Joseph Whitson. *Marketing the Wilderness: Outdoor Recreation, Indigenous Activism, and the Battle over Public Lands*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2025. 248 pages. ISBN 978-1-5179-1511-7. $22.95 USD pbk.

In this book, Joseph Whitson offers an incisive and compelling intervention into contemporary debates over public lands, outdoor recreation, and settler colonialism in the United States. At the heart of the book is the concept of "wildernessing," which Whitson uses to describe the narrative, political, and material processes through which lands have been, and continue to be, rendered pristine and unpeopled, and therefore made available as sites for recreational consumption. This is an important conceptual contribution that extends well-known critiques of wilderness as ideology, including those associated with William Cronon, while also giving concentrated attention to how wilderness is continually produced through entanglements of corporate marketing, state policy, recreational desire, and representational media. One of Whitson's more persuasive insights is that wilderness is not simply an idea that has been consistently maintained once it took hold as a settler colonial project. It is, rather, adaptive. It shifts with time. It shifts with changes in conservation policy, Indigenous activism, media technology, and consumer culture, all while staying useful as a settler colonial formation. Accordingly, Whitson extends upon familiar critiques of wilderness discourse by showing how wilderness has been put to work in different ways over time, and how it continues to order both landscapes and public feeling in the present.

The structure of Whitson's book is clear and effective. Between an introduction and conclusion are six substantive chapters, which unfold in a way that is both cumulative and instructive for readers. The first half of the book develops the historical and conceptual foundations of wildernessing. Chapter 1 establishes the political stakes by examining the rhetoric of collective ownership attached to U.S. public lands, a rhetoric made possible, Whitson argues, through the physical and discursive emptying of Indigenous presence and Indigenous counterclaims. Chapters 2 and 3 then trace important shifts in the narrative and representational life of wilderness. In the era of "frontier wilderness," Whitson shows how wilderness was tethered to romanticized forms of Indianness, which were useful to colonial power as they locked Indigenous presence into sanitized, aestheticized settler fantasies of encounter and transformation. "Untrammelled wilderness," by contrast, was (and, to an extent, continues to be) an era of more overt displacement, one in which Indigenous presence is obscured, if not entirely erased, to nurture white recreationists' desire to assume the figure of explorer, protector, and ambassador of untouched nature. The second half of the book – Chapters 4 through 6 – then turn to more contemporary terrain. Here, Whitson examines how wildernessing persists, but is also undone, through social media, corporate branding, land conflicts, and, importantly, Indigenous digital activism. The shift feels a bit abrupt and disjointed but generally works well. It allows Whitson to move the book from critical diagnosis to contestation of wilderness, and from conceptual and ideological genealogy to political possibilities in place, without sacrificing much in terms of overall coherence.

What is especially notable across these chapters is the way wildernessing is theorized as a process rather than a static condition. This framing emphasizes that the point of wilderness is not to preserve any single narrative, ethic, or conception of nature, but rather to preserve the settler colonial and extractive capitalist logics that render land as a site for accumulation and consumption. This is where concepts such as colonial terraforming and the outdoor recreation industrial complex do especially useful work. The former, Whitson uses to explicate how settler colonialism operates to displace Indigenous Peoples and cultivate settler ideals of private property, environmentalism, and cultural landscapes in their place. The latter helps situate outdoor recreation within wider assemblages of corporate retail, hospitality, governance, and environmental management. Whitson is particularly convincing in his assertion that recreation itself functions as an extractive industry on public land, a point that will resonate among readers familiar with the wider critical tourism and critical leisure studies scholarship. To be clear, Whitson positions recreation as a complicit companion of extraction. It is one of the material, political, and ideological conditions that extraction makes possible. At best then, the public land conservation ethos that undergirds the outdoor recreation industrial complex offers only a temporary reprieve from more intensive exploitation. At worst, it further entrenches the very colonial and capitalist structures the industry so often claims to oppose.

