial routine tendency within Outdoor brands to invigorate themselves with [a mission of environmental philanthropy](#). Outdoor brands have long fancied themselves as sort of stewards of nature– a Gore-Tex liaison between the recreationist and the government. This aggregate of identities: the eco-philanthropist, capitalist entrepreneur, and outdoor facilitator elevates the brand to an attitude where its jurisdiction breaches spaces not easily offered to private enterprises. The more the brand stresses the positive environmental impact of their philanthropy, the more the brand

paddles (skins? boulders?) away from the criticality conventionally imposed on profit-seeking ventures.

This relationship, between a person or group and the “Great Outdoors”—while currently is largely benign is situated in spaces thoroughly dictated by social and economic standing so that the process whereby this relationship is subtly employed and distorted to uphold those standings is relatively uncomplicated. Further, because any “green” component is presupposed as being progressive, it provides the ideology flexibility to evade traditional criteria for detection and becomes an especially malicious and well-groomed stratifying agent. [7]



BACKSEAT DRIVING

The “vote with your pocketbook” logic is the essential ingredient in the advertising of green brands and Outdoor brands alike. Further grounding this consumer-based environmental strategy is the libertarian logic of the de-bureaucratization of social impact through privatization. Buying a product as a way to support a cause is a much easier way to scratch the “guilt-itch” than by supporting any sort of political action, with the added bonus of accumulating some sort of object within the process. When businesses are aiming to “make a difference,” there is an implied logic that through patronage you’re not buying a product but rather “investing in a cause.” There’s a principle exemplified here of the “leave it to us, the experts” mindset. Your intention of doing

good is dually satisfied by purchasing a product that's deemed physically sustainable and by the assurance that the portion of the proceeds rationed to supposed earth-saving activities is injected where they would be the most environmentally beneficial (and PR-worthy). Green Brands become a sort of philanthropic investment advisor, and the patron becomes a sort of activist—all included in the price of a down jacket.

The framing of this brainwork is especially seductive to a class that has the income to reassure themselves that they can buy themselves out of their ecological footprint. Further, by purchasing goods which they deem sustainable, they ascend past even their standard, upper-class status, and into a new “eco-conscious” class construction which is supported—or rather financed—by their consumer choices. From this moral altitude offered to consumer activist, not only is the structuring relation of capitalism preserved, but augmented, as it places a more salient criticality towards communities, who are now not only materially poor, but through their inability to afford the new green tier of products, are also deemed the new contributors to climate change.

The buy-out logic dually strengthens one's reliance on privatization while providing the consumer a sense of altruism which completely sidesteps any actual political organizing that one might take to thwart the roots of catastrophe; instead providing the financially eligible an easy buy-out into moral reassurance that they are in fact stopping impending disaster through simply continuing to consume.

Inherently there is nothing wrong with ensuring a low environmental impact in production, as many Outdoor and green brands have used as an ethos for their advertising; these are all imperatives to the future of the planet. The ideologies of Green Brands, “Outdoor” or not, are probably not intentionally devised betrayals against humanity, aimed at derailing good intentions with consumerism. At their best, they are composed with a real intention to mitigate their damage and create a so-called “green alternative.” And surely, this new role of capitalists paradoxically functioning as the mutilator/replenisher of the earth has probably materially reduced certain aspects of exploitation. [Patagonia's making of 30% of their products under fair trade circumstances](#) were no doubt positive, real outcomes of a clever marketing strategy.

However, these small reconfigurings to capitalism are much outweighed by the subsequent implications of this “good guy” capitalist mentality dominating popular thought, that’s tricked us into palliating our desire for real change, real restructuring—into a flimsy consumer act.

The co-option of “sustainable practices” as advertising strategies to promote an enterprise is, in turn, a promotion of the current hegemonic; it states that confrontation is unnecessary—because in principle private companies all have a conscience that looks out for the sustainability of the planet, their workers, and their consumers. An advertisement for a green company is an advertisement for capitalism. A solution to the eradication of life on earth is not a minor readjustment in business-as-usual capitalism, but an entire restructuring of our relation to capital. Perhaps a more productive term for our epoch is needed than the Anthropocene. Perhaps a generative model we should look to is Jason Moore’s concept of the Capitalocene^[8]: a phrase more agile in its opposition to the notion of lateralizing the blame of climate catastrophe on the human species as a whole. Capitalocene rather directly addresses who’s driving the ship: those in control of the means of production. In order to thwart misstepped solutions that reinforce the bedrock of climate genocide rather than confronting it, we must acknowledge who’s responsible.

With Ours, there’s a more transparent malignancy in its rhetoric because it materializes the link between environmentalism, class, consumerism, and nativism by way of a conspicuous stance on proceed-based restrictive immigration initiatives. Although its exclusionary stance is observable in the long-form text within the website, the goal of the project was to ensure that the topical essence of the website, through its immediate branding and visuals, was as friendly and digestible as possible. This became a principal motivation of the Ours project: to experiment with how the “Green Trojan Horse,” in alliance with contemporary graphic design, holds up when packed to the brim with ideologies that seem completely incongruent to the cursory assurances of the advertising. How do “progressive branding strategies” hold up in a future where “franchises and internment camps” could exist side-by-side—will the Four Horses of the Apocalypse be adorned in the hottest subtle-serif and stamped with proof of first-world sustainability? Prototyping this subterfuge—occasionally extruding the rhetoric past the point of

current believability—we can speculate these future rhetorical pathways, as to intercept their possible arrival.



