This wind has dialects : rethinking the textual landscape of nature
by Christopher Stratton Schaberg

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English
Montana State University
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Abstract:
This thesis explores the condition of postmodernism—as a contemporary cultural field based on images and constantly new presentations—and the tenacious presence of Nature as an assumed point of authenticity or authority beyond representations. To understand the complex relationship between postmodernism and Nature, I focus on the phenomenon of Sport Utility Vehicles—or rather, I look at how SUV advertisements deploy 'natural' landscapes in order to authorize specific human desires and certain philosophical presuppositions. I then turn to Gary Snyder, whose work is symptomatic of American Nature Writing in that it depends on pre-constructed ways of seeing and knowing the so-called natural world. Finally, I use a close reading of an essay by Terry Tempest Williams as a way of fleshing out the general structure of 'textuality' that always already functions as we interpret the world. My overall argument is that since Nature cannot ever be detached from this general structure of textuality (i.e., how we make meaning), we are better off cultivating an attention to detail and an ethical sense of responsibility that is not limited to 'natural' realms but operates similarly in a wide spectrum of settings, from airports to cities to suburbs to the woods.

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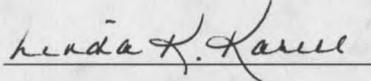MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
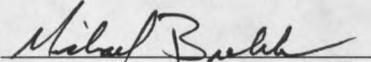Bozeman, Montana

April 2003

ii

APPROVAL

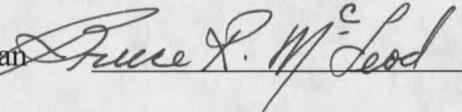of a thesis submitted by

Christopher Stratton Schaberg

This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

v

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the condition of postmodernism—as a contemporary cultural field based on images and constantly new presentations—and the tenacious presence of Nature as an assumed point of authenticity or authority beyond representations. To understand the complex relationship between postmodernism and Nature, I focus on the phenomenon of Sport Utility Vehicles—or rather, I look at how SUV advertisements deploy 'natural' landscapes in order to authorize specific human desires and certain philosophical presuppositions. I then turn to Gary Snyder, whose work is symptomatic of American Nature Writing in that it depends on pre-constructed ways of seeing and knowing the so-called natural world. Finally, I use a close reading of an essay by Terry Tempest Williams as a way of fleshing out the general structure of 'textuality' that always already functions as we interpret the world. My overall argument is that since Nature cannot ever be detached from this general structure of textuality (i.e., how we make meaning), we are better off cultivating an attention to detail and an ethical sense of responsibility that is not limited to 'natural' realms but operates similarly in a wide spectrum of settings, from airports to cities to suburbs to the woods.

EPIGRAPHS

If anything is endangered in America it is our experience of wild nature—gross contact.
                              -- Jack Turner, *The Abstract Wild*

"According to nature" you want to *live*? O you noble Stoics, what deceptive words these are! Imagine a being like nature, wasteful beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without purposes and consideration, without mercy and justice, fertile and desolate and uncertain at the same time; imagine indifference itself as power—how *could* you live according to this indifference? Living—is that not precisely wanting to be other than this nature? Is not living—estimating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting to be different? And supposing your imperative "live according to nature" meant at bottom as much as "live according to life"—how could you *not* do that? Why make a principle of what you yourselves are and must be?
                              --Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

When Nature, as self-proximity, comes to be forbidden or interrupted, when speech fails to protect presence, writing becomes necessary.
                              -- Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces.
                              -- Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play.
                              -- Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*

Rugged adventure, unprecedented safety, peace of mind—all in one beautiful package.
                              -- Subaru *Forester* ad

