Dirtbags and Bougie Boats:
Precarity, Authenticity, and Experiences with Nature among the Young
Middle Class

by

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Abstract:

This thesis explores how members of the young middle class create, maintain, and challenge conceptualizations of authenticity, emotional management, and feelings of precarity through encounters with nature. My participants were young, middle-class white-water kayakers in and around the Ottawa area. However, almost all my participants have travelled around the country and nearby by northern states of America to engage in different white-water runs prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, and most had travelled to three or more countries to engage with experiences with nature or wilderness. Through participation and observation on two white-water runs, as well as group and individual interviews, my research investigated questions like how are interactions with nature understood or experienced when there is the perception of class precarity rather than stability? How are ideas of middle-class professionalism and perfection understood in relation to the casual, earthy, “dirtbag” mentality of kayakers? What are the roles of emotion, emotional regulation, and experience for the young middle class? Finally, how is authenticity within interactions with nature sought and experienced? My research found that the young middle class use experiences with nature in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Rather than simply as an escape, often experiences with nature are used to both challenge and affirm their identity status. However, there exists tension between feelings of authenticity, precarity, and the joy of experiences with nature and the drive towards career success and traditional middle-class values.

Acknowledgements:

This thesis was an exercise in adaptability, resiliency, and a fair amount of grit for both myself as a researcher and my participants. The Covid-19 pandemic changed the way my research was imagined, as well as the ways my participants lived their lives during the two years of this project. For my participants choice to be open, friendly, and inviting during this time of uncertainty, I am forever thankful.

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Chapter 1: Context and Methodologies

This thesis explores how members of the young middle class create, maintain, and challenge conceptualizations of authenticity, emotional management, and feelings of precarity through encounters with nature. My ethnographic research focused on members of the young middle class, primarily between the ages of 20-29, who actively engage in encounters with nature through experiences such as kayaking, mountain biking, and rock climbing. My participants were primarily white-water kayakers in and around the Ottawa area. Through participation in two white-water runs and group and individual interviews, my research investigated questions like how are interactions with nature understood or experienced when there is the perception of class precarity rather than stability? How are ideas of middle-class professionalism and perfection understood in relation to kayakers' more casual, earthy, “dirtbag” mentality? What are the roles of emotion, emotional regulation, and experience for the young middle class during experiences with nature? Finally, how is authenticity within interactions with nature sought and experienced?

Older literature emphasizes the importance of encounters with nature and wild spaces; It demonstrates that nature can offer emotional and ideological space for the tensions within identity expectations to be projected onto and thus explored and negotiated.¹ However, there is a notable gap in literature exploring the young middle class in the 21st century who face much higher economic and ecological precarity levels than previous generations. While older literature often theorized that nature is used as an escape or balm for the discontents of urban life for the

¹ Nash, Roderick Frazier, and Char Miller. *Wilderness and the American Mind: Fifth Edition*. (Yale University Press, 2015.)

middle-class, it rarely investigates how experiences with nature can challenge, negotiate, or affirm ideas of class. With the reality that the environment will not exist in the same way for the young middle class as it did in previous generations, seeking outdoor experiences with nature represent an expression of this generation's search for identity during a time of ecological, economic, and class precarity. Additionally, the Covid-19 Pandemic has emphasized and worsened economic and social feelings of precarity globally and stressed the importance of encounters with nature for this community.

The Covid-19 Pandemic and Experiences with Nature

When I started writing this thesis in the fall of 2019, my perception of how it would unfold was very different. I had a clear plan, methods, and a core group of participants I was planning to study. However, by the spring of 2020, it became clear that the Covid-19 Pandemic was global, severe, and would impact almost all sectors of daily life. Initially, my participants were chosen in part due to the level at which they sought out these experiences with nature and wild spaces, namely, through travel and the pursuit of unique and new experiences with nature through activities like white-water kayaking, rock climbing, mountain biking, and hiking. Unfortunately, restrictions in Canada during the pandemic almost completely prevented travel, even within the province, which impacted how my participants could engage with nature and experience it. Not only did the restrictions impact my research and my participants, but it also added additional layers of complexity to how we value, define, and experience encounters with nature: however, not in the ways I had first assumed. While this thesis is not intended to be a thesis that explores the pandemic's impact on the young middle class or their experiences with nature, it has had an impact.

The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the impression of safety, freedom, and authenticity of experience outdoors – where masks are not required, and social distancing can be relaxed. Since the beginning the pandemic, numerous articles have been published describing how the pandemic highlights a "nature deficit." Deena Shaffer,² a Sociology Instructor at Ryerson University, described the difficulty people are feeling with pandemic restrictions, highlighting the increasing time people are forced to spend inside, especially those in tightly packed urban environments. This issue is further emphasized in Canada, where the pandemic has combined with winter to keep people further isolated indoors. In an article for The Washington Post, Digfleder³ noted how there has been an increase in participation at national and local parks and in activities like car camping in response to the pandemic. Furthermore, Digfleder wrote that people also seem to be engaging with and experiencing nature more deeply than before the pandemic. For example, as of December 2020, iNaturalist, an app that citizen-scientists use to identify wild flora and fauna, saw a 62 percent jump in users and a 60 percent increase in observations in 2020 compared to the year before. CBC⁴ noted a similar trend in Ontario, with summer park and camping passes having sold out in February, even spawning a 'black market' for resold passes. This suggests different pressures and imagining of what nature and interactions with nature can constitute, particularly with the increased pressures of a pandemic, then might have been imagined previously.

2 Deena Shaffer. "Here's Why You're Craving the Outdoors so Much during the Coronavirus Lockdown." (The Conversation, January 14, 2021.)

3 Sadie Dingfelder. "The Isolation of the Pandemic Caused Her to Form a New and Intense Relationship to Nature. She Was Hardly Alone." (The Washington Post. WP Company, December 28, 2020.)

4 Colin Butler. "Sick of Pandemic Lockdowns, Eager Campers Flood Ontario Park-Reservation Sites" (CBCnews. CBC/Radio Canada, February 27, 2021.)

Expectations and Methodology:

In my view, any ethnography would be lacking if it did not describe the researcher's positionality and motivation, if only briefly. I am a member of the young middle class, have experienced class precarity, and have 'fallen' from middle-class to working-class, to working poor and back. These experiences put me in the position of intimately understanding the 'fear of falling'⁵ that permeates the middle-class ideology, particularly during the increased strain of a global pandemic and environmental change. Additionally, I have and continue to participate in experiences with nature as a central part of my life and describe it as integral to who I am. While participating in these activities, I met many people who shared similar ideologies and drives towards these nature experiences. Within these experiences rose the questions I have postulated in this thesis and led to the decision to focus on active participation in these activities to understand the importance of the 'experience' of nature.

With that in mind, my fieldwork took part in two sections. The first was individual or small group interviews that took place on the water or shore. I spent several hours during that time learning proper kayak terminology, techniques and learning about the gear they used, in addition to asking more structured questions about their experiences with nature, their view of what it means to be middle-class, and the feelings of precarity they recounted. Then, over several days, I watched the group kayak and formulated my questions based on themes my participants raised throughout our conversations. I strove to be an active participant in the experience with nature with my participants' environment, catered to my level of skill, to better understand the

⁵ Katherine S. Newman. *Falling from Grace: The experience of downward mobility in the American middle-class*. (Free Press, 1988)

lived experiences and implications on the valuation of those experiences with the environment.⁶ The next part of my fieldwork was a day trip with thirteen of my participants to one of their more difficult kayaking runs at Hog's Back Falls in Ottawa. Finally, a few weeks later, I went on a "closing" run with five of my participants during a smaller run, as the last one before several of them left for school or travel.

Judith Okely's⁷ conceptualization of the role of the ethnographer's body within the fieldwork as vital to the construction of the field itself was essential to the ways I entered and interacted with my participants and my field site. Within her text, Okely raised the idea that theory is embedded within fieldwork through the ethnographer's participation in shared labour – either physically through bodily practice or social such as through shared emotions or stories – which is fundamental to my approach to this research site. Shared labour, whether that is through experiencing the physical ways my participants interacted with the environment – such as paddle-boarding, rock climbing, or meditating in nature, or the emotional labour – such as sharing stories, discussing conflicting worldviews, or exploring the intersection of economics, class, and emotions which might exist to varying degrees – was a fundamental aspect to how I constructed my field site. Furthermore, Okely's emphasis on bodily knowledge and the ethnographer as a site of embodied theory was fundamental to situating my research subjects within larger frameworks of coming of age, feelings of precarity, and emotional connection to experiences with nature.

⁶ For a description of ethnographic methods involving active participation, see Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography Images, Media, and Representation in Research*. (SAGE, 2007).

⁷ Judith Okely. *Anthropological Practice: Fieldwork and the Ethnographic Method*. (Bloomsbury Publishing UK, 2013).

My Participants:

My ethnographic research focused on members of the young middle class, primarily between the ages of 20-29, who actively engage in encounters with nature through experiences with nature and wilderness encounters. My participants were all white-water kayakers in and around the Ottawa area. However, almost all my participants had travelled around the country and nearby by northern states of America to engage in different white-water runs prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, and most had travelled to three or more countries to engage with experiences with nature or wilderness. Many of my participants also gathered to rock climb, mountain bike, or hike; however, the kayaking community to which they belonged acted as a nexus for their experiences with nature and this community. While many of them had come to care and identify as environmentalists during the pandemic, not all of them had a deeper political connection to the environment.

In J. Dwight Hines⁸ article, "In Pursuit of Experience," Hines studied members of what he called the Post-Industrial Middle-Class or the 'leisure class,' which I will expand on later. This group is composed of individuals who perform mental labour in relatively well-paid, white-collar professions such as medicine, teaching, journalism, business administration, and law. This also fits many of my participants; however, in Hines ethnographic research, these are people within the middle-class who move, without the incentive of a job or family, to pursue nature experiences and adventure tourism activities more regularly. While my participants used their experiences with nature in various ways, many of them did not have the urge or capabilities to leave their white-collar jobs to pursue experiences with nature full-time. In this way, they

⁸ J Dwight Hines. "In Pursuit of Experience: The Postindustrial Gentrification of the Rural American West." (2010)

deviate from older literature which often suggests that experiences with nature act as a gateway to challenge traditional middle-class lifestyles in favour of a more nomadic existence.

Furthermore, my participants are all highly educated, work middle-class jobs or jobs in service industries that require the employment of classically middle-class imaginings⁹. I chose these participants for several reasons: they form a tight-knit community within their adventure and wilderness experiences; there are a higher number of women in this particular group than in other outdoor adventure activities, which I believe presents a more robust picture of the young middle class's motivation; and these participants were primarily raised with traditionally middle-class ideologies of what it means to be successful, to be authentically motivated, and to connect and control your emotions. During my research, I conducted over a dozen semi-formal group interviews and six more formal individual interviews with group members. As a generation that already has the perception of being shallow and concerned more with the image of experience than reality, questions of authenticity, individualism, freedom, and identity abound within the young middle class. Some of the significant themes to arise from my participants during my interviews and during my ethnographic fieldwork were surrounding ideas of emotional control, authenticity, freedom, community, cultural capital, and the identity valuation of experiences with nature.

