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Staying with the Trouble with Wilderness: Reworking Nature and Culture in the Plantationocene

Jordan Johnson¹

Abstract

This essay analyzes the use of fire on Upland Island Wilderness Area (UIW) to examine how postindustrial wilderness sites rework operative notions of nature, wildness, and preservation within U.S. environmental thinking and politics. Postindustrial wilderness areas complicate conceptualizations of nature as pristine, unspoiled, or even beautiful, challenging us to address biodiversity and ecosystem function in ways that are less centered on human(ist) values. An intensively managed pine plantation prior to wilderness designation, UIW blatantly transgresses liberal humanist boundaries of nature and culture, ecology and industry. I draw on feminist and posthumanist theory to demonstrate how contestations surrounding the use of fire on UIW resituate ethical and epistemic implications of wilderness management, offering a critical counterpoint to the prioritization of pristine nature within U.S. environmental politics and demanding less humanist approaches to the complex forest ecologies of the plantationocene.

Keywords: *Feminist posthumanist theory; Naturecultures; Plantationocene; Wilderness management*

“In the face of unrelenting historically specific surplus suffering in companion species knottings, I am not interested in reconciliation or restoration, but I am deeply committed to the more modest possibilities of partial recuperation and getting on together. Call that staying with the trouble.” —Donna Haraway (2016, 10)

In contrast to the neatly ordered loblolly pine plantations surrounding it, the rolling ridges of Upland Island Wilderness Area (UIW) are characterized by the dominant presence of longleaf pine, featuring an open midstory dotted with scrub oak and dogwoods, and a thick ground layer of bluestem grasses and ferns. A cascading network of creeks and seasonal streams crisscrosses gentle slopes where pine, red oak, and southern magnolia are interspersed with azaleas and wildflowers punctuated with pitcher plant seeps and orchids. Towering oaks and bald cypress intermingle with palmetto before giving way to river cypress and willows along the wide, sandy creek bottoms that join the floodplain of the Neches River in the Pineywoods forests along the Gulf Coast Plain of the southeastern United States (Sidnell et al., 1986).²

¹ Jordan Johnson, Visiting Assistant Professor of Feminist Studies, Southwestern University, 1001 E. University Ave, Georgetown, Texas, United States. E-mail: johnson27@southwestern.edu.

² Situated in the heart of Caddo homelands, Upland Island falls within the Southern Evergreen Forest formation with floodplains falling within the Bottomland Forest formation. Both formations are considered part of the Pineywoods ecoregion, which encompasses the forested areas on either side of the Texas-Louisiana state line in the southeastern forests of the United States (Rebori, 1995).



Although official signs and markers have been removed from the wilderness area, traces of past land use remain, visible in the thorny brush protruding from paths left by decommissioned Forest Service roads. The overgrown access roads contrast sharply with the open midstory structure that characterizes the site more broadly, historically dominant pine species shaded out by a riotous congregation of early successional species that respond vigorously to the sunlight in the clearings. Like all Pineywoods wilderness areas, Upland Island was an intensively managed loblolly pine plantation prior to wilderness designation (Fritz 1986; Kulhavey et al., 1986). Its conversion from old growth forest to cutover land to timber stand to wilderness area registers the ambivalences of industrialization and its aftermaths, a messy embodiment of efforts to reckon with and respond to the ecological challenges of large-scale timber production. Contestations surrounding postindustrial wilderness sites attest to the growing distance between contemporary forests and liberal humanist fantasies of nature, demanding a posthumanist account of human-forest entanglement.

As noted in the inaugural issue of this journal (Buran et al., 2021), posthumanism offers a generative critique of “modernity and its ideals,” “invit[ing] us to seek out alternative [...] ways of staying with the trouble of living and dying (Haraway, 2016) in the posthuman condition (Braidotti, 2018), which has shown itself in the amalgamation of physical, biological, and digital environments” (2). For Haraway (2016), the ethical task “is to become capable, with each other in all our bumptious kinds, of response” (1). Throughout her work, Haraway calls on feminists to cultivate the capacity to respond to the world as a form of ethical responsibility, noting in “The Cyborg Manifesto” (1991) that “irresponsible means unable to be called into account” (191). Accounting for pine plantations-turned-wilderness areas in the postindustrial forests of the southeastern US requires cultivating the capacity to respond to historical legacies and ongoing practices of violence at multiple scales. Upland Island is constituted through the historically specific species and ecological relations that characterize the Pineywoods as a bioregion as well as historically situated processes of colonization and capitalism—specifically the forced removal of Caddo Nations, the introduction of enslaved labor and plantation agriculture, and the uneven scientific intensifications of industrial forestry. Reckoning with postindustrial sites such as UIW is one way of responding to calls within feminist, environmental, and posthumanist theory to shift from a critique of the anthropocene to critical engagement with a wider range of frameworks and concepts, including the Capitalocene, the plantationocene, and the Chthulucene.³ The case of UIW evokes the plantationocene as a lens that focuses critical attention on the centrality of settler colonialism and racial capitalism as historical and ongoing processes that constitute operative notions of nature as imagined in the US and in the Pineywoods more specifically. Haraway and Tsing (2019) frame the plantationocene as an analytic that zeroes in on multispecies process of “radical simplification, substitution of peoples, crops, microbes, and life forms; forced labor; and crucially, the disordering of times of generation across species” (6). Feminist approaches to environmental ethics in the plantationocene require cultivating the capacity to respond to postindustrial ecologies and damaged landscapes (Tsing et al., 2017). Co-constituted through situated and deeply uneven entanglements between forests, humans, and markets, sites like UIW demand a willingness to linger with the various forms of trouble that haunt projects of settler colonialism and racial capitalism.

³ See Haraway & Tsing (2019), Moore (2016), and Haraway (2015) for influential calls to rework theorizations of the anthropocene as a geological epoch that is primarily defined by humans as a “global geophysical force” (Steffan et al., 2008, 614). Attuned to feminist and postcolonial critiques of the anthropocene’s tendency to unhelpfully universalize the costs and benefits of contemporary practices, I am interested in thinking about how the plantationocene usefully highlights structures of colonialism, plantation agriculture, and racial capitalism on UIW.



This essay turns to the Upland Island Wilderness Area (UIW) to examine how postindustrial wilderness sites rework operative notions of nature, wildness, and preservation within US environmental theory and politics. Throughout, I demonstrate how contestations surrounding the creation and management of postindustrial wilderness spaces resituate ethical and epistemic implications of wilderness management, offering a critical counterpoint to the prioritization of pristine nature within the politics of US environmental protection and demanding less humanist approaches to the complex forest ecologies of the plantationocene.