Whitson's analysis into these dynamics is empirically rich. He moves readers across a wide range of sites, archives, and media, from Yosemite National Park and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness to Bears Ears National Monument, from outdoor retail catalogues and park advertisements to Instagram campaigns and activist interventions. These examples feel carefully curated and analytically generative, and draw readers deeper into understandings of, for instance, the explorer archetype, clean climbing culture, and the visual tropes of outdoor photography. They show, with plenty of precision, how wilderness is made legible, desirable, and meaningful. The latter chapters that weave in exemplars from Instagram are particularly effective. In these, Whitson demonstrates how outdoor corporations are selling lifestyles, identities, and fantasies of land relation just as much as they are selling products. The explorer figure is central here, and Whitson shows how adventure photography, point-of-view shots, road and trail imagery, gear displays, and intentionally designed nostalgia become part of a wider feedback loop between corporate representation and consumer self-fashioning. The analysis is sharp and readable, and the reproduced images, advertisements, and social media posts that populate the pages make the arguments materially vivid.

Arguably, the book's most significant contribution lies in its insistence that Indigenous Peoples are not simply acted upon by wildernessing. Whitson is deliberate and detailed in illuminating how Indigenous folks also contest it, redirect it, and force it to change. This is where the book's Indigenous environmental justice orientation becomes especially potent and crucial for reconfiguring outdoor recreation. Whitson engages it to map recurrent systems of settler colonial displacement and to uncover fractures, failures, and contestations of its power. Chapter 5 on Bears Ears National Monument initiates an especially insightful analysis. Here, Whitson shows how the creation of Bears Ears emerged from Indigenous activism and Indigenous-centred

political struggle, only for the retail giant Patagonia to campaign against its reduction under the first Trump administration and to reframe the struggle for land in terms compatible with settler recreational and preservationist politics. The result, Whitson argues persuasively, was the sidelining of Indigenous sovereignty claims in favour of a preservation narrative less threatening to settler society. Whitson goes on, however, in the next chapter on Indigenous digital activism, to work through Indigenous- and settler accomplice-led Instagram accounts that depict how social media is being appropriated and deployed in ways that challenge public land discourse, unsettle explorer-centred recreation, and foreground Indigenous sovereignty and resurgence. This chapter, in short, gives the book contemporary political and narrative edge.

Whitson's own reflexive stance is another strength of his project. His methodological discussion is thorough enough and transparent, particularly his account of digital ethnography, social media analysis, and embedded online observation. Equally important is his willingness to situate his own positionality as a white academic and activist, and to do so in a way that doesn't detract from the analytical and empirical plotlines of the text. The conclusion, likewise, is thoughtful and in places quite compelling though perhaps underdeveloped. Rather than merely calling for the abandonment of wilderness as a suspect concept, Whitson asks—cautiously and suggestively—what might follow from its deconstruction. Diversity initiatives that leave settler colonial relations to land intact are shown to be inadequate. So too are visions of post-wilderness futures that fail to reckon with Indigenous sovereignty, land repatriation, and the health and well-being of land itself. The more compelling possibility, for Whitson at least, lies in imagining futures grounded in reciprocity, relationality, and a healthier inclusion of humankind within ecological systems; futures that centre Indigenous-led and decolonial transformations. Here I suspect readers may be left wanting something more tangible and action-oriented than the rather speculative options Whitson lays out in his reposted dialogue with one of his social media followers.

Overall though, I found Whitson's *Marketing the Wilderness* to be a rich, well-researched, and thought-provoking read. I imagine it will be an instructive companion on the desks of scholars and graduate students in Indigenous studies, environmental humanities, tourism and outdoor recreation, political ecology, and related fields. Its principal strength is Whitson's critical diagnosis of the wildernessing process, balanced with careful and convincing insights about justice and social change in public land use, recreation, and outdoor life.

Bryan S. R. Grimwood
Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies
University of Waterloo