What separates this section of the middle-class from the participants I interviewed is that in Hines' ethnography, it is clear that many of his participants settled into traditional middle-class roles – such as marrying and working stable, white-collar jobs before they decided to

⁹ See Hochschild 2012; and Fletcher 2014

pursue experiences with nature. The contemporary young middle-class face increasing and unprecedented levels of environmental precarity, which means that the opportunity to 'get back to nature' might not exist in the same ways after this generation has settled into careers and families. Previous studies on the middle-class and interactions with nature often illustrate interactions with nature as an escape from the expectations of careers, and to an extent, families. They depict a sort of escape into nature as a counter push to exert control and solidify identity. While this is still a very present motivation, this is complicated for the young middle class because the nature they seek to escape to very well might not exist in the same ways while they pursue careers. Environmental events such as the mass Amazon, Australian, and California wildfires within a year of each other have demonstrated the increasing precarity of the environment, and there is a greater urgency to experience nature now. To gain experiences that might be drastically altered by environmental change caused precarity—for example, whale watching in Nova Scotia or hiking through an old-growth forest in British Columbia. Alternatively, as my participants were hyper-aware, privatization and environmental degradation are an increasing threat to the countries (and worlds) water systems, including the Ottawa River, where my research took place. The reality is that those experiences might not be accessible in five, ten, or fifteen years.

In short, my research explores questions such as: what drives young people to gather experiences? What roles do experiences with nature play in identity creation for this group, particularly in narratives of authenticity? How are perceptions of class instability and environmental precarity understood and negotiated? How are ideas of middle-class professionalism and perfection understood in relation to kayakers' casual, earthy, “dirtbag”

mentality? What are the roles of emotion, emotional regulation, and the consumption of experience for the young middle class? How is authenticity within interactions with nature sought and experienced? How has the Covid-19 pandemic interrupted, pushed, or pulled people towards interactions with nature? How do assumptions of class and class practices play in young middle-class' participation in experiences with nature?

Chapter 2: Middle-Class Ideologies of Nature and the Valuation of Experience

"Far from being the one place on Earth that stands apart from humanity, [nature] is quite profoundly a human creation – The creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history."¹⁰

William Cronon in forward to Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*

Shifts in the Construction of Nature

One of the issues in situating the meaning of experiences with nature is understanding how cultural perceptions of nature, emotions, and class shape our ideological understanding of the importance of those experiences. For the participants in my research, experiences with nature represented different things, but a common theme throughout them all was that nature felt like an authentic and 'real' place for them. Gathering experiences in nature was a way to both individually and collectively negotiate and define authenticity and freedom, challenge perceptions of class and class precarity, create space to experience and manage emotions, and find community and unity during a time of perceived unease – socially and environmentally. However, the meanings attributed to experiences in nature are not universal.

On a scientific level, the importance of human-nature interactions on mental, physical, and emotional health is well documented. One study, spanning nearly two decades by Alcock, White, Wheeler, Fleming, and Depledge¹¹ found that proximity and interactions with nature are

¹⁰ See Nash and Miller. *Wilderness and the American Mind*: (2015).

¹¹ Ian Alcock, Mathew P. White, Benedict W. Wheeler, Lora E. Fleming, and Michael H. Depledge. "Longitudinal Effects on Mental Health of Moving to Greener and Less Green Urban Areas." (2014)

vital to people's well-being and happiness, rivalling the importance of marriage and jobs to everyday life. Their study found that those who engaged with nature routinely rated themselves as having better mental and emotional health and, in most cases, physical health as well. This was further confirmed by Keniger¹² and her colleagues, who released a paper in 2013 which explored the benefits of intimate relationships with nature on human health. Intimate relationships were defined as people who spend time in nature or did nature activities intentionally. Keniger and her team demonstrate the mounting empirical evidence that interacting with nature delivers a range of measurable human benefits, including but not limited to positive effects on physical health, psychological well-being, cognitive ability, and social cohesion¹³. They argued that humans previously had an intimate relationship with nature throughout history, most obviously depending on it for subsistence and production. As modern societies emerged and slowly moved from rural to urban areas, industrialization freed many people from reliance on direct consumptive interactions with nature. They track a shift in society, where people-nature interactions moved from direct consumption and exploitation to more mutualistic relationships. People actively sought out interactions with nature for recreation and enjoyment rather than for its productive value. While this is not true in every area or even for every class, it shows that interacting with nature can have personal and emotional value for people's quality of life. The study specifically pointed to the importance of interactions with nature to middle-class people who often have the economic freedom and free time to spend their leisure time in nature.

However, scientific benefits aside, the perception of nature, or wilderness, has undergone a dramatic shift in the last century, particularly in the ideological perception of what constitutes

¹² Lucy E Keniger, Kevin J. Gaston, Katherine N. Irvine, and Richard A. Fuller. "What are the Benefits of Interacting with Nature?" (2013)

¹³ Keniger, et. al.

nature and what that nature represents in North American culture. Nature has not always been viewed in a positive light; traditionally, it has been viewed as a place to be "feared, fought, and flattened." Or nature has been viewed as a resource to be used while simultaneously a danger to be mitigated, controlled, and managed. In his book Wilderness and the American Mind,¹⁴ Roderick Nash tracks the ideological shift that nature has gone through in the imagination and culture of North Americans. Specifically, Nash explored the religious and colonial history of how nature came to be 'nature' and the ideological shifts it created as a result. Colonialism brought ideas of control, domination, and development, and for centuries the land, nature, wilderness, or however else it was defined was a place to be civilized, altered, and utilized for its resources. Furthermore, wilderness, or nature, was viewed as a barrier to expansion and development, which was seen as the bringer of safety and progress. Nash argued that as the land became more settled, as class structures and urbanization strengthened during the industrial revolution and into the late 20th century, nature's conceptualization also changed, particularly within the middle-class.

Within the literature, Nash's text made significant contributions to ideas of wilderness, including the way that nature came to be viewed as an escape from regular or 'modern' life. He argued that, alongside the more significant conceptual shift that occurred after active processes of colonialism and industrialization within North America, urban rather than rural living encouraged an interest in nature. He argued that nature came to represent, particularly within the urban middle-class, a place of perceived freedom from societal bonds and the reality of urban existence. Ideologically, nature came to be valued for the feelings it produced in the observer,¹⁵

¹⁴ Nash and Miller.

¹⁵ Nash and Miller.

namely feelings of freedom, authenticity, awe, and the more affectual feelings it produced in the body. As cultural and economic needs shifted, the perspective and imagination of nature changed to reflect the wild as 'sublime,' cleansing, restorative, rather than the older, colonial-based understandings of nature as a resource to be used and exploited.

Consequently, nature in this understanding came to represent a place one went to rather than where one lives, and ideologically it became a site of leisure. Nature became a place where one went to relax, gain clarity, or play at a simpler life, without the burden of having to survive. In this vein, Nash argued that experiences with nature allowed social and cultural performances to be practiced, challenged, and reaffirmed. For the white middle-class, who had the safety, leisure, and economic ability to have encounters with nature not be a necessity – such as through agriculture or manual labour – experiences with nature and the wild underwent a cultural shift. Thus, nature became a place you *go*, as opposed to a place you *live*. It became representative for the middle-class as a place of leisure, expansion, peace, and in many ways, authenticity.

In the introduction of Nash's text, William Cronon wrote, "What we mean when we use the word "nature" said as much about ourselves as about the things we label with that word." What this indicates is twofold: first, that the way nature is conceptualized and our interactions with it is socially, culturally, and time-specific; and second, that the experiences had in nature are performative in some way. 'Getting back to nature' became something the middle-class did to shake off daily life struggles as a class defined by its mental labourers. In this way, Nash laid the groundwork within the literature to understand some of the middle-class's motivation to have experiences with nature and adventure activities.

Conceptualizations of Experience and Authenticity

The ways we view and understand nature are individual, cultural, and, more notably, fluctuating. Therefore, the way we conceptualize nature and the meanings we attribute to those experiences depend on class, gender, and other identity factors. For the middle-class, experiences with nature can represent determination, independence, and adventure, which work reproduce and distort attributes valued within middle-class cosmologies that often favour the individual. Nash argued that nature and wilderness spaces represent a place of ideological imaginings of freedom, individuality, authenticity, and experience to be practiced and projected upon, which is connected to how nature has come to stand in as in opposition to urbaness, civilization, and in many ways, the middle-class lifestyle of the generations before us. Vital to understanding how experiences with nature are conceptualized is also understanding what the young middle class view as authentic or a true experience with nature. The literature echoes what my participants describe, which is a sometimes-sharp delineation between the ‘real’ or authentic experiences had with nature, and the artificiality, or act, of work or social lives. For example, a day trip to the park with your children might not be understood or deemed a ‘real’ or authentic experience with nature; but backpacking through a national park might be viewed as a genuine nature experience.

According to Robert Fletcher¹⁶ in his text Romancing the Wild, part of what defines authentic experiences with nature is the idea of active participation and overcoming challenges which are often a mark of positive attributes valued in broader society. This is broadly connected to the middle-class imaginary, which urges independence, self-sufficiency, discipline, education,

¹⁶ Fletcher, Robert. *Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism*. (Duke University Press, 2014).

and motivation. In this way, these experiences seem to act as a way to both challenge and reaffirm middle-classness: emotional mastery, discipline, and independence are explored, but in an 'unproductive' way. Or rather, in a way that is not economically beneficial and requires a more significant emphasis on the body rather than the mind. Physical labour is active, but experiences rather than tangible commodities are consumed. Physical skills are gained that are not directly translated to middle-class professions, but valued attributes are reaffirmed. Characteristics such as bravery, individualism, productivity, perseverance, and specified knowledge appeal to both the middle-class mindset and the ethos behind experiences with nature or wilderness. Therefore, experiences with nature provide a fertile ground to play, perform, and challenge class and identity issues.

Fletcher¹⁷ argued that experiences with nature require the human body itself to be a site of accumulation by selling experiences and the feelings they evoke, which are inherently transitory and must be 'purchased' or experienced again. As in the accumulation of goods, the experience of emotion offers an experience that can be leveraged as cultural capital. Such as through conquering fear, one can become 'brave' during experiences with nature. In this way, he draws a connection to the ways that those experiences (adventures) offer a "controlled" (i.e. intentionally sought after) emotional response that people can use to solidify traits sought after in the middle-class imaginary – such as discipline, seriousness, productivity, etcetera. Those in the middle-class seem to be especially drawn to the emotions and experiences created within those interactions. However, in this understanding of the accumulation of experience, both the collection of experiences and the emotions had during those experiences produce value for the

17 See Fletcher. (2014)

participants. Therefore, these encounters need to be collected and skills tested repeatedly to hold value outside the individual. By this, I mean that during encounters with nature, one cannot be brave unless they experience and overcome fear, and for bravery to be valued socially, it often must be tested. So, in essence, one must continue to gather experiences to feel and test those emotions, and in doing so, value is created, and experiences can be further accumulated.

During my ethnographic research with my participants, understanding how experiences with nature are conceptualized, valued and how authentic experiences were defined was vital to gaining insight into why they seek to participate in activities like white-water kayaking. On the water, it became clear that while the accumulation of experience was deeply valued, sharing the experiences and emotions felt there encouraged my participants to continue to kayak and seek out more experiences. To be authentic in experiences with nature, repetition, skill and to some extent, exclusivity seems to be required, which is only possible by gathering more experiences. In doing so, they strengthened their positive attributes and formed deep and complicated relationships to those experiences.

Chapter 3: A Day on the Water

Broads, Boats, Booties

On an early Saturday morning in June, I found myself packing my watertight Pelican case with my camera, keys, and a more recent addition, a face mask. I dressed in water-resistant hiking pants over a swimsuit I had not worn in nearly two years before the Covid-19 pandemic, a t-shirt, and a sweater. I tossed my water shoes in my bag, throwing on my runners just in case. I tried to plan how to beat the chill and be prepared to get in a much smaller kayak than I was used to. As part of my ethnographic research, I had been invited by a friend to attend, observe, and where my limited skill allowed, participate in a day trip on one of the local Ottawa River runs with a group of young, primarily middle-class white-water kayakers. My previous research for my Honors thesis explored the tension within relationships with nature in British Columbia and its impact on people's connection to the environment as perceived from host communities and nature tourists' perspectives. Within that, the importance that both communities and ecotourists placed on interactions with nature was emphasized.