Responding to the trouble with wilderness

Environmental historian Walter Cronon has influentially theorized “the trouble with wilderness” as the concept’s reliance on the modernist separation of nature and culture, asserting that the framework of wilderness leaves “little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, honorable human place in nature might actually look like” (1996a, 17). Indeed, the trouble with wilderness cuts to the core of the conceptualization of wildness within the mutually constitutive contexts of settler colonialism and racial capitalism. While the notion of ‘wildness’ has the potential to assert a sense of alterity, otherness, agency, and non-instrumentality to more-than-human actants and assemblages,⁴ the concept has also naturalized the violence of settler colonialism and plantation agriculture as a form of progress, imagining the forests of North America as ‘wild’ and uninhabited in spite of obvious evidence to the contrary. As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2015) notes, “had North America been a wilderness, undeveloped, without roads, and uncultivated, it might still be so, for the European colonists could not have survived. They appropriated what had already been created by Indigenous civilizations” (46). The widespread use of game management and animal husbandry in North America enabled colonial accounts that misread the carefully cultivated food forests and game parks of Indigenous America as an alternatively bounteous and threatening wilderness (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2015, 15–16). This claim to wildness, however tenuous, erased the presence of Indigenous Nations to justify land theft and genocide through the settler colonial fantasy of manifest destiny. Indeed, the history of North America is one of land theft, and the idea of wilderness has been a key mechanism in operationalizing this theft, naturalizing the genocide of Indigenous peoples by rendering invisible complex cultural and ecological practices.

Wilderness has been and continues to be a project of idealization, a way of parsing the human and nonhuman through liberal humanist fantasies of mastery and management. Whether situated as a site of threatening nature to be conquered or as a refuge to be protected, wilderness as a form of strictly non-human nature defined in contrast to culture is a colonial fantasy with ongoing, uneven material consequences for multispecies communities. Simultaneously, wilderness protection is currently one of the strongest forms of legal protection for multispecies assemblages within the boundaries of the US settler state.

While the legacies of wilderness in North America are deeply troubling, Haraway calls for staying with the trouble as an ethical practice attuned to the many ambivalences of late capitalism. For Haraway (2016), staying with the trouble involves stepping away from teleological histories and linear progress narratives, drawing “lines of inventive connection” that denaturalize western stories of nature, culture, and development (1). Staying with the trouble of wilderness, of settler colonialism, industrial capitalism, and ecological destruction requires learning the practice of “living and dying

⁴ Cronon (1996a) highlights this possibility as well as its downsides within western conceptualizations of wilderness. Writing in queer feminist cultural studies, Jack Halberstam (2020) explores the more radical possibilities of wildness to queerly rupture the logic of modernity.

well with each other in a thick present” (Haraway, 2016, 1), refusing the comfort of escapism whether such fantasies are oriented toward a technoscientific future or a romanticized past. Responding to sites like UIW requires refracting the concept of wilderness through feminist and posthumanist theorizations of environmental ethics in the plantationocene in order to enable messier, more complex approaches to human-forest entanglements.

Haraway (2016) offers the hyphenated term “response-ability” to situate ethics as a practice of encounter, an ongoing process of “intensely inhabiting specific bodies and places as the means to cultivate the capacity to respond to worldly urgencies” (7). Response-ability requires redefining one’s capacity to respond, experimenting with new ways of holding each other accountable “in the face of terrible histories, and sometimes joyful histories too” (Haraway, 2016, 29). Drawing on Haraway, Deboleena Roy (2018) characterizes a feminist approach to posthumanist ethics as “a movement from a transcendent understanding of ‘responsibility’ toward the other, to a more immanent awareness of the ‘ability to respond’” (30). Roy emphasizes how feminist posthumanist approaches to response-ability break with the impulse to conceptualize ethics as the exclusive realm of individual, liberal humanist subjects, looking instead to more emergent modes of relation. Importantly, Roy’s relational sense of ethics is rooted in a commitment to becoming-with and thinking-with a wide range of human and multispecies others, a willingness to rework humanist frameworks of agency and subjectivity as well as ontology and epistemology. Reading Cronon’s work through Haraway and Roy’s feminist theorizations of posthumanist ethics, what might it mean to stay with the trouble of wilderness as a form of cultivating response-ability? How might we linger with the trouble with wilderness in the context of postindustrial spaces? How do postindustrial wilderness areas reframe the valuation, appreciation, and preservation of nature and wildness, demanding alternative ways of approaching and relating to multispecies entanglements within and beyond wilderness boundaries?

Clearly, the trouble with wilderness thoroughly predates its establishment as a land use category in the United States with the 1964 National Wilderness Act. However, the Wilderness Act and the social movement that inspired it codifies a specific adaptation of the concept, highlighting the uneven transformation of wilderness as wild nature to be conquered and colonized to a notion of wilderness as wild nature to be protected. Across the United States, wilderness designation has remained controversial, with the act serving as a grounding reference amongst proliferating stakeholders who read varying conceptualizations of nature and ecology onto the law as well as the landscape. Rather than stipulating specific characteristics and criteria for wilderness designation, the 1964 Act defines wilderness “in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape,” as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (88th Congress, 1964, A-17). Thus, legal conceptualizations of wilderness in the United States are defined in contrast to humans, perpetuating masculinist, modernist distinctions between nature and culture while situating wildlands as a refuge to be preserved from the incursions of urbanization and industrialization.

Emerging in the late 19th century and blossoming in the mid-20th century, U.S. approaches to wilderness preservation contain irreducible contradictions that continue to reverberate across discourses of environmental protection and resource management. For example, the Wilderness Act aims to preserve specific ecosystems and ecological communities “in perpetuity;” the ecosystems at the heart of this project, however, are dynamic, ever-changing communities, emergent assemblages that have co-developed unevenly alongside changing ecological conditions as well as shifting regimes of human management. Furthermore, while legal definitions of wilderness



emphasize the absence of human influence, ecosystem processes refuse to follow humanist boundaries and Cartesian spatial arrangements, intra-acting directly and indirectly with various anthropogenic forces while also exceeding humanist schemes of management and mastery. At the root of U.S.-based contestations over wilderness, then, lies a tension between notions of permanence and ongoing change as well as between a presumed-unchanging natural world and the operative notion of change as a cultural force, a product of human agency.