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: POSTMODERNISM AND NATURE

Always naturalize! This tendency—a slippery and we may even say "imagined" imperative within postmodern cultural contexts—will surprisingly turn out to be the target of this project as well. And, as the breakdown of the traditional dialectic teaches us, the naturalizing operation inevitably splinters determinate definitions: appropriating 'nature' always already requires a host of fabricated desires that are neither associatively coherent nor even individually secure in their naturalized state. In a culture made up of conglomerate desires for mobility, authenticity, and personal agency, various versions of nature are constantly deployed as devices by which these desires are authorized: when we call on nature (as in a 'natural law'), we invoke a permanent source of control; when we seek out nature as refuge or illumination, we claim privileged spaces for ourselves (as individuals) apart from masses who misunderstand. Nature—as force and as space—has most recently, 'naturally', been adopted and modified to fit into postmodern scenarios. Stereotypes of nature have become so incredibly naturalized that we are constantly called upon to imagine and identify an essential Mother Nature who exists beyond and/or before human contact. The irony, of course, is that our denotations of nature always presuppose a human context of interpretation; we only comprehend (however vaguely) this 'separate nature' through an epistemological lens.

I invoke postmodernism in order to suggest the contemporary cultural whirlpool in which authentic identities are at once socially stable and yet entirely

variable. On the one hand, cultural norms are invented, disseminated, modified, and perpetuated seemingly without question—one need only to think of mobile phones as an example of this: the small communications devices have been introduced and assimilated into all segments of society, appropriated to accommodate an endless stream of already stable identities. On the other hand, phenomena such as mobile phones indicate the absolute instability of such identities: one is always necessarily ready for change, for a sudden shift in identity—whether be it ever so subtle, entirely intentional, or utterly spontaneous. This simultaneity of stability and instability is suggestive of the thoroughly accepted mixture of the absurd and the ordinary that is postmodernism—and everyday life is never simply paralyzed by the seeming impossibility of decisive forward movement. In all corners and mainstreams of American culture, individuals lead day to day lives coherently patchworked from a smorgasbord of possibilities, thus blurring oppositional distinctions (really a vast network of *options*) that would otherwise seem to render contemporary individuals forever hesitant.

Options: Verizon Wireless or Cellular One? Internet Explorer or Netscape Navigator? PC or Mac? Ford or Chevy? DVD or VHS? Priceline or Hotwire? United or Delta? Organic or non-organic? Big & Tasty or Whopper? It is in this onslaught of personal options and incessant choices that postmodernism takes place—or rather, it is to (be able to) answer "*both*" to each of these questions that marks the arrival of postmodernism. In his essay "What is Postmodernism?" Jean-François Lyotard has argued:

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward
> the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the
> solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it
> possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that
> which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them
> but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. (CPR
> 436)

This notion of the unpresentable in presentation itself is precisely what takes place

in the bevy of consumer alternatives available at any given moment; individuals

cannot possibly have everything at once, but forms of media such as television

and the internet present the unpresentable as such. We daily give up the solace of

"good forms" in exchange for an active "nostalgia for the unattainable"—our

culture depends upon constant novelty and change as a bizarrely effective way to

stabilize the otherwise frantic velocity of daily life. This is postmodernism in

action, and it affects even the most 'simple' American lifestyle: the unattainable

(which is embodied in everything from the "perfect kitchen" to the "safest car on

the road") constantly shifts so that it never can be attained and yet is always

visible on a horizon within continually incoming (re)presentations.

The 'naturalize' part of this thesis has to do with the tenacious presence of

authority imbedded in notions of wilderness, nature, and the wild. Throughout

this particular project, I will be somewhat conflating the terms wilderness, nature,