By 5 am, I was ready to meet my friend Abby at the pick-up spot. I met Abby in the first year of university, and we quickly bonded over our love of the outdoors and years spend in gymnastics as children. Abby is a woman who grew up in a middle-class, culturally Jewish family. Both of her parents emigrated from Argentina to the United States, where she and her brother were born, quickly moving to Canada. Abby described herself as clearly not fitting in during her childhood, and she was often critiqued as too loud, opinionated, and brash. After sustaining a severe break and dislocation of her hip when she was 15, her promising gymnastics

career was cut short. After her recovery, Abby began working at fifteen to meet her parents' requirement to match their university tuition savings. While Abby had always been active, it was while working as a lifeguard for the next six years that she began to solidify her love of the outdoors in a meaningful way. During this time, she finished high school and started university in Global and International Affairs, focusing on law. During her time at university and through connections made as a lifeguard, Abby devoted most of her free time to experiences in nature. Through hiking, swimming, paddle boarding, rock climbing, and eventually, she was kayaking recreationally. When she began dating someone in her second year, a member of the Carleton University Kayaking Club (CUKC), she quickly found a passion for white-water kayaking and accompanying him on several excursions. When she and her boyfriend broke up, her boyfriend left the community, continuing for the rest of her university career.

A theme I noticed, particularly among the women in the community, was that their entrance into the white-water kayaking was often through a friend, or more commonly, a male partner. There are several reasons for this within the literature, and they boil down to accessibility. Not only is the sport expensive, but it is also one that heavily relies on community and interpersonal trust. As already discussed, a barrier to female participation in the outdoors is safety concerns. Accompanying a male partner or a friend served to provide a safety net against assault and help mitigate the inherent risk in a sport as dangerous as white-water kayaking, ensuring that someone was accountable for your safety and whereabouts during runs. In this particular community, women would often come into the group as the plus one of a partner and outlast them. This was, in part, the reason for the high retention rate of all members, but especially women. The more women that joined, the safer women felt in joining. Abby referred

to this process as being indoctrinated into the dirtbag cult. In many ways, this seemed to be a shared feeling within the group. Several of the women in the community referred to the subgroup of women as the “Broads, Boats, and Booties” gang – referring to the high number of women in the group and the river shoes they all wore during their excursions. By Abby's admission, kayaking was difficult for her, and she struggled as a former gymnast with how steep the learning curve was with this sport. While she had grown up with a family which valued time spend in nature, she did not play sports, boat, or otherwise recreationally kayak. When she joined, she had an uphill fight to be skilled enough to join the group on their longer weekend excursions. She expressed how frustrated she felt when she had to sit out the more challenging runs. Despite this, Abby said that she always felt included in the group. She said that there was always space for different skill levels, and she continued to come because of her inclusion. Not only were there more women in this group than in other outdoor activities, but she also valued the “mermaid” time, as she called it. Or the time spent between runs sitting, often drinking, on rocks while you watched others make the runs.

Kayaking quickly became more than a hobby for her, she recounted. It became a way to manage school and work stress and join the community and make friends. However, the more time she devoted to kayaking, the more her family disapproved. Abby argued that through her experiences with travel, outdoor sports, and her passion for kayaking, she had set herself apart from her family in what she valued.¹⁸ Her father, after completing his mandatory military service in Argentina, moved to the United States and later Canada with his wife, where he

¹⁸ See Fletcher, "Living on the edge: The appeal of risk sports for the professional middle-class." (2008).

instilled a dogged work ethic into his two children, priding himself on his ability to move “up and out, always up and out.” Having been raised middle-class, Abby's mother often pressured Abby to take her career seriously and not get distracted by things she viewed as both time and money drains. Abby was primarily able to manage the tension between kayaking, work, school, and her family for the first year; however, at the end of her 3rd year of university and in the middle of her 2nd year in the group, she suffered a concussion on the strangely named run, Babyface. Despite being known as a friendly park and play spot, Abby hit an obstacle while navigating a hole, overcorrected, went under, and could not right herself. Cole, seeing the problem, reacted quickly and was able to paddle out to her, situate her through the rapids, and set her out of the hole. However, he lost his paddle and was forced to swim them back to shore.

The fall out from the injury eventually forced Abby to take a year off university and recover. Despite this, and much against her family’s urgings, Abby continued with the group outside of CUKC and continued improving and practicing her skills within the community. Over the next two years, she graduated with an honour’s degree, and she successfully applied to law school, with a focus on environmental law. She left her job as a lifeguard and began working part-time in a government job. Despite the pandemic requiring online law school classes, a commute from Ottawa to New York on occasion, and multiple failed attempts to move from Canada to the United States during a pandemic, Abby continued to kayak every weekend possible, with plans to commute back after her move to continue kayaking with this community. While part of that drive was because of the quality of runs available in Ottawa, a larger reason was that she wanted to retain the portion of her life where she felt she could be less cerebral and less emotionally contained.

Abby represents a push away from her family's more traditional middle-class lifestyle with her devotion to kayaking and experiences with nature, which illustrated the process of negotiation and tension within our generation's search for authenticity and identity. While she, like her family, was highly educated, she recounted feeling out of place within the educational system and within the more traditionally middle-class jobs, she held. However, despite this, she described herself as incredibly passionate and motivated during university and within her first and second year of law school, and her grades reflect that. In many ways, Abby is similar to how Fletcher¹⁹ understands the middle-class model of ecotourism and wilderness experiences to look in his text Romancing the Wild, with a few key differences. Abby is younger than most of Fletcher's participants; her gender is a key factor in how she chose to identify and interact within nature spaces. She both worked and attended university while also pursuing outdoor experiences. Her gender and work priorities are significant to how she interacted with nature and could impact her perceptions and ideologies. Within much of the older literature, the younger middle-class is often shown to drastically separate from the middle-class lifestyle, choose more nomadic lifestyles, settle into the trajectory of work and family that is often expected, and maybe have casual and recreational experiences in nature. By their admission, the young middle class within my research is desperate to find a balance of both. Abby, in particular, was adamant about not losing either part of herself. Of being a committed and motivated law school student, while also spending most of her free time and weekends on runs, researching equipment, and improving her skills. After finishing a summer semester, Abby went on a three-week trip from Ottawa to Jasper National Park in Alberta to kayak, rock climb, and hike before she officially moved to the United

¹⁹ Fletcher. (2014)

States. Instead of being one last run before settling into law school, it was one of five major trips planned with other community members to continue to have these experiences in nature.

When I got to the pick-up spot, I found Abby and her friend Cole already there, waiting beside a large red SUV with two small white-water kayaks on top and a paddleboard tied down somewhat unsteadily on the trunk. Cole was a very tall man, well over 6'3 and for a moment, I wondered how he fit his long legs in his kayak. Unlike recreational kayaks, which can get up to fourteen feet, white-water kayaks typically range from four-nine feet and are meant to move down fast-moving rocky or otherwise obstacle-filled courses. There are two types of white-water kayaks, playboats (or river runners as they are sometimes called) and creekboats, I was informed. Playboats, which were the most common boat during my research, is the shortest white-water kayaks. They have a scooped bow and blunt stern, making them highly maneuverable, which is the goal in rough, high water like what was often experienced on the bigger runs of the Ottawa River. By utilizing the speed gained by travelling through rapids, playboats perform technical tricks in a sport known as rodeo boating or freestyle boating. Playboats are highly responsive, and their hulls are very resistant to damage from things like rocks, logs, or other barriers or terrain. They excel at navigating steep, rocky waters that have fast-flowing water. However, they are smaller and narrower, and while all white-water kayaks are highly customizable, they present more challenges for taller or heavier boaters.

In addition, as they are intended to move and move fast, playboats are inherently unstable, and their scooped bow makes them slow in open water where they are not experiencing the side and rear push of water to the same extent. Creekboats, on the other hand, are longer and

have more capacity than a playboat. They are used to run narrow, low-volume waterways, and due to their stability, creekboats are more multi-purpose. They can be used on larger rivers with more open water. Their greater volume allows them to navigate the flatter stretches, and their stability will facilitate the boater's ability to negotiate rapids and accommodate larger bodies. Creekboats are designed to run tighter, steeper, and more technical white-water, while playboats are designed for down-river speed, catching eddies, and the occasional surf on a green wave.

Sooner than expected, we were loaded and ready to pick up Veronica and Sarah with three more boaters. On the way, I learned more about the demographic of the group, how they came to join, and some rather colourful recounting of intergroup romance, fighting, and fails. As they spoke, I was struck by the number of women in the group, even knowing that this was not the entire community that would show up for some of the longer or more difficult outings. From my understanding, this specific kayaking community was an amalgamation of structural and social components. As a result, they had a much higher retention rate within the group than other kayaking communities might.

The community was roughly twenty-five people of varying commitments to the sport of kayaking, relatively evenly split among gender and all within the young middle class group. The sheer number of women who were active members of this group is one thing that helps to set this specific community apart from both other nature sports and activities groups and also from many other kayaking communities. Even in the smaller group that I participated in, there were seven women and six men. While there were more men in the larger group, over a third were women. Of the women there, Veronica, Abby, Torri, Jennifer, Samantha, Sarah, and Phoebe had been a

part of the group for at least two years, with Jennifer, Samantha, and Torri having been there the longest at 5 and 7 years, respectively.

Statistically, women have a lower participation rate in outdoor sports and activities. There are several reasons for this; a brief literature review of women and interactions with nature and wilderness demonstrate women's absence. Karen Warren's²⁰ article on Gender and the Outdoors illustrates some of the barriers to participation that women face in activities, such as white-water kayaking. Warren's research explored gender in outdoor studies and how evidence of the male-dominated nature of outdoor activities persists despite advances by women and girls in outdoor participation²¹. Her article illustrates how often women were simply left out of conversations on the valuation of nature within the middle-class. She provides ample reasons why the demographic who participates in encounters with nature might be skewed towards men. The participants felt many of those reasons in my research, particularly those who did not boat or play at a high level for competitive sports, such as Sarah and Veronica.

In the last thirty years, the reasoning for the absence of women in nature and adventure experiences was generally attributed to the difference in socialization between boys and girls; Particularly in the middle-class, where gendered expectations can often be strong. However, Warren argues that while gender role socialization continues to be a factor in unequal power relationships in outdoor programs and leadership positions for adult women, there is a more extensive feminist critique of the teaching and learning practices that are upheld in wilderness

20 Karen Warren. "Gender in Outdoor Studies." in *Routledge International Handbook of Outdoor Studies*. (2016) pg. 360-364.

21 Warren. Pg. 360

activities that point to the ideologies of outdoor activities as male-centred and gender-privileged. Warren references one study which analyzed popular outdoor magazines, which concluded that women were portrayed in three main ways: as engaging in less physically or time-intensive activities, as followers rather than leaders, and as escaping motherhood or as the instigators of family bonding time outside. By and large, other experiences of women and girls, particularly racialized women, were invisibilized. Warren directly connects this back to the idea of prescribed gender roles, arguing that prescribed gender roles focus on rugged individualism for men and boys. For women, outdoor activities often emphasized traditional feminine traits such as being a follower, engaging in less rigorous sports, or binding the family together. Additionally, women who did engage in those sports were viewed as “superwomen”²² or far outside the norm.

This is congruent with what Warren and several other authors such as Liz Newberry²³ and Tonia Gray²⁴ argue that gendered messages about the outdoor experience impact participation and the visibility of women in nature participation. It is important to note here that while many within my ethnography were white, several were not, and additionally, the sexual orientations of the group were widespread. Warren specifically argued that typical feminine traits are defined in opposition to many of the characteristics valued in outdoor activities²⁵. Traits such as bravery, boldness, a certain level of selfishness that goes with self-sufficiency, and individualism, are all traits that are expected in most adventure sports or nature experiences. In addition, the ability to push past fear and manage negative emotions is highly valued and

22 Warren. Pg. 361-162

23 Liz Newberry. "Hegemonic gender identity and Outward Bound: Resistance and re-inscription?." *Women in Sport & Physical Activity Journal* 13, no. 1 (2004): 36-50.