The tendency to view nonhuman nature as passive or inert—to commodify nature as natural resource within humanist projects of development and progress—continues a lengthy western philosophical assumption that “we” as humans are masters of the material world, unique from other forms of life and uniquely invested with the rational ability to know and order the world around us. Feminist anthropologist Anna Tsing (2015) terms this instrumentalizing impulse “the modern human conceit,” an intellectual legacy that ties notions of liberal humanism to capitalist development and modernization, entangling us “with ideas of progress and with the spread of techniques of alienation that turn both humans and other beings into resources” (19).

Western thinkers have had a hard time reckoning with more-than-human nature as an active force in producing our worlds, falling back on notions of nonhuman nature as passive raw material within humanist projects.⁵ In contrast, feminist materialist and posthumanist accounts of co-production, intra-action, and becoming-with evoke a relational ontology that, as Roy (2018) notes, “involves giving up the idea of human exceptionalism,” opening human and more-than-human actants to unknowable risks and possibilities (80). As Haraway (2008) reminds, “acknowledging the agency of the world makes room for some unsettling possibilities” (198). Namely that we, as humans, are not masters of our environments, our technologies, or even ourselves. Becoming-with emerges as a risky practice of encounter, highlighting ethical and ontological stakes of ongoing meetings and entanglements “in the avid contact zones that are the world” (Haraway, 2008, 287).

Reframing wildness on postindustrial sites

In spite of the crucial successes of the U.S. wilderness movement in preserving sites perceived as wild, sublime, or pristine, the notion of wilderness preservation failed to attach comfortably to the postdisturbance patchwork of swamps and backwoods in the southeastern United States (Hendee, 1986; Jacobson, 1986).⁶ Although the Forest Service opposed measures to expand wilderness designation, Congress amended the Wilderness Act in 1975, widening the legal criteria for wilderness designation by clarifying that wilderness protection shall not be contingent on land use history (93rd Congress, 1975). The 1975 amendment overturned the long-held notion that wilderness is primarily defined by its pristine condition and lack of human disturbance, creating a pathway for wilderness preservation on postdisturbance sites (Kulhavy et al., 1986). Established on cutover timberlands and abandoned farms, proposed wilderness areas in the Pineywoods consisted of small islands of publicly owned land surrounded by private holdings (Phillips, 1986, 15). Fragmented landscapes co-produced through ecological and industrial processes, postindustrial wilderness areas

⁵ See Carolyn Merchant (1980) for a feminist critique of the instrumentalization and mechanization of nonhuman nature within western traditions.

⁶ Focusing initially on western landscapes, wilderness advocacy in the United States was galvanized by the urgent desire to protect relatively undisturbed landscapes from the impact of unregulated human use, be it for timber, grazing, mineral extraction, or recreation (Cronon, 1996a; Kulhavy et al., 1986). In the decade following the Wilderness Act, only four wilderness areas had been designated east of the 100th meridian (Kulhavy et al., 1986).

pose unique management challenges, reframing the notion of nature that underwrites U.S. approaches to wilderness.

Motivated less by fantasies of pristine nature in need of human protection and more by the need to restore remnants of cutover land to a more robust ecological state, wilderness advocates and resource managers in postindustrial contexts grappled with competing visions for what “partial recuperation and getting on together” might look like in the Pineywoods, testing, challenging, and reconfiguring the boundaries of nature and culture as they asserted wilderness designation in spaces with intensive histories and ongoing practices of industrial land use (Haraway, 2016, 10). As argued by Senator Frank Church in 1972, “this is one of the great promises of the Wilderness Act, that we can dedicate formerly abused areas where the primeval scene can be restored by natural forces” (Phillips, 1986, 17). The precise nature of such natural forces, however, has proven to be a point of great contention.

Recognizing the ongoing impact of agricultural and industrial practices, the 1975 amendment introduces the concept of nondegradation to wilderness management, allowing “maintenance” of ecological character or “restoration if necessary” to bring the area into alignment with wilderness standards (93rd Congress, 1975; Phillips, 1986, 18). However, neither the amendment nor the original act offers concrete criteria for defining wilderness standards across the wide range of landscapes administered under the legislation. Hinging on the tension between the legal injunction to leave wilderness to natural processes and the mandate to mitigate against the influence of past and surrounding land use practices, conflicts surrounding wilderness preservation on postindustrial sites highlight tensions within dominant approaches to wilderness while also underscoring the specific problems and possibilities of wilderness areas within working forests. Although all wilderness management evokes tensions between nature and culture, permanence and adaptation, postindustrial wilderness spaces bring these challenges more clearly into focus, raising questions about the legal imperative to allow the “free play of natural forces” within landscapes that have been shaped by and through industrial development, where generational time has been utterly warped by the demands of resource extraction and production.

Postindustrial sites remain marginalized within the material landscape and critical literature of U.S. wilderness. By directing attention to the plantationocene, posthumanist feminist theorists such as Haraway and Tsing (2019) have responded to this gap in environmental thinking by insisting on the lessons evoked in the ruins of colonialism and capitalism. This project is deeply indebted to that work. Bisected by a pre-existing pipeline and surrounded by pine plantations and active drilling sites, UIW is a wilderness that blatantly transgresses liberal humanist boundaries of nature and culture, ecology and industry (Fritz, 1986). The establishment of wilderness areas on postindustrial sites such as UIW pushes back on liberal humanist approaches to nature, raising questions about the place of humans and the meaning of wilderness in the forests of the plantationocene.

Given the absence of undisturbed landscapes in the region, wilderness designation in the Pineywoods has prioritized areas with unique ecological profiles, significant geologic formations, and greater potential for wilderness manageability. UIW was recommended for wilderness designation in 1980 due to the wide diversity of flora and fauna relative to its size (Sidnell, 1980).⁷ The research team also emphasized a geologically significant outcropping of the Catahoula formation, responsible for the striking seepage swamps and hanging bogs along the slopes near

⁷ The research team found evidence of four active colonies for the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker as well as a rare species of grasshopper identified in the ephemeral lowland ponds (Sidnell, 1980; Sidnell et al., 1986).



creeks (Sidnell et al., 1986). These unique aquatic ecosystems feature carnivorous plants alongside herbaceous heliophytes, shrubs, and small trees which provide critical habitat for reptile and amphibian populations (Nixon & Ward, 1986). The longleaf pine-dominated upland ridge constitutes the core of UIW and plays an important role in the ecological function of the site as well as its consideration for wilderness protection (Nixon & Ward, 1986).