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The role of the brand is to bridge ideology to the individual. A brand links thought, image, and object and presents it to the individual as one. Branding can beautify an unapproachable idea; and past the visual embellishments, having an established brand can aid an ideology by facilitating a more apt transition into an accumulatory object or status.

Graphic design, even in its most fundamental and benign forms, is subterfuge of information in one form or another. Its popular contemporary iteration seems to be whatever is pasted in Masqualero Bold is accompanied by a degree of carefully formulated, yet innovatively casual class refinement. In the case of the hypothesized corporate-green-right, branding would pivot around the ethos of lifestyle environmentalism, and would necessarily require the usage of contemporary movements in graphic design in order to properly clarify its audience. By utilizing the already present strategies within branding, the ideology only has to drape itself over the

strategic audience and class refinement already established through the calculated deployment of design elements.

The corporeal advertisement is the outdated medium of the brand. The contemporary medium, encumbered with much more semiotic breadth and possibilities: is the brand web page. Web design holds especially persuasive abilities, that being its unique faculty to present a fully rounded branding environment wherein deep connection and interaction with a brand may be achieved in a short and accessible format. This level of engagement was traditionally only attainable by way of a sort of a physical apparatus, usually only materialized in the form of a brick-and-mortar [store](#). The unique architecture of a website is capable of not only providing branding images, slogans, and the short-form jargon that you might see in static advertising, but also allows the company to strategically expel long-form complementary persuasion by use of the “about us/learn more/our brand” page. This “about us/our mission” further permits the brand to posture themselves as a social being, concerned with a “mission” or a “purpose” that’s independent of profit accumulation. The .com also enables a .com/shop, where the visitor may fulfill their financial obligation to support the cause. The website’s one-sided form of communication is particularly cogent for brands encumbered by a hefty and possibly controversial “brand mission.” Where a physical presence presents a tangibility—and therefore rigidity—to which a controversial stance may endanger, the immateriality of the private webpage breeds a dually flexible and invulnerable message; one that becomes impossible to deface with scrutiny or criticism.

The evasive nature of the Brand Website facilitates the possibility for flimsy, contradictory and malignant ideas to pass off as developed and coherent by using a digital space where full semiotic branding control is [maintained](#), and space of discussion or rebuttal is absent. If one was to sprint to the right with current advertising trends, the result would be a brand who’s formulated their attraction around current structuring relations within their target audience, mostly posturing themselves on a background enthusiasm for environmental or social progression, augmented by a startup-oriented “progressive mindset” (cut the bureaucracy fat, and let’s give the people what they want.)

By some act of suturing itself onto seemingly progressive strategies, new capitalist regression strays more remote from its authoritarian archetype and becomes further concealed as customary capitalism, thus necessitating a rebuttal that does not ground itself in outmoded empiricism based on the assumption that exclusionary forms will be easily detectable.

There is an understated overlap between nature, sovereignty, capitalism, and the internet as a structure that has all the urgency to be the foundation on which a new dominant structure is centered. The attention to which we place on this developing intersection is pertinent in the construction of emancipatory environmental futures. This is not a problem for which humans, as a species, are responsible—but one that rests along a trajectory laid out by a structural determinism. Cuarón's depiction of a future in which “internment camps and franchise coffee bars co-exist” is the reality which sat as a model for Ours, and by giving palpability to futures that are regulated not by a bilateral relationship of pre- and post-society, left or right, or even dystopian and current conditions, we're able to more accurately speculate potential futures.

Green capitalism, benign and unrecognizable from the caricature of the Ours website as it may be, nonetheless fundamentally uses the same ammunition, one that propagates the preservation of (or the aspiration to a) lifestyle as the primary motivator in the conservation of an ecological future; and if this motivation happens to intersect with brutal forms of stratification, then it will surely find ways to rationalize that, as the goal was never to save the earth, but rather to save the system.

References

1. Fisher, M. 2007. "Coffee Bars and Internment Camps." January 26, 2007. <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/008956.html>.
2. Cuarón, A. (Director). 2006. *Children of Men*. Film.
The foregrounding of the xenophobia and immigration lockdown that Britain undertakes in the film is mostly absent in the novel. The film does a great job of taking a crises remote enough from current politics (infertility) to bring a sort of parallax viewing of disaster politics.
3. REI. 2017. "REI Responds to Administration's Decision on Bears Ear's, Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments." Image.
4. Hultgren, J. 2015. *Border Walls Gone Green*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2.
5. Hultgren, 3.
6. N.d. This is a pretty interesting display of the crossover between conservatism, conservation, the military and advertising by Patagonia. Coincidentally, it name-checks my hometown, which isn't surprising as the crypto-conservative contemporary outdoor mentality is pretty widespread there, which is essentially how this project came about.
7. Screenshot from Patagonia's website, taken September 17th, 2019. Patagonia is a bit harder to pin down. Their initiative to connect those who visit their website to grassroots organizations is pretty foregrounded on their website. Many of their projects seem to really stress community organizing as opposed to the over a "% of sales" approach that Outdoor brands seem to usually stick to. While their ideology still occupies a strange space—Patagonia being a massive producer of clothing, while spouting ecological ideals as their sole source of advertising, I do think that when heavy litigation surrounding the fashion industry starts to appear, they'll probably be a model that's kept in mind.
8. Altvater, E., E. Crist, D. Haraway, D. Hartley, C. Parenti, J. McBrien, and J. (Ed.) Moore. 2016. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* Oakland, CA: PM Press, 1.
9. Image from the Ours website.