24 Tonia Gray, Christine Norton, Joelle Breault-Hood, Beth Christie, and Nicole Taylor. "Curating a Public Self: Exploring Social Media Images of Women in the Outdoors." (*Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*. 2018): pg. 153-170.

25 Warren. Pg. 364

expected within these activities. However, they are also generally discouraged in women, and this was a barrier mentioned for several of my female participants. White-water kayaking is a dangerous activity, and the culture encourages not only bravery but also a great deal of ego, forcefulness, and in the linguistic style of paddlers, the “dirtbag” personality trait. Or a combination of easy-going personality, level-headed practicality, ego, bravery, opportunism, and a willingness to get dirty, banged up, and injured. The difference between women’s and men’s participation is particularly relevant when looking at how members of the young middle class in this community challenge and negotiate ideas and class and identity within the broader feelings of precarity they face.

Warren also connects these ideas to the concept of individual agency versus social agency and the broader meaning of who is allowed to participate in nature activities and whose participation is viewed as valuable. While individual agency allows many women to enjoy the outdoor adventures they desire, social meanings and conditions continue to follow women into both practices and experiences in the wilderness. This was an experience that several of my female participants cited. For example, Phoebe recounted a story of a run she and several group members in New York during a Festival. Along with five other women from the Ottawa Valley, she went down with a few male friends to run several rapids and, more generally, to connect and have fun. While there, they noticed that there were very few women. One of the few women there commented that she had never seen so many women on a run. She only knew of one or two other women in her area that were regulars to the sport. She was astounded to know that Phoebe was one of the newer female members of her group and routinely went on runs of fifteen women.

saying that, “well, where I’m from, we have like three women in the country that I know of who paddle.”

While this was obviously an exaggeration, the number of women in this kayaking community played a vital role in the group's retention and signaled the identity valuation of being a woman who kayaks in this community. A solid portion of the group, roughly half, had been members of CUKC prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. While many had graduated five or more years ago, the club had three functions for this specific community: it created connections and formed the initial group together; it made the financial aspect of kayaking (cost of the boat, paddles, safety gear, and vehicle equipment) more accessible and attainable; and provided a structured organizational system of people and safety procedures that the group has continued to use outside of the structure of the original university club. A white-water kayak, plus the necessary gear like a dry suit, kayak skirt, helmet, paddles, and booties, will set you back a minimum of \$1500 at the cheapest end of the spectrum. As a result, many of my participants still referred to themselves as part of the Carleton kayaking community, despite no longer being affiliated with it.

As a part of CUKC, kayaking had also been made more accessible to women. Veronica, Abby, and Sarah, some of the youngest women in the group, also stressed how vital CUKC had been to make them feel welcome to the community, but more importantly, safe in what is inherently a dangerous sport. Something echoed in the literature about women, particularly young, middle-class women, is the inherent fear of assault or harassment by men when they enter into experiences with nature or wilderness activities. Warren stresses that the central barriers to

female participation in outdoor activities are gender role socialization, family obligations, financial constraints, sexual harassment, fear, or lack of safe companionship.²⁶ She notes that female-only trips and activities are essential for female participants to negotiate barriers to the outdoors. CUKC, due to its position and funding as a university club, naturally attracted more women than in the broader kayaking community. This allowed a higher number of middle-class women to participate in experiences with nature and join the community than what is portrayed in the literature. However, particularly in adventure sports, the number of women is often limited due to the barriers discussed. This results in fewer women accessing experiences with nature and fewer women visibly negotiating, challenging, and affirming their class and social identities through those experiences.

Additionally, white-water kayaking requires a high level of comfort between your fellow paddlers. Having to pack several people into a few cars, changing into drysuits in parking lots and behind trees, you must get used to the idea of other people seeing you in a vulnerable state. Veronica, Abby, and Sarah described it as having to view yourself as siblings.

“Yeah, it's different because. Like you're used to the possibility of somebody seeing you in a state of undress. Like for me, having worked as a lifeguard, etcetera for a really long time, it's kind of a normal thing. Like I will wrap a towel around myself, but if you see boob you see boob. Yeah, try to avoid. Don't be a creep; move on.” Abby said.

26 Warren. Pg. 363

“But like me, I have a Masters in International Law, I’m not used to the casual nudity, and it was quite an adjustment,” Sarah interjected. Abby agreed before continuing.

“Like the people are, at least with KUKC, especially the men, are very, very, aware that it’s a risky position. Kayaking itself is dangerous enough, and you have to trust the people you’re with. They don’t want to be the creepy ones and will do what they can to make you feel comfortable. We’ve had people in the Cubs who have been removed. And that’s really good to know because the general community isn’t as strict about that, right?”

For the next twenty minutes, we discussed some of the experiences that Cole, Veronica, Abby, and Sarah had with their tightknit group, and by 6 am, I found myself standing outside of a red SUV in the large parking lot of Hog’s Back Falls, waiting for five other people to crawl out slowly. As they did, they all quickly pulled masks from their faces as they took a deep breath of foggy morning air. After being packed in close quarters with five other people, each of us muffled by masks that were our mandatory accessory, we were all thankful to be able to stretch and have our own space. I held my thermos full of lukewarm coffee a little tighter as another SUV and a small car pulled beside us.

The fog lay thick around the trees and covered the road, seeming to engulf it where it rose around us in small valleys and lines of trees. Large towering buildings lay a little further out, seemingly out of place in the early morning fog. Cole, the driver of the SUV I came in, was the last to leave the car, pulling two bags I did not recognize from the passenger seat before looping

each cross strap on opposite sides of his shoulder. Abby, who had been in this community for four years, referred to Cole as the unofficial Big Brother of the group. As he directed the others to unload the kayaks and called out to others to explain where we were going to meet the others before the run, I could see why. He was not only the organizer of the runs, but the group seemed to look to him for direction in all things. I knew he had been instrumental in organizing most of the safety procedures on the big runs, and the group clearly valued his expertise. Under the thick fog, Cole stood out like a tree, the brightly coloured boats on the car behind him acting as a gathering point for the group. As people gathered around our SUV, Abby, my friend who had arranged for me to come to today's run, lightly pushed me off to the front of the line of cars, so I was out of the way of the small crowd.

“We are waiting on Liam’s car, and then Cole will send a shuttle to the top. I think he wants one of us as a boat scout today because Cara and Dave are home with the Kiddo, and Daniel has an assignment or something, so it won't be a big group today. But Torri, Jennifer, Samantha, and Sarah will head out to the spot now.”

I nodded, yawning. I seemed to be the only one tired. There was a low buzzing of energy despite the early hour as the group gathered together, some already in dry suits. Another car pulled up, small, brightly coloured boats stacked on top, and outpoured four more people. Ten minutes and a few more cars later, and thirteen people were gathered around Cole’s car. As I sipped my coffee, Abby moved us towards the group, and I listened intently and took as many notes as I could as they decided on the plan for today’s run. As they did, I counted the final

group. In total, there the group was made up of Veronica, Abby, Torri, Jennifer, Samantha, Sarah, and Phoebe, Cole, Adam, Michael, Liam, James, and Jake.

Hog's Back Falls:

During this trip, the group ran the rapids at Hog's Back Falls in Ottawa. Meeting where the Rideau River and the Rideau Canal part, the falls consisted of waterfalls, sharp rapids with various obstacles, holes, boils, eddies, and some areas where the water was practically too difficult to maneuver, shallow areas and flat water. Hog's Back Falls, and the flat water after, amounted to several rivers in one, trailing down several kilometres until it wrapped around Carleton University's campus splitting of to become the Rideau Canal. Lovingly referred to as Back Bacon, Hog's Back, already a nickname for Prince of Wales Falls, consists of a variety of rapids. Hog's Back comprises one Class V waterfall, with multiple lines to get down the water. As well as several class III rapids below the falls.

Hog's Back Falls, as seen from a rock shelf after the largest set of rapids

Three channels emerge below the falls. The far river-left channel has the most flow. Halfway down this channel are two foamy, deep, and powerful holes with small eddies. The second main hole, Back Bacon, is marked with a sign in the eddy. According to my participants, Back Bacon is a difficult hole that is known to give paddlers a pounding, making it unsuitable for beginners—but is a favourite for experienced paddlers. It required skill, energy, and a great deal of emotional management to keep your underwear clean, in Cole's words. Further down the river, there were Class I, II, and flatwater entries points in the river, where Cole and I would enter in the double kayak for some a gentle introduction to white water.

A hydraulic, or a hole, is a feature created when water flows over a rock or shelf in the river, drops, comes back up, mixes with the air and travels upstream back toward the obstacle that it flowed over. This creates green water that is flowing downstream and a foam pile or backwash that flows back up and into the hole, creating a continuous flow cycle. Also called a sticky wave, people may surf or avoid depending on skill. Boils are found on very large rivers, like the Ottawa River. They are usually found in spots where the river constricts, forcing most of the water down. As the river's flow is so constrained, the water is forced back up to the surface and then down again and forms features that resemble boiling water. Related to this, and present at Hog's Back are Keeper holes or powerful holes in which the foam pile or backwash is so strong that it does not easily release kayaks, debris, or bodies and recirculates them in the hole. Paddlers should always avoid keeper holes. Boils are water features that are very unstable for kayakers and can quickly flip them over if paddlers do not know how to maneuver through them. Finally, an eddy is a feature created when the water flows around an obstacle and water

flows back upstream to fill in the space left by the current. The current inside of eddies flows upstream and therefore is ideal for paddlers to rest. They are most easily understood as countercurrent, which is generally caused by rocks, islands, or little jetting outs of water.

Hog's Back Falls were popularized by Mark Sriver and Paul Mason in their book Thrill of the Paddle; however, they are known to everyone in the kayaking community as they are also conveniently located less than ten minutes away from Carleton University and are routinely used by CUKC. In 2002, a few paddlers were charged with trespassing on National Capital Commission property. However, they managed to scrape a win in court, as technically, they never left their kayaks to scout and never actually set foot on the restricted area of the riverside. After that, it became an open joke in the community – that it would be perfectly legal to surf there, as long as you did not scout the area first. Or rather, if you scouted from the correct side of the black, protective barrier that ringed the falls.

Hog's Back Falls on the day of our trip

We were parked near the lookout of the falls, and after all the kayaks were unloaded, I followed along somewhat hesitantly as the group decided who was going to the top of the falls. The plan was that Jake, Kelly, Torri, Sarah, Veronica, Michael, Adam, and Abby were all taking a slightly lower point on the falls, starting their run after the dam and were planning to take the far-left channel while Cole, Jennifer, Samantha, Liam, and James, the most confident and experienced boaters, were starting under the bridge, on the far side of the falls. Their plan was to park their boats, head to the top of the bridge to scout, and once they decided on a plan for the first run-through, a few of them would navigate down the side of the sharp rock face and the ones at the top would run lines to pass their boats down to the people waiting at the edge of the falls.