and wildness, using these ideas interchangeably in order to streamline the

designation process of this paper as well as to move toward a broader point

concerning the implications of such categorization—and the implications of

naturalization in general. While several celebrated nature writers (from Thoreau

to Edward Abbey to Gary Snyder) have gone into great detail defining the shades

of difference between these terms —both culturally and etymologically—for our purposes here it is really only necessary to have a general understanding of the rather vague ways that the ideas of nature, wildness, and wilderness get employed in certain recognizable American cultural contexts.[1] What is natural, wild, or of the wilderness is always an Other, always located in (or originating from) a vague 'out there', and usually these terms are invoked by association with dependably powerful sources of authority and autonomy. For Thoreau, the woods around Concord serve to legitimize a social critique based on discovered 'principles' of Nature. Edward Abbey's writings are inspired by the 'emptiness' and wildness of the southwest deserts—for Abbey, these perceptions of wilderness authorize a theory of social anarchy. For another popular example of this sloppy yet effective vernacular, we might recall how Tony Soprano refers to the family of ducks inhabiting his swimming pool as "a little bit of nature"—I would argue that he could have loosely used the word "wilderness" or the phrase "the wild" to the same end. In all of these examples—and many more—the wild, wilderness, and nature are invoked as exterior subjects that warrant a sort of authentic authority. We might be tempted to say that *Nature* is the umbrella term, underneath which are *wilderness* (as theoretical places 'outside' the 'civilized' reaches of human society) and *wildness* (as the aspects or segments of wilderness that flood beyond the strict parameters of the defined place)—and yet, here we are already confronted with the irony of human categorization and denotation. For the purpose of this thesis, then, I will be using these terms somewhat interchangeably,

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[1] For an example of a brief discussion that explores the shades of difference in these terms—from a Deep Ecologist's perspective—see Gary Snyder's essay "The Etiquette of Freedom," pgs. 3 - 24, in *The Practice of the Wild*, North Point Press, 1990.

both as an attempt to hold the irony of final distinction at bay while also submitting to a popularized conflation of these terms to simply suggest something Other, 'out there', that is authentic in its pure autonomy, always already detached from whatever is human. And this spectral presence is something I hope to eventually dispel throughout the course of this project.

Jennifer Price, in her book *Flight Maps*, succinctly fleshes out this generalized—and yet sufficient—subject of nature (including wilderness and the wild) as such: "I embraced Nature as the Last Best Places. I defined my experiences in Nature as more Real and Essential. I set Nature in stark contrast to everything modern and urban, and used Nature to articulate the social confusions and ecological destructions of modern urban American life" (xvii). This is the simplistic and yet problematic understanding of Nature that I want to explore through a close analysis of specific texts that rely on and complicate the Euro American consciousness of this mysterious Nature, this source of authority with a capital N. By veering between Deep Culture (consumer culture vortices such as SUVs, airports, or McDonalds) and Deep Ecology (the literary attempts at recording ecological purity and balanced, practical human interaction with this alleged pure presence) I hope to challenge rigid interpretations of what is considered 'natural', and in doing so work toward an interpretive attitude that no longer functions in respect to a strict nature/culture dichotomy, but can be implemented more widely and broadly across our world of interactions—be they in the woods or in your local Target store.

Postmodernism has not yet overwhelmed the tendency to naturalize;
objects are still granted authority and/or authenticity (however fleeting) by a
process that defers their existence to some sort of natural or wild origin—or
destination. This move is always made as a sort of admitted deception; the wild
or natural origins/destinations are never simply, essentially *real*, but are invoked
in order to maintain a connection—however illusory—with a world—again,
however illusory—that precedes and therefore legitimizes certain human
activities. On the other hand, these imagined natural sources are always based on
actual places; thus the desire for natural or wild origin/destination is always
double, as fantasy dependent on a (however distant) reality. (For example, Tony
Soprano's ducks that are "a little bit of nature" depend on a totally imagined place
where ducks are wild and free and connected with a vast ecological system—yet
on the other hand, denoting the ducks as natural suggests a participatory
interaction with actual ducks in his pool, a scene no less 'natural'.)