In Texas, escalating contestation and litigation around wilderness management brought all agency plans and practices to a grinding halt in the final decades of the 20th century, inciting passion, frustration, and eventually, exhaustion from agency personnel, environmental activists, and local landowners alike.⁸ Faced with offsite threats to timber production as well as the onsite loss of biodiversity—and in particular the endangerment of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW)—environmental advocates and agency personnel agreed that the challenges of Texas wilderness areas necessitated active management. However, these differently situated stakeholders disagreed vehemently about the purpose and priorities of agency action within wilderness boundaries and, ultimately, about the very notion of nature that underwrites wilderness preservation. These disagreements reveal situated responses to industrial, cultural, and ecological pressures, mobilizing different conceptualizations of forests, wildness, and the place of humans within forest ecologies. The contestations in Texas reveal the limitations of wilderness preservation as a liberal humanist boundary-making project, situating it instead as an ongoing experiment in enabling multispecies survival and partial recuperation.

Animated by contrasting priorities and ways of apprehending the woods, foresters and environmentalists in Texas engaged in various, often conflicting, approaches to the challenges of postindustrial wilderness management. Drawing on the logic of preservationism, environmental advocates utilized the Wilderness Act in efforts to establish a refuge for nonhuman nature, addressing the environmental threats of the timber industry by appealing to wilderness as a place of sanctuary from the incursions of industrialization. Operationalizing utilitarian notions of nature-as-resource to be managed for the benefit of the nation, foresters viewed postindustrial wilderness sites as misguided, pointless, and threatening to broader management objectives.

Excluded from the agency's prescribed burning regimes, yet too fragmented to burn through ecological processes, pine plantations-turned-wilderness areas grew dense and dark, a frenzy of riotous growth useful to generalist species, but unsuitable for species adapted specifically to fire-dependent pine savannas, specialists like the Red-cockaded Woodpecker which relies on old trees with open midstory and lush ground layers of grasses and orbs. As species loss and site degradation escalated pressures to end the gridlock and establish a management plan for UIW, foresters, scientists, and activists grappled with questions of response-ability and becoming-with in wilderness spaces bearing the indelible influence of industry. This wilderness area cannot be imagined as a refuge where nature is protected from the incursions of humans. Rather, on UIW management *and* the removal of management both intensify human influence and ecological damage. This site sharply underscores the fictitious nature of western colonial myths of wilderness as well as the material consequences of such fictions in the plantationocene. There is no choice but to respond to the

⁸ Spanning decades and involving local, state, and national agencies and activist organizations, the controversy over wilderness management in Texas focused on the Forest Service's use of clearcutting within wilderness boundaries in the form of commercial "salvage" cuts positioned by the agency as a pest management strategy (Phillips, 1989). Legal challenges to the Forest Service's use of clearcutting on wilderness areas coincided with a series of particularly devastating Southern Pine Beetle outbreaks in the 1980s, intensifying disagreements between resource managers and wilderness advocates through increased economic pressure to protect surrounding timber holdings (Fritz, 1986; Phillips, 1989).

complex histories of these landscapes and to practice accountability for our responses in the ongoing context of scientific uncertainty and conflicting management concerns.

Naturalcultural wilderness management

Although wilderness preservation is often positioned as a counterpoint to the utilitarian notion of nature-as-resource (taking land ‘out of production’ for ecological reasons), the Wilderness Act frames wildness itself as a resource for human use, emphasizing existential, recreational, scientific, and economic benefits as justification for congressional protection of wildlands, and proposing to “secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness” (88th Congress, 1965). U.S. environmental advocates situated wilderness areas as a crucial resource for an urbanizing nation, offering the opportunity to combat the alienation of modernization by re-establishing connection with the natural world (Turner, 2012). The 1975 amendment expands the original act to include the restoration of postdisturbance sites, and yet an emphasis remains on restoring wilderness areas in order to commodify such sites as a state resource. Undercutting conceptualizations of nature as timeless or universal, the 1975 amendment applies wilderness designation onto landscapes that have been deeply, perhaps permanently, altered by human use, and in doing so redefines wilderness as a renewable resource within a recovery narrative in which state-sponsored scientific resource management is responsible for the depletion *and* rejuvenation of postindustrial landscapes.⁹ Resource management approaches the forest as a system to be manipulated and adjusted to achieve a range of goals—from Indigenous removal, settler colonialism, and resource liquidation in the 18th and 19th centuries, to regeneration, intensified management, and eventually ecological restoration in the 20th and 21st (Merchant, 2007).

In applying the logic of resource management to wilderness sites, foresters are tasked with determining how much change is acceptable and how to intervene to protect “the wilderness resource” itself (Kulhavy et al., 1986). The Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) framework aims to do just that, identifying and monitoring “system outputs i.e. defining appropriate wilderness conditions and opportunities” for a specified population, such as wilderness users or environmental advocates or adjacent landowners (Roggenbuck et al., 1993, 187). Frequently used where controversy has stalled the implementation of management procedures, the LAC process requires resource managers to identify site-specific wilderness indicators, using public input from “clientele groups” to specify the more general terms of the Wilderness Act in a contextually relevant way (Rebori, 1995; Roggenbuck et al., 1993). The LAC system moves beyond restrictive notions of carrying capacity to address more contingent relationships between types of recreational use, visitor behavior, site durability, and more (Rebori, 1995). The task is not to authoritatively define wilderness criteria, but to identify which indicators are most important for users of a specific site, and to combine this information with Forest Service expertise to develop an appropriate management plan. While public input is vital in defining wilderness qualities and management objectives, “wilderness managers [...] do not necessarily select the indicators and standards that are preferred by current area visitors or wilderness interest groups” (Rebori, 1995, 188). Rather, resource managers use their expertise to make judgements based on public feedback as well as other management objectives and conditioning contexts (legal and budgetary as well as scientific). While this approach aims to “rework the roles of client and planner”—and may offer an important alternative to the strictly top-down nature of rational comprehensive planning models—it does not necessarily challenge the epistemic

⁹ See Carolyn Merchant (2007) for more on ecological recovery narratives as a form of consolidating state power in the United States.



authority of agency expertise or raise questions about the role of power and profit in the production of scientific knowledge and management objectives.