Then, they would start the run by donning their lifejackets, helmets, and other protective gear. The rest of us would wait lower down the falls, in part to help scout and to have better access if a rescue were needed; in part to have a more friendly run for the less confident boaters. When the water was high, as it was the day of my visit, it flows over the dam, allowing a brave and skilled enough boater to enter directly under the bridge itself. This allows the boater to enter right before the falls, enabling them to gather themselves before the sixty-foot drop and choose which of the three channels to run. Often, only two were viable with a water level that would be safe enough to boat. Safe, I want to stress, being a contextually dependent word in the world of white-water kayaking. Dependant on the skill, water level, and if the boater had a death wish, or in Jul's words, had recently paid the River Gods. The falls started at a large dam and bridge, where the water formed what looked like a bowl before dropping sharply into several different falls. After the drop, a boater would be ringed by twenty-forty-foot-tall rock cliffs, which

presented an extremely dangerous obstacle that one needed to avoid while also navigating the falls itself. Depending on the water level, flat, sharp-edged rocks would jut out of the water's surface as well, threatening to beach or tangle a boat. Additionally, there were several holes and boils of different skill levels to navigate as well.

I went with Torri, Abby, and Adam's group to situate ourselves on one of the lower outcroppings of rock. We would have an excellent view of the first run, and the rest of the group could scout their entry and exit points too, noting and planning how to navigate the visible obstacles. Everyone present, except for Jake, had run the falls before and were well prepared for the danger that the falls presented. In order to get everyone's kayaks down to the starting point, we formed what amounted to a human chain down to the lowest rocks, where we lined up two by two, facing each other, to pass the kayaks down to the next person. This required a fair amount more balance, grace, and trust than I had anticipated, at some points having to be supported by Adam and Jake, just to turn around and support Sarah, Abby, and Michael as they scrambled over the fence and down the sheer rock face. Once situated, Torri and Veronica, not uncoincidentally the resident expert rock climbers, would pass each of the small boats down, attached on one end by ratchet straps to lower the boats without them sliding down the rocks and into the water for an empty run. After the boats were lowered, two separate first aid kits were tossed down, several ropes and more ratchet straps, a few spare paddles, and finally, several bright orange flags and a can of spray paint were dropped down to rest with the first aid kits.

Despite how unstable I felt at the bottom of the rock shelf, with a twenty-foot drop into the roaring water behind me, Torri and Veronica were the ones in the most danger. After the

supplies and boats were lowered, it was their job to lower themselves down without help from the group and crawl down the rocks to join us on the now packed rock shelf. My body tensed as they climbed down, Veronica choosing to use the ratchet strap attached to the side of the metal fencing for support, Torri simply standing at the top silently scouting the best path. Once Veronica was safely lowered, Torri turned, stomach to the rock, and smoothly climbed down, shifting slightly to the left and right to find better purchase in the rock as she did.

I had met Torri through my friendship with Abby, and we had all hiked and flatwater kayaked before together. While discussing my research a year previously, Abby mentioned that she knew some incredible female kayakers within the community and Torri and Veronica came up. Torri was 27, one of the group's older members, and had been in this community for six years. She described growing up in a typical middle-class family, where they camped in the summer, boated most of the season, and hiked whenever the mood struck them. However, other than her brother, she did not think of her family as particularly outdoorsy. She had grown up playing soccer, softball, and swimming while in university for biochemistry, and later recreationally when she went to college for nursing. Like Abby, Torri joined the group when she was dating someone within the kayaking community, and she was invited along. However, she was never a member of the university club. At first, she described absolutely hating it. She described how difficult of an adjustment it was after very successful soccer and softball experiences to be, in her words, “worse than crap” at something. While Torri was vehement about not being competitive, Abby, Veronica, and James were all quick to inform me that not only was she competitive, but she was also a sore loser at times and prone to repeating the same runs until she felt like they were perfect. After countless descriptions of falls, flips forced swims,

and even a paddle to the side of the head which resulted in several stitches, in the first three years alone, I asked Torri why she continued kayaking if it seemed to frustrate her. Her response was:

“Life is frustrating. Especially the last two years as a nurse during covid, my job requires me to act as a clean-up crew. You try for literal hours to help people with zero resources and no good options. It's exhausting.” Torri received a nod of agreement from Veronica. She went on to describe the emotional toll that working in the health care sector during a pandemic caused and how it also brought to light a lot of the precarity in the world. Torri explained how in 2020 working as an emergency care nurse. She described long, 18-hour shifts where she was on her feet, desperately trying to keep all her patients safe, or at least comfortable. She described the physical and mental toll of watching people die in front of her, and the frustration that build as a result. Torri was quite candid during our discussions of the negative impact on her mental health, and how kayaking became the way she worked to pull herself out of the deep depression she had fallen into at work.

“Being out there, on the water, is just next level. During the runs, you are so completely in your body. Nothing else matters but figuring out the best path, navigating the holes, and just getting down the water. And it's fun! Oh my god is it fun. To just be out there shooting the shit and enjoying yourself.” She went on to describe how often the trips she went on were one-part therapy, one-part cross-fit, and a large portion acting like dirtbags on the side of the river. She repeatedly expressed the pride that she took in kayaking but experiencing nature more broadly. Both Torri and Veronica ruminated about how uncommon it was for women in their field to do something like white-water kayaking, let alone to be as committed to it as they were. They both

described the pride they felt in accumulating challenging runs, of being able to share and circulate pictures and stories from some of their more difficult or exclusive trips, both inside and outside of the country. Torri, like Abby, had accompanied several other members to the United States and had even gone on a two-week trip with James and two other people to New Zealand. Torri was highly talented and had a shot at sponsorship before the Covid-19 pandemic but could not make the commitments necessary to continue. At least three of the group had been sponsored to some level, including Jennifer, Samantha, and a man I had not met named Mike. Cole had the talent, I was informed, but often spent more of his time on adventures than showcasing his freestyle.

Once we were all stationed on a stable spot on the rock, we waited for Cole's group to get in position higher up the waterfall. They had finished scouting, and it seemed they were waiting on a signal from our group before entering the water. Michael raised his hand with one of the flags, and Samantha returned the gesture. When she did, Jake reached into his case and started setting up a small drone equipped with a camera. As Jake had not run Hog's Back before, it was his job to operate the drone the group often brought along with them until Cole was ready to take it over. The group, and kayakers in general, often used drones during their runs. Partly to help scout obstacles in the water and partially so they could share, upload, and track their runs. A large community of Ottawa boaters would tune in to watch people navigate some of the more challenging runs, and Hog's Back always received a good number of views, I was told. In one way or another, running this location gave kayakers credibility and illustrated their skill.

The water at Hog's Back was typically only high enough to run in the fall or spring, and it was rare that it was both high and stable enough to run from the top in summer. However, after several weeks of unusual rainfall, it was high enough to run today. After Michael's signal, Cole, Samantha, and the rest of that group disappeared on the other side of the bridge. Having been here several times during my university career, I knew that on the other side of the dam sat a small, calm spot in the water where they could safely enter the water before coming over the dam's edge into the start of the dam falls. However, even when the water was high, underneath the bridge still only sat in two-three feet of water before sharply dropping off, only to rest a small amount of flatwater before the falls started. As we watched, Cole, Jennifer, Samantha, Liam, and James came through the dam, only their boats and helmets identifiable from a distance. Once they were in the water, I could see them back surfing, along the edge of the rock, presumably gathering themselves before their run.

Photo courtesy of the NCC - the three channels²⁷

²⁷ See, <https://ncc-ccn.gc.ca/places/Hog's-back-park>

Today, Abby told me that the far-right channel was challenging to run, even though the water was high for the season. When it was like this, you would drop straight into a high-pressure situation and a possible sieve. A sieve is a pile or jumble of rocks in the current that creates a dangerous feature for kayakers. Water flows through the rocks pushing the kayaker in and trapping them. The water pressure keeps the kayaker trapped, but the rocks do not allow the paddler to push through. Only Cole and Jennifer had the necessary skill and bravado to attempt it, as they had both run it several times throughout the fall and into winter.

For the first run, Liam went first, sliding down the middle channel, dropping several feet. Despite knowing that they were skilled, my heart was in my throat as he hit the roiling water, the tip and right side of his boat briefly invisible underneath the white splash, before pulling himself out, paddling for a second backwards, and dropping again. Liam edged over the next falls, and we briefly lost sight of him underneath the water. Adam leaned over, telling me, “That was a bit of a messy boof, but he always pulls through.” A boof is a move performed over a rock, waterfall, drop or hole to keep the bow of the paddlers boat above the water's surface and keep the kayak flat or close to flat; essentially, going over the edge of a feature and landing flat. When going over the falls, the goal was to boof each drop to negate some of the downward pulling power of the water. However, it required a quick recovery in order to prepare for the next one. Thankfully, Liam's bright yellow boat was soon visible again as he paddled hard for flatter water. Once there, he treaded water, and Adam told me it was to act as a lookout for the others as they came down. Samantha came next, with remarkable smoothness, making it seem as graceful as if she was on flat water. Her bright purple helmet made her easily distinguishable from the water as she made her run. When she hit flatter water, we could hear her laughing with Liam

from where we stood at the top of the rocks, which elicited several wolf whistles and shouts of, “Get a room” down to the waiting pair. In an apparent reversal, Samantha had brought Liam into the group when they had been dating. It seemed to be an open secret that she would take the opportunities presented during the runs to remind him that she was by far the more skilled boater and that it had been the apparent reason for the breakup. The gentle hazing from the group was a playful chide to remind them to keep it civil.

While I was discussing this with Adam and Veronica, James made his run, and I was brought back to the moment as Abby rather aggressively clapped Adam on the back and tersely said, “James went under.” Adam, Veronica, and I quickly shifted our attention back to the water, where Kelly, Torri, Michael, and Sarah were standing, intently looking at the water. Jake remained at the furthest rock from us, still running his drone. James’s boat appeared to be on its side, his paddle still visible, beating against the water to right itself. From slightly behind me, I heard one of the women whispers,

“Shit, he’s carping.”

Unsure of the term but confident it referred to the apparent way James was struggling to right himself while keeping his head only slightly above water; I tensed up, waiting. I expected the group to rally, perhaps through him a rope. Maybe get in the water. However, in another minute, he had righted himself and paddled out to join Samantha and Liam. The speed at which they navigated the water, got into and out of dangerous situations was astounding. Adam and Michael regaled me with stories over the next several minutes while we waited for Cole and

Jennifer to start their runs of some of the more dangerous moments they had heard of or experienced in the sport. It seemed astonishing the level of intensity followed by relaxation they were able to maintain, everyone tensing when they watched a challenging run, and then immediately relaxing, joking, and often, drinking in the off time. A minute after James's recovery and Adam was back to flirting with Veronica.

I met Adam at the end of last year through mutual friends. I was introduced to him by our friends because of my research interests. Adam grew up in my hometown of Kingston and prided himself on being incredibly active in almost every sport or hobby you could have outside. He sails, Skidoos, surfs, climbs, hikes, bikes, and skis, and has travelled across Canada and the United States to participate in several types of nature and adventure tourism experiences. His parents were fortunate enough to pay for his university and his apartment, allowing him to work to pay for his travels and experiences, not to mention his equipment. Both of his parents were highly educated, working at Queen's University as a professor and an administrator. Not only did they facilitate his experiences with nature, but they actively encouraged his participation. His parents, in contrast to Abby's, are supportive and encouraging of Adam's participation in nature. Instead of viewing it as an act of rebellion as is presented in older literature, Adam's parents view his participation as a benefit to his character, strengthening his community ties and environmental ethic. Whether that is a more complicated mix of gender expectations or simply personal ideology, Adam was encouraged by his parents to pursue interactions and experiences with nature, even though they do not pursue those experiences themselves.

Having grown up in Kingston, Adam had grown up sailing, paddle boarding and kayaking. He grew up participating in the sailing club. Eventually, He joined an initiative to clean up the lakes and rivers around Kingston of trash on his paddleboard, filming it with his GoPro camera to raise money for the Clean Water Initiative (CWI). However, it was not until university that he joined CUKC to learn to white-water kayak. Within the group, Adam was quite well known as a loveable player; having dated Abby, Sarah, and having made clear attempts as Veronica and Samantha. He was partially responsible for several other members joining and exemplary of the reason why many members of the group referred to it as incestuous: many members of the group had dated, brought friends and partners in, who had subsequently dated and broken up, and then dated someone else. This was both a reason for the high retention rate within the group and an ever-present reason for potential instability.