A completely common example of this naturalization in/of a postmodern
context arrived in my email "Inbox" just the other day (see Figure 1). The
email—from Patagonia, a high-end outdoor gear retailer—states its subject as
"Personality Crisis." Upon opening this email, I am faced with four pictures
below a title that reads "Multiple Personalities." Each picture depicts an eerily
androgynous individual exerting her or himself in a rigorous outdoor
activity/setting. The first picture captures a climber scaling a sheer rock face; the
second image shows a skier making turns down an expansive snowy slope; third,
a hiker nears what seems to be the top of an alpine ridgeline; finally, a mountain

biker whizzes through a blurry background of fall-color deciduous foliage. The

caption below the pictures reads: "A thirty-five foot clean traverse onto untracked

slopes up a loose talus ridge to blazing fast single track. Quite interesting." Then,

in smaller print: "So many sports, so little time. Seek counseling at

Patagonia.com to find the latest for multisport all-mountain athletes."

Multiple Personalities patagonia

A thirty-five foot clean traverse onto untracked slopes up a loose talus ridge
to blazing fast single track. Quite interesting.

So many sports, so little time. Seek counseling at Patagonia.com to find the latest for
multisport all-mountain athletes.

Figure 1 "Multiple Personalities"

Clearly, in each of these images, there is the presence of nature or the

wild—thus the emphasis on the "all-mountain" (—yet what is this? *Every*

mountain? *Any* mountain? *All over* a singular mountain?). In each image there is

a solitary figure in motion, moving through an otherwise static landscape—the

athlete. The landscapes depicted in these images represent playgrounds, or some

sort of arenas in which human athletes can compete (against whom?). But there is

more going on here. The subject of the email, after all, mentions a crisis—a personality crisis. What sense of crisis lurks in these images? The desire to be everywhere at once? To be each of these athletes simultaneously? Or perhaps this ad presumes to know all too much about its intended audience—could the ad function as an ironic wink at the fact that the "all-mountain athlete" might be, in actuality, an oxford cloth shirt-clad worker bee in an urban or suburban setting stationed in an office five days a week but who can nevertheless afford to buy the gear that suggests a surface association with such wildness, such athletic power, such expansive wilderness, and such natural authority? We must not forget, after all, that we are reading this text online, via email, possibly on a high-tech translucent aqua blue I-Mac—this is not exactly the site of 'wilderness' invoked in the digital pictures flashing across the screen; and yet, it is strangely necessary for the 'crisis' at hand.

I am counseled to seek counseling at Patagonia.com. We do not have to work extremely hard to conjure up the subliminal message of retail therapy. I am being encouraged to shop, to purchase two hundred dollar petroleum-product Gore-tex jackets (*online*—this is even *virtual* shopping: a simulacrum of the simulation of *being there*). Or, perhaps I am being urged to get 'out' into nature—for which I need the gear, first. Could both of these possibilities be taking place at once? In this expression of simultaneity, there is a presumed/compelled desire for multiplicity, for several choices of color scheme, fabric, and personality 'types' at once—a variety of activities and places that one can pursue while 'out there' in the wild. This is a thoroughly postmodern

situation, in which what is real, unreal, and hyper-real cannot be separated or easily distinguished. While reading my email, I am presented with the unattainable, with a plurality of possibilities all at once: I can visualize four scenes—four *perspectives*—simultaneously, and in doing so I am affirming a certain impossibility of attainment. And yet, my experience of the ad—in Hemingway's language, my 'stomach tightening' at the thought of new Patagonia gear—is visceral, too. The plastic keys under my finger tips are as real (and as entirely constructed) as the feel of the handlebars on the mountain bike that careens down the single track through the lush forest. "Quite interesting" is right—there is so much going on in this email, all of which takes place somewhere between the pure landscapes invoked and the highly fabricated setting of the computer user accessing email—it is in this liminal space that 'Deep Culture' has been strangely *naturalized*, tu(r)ned into an abstract place beyond and yet within at once.