Nevertheless, resource managers insist that “the views of clientele groups are critically important because wilderness is largely a cultural resource. It is more than a collection of natural objects; it is instead a perceived reality or state of mind” (Rebori, 1995, 188). As environmental historians have demonstrated, distinctions between nature and culture structure the felt need for wilderness protection as well as working definitions of wilderness in the United States, framing humans in opposition to nonhuman nature (Cronon, 1996b; Nash, 2001; Merchant, 2007). In this sense, contemporary notions of wilderness can be seen as a product of ‘culture,’ not of ‘nature,’ a set of socially and historically specific ideas masquerading as nature itself.

Addressing wilderness as a cultural resource rather than a natural resource has produced a more robust approach to wilderness management, highlighting the contextual and contingent nature of wilderness values. But how might the insights of feminist and posthumanist theory take this thinking a step further, approaching wilderness, not as a natural or cultural resource, but as a naturalcultural assemblage with complex historical, cultural, and ecological ramifications? Haraway offers the term “naturecultures” as a tool for telling more complex stories about multispecies entanglements, unsettling the modernizing imperative to parse nature from culture in order to reflect messier rubrics of multispecies modes of relating and becoming-with (Haraway, 2003; 2008). A naturalcultural approach to wilderness management would not only highlight the contingent nature of wilderness values, but would more specifically identify the role of colonialism and capitalism in material landscapes and dominant conceptualizations of wildness and wilderness protection.

Contemporary wilderness management is a complex process involving the production of scientific knowledge as well as the monitoring and regulation of natural and cultural forces, with the boundary between nature and culture emerging as perhaps the most contentious ground of all. The case of UIW highlights the naturalcultural entanglements of wilderness, co-produced by culturally constructed frameworks, yet always exceeding humanist notions of nature as inert/passive. Attempts to master, modernize, and manage the forest entangle a wide array of actants in a multispecies web that is both material and semiotic, natural and cultural, all too human and decidedly more-than-human all at once.

UIW offers one site through which to trace shifting notions of nature, wildness, and the imagined place of humans within the natural world. Read through feminist and posthumanist theorizations of ethics, entanglement and multispecies becoming in the plantationocene, the qualities that almost disqualified UIW from wilderness designation—its limited size and high level of disturbance, ecosystem fragmentation, surrounding land use—emerge as opportunities to reconceptualize nature and culture within U.S. environmental politics. Attempts to apply the LAC framework to wilderness management on UIW offer examples of how differently situated stakeholders might partially meet each other in the context of wilderness sites that stubbornly refuse to be tamed by humanist conceptualizations of wildness and pristine nature. The postindustrial wildernesses of the Pineywoods snag humanist notions of resource management, raising questions about the permeability of boundaries between nature and culture, wilderness and working forest, as well as the boundaries between self and Other and the ethical considerations inherent in these exchanges.

In contrast to more pristine (and heavily visited) parks, preserves, and wilderness areas, on UIW human impact doesn’t come primarily from wilderness visitors, but from the area’s enmeshment in

larger patterns of land use across time and space.¹⁰ Offsite fertilizers and agricultural runoff introduce change into these ecosystems, as do onsite practices such as fire suppression and pest control, as does resource management on adjacent federal and private property, as does land use history. Such sites subvert assumptions embedded in the U.S. logic of wilderness preservation, highlighting the natural-cultural character of wildlands, and suggesting the ways in which all wilderness areas are a product of ongoing multispecies entanglement. The legal, cultural, political, and scientific disputes surrounding UIW demonstrate how wilderness management functions as a risky practice of meeting and becoming-with variously situated human and more-than-human others. Read through the lens of feminist and posthumanist theory, wilderness protection on UIW emerges as a messy mechanism for reckoning with damage and cultivating response-ability between humans and forests (Haraway, 2016). Inspired by Stacy Alaimo's (2010) insistence that the complexity of contemporary multispecies entanglements requires "more responsible, less confident epistemologies," the next section turns to the issue of fire on UIW. Planning processes and debates about the (re)introduction of fire on UIW exemplify Alaimo's demand for humbler ways of meeting species, "allow[ing] us to forge ethical and political positions that can contend with numerous late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century realities in which 'human' and 'environment' can by no means be considered separate" (22; 2).

Reintroducing fire on UIW

In 1994, Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA) and the Texas Nature Conservancy contracted a cost-share agreement to develop a wilderness management plan for UIW¹¹ using the LAC process alongside transactive planning strategies.¹² Within this framework, facilitators look to agency representatives to provide information on forest ecology and wilderness management and to advocacy organizations and members of the public for insight regarding wilderness expectations and priorities. Importantly, the planning process remains structured by humanist notions of subjectivity, agency, and expertise—it is designed to include only humans, privileging rational speaking subjects, and referring to human(ist) values of wilderness (as opposed to the rights of natural entities to existence, the imperative to preserve biological integrity and genetic diversity, or another less human-centered way of apprehending the forest). However, this partial encounter amongst differently situated humans enabled the re-introduction of fire on UIW, resulting in a management plan that aimed to respond more ethically to the situated challenges of the site. Transactive planning theory posits disagreement as constitutive to meaningful dialogue, asking participants to commit to an ongoing process in which reciprocity and mutual obligation enable partial communication between oppositional perspectives (Rebori, 1995, 16). Haraway (2008)

¹⁰ While Texas wilderness areas remain lightly used, areas with more recreational use face serious management challenges related to carrying capacity and setting limitations on human use of wilderness in order to protect sensitive ecologies that incited/justified wilderness designation in the first place, a phenomenon referred to by managers as "loving the wilderness to death." While this is a fascinating problem of contemporary wilderness management, postindustrial wilderness areas such as UIW pose different challenges, since site deterioration is more attributable to historical factors and surrounding land use than from contemporary human users of wilderness (Cronon, 1996a; Kulhavy et al., 1986).

¹¹ A team of researchers from SFA organized and carried out the process which consisted of 12 meetings over 10 months. Participants included representatives from the U.S. Forest Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife, the Angelina District Forest Ranger, as well as representatives from the Sierra Club, Texas Committee on Natural Resources, The Native Plant Society, and The Nature Conservancy (Rebori, 1995, 50).