The group had a very strong code that if you dated or broke up, you needed to be polite and amicable or not be invited to participate in any outing. Several of the members recounted stories of how this was socially enforced, arguing that you could not have a lover's spat on the water as it threatened the safety of yourself and everyone around you when emotions ran high. This had been tested several times, and more than a few people within the group had been excommunicated when they could not follow these guidelines. Connected to this, several of the women in the group discussed how Cole, Samantha, Jennifer, and James in particular, who were core members of the group, were very supportive and kind and often took the women's side, which had helped them to stay with the group after their 'in' or the connection that had brought them into the group, had dissolved.

Adam was a member of CUKC for most of his university career. However, when the Covid-19 pandemic closures hit in 2020, Adam packed up his Jeep and immediately headed for the East Coast, determined to cram as much adventure in as he could before he was supposed to leave for his Masters in Australia. Half for the education, half for the waves, as he told me happily. However, by the end of 2020, it became clear that he would not be able to leave for Australia, and he deferred for another year. During this time, he continued to kayak with the group on weekends and into the spring and summer of 2021. Adam is most representative of the type of ecotourism, nomad, or middle-class adventurer that is commonly described in the literature when exploring experiences with nature. He is young, white, heterosexual, financially stable and supported, and otherwise untethered or restricted by family obligations. However, Adam expressed numerous times the anxiety and feelings of loss he felt during his experiences with nature. As much as he loved paddling and sailing, he could see the changes in the environment taking place even in the last five years. He seemed genuinely worried that if he didn't have these experiences now, he would miss out on the chance ever to experience them. He stressed the impact of the Australian forest fires on his decision to pursue a graduate degree and the frustration he felt during the pandemic with restrictions limiting his ability to move. He showed me pictures on his phone of the university he was planning to attend.

However, for every school picture he showed me, there were five pictures of the ocean, rivers, or lakes he was planning to run. Pictures of the hikes he wanted to do and the places he was planning to hike. While he showed me these beautiful places, he spoke with anxiety about his worry over the loss of the forests to raging forest fires, the pollution of the rivers he had wanted to visit for over a decade, and the pandemic restrictions necessarily put in place that

could stop him from ever seeing them in person. We sat in silence for another minute, both thinking about the last year of precarity the world had experienced.

Cole and Jennifer ran next, both taking the far-right channel, Jennifer first in her bright blue boat, and Cole moment behind her in his orange boat. Watching them run, it was clear they were more than skilled; the group cheered and called out as they both came down the first drop fast and hard, not only boofing, but appearing to do several tricks that I didn't quite understand the mechanics of. Upon hitting the roughest water after the second small drop, Jennifer flipped upside down, but unlike James, she was able to quickly right herself, paddling hard to keep up with Cole's longer-armed paddle strokes. Wordlessly, Jake pulled me gently out of the way, and Kelly, Torri, Sarah, Veronica, Michael, Adam, and Abby all silently slid in their boats, shuffled, and dropped below the rocks, starting their first runs.

As the resident greenie, my job was to help Jake navigate down the rock face after the rest of the group had entered the water to a spot roughly thirty feet down where he and I could enter with the double kayak. I assured the group that I was at least skilled enough to safely navigate friendly white-water so Jake could focus on capturing the group's second runs. However, looking at the water, I was worried I had overestimated my potential skill when faced with a double kayak. However, Jake didn't give me any time to contemplate my fears, simply instructing me to grab the remaining equipment and the double kayak. Thankfully, as unstable as it was to get down, descending the rest of the rocks was simple, and we made it down to our entry point without either of us swimming. We loaded up the double kayak when we did, and I got in the front while Jake got in behind me.

Over the next several hours, I watched the group play on some of the gentler rapids, showing off for me and each other and generally having an uproarious time. I spent most of my time frantically writing notes on my arm, my notepad back in my backpack on shore. Jake demonstrated, as well as he could while we were attached, how to navigate some friendly holes, eddies, and avoid strainers or a spot where a tree or branches in the current allow for the water to flow through, but that can trap a boat. He gave me a crash course in defensive paddling, something I was not familiar with, and much against my protests showed me how to recover from a flip by forcibly flipping our kayak underwater and then rolling us back up. Thankfully, as a non-drinker, I did not swim, and the River Gods remained satiated by the rest of the group's antics.

Two of my participants back surfing at Hog's Back

On (and Under) the Water)

We settled into a pattern; four or five people would hike their boats up the rocks and make a run while three or four people would stay down on the flatter water. The rest of us would stay on the rocks, and I would listen, observe, and ask as many questions as I could without interrupting. Over the next hour or so, I listened as the group discussed their favourite runs, joy, fear, pride, and overall excitement had during their experiences. I listened as they recalled their worst accidents, some stories of injuries or second-hand stories of death or close calls. Themes of freedom, fear, anxiety, pride, and other emotions, authenticity, community, family, cultural capital, and the pressure of navigating a work-life balance during precarity of youth and a global pandemic were repeatedly discussed throughout our time on the rocks. In truly the most over-educated and middle-class example I could think of, Abby, Adam, and Sarah sat with me on the rocks, brought their phones out of their watertight sacks, and helped me to craft a spreadsheet of kayaking terms, tricks, and gear, and associated phrases for my research.

Several of the larger group decided to head back up the falls for another few runs during my discussions with the ever-changing group on the rocks. I lost track of who was where, except for the people on the rocks. It was not until I heard a commotion behind me that I turned to see. At that point, I could not see anything wrong, but Cole was yelling something and gestured towards the falls. I could see someone in a yellow and orange boat seemingly caught in the water, flipping sideways but not seeming to move through the current. They were at the bottom of the second falls, right in the foamy white water stirred up from the pressure of the rapids. Before I could think of anything else, Cole had set off towards them, paddling hard upriver through the foamy white rapids. At the top of the second drop-off, Jennifer and Liam were

swiftly paddling down to the boat. By process of elimination, I realized the boater must be either Michael or Jake, but I was not sure which. There were several orange boats, and I could not see from the distance what colour the paddler's helmet was. By the look of it, and from what I heard later, Michael had started his run perfectly, boofed over the first falls, but during his second, he had over-rotated his torso, and his boat had landed just slightly on its right side. However, that was enough. He had tried to roll his boat back up several times but was unable to. Eventually, he pulled free from his kayak and bailed and was forced to swim the rest of the rapid. The most experienced paddlers in the water, Cole, Jennifer, and Liam, immediately raced after him to get him on their boat.

Seemingly without a word, Torri and James set off for Michael's boat, paddle, and the skirt of his kayak, which he had lost after bailing. Torri had somehow materialized a tow rope out of thin air and had his boat snugly fitted against her own before Cole had pulled Michael onto his kayak. Abby, Sarah, Veronica, and Adam had already been on the rocks, but they quickly shuffled the beached boats, gear, and me out of the way to clear a path for Cole and Michael. Samantha, Jake, and Kelly stayed in the water but brought their boats closer to the rocks. A few minutes later, Cole brought Michael, who seemed utterly unhurt, to the takeout spot. Bizarrely, as soon as it was announced that he was ok, the group, led by Cole, who seemed to be the most mature and level-headed of the people I had met, began to jeer Michael. Finally, they physically sat him down, and he pulled off his water shoe, and I was introduced to my first bootie beer. A bootie beer is a type of gentle hazing that requires a boater to down a beer – typically the cheapest and most off-putting of cheap beer– from a river shoe to 'Pay the River Gods.' Or as a chiding for flipping your boat or otherwise having to swim during a run. Often,

paddlers would take great pains to find the oldest, grossest, or most repellant bootie to serve as a mug for the beer. However, despite the frat-like nature of the bootie beer, it served as a reminder of the potential danger in flipping. Cole stood over Michael and ensured he drank every drop, and my stomach roiled at the thought of the swamp water concoction of foot sweat, cheap beer, and river water he was ingesting. Veronica and Torri insisted on examining Michael, and after everyone was settled again, Cole, Michael, Liam, and Veronica and I stayed up on the rocks to discuss what had happened.

Cole was one of the most skilled within the group. Unlike some of the other people I interviewed, he grew up white-water kayaking, competing, and had a family that did the same. Growing up just outside of Ottawa, Cole grew up middle-class, active in nature, and was exceptionally well-educated, studying at both the University of Toronto and getting his MA in Electrical and Computer Engineering. While working as an engineer in the cyber technology sector during the day, he spent most of his free time and holidays travelling internationally and within the United States and Canada, white-water kayaking, climbing, biking, and hiking. He estimated that he had been to ten countries to kayak or rock climb, and he tallied his best runs in what he called his ‘white-water passport.’ A tall, rather lanky man, at 6’4, he was one of the older members of the core group I interviewed. At 29, he has been in the white-water community for over ten years and had been on the executive team of CUKC.

By and large, Cole was the glue that held the group together; he was technically skilled, talented, and had a mind for safety. After years as the head of CUKC, he implemented many of the same safety practices required as a university club. Many of the group credited Cole because

the injury rate had been so low within the group compared to other kayaking communities. Having been an executive member and spent many years within the white-water community, Cole was strict in ensuring everyone had as safe runs as possible. He had become responsible for putting together what he called the “Oh Shit Crew” or the cleanup and rescue crew – organizing who would be the best fit for a water rescue, first aid, organizing a safe exit, and grabbing everyone’s gear when an accident did happen. While everyone in the group was there due to a love of the community and the sport, those experiences on the water came with a high level of danger. Even if all safety measures were followed, kayaking remained a dangerous sport due to the unpredictability of the water. Many of the cultural aspects of the sport, such as bootie beers, paid homage to that. Cole, more than most, knew how quickly the fun could turn into a rescue operation. A month prior at the falls, Cole had been a part of the three local boaters called to assist the diving unit and the Ottawa police in retrieving the body of a 27-year-old man who had fallen into the water at Hog’s Back and drowned. This was not the first time Cole had participated in a retrieval; when I asked why he had chosen to do this run so soon after what I assumed was a traumatic day, he replied that it was a good reminder. Kayaking was fun, and the community was unparalleled, but the reality was that even with safety gear and a solid group, there was always the chance that the water would win and you would not come back to run another day.

With a sport like white-water kayaking, there was always the danger of death, permanent injury, and the ever-present worry and fear that came with something as fast-paced and dangerous as a sport of this level. Additionally, there was the added danger of having to swim to safety after an injury, flip, or other run gone wrong, which could itself result in injury. However,

despite the danger inherent in whitewater kayaking, the community agreed that kayaking, and being in nature in general, made them feel more in control of their lives. Instead of creating more anxiety, my interviews revealed that they experienced a deeper joy during experiences in nature, which carried over to other areas of their life where they might feel less certain or more troubled.

Despite different jobs, sexualities, and genders, this community is representative of how the young middle class live with an ever-present feeling of precarity. My participants echoed this in concerns over their living situations, making rent, keeping their jobs during widespread job losses accelerated by pandemic shutdowns, and fears over climate disasters which seemed to be getting closer and closer to home.

Two of my participants “parking” their boats in the flatter water after the falls

Chapter 4: Emotional Management, Class Precarity, and Authenticity

"It is not about managing our emotions; it is about managing our reactions to them so we can actually feel and enjoy them" – Cole

Emotional Management within the Middle-Class

A fundamental part of exploring and understanding how and why the young middle class seek out experiences with nature requires understanding middle-class imaginaries and expectations. My research explored how people negotiate identity, class, emotions during a time of perceived crisis, all while coming of age. Emotional management is a large part of that, particularly for the overeducated middle-class who primarily work in service sector jobs or traditional white-collar jobs. Within my ethnographic research, several themes arose surrounding emotional management, emotional release, and the experience of authentic emotions during encounters with nature. Specifically, several of my participants felt that experiences in nature, such as white-water kayaking as most of my participants engaged in, helped them feel authentically. During my ethnographic research, something that arose repeatedly was the idea that there was a division between individuals' work and personal life, which led to increased fears and anxiety around their place in the world, and in how they saw themselves as fitting in and coping with broader stresses of coming of age during a time of economic, environmental, and social crisis.