The solution is not in a singular coherent personality, but rather lies in accepting and embracing "multiple personalities"—multiple solutions that occur at once. One can actually (and yet *never* at the same time) be all of these agents toiling in/against barren landscapes. The hope is for an activated multiple agency, and this floods back over into the initial setting: the email being read suggests yet another personality—that of the computer user—an 'online athlete' of sorts in a virtual wilderness. As if to authorize the multiple personalities (because in another setting we might call this pathological and even potentially psychologically dangerous), we must invoke a legitimizing, authentic

background: *Nature*. As long as these multiple personalities remain solitary in the wilderness (a confused notion already if we consider the strange god-like role of the Photographer), one is encouraged to indulge in a sort of sanctioned schizophrenia.

In this email, we can interpret a cluttered assortment of desires: solitude and plurality, deep nature and deep culture, empowerment and abandonment, dominance and anarchy, wildness and security—each of these double desires is commodified and compressed to the point of indisputable coherence. This email—most likely sent to hundreds of thousands of eager Patagonia consumers—will not cause a widespread rupture of the self, nor will it provoke a mass exodus into the wilderness. Rather, it functions merely (and entirely significantly) as a moment of naturalization in the midst of postmodernism. Most readers will not think twice about the intricate messages and assumed meanings contained in this strange virtual text that calls for the wild. It is this complex textual movement—always at least a double movement—that I hope to trace across several examples of contemporary nature writing. The goal of this thesis, then, is to expose the necessary play of ambiguity and simultaneity that takes place in contemporary discourses involving Nature. By moving through a variety of texts that deploy Nature as a setting of Authentic Presence, I will argue that whatever is invoked as 'Nature' (as natural, as wild, or designated as Wilderness) is always already supplemented by a structure of textuality that problematizes any essentialist categorization of Nature as an Other—liminally observable, exclusively knowable, or mystically ineffable— 'out there'.

CHAPTER TWO

EPISTEMOLOGY OF CLASS: THE LEATHER EXTERIOR OF NATURE

A ready-made subject for this project can be found at once on the periphery and at the core of contemporary culture: Nature has been implicated in the consumer craze of the Sport Utility Vehicle. In this icon of excess we are presented with a fragment of automobile culture that rapidly became both a norm and a class-distinguishing mark among many Americans. SUVs have been painted into a spectrum of American landscapes ranging from mountainous deserts to elementary school parking lots, from staged rocky slopes in shopping malls to actual remote woodsy 'interiors'. The characteristic hybrid shape—hovering somewhere between a minivan on steroids and a pickup truck outfitted for the apocalypse—has been crafted into a cultural symbol that rumbles along suggesting prestige, power, and an ironic twist of widespread self-reliant individualism. And yet the very crafting of this idea, this image, has taken place alongside the continually disclosed ulterior motive of offering consumers a commodified way of contacting the 'natural' world—thus the naturalization of a constructed schema via a postmodern cultural trend.

What makes the SUV a distinctly "postmodern" phenomenon? For one, the SUV was not a freak spin-off of the automobile industry; it was not a sudden idea that spontaneously combusted in public interest and delight. Rather, the SUV is a hybrid, fashioned as a carefully planned pastiche of certain functional appeals within the intricate expression of a shifty collage of contradictory aesthetic desires (independence and status, control and abandon, silence and

noise) embodied in the accelerated collective consciousness of a consumer-based public. The SUV's mechanistic and aesthetic hybridity, along with its ability to morph with ever-shifting social trends account for its status as *postmodern*. One might argue that all vehicles in the 21st-century count as postmodern, and while I do not disagree with this claim, I would suggest that the SUV—as a rather dynamic public spectacle—has demonstrated a unique ability to sustain a certain amount of social tension. The SUV is as uniquely controversial as it is overwhelmingly popular: it is as functionally utilitarian as it is a bourgeois symbol of an elite, privileged, wasteful class. For its ability to accommodate manic social hysteria, maintain functional flexibility across precise (yet unpredictable) social and geographic divides, and absorb oppositional desires (e.g., as rugged and luxurious at once), the SUV has become representative of the decenteredness, indeterminability, and schizophrenia that drive postmodernism.