¹² Researchers supplemented the LAC process with transactive planning approaches and strategies in order to address the extensive controversies surrounding wilderness management in East Texas (Rebori, 1995). Developed by John Friedmann in 1973, transactive planning brings insights from the interdisciplinary field of conflict resolution to bear on theories of urban planning (Friedman, 1973). Transactive planning emphasizes robust dialogue and ongoing public input, asking participants to commit themselves to open discussion and disagreement in order to work toward collaborative decisions on contested issues (Rebori, 1995).



emphasizes how processes of intra-action and becoming-with introduce risk, ambiguity, and unknowability invoking “the kinds of response and regard that change the subject—and the object” (287). This reworking of relations challenges instrumentalist approaches to forest ecosystems and disperses the possibilities for what counts as response-ability in the uneven process of meeting species on UIW. These partial encounters and conversations did not resolve longstanding conflict between stakeholders, but the process did enable the eventual adoption of a management plan by establishing group consensus on one of the most urgent underlying issues: the use of fire within wilderness boundaries.

By reaching the consensus that “fire is a natural element,” participants were forced to challenge deeply held convictions about nature, culture, management, and preservation (Rebori, 1995). The group’s assertion that fire is a natural process was rooted in a shared understanding of the centrality of fire in longleaf ecologies. Within fire-climax ecosystems, cyclical disturbance is a constitutive ongoing process without which the ecosystem cannot persist. Longleaf pine ecologies do not just tolerate fire, but actually facilitate it through the production of highly flammable litter and resins (Frost et al., 1986, 350). Thus, the imperative to preserve pyrophytic communities in fragmented wilderness areas brings stakeholders face to face with underlying tensions in the legal, cultural, and scientific management of wilderness in the United States. Tasked with protecting ever-changing ecological communities enmeshed in industrial processes, resource managers and activists on UIW examined the historical role of fire in more detail, conducting a comprehensive fire history of the site with environmentalist interest in the specificity of historic fire regimes shaping the objectives and findings of this study and subsequent policy decisions (Rebori, 1995).

Agency approaches to prescribed burning have focused on controlling fires within designated spaces to reduce the combustible fuel load and ensure the protection of surrounding property and timber holdings while meeting burn targets without substantially impacting air quality downwind of the forest (Forest Service, 2009). Decisions about the timing and character of burns have been driven by the mandated imperative to protect human life and private property as opposed to the ecological imperative to mimic fire regime history. Representatives from the Sierra Club, the Texas Committee on Natural Resources, and the Wilderness Society insisted on the relevance of the type of fire, season of burn, and burn frequency, raising questions about the ecologically intrusive methods used for ploughing fire lines and initiating burns in sensitive habitats (Kirby, 1986; Oswald et al., 2011). In more recent years, ecologists have also emphasized that “reintroduction of fire per se is not sufficient in that fire characteristics are altered in reconstructed habitats,” recommending that restoration efforts aim to reconstitute not just the presence of fire, but the restoration of vegetation-fire feedbacks which depend on specific relationships between longleaf pines, groundcover, and fungi established over evolutionary time (Peet et al., 2018, 42).

While environmentalists had not necessarily disputed the historical role of fire in longleaf ecologies, advocates in Texas had long opposed the Forest Service’s use of prescribed burning in wilderness areas as an attempt to curtail intensive management and commercial cutting (Kirby, 1986; Fritz, 1986; Phillips, 1989). These concerns draw on preservationist distrust of commodity-based approaches to forest management, an outgrowth of the specific history of agency opposition to wilderness designation in Texas. In one participant’s words, “it’s very difficult to hand over the reins of management to an agency who doesn’t have a clear record of wilderness advocacy, that’s why there’s distrust there” (Rebori, 1995, 99). Suspending the debate between preservationism and utilitarianism forced participants to reckon more directly with the limitations of humanist approaches to wilderness and the porosity of wilderness boundaries. The process forced

environmental activists, some of whom were in the midst of ongoing litigation with the Forest Service, to become openly and acutely aware of the impossibility of shielding Pineywoods wilderness areas from human influence. Advocates were forced to reckon with the loss of wilderness as idealized nature as well as the loss of ecological integrity onsite. Participants had to establish planning objectives and priorities starting from the recognition that, on UIW as on many postindustrial sites, too many ecological links have been severed to enable a wilderness preserve capable of perpetuating the dynamic processes necessary for its continuation. Suspending liberal humanist fantasies of progress and control in the context of environmental protection, UIW asks us to work toward “partial recuperation and getting on together” while realizing that we can’t preserve nature “in perpetuity,” or even effectively distinguish between nature and culture (Haraway, 2016, 10). Read through the lens of feminist and posthumanist theory, the challenges of wilderness management on UIW ask us to continue the work of co-habiting postindustrial sites more ethically while acknowledging that the task of restoration can never be fully accomplished or achieved, but remains an ongoing process of learning to respond, often imperfectly, to past, present, and future multispecies entanglements.

Despite deep disagreement and disputes, the group reached a consenting decision to allow prescribed burning within designated zones of the wilderness “in order to restore the ecological balance in the fire dependent communities” (Rebori, 1995, 56). Rebori (1995) notes that “dealing with a cultural resource such as wilderness allowed the timber harvesting value of the National Forest to be omitted. This omission helped set the common ground among participants by deleting the often-debated commodity issue and focused discussion on wilderness values” (104). While the shift from wilderness as a natural resource to wilderness as a cultural resource enabled the development of a fire management plan on UIW, the suspension of the material, ecological, and economic realities surrounding the wilderness is only ever partial at best. Feminist posthumanist theory reminds us that the trouble with wilderness remains a naturalcultural question, not a matter of assessing ecological or cultural values in isolation. Whether discussed by participants during the formal process or not, the imperatives of commodity forestry haunt the planning process, revealing the contingency and partiality of meetings between stakeholders. The LAC framework foregrounds context and contingency, insisting that the notion of wilderness means very little outside of specific historical and cultural parameters. But this approach also participates in the commodification of wilderness as a cultural resource, domesticating the meaning of wilderness and limiting the naturalcultural possibilities of meeting species differently on UIW.

Efforts to engage public input in the management of Pineywoods wilderness areas continue to be driven by the need to act urgently to respond to the rapid, global loss of pine savanna ecosystems (Keeton et al., 2018). The 1995 LAC study documented and participated in shifting approaches to the role of fire in wilderness management, resulting in the Forest Service’s 1996 management plan for UIW, which authorized prescribed burning within a designated section of the wilderness and led to the development of a restoration plan for the area. Between 2004 and 2007 SFA collaborated with the Forest Service and members of the public to draft a UIW Fire Management Plan, “which identified human-ignited prescribed fire as the management option of choice to restore the longleaf pine portions” (Oswald et al., 2011, 68). Revealing shifting notions of nature by situating prescribed burning as a natural process when initiated by humans for the purposes of ecological restoration, this approach to fire disrupts the humanist logic of resource management and wilderness preservation, evoking a posthumanist approach to human-forest relations that enables greater possibility for response-ability, relationality, and partial recuperation.