Hochschild's book, The Managed Heart,²⁸ is the pivotal sociological text that pioneered the concept of emotional management, emotional labour, and the cost of emotional exchanges both personally and commercially, particularly within the middle-class in North America. Hochschild's text has three central arguments: emotional labour and management play a crucial role in our personal and professional lives. Second, emotions reveal our inner workings, which often clash with what we have been taught to think and feel. Third, emotions work as currency within social exchanges, and in addition, the value of those emotions fluctuates depending on your status and place in those interactions. Hochschild's book explored how we modify our emotions to our advantage in social and professional contexts. This text explored the risks and consequences of emotional self-management to our larger social, cultural, and emotional health. Hochschild investigated the complexities of emotional management within the middle-class and how they impact authenticity and identity feelings. The themes explored within Hochschild's text have specific relevancies to my research and help to ground much of the identity negation, emotional management, and emotions evoked during experiences with nature for my participants. Finally, Hochschild provided needed context on what it means to be middle-class, and the emotional management required for it.

Hochschild's first argument was that emotional labour and management play an important role in our social lives, particularly for the middle-class. Emotional labour, in this context, was when feelings are consciously managed, manipulated, ignored, or transformed to ensure they are appropriate for a particular commercial or social setting. In Hochschild's text, two middle-class ethnographic groups are explored, flight attendants and bill collectors. First and foremost,

²⁸ Arlie Russell Hochschild. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. (2012).

Hochschild wrote that while there are jobs at every socioeconomic level that place emotional burdens on the worker, these burdens may have little to do with the performance of emotional labour except for the middle-class.²⁹ Second, she wrote that a certain type of "middle-class sociability" lends itself to this kind of emotional labour. 'Service with a Smile' is an expected attribute for workers across many industries, but as anyone who has worked in a customer-facing job knows, faking a friendly attitude all day long is difficult, and emotional labour is often invisibilized. Hochschild argued that among the lower-class where work is often deskilled and boring, and the work process beyond the worker's control, the emotional task often suppresses feelings of any sort.³⁰ For the middle-class, however, work is often not about suppressing your emotions, which can come across as fake or extremely difficult to maintain, it is instead about transforming your emotions into the 'correct' feelings for the situation. For example, frustration becomes curiosity, boredom becomes relaxation (or the perception of such), and anger can be transformed into empathy for a particularly difficult customer. Not only are emotions transformed, the emotional responses must also be maintained indefinitely: emotions are transformed, performed, and maintained for the entirety of the job.

This process of emotional transformation is visible in several of my participants: For Torri and Veronica, who work in the health care sector, this takes much the same form as Hochschild's flight attendants; frustration, anger, or fear is transformed rather than masked to not only remain calm and focused in order to take care of their patients, but also to soothe their emotions in times of stress, pain and fear. For people such as Adam and Samantha who work in customer service, however, part of their jobs requires them to 'sell' their emotions in a way that

²⁹ Hochschild. Pg. 154.

³⁰ Hochschild. Pg. 150-154

might not be considered authentic. Rather than simply transforming one emotion into another, they are required to transform all emotions into helpfulness, friendliness and then to further engage clients in the pursuit of selling them goods they might not wish to purchase. However, what this has amounted to, especially for middle-class workers, is that emotional labour plays a significant role in what it means to work in certain jobs and be 'professional.' What was once considered private, our emotions are now a public good sold as part of a service – professionalism, friendliness, trustworthiness, etcetera, which means that it is not only their time and physical labour for middle-class workers that must be harnessed within their jobs. In addition, their emotional labour has created a much more complex issue for the young-middle-class who are coming of age and negotiating their feelings of identity, authenticity, and conceptualizations of their futures while coming of age.

Secondly, Hochschild's text explores how emotions often reveal the inner workings of ourselves, which often clash with what we have been taught to think and feel is correct or appropriate, which can lead to a disconnect between genuine and expected emotions. Hochschild argued that the middle-class work in a market for emotional labour in a way that other classes do not: their emotional work is no longer a private act used to create, maintain, and negotiate interpersonal relationships but a public good bought and sold.³¹ As such, middle-class workers must have a high level of emotional attunement and emotional management when working with the public, and consequently, emotional dissonance can result. The strain of emotional dissonance – a feeling of uneasiness that occurs when someone assesses an emotional experience as a threat to their identity – is often managed at work by either changing how we feel or by

31 Hochschild. Pg. 118

changing what we feign. According to Hochschild, this means that members of the middle-class, within their careers, often face a higher requirement to not only manage their emotions but to transform their emotions into socially 'correct' or 'right' emotions in order to present a certain appearance for their company, their position, or simply the customers more broadly. The expectation of emotional transformation can in turn lead to a disconnect between the authentic emotions and the persona of emotions one is expected to portray.

Cole and Abby recounted this feeling in different ways. Their jobs and academic positions place a high value on professionalism as often defined by the middle-class,³² as segregated into appropriate spaces; work, social, leisure, etcetera. Abby recounted that this specifically meant that while she loved her job and position as a law student, it left her feeling like her 'work' self and who she was outside of that world were very different people. While she felt both aspects were vital to what she identified with the strict division often left her feeling like she was acting or simply out of place; the divide between her cerebral, professional, and incredibly driven position as a law student is also very physical, active, and 'raw' during her experiences with nature, such as within her community of kayakers. In her words, the divide between wearing business suits, heels, and always being outspoken during the week, and then switching to an intensely casual, physical, community-based identity during her leisure time often left her feeling what she called "identity whiplash." This experience reflects what several of my participants said, both during the day on the water and during smaller interviews. They argued that there was a sharp division between their work selves and their other selves, whether that was who they were socially, during their leisure time, or simply outside of work. While this

32 Bledstein, Burton J. *Culture of Professionalism: The Middle-class and the Development of Higher Education in America*. (Norton., 1967).

is not a phenomenon exclusive to the young middle class, they cited not simply a division in acceptable behaviours but a division in acceptable emotions, thoughts, ways of acting and interacting. This resulted in a widespread disconnect between how they viewed their authentic identity and the act of their personalities required at work.

Thirdly, Hochschild argued that the management and offering of emotions work as a type of emotional gift exchange,³³ which is already present amongst the middle-class imaginary. In this view, emotional management is not only a required attribute for middle-class workers but part of what it means to be middle-class. Robert Fletcher³⁴ agrees with this idea, arguing that middle-class professions are often characterized by the relatively high salaries, sedentary mental labour they entail, and high emotional regulation levels. Unfortunately, much of the young middle class today do not experience high salaries but a high level of emotional labour. Fletcher argued that the reason for the high demand for emotional management amongst the middle-class is complex. In part, Fletcher argued that it comes down to the distinct ways in which members of different classes are socialized. Following in Hochschild's footsteps, Fletcher noted that middle-class children tend to internalize a stronger imperative for emotional management than their working-class counterparts.³⁵ One example is the expectation that one can 'act' (in this instance, act as in action rather than pretend) in the correct manner emotionally without showing the emotional labour that goes into it. Hochschild argued that a middle-class worker is required to not only act as though they can sympathize with a problematic client but to work to empathize even when it might not occur spontaneously. Emotional labour and management are required for

33 Hochschild. pg. 118

34 Fletcher. (2014). pg. 62

35 Fletcher. (2014). pg. 67.

many social relationships, personal and professional, and work as a currency. However, the value of that emotional exchange can vary significantly depending on status, gender, race, or positionality.

Hochschild wrote that "there is a cost to emotion work: it affects the degree to which we listen to feeling and sometimes our very capacity to feel."³⁶ Several, particularly my female-identifying participants, noted that they felt a severe disconnect from their emotional selves at work. Specifically, they felt a pressure always to be 'on,' to be outgoing, friendly, helpful, or to display other predominantly positive and productive emotions. This required intense concentration and emotional labour to maintain, which they conveyed often left them burnt out, emotionally drained, or in some cases, numb. Experiences with nature, particularly ones as physically and emotionally consuming as white-water kayaking, provided an outlet for more authentic emotions, according to participants such as Torri and Cole. However, ironically, there is still a great deal of emotional management required in the sport.

Affect, Embodiment, and 'Free' Emotions

Theories of affect are helpful to better understand the cost of emotional management and how my participants internalized authentic emotions during experiences with nature.

Anthropologists and other social theorists from Durkheim and his discussion of collective effervescence onward have considered questions of bodies, sensation, emotion, and social, cultural, or political change with an anthropological lens. For some, affect is contrasted with emotion: it is potential or capacity, not set cultural meaning. For others, affect theory is

³⁶ Hochschild. Pg. 21

understood to be contrasted with structure or form: it is bodily sensation or intensity. Within Hochschild's text, affect theory explores how emotions are mobilized and valued in ways that have more significant social and identity implications. This means, there is the affect of an experience on the body, which is then understood as an emotion to be accepted or transformed based on the circumstances. In the context of my research, the affect of experiences such as kayaking and other encounters with wild and nature spaces impact the valuation my participants put on those interactions with nature. The emotions experienced, the community created, and the identity built around those experiences are vital to understanding why the young middle class engage with experiences with nature and the value they place on those experiences.

One of Nash's central arguments in his text is that the importance of interactions with wild spaces is the embodied or affectual feelings produced in the observation and participation within nature.³⁷ Sarah Ahmed's³⁸ notion of affect theory and the affectual economy may be applicable to why these people are drawn towards these experiences and their meaning. Affect is a complex theory, but Ahmed argued that emotions are cultural practices, not always individual psychological states. In this view, and according to Ahmed, feelings and emotions do not belong to subjects (people) but instead gain meaning through their circulation between subjects and objects to assign affective or emotional value, much as Hochschild discusses emotions as not an individual practice but more of a group project. Emotions and affect arise out of a process of interactions between people, places, and things, and value is attached to those things based on those interactions. Similar to how monetary value is attached to commodities, emotions can be attached to a place and cultural practices resulting from these interactions. Over time, feelings

³⁷ See Nash and Miller.

³⁸ Sara Ahmed. "Affective Economies." (2004).

and emotions become 'stuck' to subjects, objects, or spaces such as the wilderness or nature, which is at the forefront of these practices. This allows them to “align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the sheer intensity of their attachments.”³⁹ In this case, experiences or feelings that one has in a particular place while interacting with nature are repeatedly sought or 'collected' by individuals because they provide something more than what is achieved in their everyday lives. More directly, this means that the emotions projected onto specific spaces or activities begin to signify those feelings. Instead of being a by-product, the affectual experiences had during those activities may be as equally sought after as the experiences themselves. Thus, the places themselves begin to signify those feelings.

When describing their experiences with nature, my participants repeatedly described the embodied feeling of both the activities and the emotions experienced during those activities. Thus, the affect of those experiences on the body is inseparable from the activity and those encounters with nature in the eyes of my participants. Contrary to the way emotions and sensations were experienced at work, however, my participants argued that the way they experienced emotions during activities like kayaking was one of the reasons they felt drawn towards those experiences repeatedly and consistently. One of my participants, Cole, summed it up best, stating,

39 Sara Ahmed. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

"It's not about managing our emotions when we are on the water; its about managing our reactions to them so we can actually feel and enjoy them."