For the purpose of this particular project, I am primarily interested in how landscape settings have been naturalized around the marketing of SUVs. The icon of the SUV has been imagined—even encrypted—into a highly constructed cultural perception of wilderness landscapes. If wilderness landscapes (depicted in ads from the piney forests and jagged anonymous peaks behind a Subaru Forester to the endless white tundra surrounding a glossy yellow Hummer H2) are meant to signify the most natural parts of the planet, the assimilation of SUVs into these landscapes constitutes a naturalizing process that sneaks into their overwhelming sub/urban reception and appeal.

One explanation for the suburban/urban fervor around SUVs calls on a resurgence of Michel Foucault's notion of "crisis heterotopias." Heterotopia is Foucault's theory that specific places are created in societies to act as counter-sites in which alternative ideas can be practiced and executed without an underlying critique or confirmation of day-to-day situations; unlike utopias, which are ultimately analogies based on fictions of ideal situations, heterotopias *happen*, they actually take place in distinct societal spaces that can be differentiated from other parts of society that they reflect or to which they respond—they are "enacted utopias" (*Diacritics* 24). Crisis heterotopias accommodate individuals who occupy "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society...in a state of crisis" (*Diacritics* 22). This "state of crisis" has been the target of many critics of SUV-mania. In a recently released book called *High and Mighty*, in which the author traces the shady history of SUVs to their present popularity, the author discovers that SUV buyers are

> ...insecure and vain. They are frequently nervous about their marriages and uncomfortable about parenthood. They often lack self-confidence in their driving skills. Above all, they are apt to be self-centered and self-absorbed, with little interest in their neighbors and communities. ...[they] are more restless, more sybaritic, and less social than most Americans are. They tend to like fine restaurants a lot more than off-road driving, seldom go to church and have limited interest in doing volunteer work to help others. (Bradsher 101, 106)

This sentiment stems from a reading of SUVs as the mobile site of a crisis heterotopia; individuals who are discontent with their societal roles or who seek a deviant course against the mainstream ("most Americans") can choose to place themselves in a privileged position while simultaneously existing in (and off of)

the thick of a human swamp. The socially "insecure" SUV driver can thus be in the maw of dense highway traffic or urban gridlock, but because of the status of the vehicle—not to mention tinted windows and elevated perspective—the driver is able to retreat into and make local this state of crisis, this voluntary distancing from all Others. But does such a generalization do justice to the cultural flexibility of SUVs? Rather than cast SUV drivers together in a eerily conspiratorial anti-American guerilla movement, I would argue that the case of SUVs is hardly ever this clear; the defining characteristics of such a crisis heterotopia are bound to be transgressed and redrawn by each act of appropriation and deployment.

This concept of SUVs as mobile sites of crisis heterotopias appeals to a general cliché; this image at least superficially reflects the general indifference and detachment associated with the familiar stereotype of the self-absorbed hyper-parent who zooms around urban or suburban landscapes in a new decked-out SUV, depositing caffeinated children into awaiting bright green soccer fields. But if the SUV represents a special, specific place (privileged, possibly even *sacred*) in which a commentary of societal complexity is played out, can we simply dismiss SUV drivers pejoratively as self-centeredly deviating from the interests of "most Americans"? If the SUV does signify a type of heterotopia, there is more going on than simply what Jürgen Habermas has called a "legitimation crisis" (46), an identity confusion resulting from the threat of inauthenticity while still within a distinct economic class position—here represented in the privileged, exclusive (and yet always necessarily alterable) popularity of SUVs. One cannot

ignore the way that SUVs are marketed as points of entry through which (privileged) drivers can access wilderness, nature, a lost garden—and suddenly the focus shifts from dense urban concentration to sparse landscapes. SUVs then become emblematic of a solipsistic, self-reliant urge to escape urban centers and flee to the most remote areas, areas denoted for their 'naturally' sublime beauty and/or emptiness. This suture of different scenes—the ultra urban with(in) stark wilderness—marks the point of departure from a simplistic social explanation of the escalating SUV hype.