While the importance of fire in longleaf ecosystems was acknowledged by all participants, the Sierra Club challenged the initial management plan on its implementation of prescribed burning, advocating for prescribed burns to replicate “natural fire frequency, seasonality, rate, duration, start location, and patchiness” (Oswald et al., 2011, 69). These concerns were addressed in a revised version of the plan which incorporates burning for the purposes of ecological restoration as well as for the protection of private property. As a direct result of contentions raised by the Sierra Club, the fire plan mandates that prescribed burns mimic natural fire regimes, that fire ignitions be conducted by hand, that natural lightning fire be allowed to burn, and that “no one will be allowed to intentionally manipulate fire to favor any particular plant, animal, or community” (Oswald et al., 2011, 69). The wildness of this fire regime lies in the relinquishing of human intention with regard to species profile. This openness to emergence, also a refusal to center human(ist) values (be they environmentalist or industrialist) embodies a more posthumanist approach to wilderness that is potentially more difficult to commodify within the operative liberal logics of production and preservation.

The 2010 plan also requires pre-burning activities to establish fire lines outside of the wilderness area on adjacent private property rather than within wilderness boundaries, calling for prescribed burns on 13 private tracts adjacent to UIW, “as part of the overall ecosystem approach to this project and reflecting the buy-in of some of the stakeholders” (Oswald et al., 2011, 69). This collaboration between managers, wilderness advocates, and landowners registers shifting approaches to publicly-managed wilderness areas and private property. The 2010 plan’s attention to the urban-wildland interface challenges operative approaches to managing wilderness areas by building on the insight that wilderness boundaries are not definite and that ecological processes don’t abide by humanist maps and management schemes.

Forest planning in the Plantationocene

The fire regime on UIW is the product of shifting approaches to wildness and nature, drawn from contrasting epistemic and ethical commitments, but operationalized by a partially shared, urgent need to take action in the messy context of scientific uncertainty and escalating environmental change. The plan cobbles together ecological and commodity concerns, and perhaps for this reason, enables the possibility of continued existence, partial recuperation, perhaps even flourishing for (some) elements of Pineywoods ecologies. The Fire Management Plan for UIW is a naturalcultural artifact of forest planning in the plantationocene, a product of the push and pull between utilitarian and preservationist impulses in the context of late capitalism.

Across decades of controversy, the conflicting ethical and epistemic approaches of stakeholders combined with incomplete scientific understanding of ecological processes in postdisturbance landscapes to create a thicket of scientific uncertainty around ecological restoration in postindustrial forests and wilderness spaces. In contrast to the certainty of mastery and scientific expertise espoused in early agency approaches, the collaborative process of re-introducing fire to longleaf ecologies demands humbler approaches as activists and scientists work toward understanding and responding to the postindustrial forests of the Pineywoods. On the one hand, foresters insist on the impossibility and undesirability of a ‘hands off’ approach to wilderness management; on the other, environmentalists critique overlaps between industry, science, and state forestry. However, a feminist posthumanist approach to wilderness management reminds us that there are no clean hands in this story. Differently situated human actors are unevenly implicated in the (mis)management of wilderness areas and working forests. Ongoing entanglements of nature and culture reveal

postindustrial wilderness sites as multispecies assemblages emerging through shifting practices of utilitarianism and preservation, enmeshed in while also exceeding ongoing processes of empire expansion, commodification, and state power.

Produced by and through the myriad violences of colonialism and capitalism, wilderness designation continues to be the most stringent form of land protection in the United States and remains a strong tool in the preservation of sensitive ecosystems. Since the 1975 amendment, environmentalists and foresters alike have wrestled with the implications of asserting wilderness designation in postindustrial landscapes, a project that has only increased in relevance within ongoing ecological destabilizations. Divergent stakeholders have questioned whether and how lands deeply impacted by colonialism and capitalism have wilderness value, addressing the historical and cultural contingency of wilderness. Sites such as UIW demonstrate how we have made room for postindustrial landscapes within U.S. environmental imaginaries, but also suggest how these sites have been considered marginal in quality and importance. Postindustrial wilderness areas constitute less than 5% of designated wildlands in the United States and remain overlooked in the literature on forest management and history (Kulhavy et al., 1986). However, these sites are central to cultivating humbler epistemologies and less humanist approaches to wildness and the natural world. Postindustrial wilderness areas complicate operative notions of nature as pristine, unspoiled, or even beautiful, asking us to address biodiversity and ecosystem function in more complex ways that are less centered on human(ist) values. Insisting on the deconstruction of purity and permanence as a source of value within western culture, a feminist posthumanist approach involves moving postindustrial wilderness spaces from margin to center, reading them as lively sites of contestation and co-habitation, sites that demand more robust ethical consideration.

As noted by Kulhavy et al. (1986), “the wilderness areas we have today are not the pristine ‘natural’ communities our forefathers encountered. They are a product of the alterations we have made on them” (2). This recognition punctures notions of wilderness as ‘natural,’ insisting on a version of nature that is not defined in contrast to culture by maintaining that past and surrounding land use frame the conceptualization and management of wilderness spaces. Postindustrial wilderness sites refute the illusion that the ecologies within the wilderness are somehow disconnected from those beyond its boundaries, relieving us of the modernist insistence on wilderness preservation as a way of distinguishing and protecting nature from culture. This is, of course, only ever a fantasy in any context, but what does it mean to address wilderness in these terms? To view wilderness itself as always already enmeshed with anthropogenic influences and processes?

The challenges of postindustrial wilderness management indicate the ways in which wilderness is not a space that can be separated and protected from humans; rather it is a situated process that raises questions about what counts as nature, what counts as threat, and what counts as restoration. The management of wilderness areas on postindustrial sites has inspired a wide range of responses and strategies, situating nature less as a refuge from culture and more as a densely trafficked contact zone between agency imperatives, environmental advocacy, and longleaf ecosystems. Fragmented, postindustrial wilderness areas like UIW might require human input, but this input need not be based solely in utilitarian notions of nature-as-resource. If the goal is to enable the partial recuperation, even flourishing of longleaf pine ecosystems, we would do well to approach the forest through posthumanist frameworks that decenter instrumentalizing ways of apprehending forest ecologies while also refusing a notion of nature defined in contrast to humans/culture.