There is more happening within and around SUVs than simply an ever-expanding site of personality crises. To limit SUVs to being a mobile manifestation of crisis heterotopias—the site for distressed individuals estranged from the "rest" of society—is to avoid fully exploring Foucault's third principle of heterotopias: "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (*Diacritics* 25). SUVs sustain a certain amount of irony in incompatibilities; SUVs invoke both the ultra-wild (just look for the mountains in almost any SUV ad) and the ultra-urban (leather interiors, hi-fi CD stereo systems, seat warmers, DVD players, etc.); SUVs balance brilliantly the desire for solipsism alongside the craving for trend-based community. SUVs thus become a prime example of postmodern heterotopias: they mesh seemingly contradictory oppositional systems as a way of achieving a necessary amount of slippage within the most culturally common scenarios.

While I was living in Tempe, Arizona—a rather vogue college town adjacent to Phoenix—I recall an evening news story of a family who had wanted to experience as much of the wild desert as possible while still living comfortably suburban lives within driving distance to school, work, and urban conveniences. (Phoenix is in the constant process of spanning out into the more distant reaches of the vast desert valley it lies in, with upper-middle class families building sprawling adobe-style homes that are required to adhere to specific environmental ordinances concerning native vegetation, minimal light pollution, and the desert-shade colors of exterior paint.)

You can imagine the scene: It is late evening—a low, muted, lavish home stretches out under the stars at night, silhouettes of saguaro cacti and ocotillo surrounding the structure. There is a curvaceous pool in the cleverly indistinguishable "backyard"—dim mood lighting illumines the shimmering water and a small child crawls around the border of the pool. In the distance, if we were to listen carefully, we might hear packs of coyotes howling from some invisible (but 'out there') rise in the landscape. But in fact, the faint yapping could just as easily be coming from a "Sounds of Nature" CD in the 100 Disc-Changer Pioneer stereo in the living room, which plays from the supplemental outdoor speakers strategically sprinkled around the pool. The wilderness, from the vantage point of this overwhelmingly comfortable patio, is tame, idyllic, and sculpted to a precisely desired aesthetic expectation.

Unfortunately, the wilderness in question seemed to care very little about aesthetics, for, just at that moment, several mangy coyotes rushed into the

environmentally-articulated 'yard' and promptly plucked the unaware child from the "slickrock" colored concrete.

This story was anxiously reported from the (naturally) dark scene of the 'crime'; the obscure forms of the sobbing parents exuded a mixture of frantic disbelief and erratic frustration. What had gone wrong with this so carefully planned domestic scene? A similar incident took place that same season; the next time the perpetrator was a mountain lion, the victim a four year old playing outside—again—around dusk. The obvious ironies of this story indicate a poignant example of the all too common disconnect between the fundamentally constructed roles of nature and culture and how the fabricated blurring of these seemingly distinct categories can result in eerie outcomes. Let us work to better understand how the complex dynamic between the supposedly clear roles of nature and culture played out in this grim narrative.

A much shorter story will serve to bridge the subjects of the misplaced desire for nature and the complex role of the SUV. On December 14 2002, *The Tricolor*—a Norwegian freighter carrying nearly 3000 high-end European luxury automobiles—collided with another ship and sank in the English Channel; about 400 vehicles in this shipment were brand new Volvo XC90s, the latest high-end SUV on the market. Nine thousand Americans (those who could afford to buy a $40,000 SUV) had rapidly formed a long waiting list to procure the chic XC90s. Needless to say, many Americans mourned the loss of such a fleet of sparkling new SUVs.

The human desire for nature—for 'raw wildness,' more specifically—allowed to fully express itself, might embrace these types of extreme instances; from a certain perspective, the Phoenix children were, in a sense, granted a visceral return to nature, as were the Volvos that now house bottom-dwelling sea creatures and schools of innumerable fishes. But clearly, this is neither a compassionate nor an ethical way to treat such incidents; however, this conceptual move to an interpretive extreme reveals uncomfortable contradictions embedded in nature/culture oppositional theories.