While the Wilderness Act mandates that wilderness sites “allow natural forces to function freely,” spaces like UIW imply that such “freedom” is fundamentally fictive—a settler fantasy with ongoing



material consequences. The trouble with congressionally-designated wilderness within postindustrial landscapes suggests that wilderness boundaries, while important to supporting ecosystem integrity, restoration, and protection, are as porous as the boundary between nature and culture. UIW is co-produced through ongoing natural-cultural processes, and because human impact is constitutive of the landscape itself, the restoration of ecological processes requires ongoing human input. On UIW there are no pure ‘natural forces’ to leave the wilderness to because there is no pristine, ‘wild,’ nature left—and there hasn’t been for a long time. While much of the world grapples unevenly with this realization, landscapes that have long lacked this functional fantasy have already begun the process of coming to terms with the challenges of postindustrial landscapes, experimenting with messier conceptualizations of nature that can be instructive in cultivating response-ability and environmental ethics on a planet increasingly, indelibly, unevenly impacted by structures of colonialism and capitalism.

Disagreements, misunderstandings, and mistakes in the management of postindustrial wilderness areas offer the potential to encounter the sense of otherness, excess, alterity attributed to the wild and to the wilderness experience in popular discourse and environmental studies,¹³ highlighting how the more-than-human world exceeds humanist ways of knowing and relating. While the logic of resource management situates humans in the forests as masters, managers, and users of the natural world, contentions and complications within management plans on UIW reveal how humans more accurately enter the forest as messmates, companions, unevenly entangled actants becoming-with one another in ongoing acts of relating that involve intense, though uneven, risk to all parties (Haraway, 2008).

At the time of this writing, the creation of wilderness preserves has not yet created the conditions to support the flourishing of longleaf pine ecosystems in Texas.¹⁴ Although wilderness preservation efforts have not protected Texas forests from the destabilizations of late capitalism, the challenges of postindustrial wilderness management offer strategies for rethinking the place of humans in the natural world. Species loss and ecosystem fragmentation on postindustrial sites like UIW suggest how wilderness functions as a humbling process of learning to meet species, account for damage, and cultivate response-ability.

In the working forests of the Pineywoods, even wilderness areas obstinately refuse operative fantasies of wildness, demanding that humans see nature in mottled, fragmented landscapes—sites that bear the marks of human(ist) folly, stands co-produced through ecological processes as well as human (mis)understandings. Staying with the trouble with wilderness on UIW means looking beyond sweeping landscapes that already map onto ideas of sublime nature, expanding our environmental imaginations and ethical considerations to include postindustrial landscapes, fragmented forest ecologies that challenge the notions of nature most central to US culture and politics. Framing UIW through the lens of the plantationocene utterly reworks liberal humanist distinctions between nature and culture, revealing these distinctions to be an operative illusion, an unevenly shared cultural fantasy with material implications. This boundary is transgressed all the time, but allowances are made as long as these transgressions ultimately serve to bolster the belief in an instrumentalist relation to the natural world, where particular humans are understood as the appropriate masters of nature. A posthumanist, feminist materialist approach to human-forest

¹³ See Cronon (1996a) for an influential example from the environmental humanities.

¹⁴ Ecologists highlight the disappearance of indicator species such as frogs and other amphibians as well as keystone species such as the Longleaf Pine and the Red-Cockaded Woodpecker in addition to the loss of ecosystem function, in particular the suppression of fire within fire-dependent forests. See Davis (1996); Barton & Keeton (2018).

entanglements introduces humbler epistemologies and less self-assured configurations of the place of humans within nature, challenging us to sit with the uncertainties of postindustrial wilderness management as an open question, a requirement for staying with the trouble and meeting species in the plantationocene.

The cascading destabilizations of late capitalism demand acknowledgement of the limitations of humanist attempts to know, master, and manage the more-than-human world. Postindustrial wilderness sites complicate common sense approaches to wildness and management, raising questions about how various stakeholders view and value wilderness and how these perspectives emerge from differently situated knowledges of the forest as well as differing notions of nature (Haraway, 1988). As Cronon (1996a) points out, some definitions of nature are more useful, more harmful, more ethical than others. How might we cohabit this landscape in a more responsible, less confident way, given the limitations of western scientific knowledge as well as the irreparable damage inflicted by past land management practices, by industrialization, by settler colonialism? How might we cultivate openness to the uncertainties created by the inability to fully grasp, master, or manage the more-than-human world?

In the United States, wilderness is a central conceptual and legal framework for envisioning multispecies relations beyond humanist instrumentalism *and* a central tool of settler colonialism and industrial capitalism. The troubled legacies of postindustrial wilderness demand a response. Extolling the potential of wilderness to enhance human forms of relating and responding to the more-than-human world, Cronon (1996a) writes, “In reminding us of the world we did not make, wilderness can teach profound feeling of humility and respect as we confront our fellow beings and the earth itself” (23). On a rapidly destabilizing planet, the luxury of cultivating humility through encounters with the wild nature at the heart of U.S. wilderness culture is becoming less imaginable. Thanks to the work of contemporary climate scientists, we are becoming aware that human processes are already deeply enmeshed with ecological processes as anthropogenic patterns unevenly inundate waterways, atmospheres, and ecologies all over the world (Chakrabarty, 2009). In the messy business of surviving, recuperating, and/or flourishing to whatever extent, we might do well to look to landscapes inundated with the strange ghosts of liberal humanist progress, postindustrial wilderness sites like UIW. The questions of postindustrial wilderness management hold many lessons for staying with the trouble and getting on together in the plantationocene. Efforts to think differently about becoming and ethical responsibility make posthumanist theory particularly well-poised to take in these lessons, to learn from these embodied critiques of purity, authority, mastery, and to apply these insights to our theorizations of environmental ethics, of getting on together as co-inhabitants of an unevenly changing world. As asserted by Cronon (1996a), the trouble with wilderness lies in its tendency to perpetuate liberal humanist conceptualizations of nature and culture as well as its inability to imagine a responsible place for humans within the natural world. As demonstrated by Haraway (2016) and Alaimo (2010), the promise of staying with this trouble lies in the potential to instill a respect for working toward partial recuperation and humbler epistemologies. In this context, postindustrial wilderness sites offer crucial lessons for cultivating more ethical considerations of wildness and nature, reminding us that ‘we’ haven’t ever been in control and forcing us to meet each other in more humble, more response-able ways.

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