The children crawling through meticulously crafted liminal zones between yard and wilderness echo a sentiment shared by Edward Abbey in *Desert Solitaire*; Abbey argues that in order to experience a sublime encounter with the desert, "…you can't see *anything* from a car; you've got to get out of the goddamned contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you'll see something, maybe. Probably not" (xii). Certainly the children in question were on their hands and knees in just this sort of environment; and their trails were, eventually, marked by blood. Were these unfortunate souls actually fortunate to be granted a (however brief) mystical vision that at once obliterated their domestic situations and propelled them into a Thoreauvian wilderness sublime? To again quote Abbey, "probably not." It might sound very creepy to contextualize premature deaths in such a way; but considering these situations with the utmost seriousness, does a specifically vague

notion of Nature as external Other significantly figure into these scenarios that we can understand as postmodern?

Such suburban sites located at the edge of vast 'empty' spaces would seem to epitomize the postmodern era. The upper-middle class families inhabiting these zones appear to understand nature as something 'out there' to be reckoned with, perceived, and experienced in precisely manipulated ways—and this notion conflicts with desires to infiltrate the Other, even if this infiltration takes place liminally or what we might call 'superficially.' The fact that children were sacrificed to such an exterior Other seems, if anything, to reinforce such a concept of nature as 'out there'—as a force to be watched over and occasionally deliberately accessed, but which remains ultimately Other: knowable and also beyond knowledge.

As for the shipping mishap that left 400 Volvo SUVs at the bottom of the English Channel, one can almost imagine a clever ad depicting a happy, white, nuclear family sitting in a sort of panoramic aquarium, safe in their brand new leather interior Volvo XC90 at the bottom of the sea. The GPS unit would be blinking hopefully and the father would be negotiating reefs and shipwrecks, driving patiently out of the depths as the children in the back seat marvel at the wonders of the sea and the mother points out spectacular deep sea species of fish. "The New Volvo XC90: Celebrate a Full Immersion into the Wild."

Of course, our society is not quite ironic enough to appreciate the extent of naturalization that we assume in our vast consumer culture. But in another sense,

we are absorbed in the irony and we embrace it as a cultural necessity. We see this in practically every SUV ad: on television, in magazines, and online.

One current Subaru ad claims "Nature has mountains, canyons, rain and snow. We have all-wheel drive. SEEMS FAIR." (see Figure 2). The ad depicts four brand new silver Subaru vehicles poised—vigilantly, perhaps even competitively—on what appears to be a sort of frozen arctic lake; dark mountain ranges line the horizon and dramatic clouds float above. Nature is textualized as a subject that functions as a sort of ever-present background to human activity—but always a *background*, always something at a distance from the foregrounded SUV. The ad functions on multiple levels, simultaneously presenting nature as an anthropomorphic force opposed to humans (it "has" certain things, like "we have all-wheel drive"), and also as a serene backdrop into which the most technologically advanced automobiles blend (at least superficially), picking up the hues and shades of 'nature' in their windows, grills, hubcaps, and gleaming paintjobs. Nature is commodified as a mutual competitor to be respected, appreciated, and challenged via the Subaru experience. The assertion of 'fairness' again deploys the fantasy of Nature as knowable Other—or at least as a conscious Other who understands (and 'plays by') concepts like justice. The small print of the ad fleshes out this unflinching anthropotextualization of nature:

> If you get that nature's biggest charms are sometimes its biggest challenges, you'll get an All-Wheel Drive Subaru. We put All-Wheel Drive standard on every Subaru we make. For incredible traction and control no matter what the driving conditions. So tell nature to bring it on. In a Subaru, you can handle it. The beauty of Subaru All-Wheel Drive. When you get it, you get it.