He went on to say that feeling things like fear, anger, nervousness, joy, and caution were all needed to safely participate in things like white-water kayaking, mountain biking, or climbing. The difference, he stressed, was that work required separation from your emotions or experiences in a way as to provide the best service to someone else. He described this as 'free' emotions. Not that they felt the space allowed them to feel freely, but rather that emotions felt in nature were free without the same cost level as those emotions felt during work. Or, to clarify, emotions felt during experiences with nature did not come with the same level of emotional management or manipulation required at work. For example, if one felt anger, grief, or disinterest at work, my participants essentially felt that it was required to be suppressed, manipulated, or ignored in order to present their best selves and accomplish their jobs. However, during kayaking, those emotions could be used to fuel the activity, progress, or community. James put it this way,

"Pissed off? Great, get that run. Tired? Flip, grab a beer and sit on the rocks. Crying your eyes out because a girl broke up with you? That's cool, pay the next tab, and you've got twenty-five willing ears to listen to you. As long as you can play safely, there is space for everything."

Not only that, but as Abby connected, feelings of fear and anger were essential to the sport. Experiences with nature require embodying those feelings and sensations to gauge and navigate the situation and bail, if necessary, accurately. It was this attunement that my

participants argued kept not only yourself safe but also the group. One's mental state could directly put them in danger during a run, and if they were to get injured or caught, it could impact the group who would need to put themselves on that run to rescue them. As Hochschild described, this differs significantly from the highly internalized and scripted emotional labour required from many middle-class jobs.

Additionally, as Hochschild and many of my participants note, the emotional management required in many middle-class jobs often results in emotional alienation of the self due to the forced mismanagement of emotions within their jobs. On the other hand, adventure sports and experiences with nature such as white-water kayaking require emotional management, but they require the successful assessment and understanding of those emotions first. Fletcher argued in his text that due to the embodied nature of these activities, the body is freed from much of the mental command, becoming a zone in which, the mental worker feels entirely free to exert his or her own will.⁴⁰ What this indicates is not necessarily that my participants felt as though work required emotional management and encounters with nature did not. Instead, my research suggests that encounters with nature allow for the authentic experience of emotions and create space for a greater understanding of those emotions as they are felt in the body.

40 Fletcher. (2014). Pg. 89

Chapter 5: Cultural Capital and Productive Encounters with Nature

Precarity and the Fear of Falling

My participants repeatedly echoed the fear of economic, social, and environmental precarity during individual and group interviews, especially accentuated during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is augmented by the well-studied ‘fear of falling’⁴¹ that exists within the middle-class more generally, and this is additionally emphasized for the young middle class who are coming of age during this time of global uncertainty. A thread I want to pick up from Fletcher’s text Romancing the Wild is the important discussion of class precarity and reaffirming class status through encounters and experiences with nature. Fletcher discusses early on how the middle-class is overeducated, specialized, and more ‘mental’ workers. However, unlike the ultra-rich, which can be gifted capital in the form of wealth or the working class, which can learn a trade relatively quickly, the middle-class generation must rearticulate the lengthy education process every generation⁴². This seems to lead to a general destabilization in the imaginary middle-class, creating a feeling of social and economic precarity. Their status is further stressed by the affordability of education, housing, and the access to and economic burden of student and other debt.

Brett Arends for MarketWatch⁴³ wrote that disposable incomes for the middle-class have not grown since the middle of the last decade, while incomes for the top 10% are hitting new

41 See Katherine S Newman. *Falling from Grace: The experience of downward mobility in the American middle-class*. (Free Press, 1988).

42 Fletcher. (2014). Pg. 64

43 Brett Arends. “Why the Middle-class Is Shrinking.” (MarketWatch, April 22, 2019).

highs. In the previous decade, from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, average disposable incomes rose by about 17% in more affluent countries such as the United States and Canada, according to the Paris-based Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD).⁴⁴

However, the middle-class is getting pinched particularly hard by the rising education, health care, and housing costs. Post-secondary fees are up in North America and elsewhere. Homes are much more expensive relative to incomes. Arends argued that, at the same time, technology and global competition are destroying many middle-class careers. Higher skills are no longer passports to good jobs and incomes. Middle-skill workers are now more likely to be in the lower-income class and less likely to be middle income, and more highly skilled workers are also less likely to make it to the higher-income class. As a result, downward mobility — the risk of losing your middle-class lifestyle and ending up poor — is a rising concern. What has resulted is a general fear of falling down the economic ladder. The pandemic has only increased this pressure with large-scale job loss, which has hit people within the young middle class particularly hard. OECD noted that about 70% of the Baby Boomer generation were already middle-class in their 20s. For millennials today, the figure is 60%. One in six middle-income jobs face a "high risk" of automation, and already more than one-fifth of middle-income households are borrowing to make ends meet. According to Fletcher, tied up in this is a fear of losing discipline and willpower,⁴⁵ traits that help distinguish the middle-class from other classes – at least in their cultural perception. This indicates that the young middle class faces several intersecting spheres of precarity, which has a legitimate impact on them, and how they view their identities.

⁴⁴ "Under Pressure: The Squeezed Middle-class." (OECD. Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2019).

⁴⁵ Fletcher. (2014). Pg. 84

In particular, my participants as the young middle class were facing large student debt loans – often as a result of their family’s middle-class status excluding them from government loan funding, but not economically endowed enough to pay for post-secondary tuition, let alone graduate degrees, which several of my participants had. Individuals such as Torri, Veronica, Issacs, Liam, and Cole were all paying some level of student loan debt, housing or vehicle debt, and not one of my participants was financially stable enough to own property, which meant they were also subject to the cost of the rising rental market. Within this is the broader fear of falling down the social/economic rung that runs within the middle-class, where debt, or an unexpected job loss or a major expense, threatens to push them into the struggling working-class or below the poverty line in some cases.

Additionally, numerous sources in the last decade have underscored the issue of young people experiencing the impact of eco-anxiety, or a combination of fear, anxiety, and hopelessness over environmental change, loss, and degradation occurring globally. The rate of eco-anxiety is exceptionally high among youth and younger adults and can have especially devastating impacts on their mental health.⁴⁶ The fear and anxiety over the loss of the environment we are experiencing, while a global issue, is also happening within Canada. In 2021 alone, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Ontario have faced extreme and devastating forest fires which have burned hundreds of thousands of hectares of land, caused extreme weather and air quality warnings across provincial lines and hundreds of kilometres away from the fires themselves, and have driven home the fact that even during a pandemic that has shut down a lot of the world, the climate crisis continues. One of the key methods acknowledged to help soothe

46 Matthew Taylor, and Jessica Murray. “Overwhelming and Terrifying”: The Rise of Climate Anxiety.” (The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, February 10, 2020).

eco-anxiety specifically is through action: primarily taking action to address, understand, or experience and protect nature and wild spaces during this time of climate crisis. The way my participants chose to engage, experience, and learn about nature and wild spaces during these encounters through kayaking, rock climbing, and mountain biking helps to soothe anxiety but also indicate the value placed on those natural spaces they inhabit during those activities. This further ties into the ideologies present within the young middle class and the importance of cultural capital and productive leisure within experiences with nature.

Kayaking, Cultural Capital, and the “Experience” Economy

Experiences with nature can provide a respite from class anxiety, which permeated everyday life, and it can help to soothe eco-anxiety as well.⁴⁷ One of the ways those experiences hold value, particularly for the middle-class, is through the idea of cultural capital. The concept of cultural capital is put forth by authors such as Pierre Bourdieu,⁴⁸ whose conceptualization of the concept refers to the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, clothing, habits, material belongings, and credentials that a person acquires through being part of a particular social class, such as the young middle class. According to this understanding, cultural capital can take on three different forms: embodied, objectified, or institutionalized. A person’s accent or way of speaking or holding themselves is an example of embodied cultural capital, while an expensive boat, car, or other collection can be an example of objectified cultural capital. Finally, institutionalized cultural capital refers to credentials or other qualifications such as degrees or titles which work to symbolize and solidify someone’s competence or authority.

⁴⁷ See, Fletcher. (2014).

⁴⁸ Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. (Harvard University Press, 1984).

Sharing similar forms of cultural capital with others—the same taste in media, the attendance of the same university, is thought to create a sense of collective identity and group unity. However, some forms of cultural capital are valued over others. For example, Pierre Bordeaux's 1984 Distinctions book described the middle-class as having limited economic capital compared to the upper-class but with high degrees of cultural capital. Within this idea of cultural capital can also fit experiences, such as the experiences with nature that my participants seek. This connects to a broader category that many of my participants engage in prior to the Pandemic, the 'Experience Economy.' The idea of the experience economy, a term coined to reflect the accumulation of experiences rather than traditional goods, has risen to prominence in discussions of the young, overeducated middle-class – namely, the group my research engages with. The general idea is that due to the temporary structure of experiences rather than physical goods, they must be continuously gathered to maintain cultural capital within this idea of an experience economy. While there is some debate about the applicability of the experience economy outside of direct tourism participation, the principles of the experience economy, as argued by Tommy D. Andersson,⁴⁹ the creation of value, and the temporal nature of the construction of experience, can be readily applied to the issue of middle-class interactions with nature and adventure tourism.

My research indicated that engaging in these experiences both soothes and stresses feelings of precarity – environmental, economic, and social – which further encourages them to participate in the experience economy.⁵⁰ On one hand, engaging with nature through experiences

49 Andersson, Tommy D. "The tourist in the experience economy." 2007

50 For examples of consumer experience and immersion, see Lindberg, Frank, and Per Østergaard. "Extraordinary Consumer Experiences: Why Immersion and Transformation Cause Trouble." (Journal of consumer behaviour 14. 2015)

such as kayaking provides mental relief from some of the economic uncertainty my participants face: kayaking is a particularly middle-class pastime, playing into both the beliefs and financial privilege of being in a more affluent class. However, when participating in nature activities, they are constantly confronted with the reality of the climate crisis and are unable to deny changes that they themselves bare witness too: such as water pollution, or the privatizations of many parts of the Ottawa River.

Andersson argued that the experience economy is where consumption and production meet, creating ideological value. He argued that, unlike in traditional forms of consumption, the tourist is a participant in the production chain rather than the final consumer of a finished project. In this way, I think that the idea of the experience economy can be applied more broadly to what my participants regularly engage in, which is not only experiencing nature close to home, but travelling, planning, and seeking out experiences with nature outside of the province, country, and in some cases, continent. Encounters in nature and adventure sports in these ways represent both the consumption and production of experiences and the creation of ideological value. Of the thirteen people I spent time with during my ethnographic fieldwork and during my interviews, twelve of them had travelled to three or more countries with the express purpose to engage with nature through things like kayaking, mountain biking, hiking, or rock climbing. This did not include things such as travel for school or family vacations where they might have also had encounters with nature.

However, experiences come to represent a form of cultural capital that is not transferable and must be continually gathered and experienced to hold relevance but can confer positive attributes to the experience holder in this understanding. A classic example would be something

like attending a concert. Attending can gain one cultural capital, and the more complex or exclusive to participate in, the more cultural capital is assigned to the experience. In Fletcher's text, this takes the form of exclusive activities, such as challenging and remote White-water runs, rock, or icefalls. The more difficult, remote, or unknown the experience was to access, notably where it provided no economic value,⁵¹ the more sought after and valuable the experience was felt to be. This is the same for my participants. What runs you have done, both on the Ottawa River as it is a world-famous location for white-water sports and where you have travelled to do more complex or harder to access runs, means that you hold more cultural capital within that community. Possessing appropriate symbolic capital can facilitate one's acceptance within a class group, such as the young middle class that I studied, opening the door to opportunities in terms of education and employment as a result of social networking. Through such means, symbolic capital can be converted into financial resources.⁵² For that reason, the experience economy is especially relevant when exploring experiences with nature or other interactions with wild spaces and the cultural capital accumulated there. Even while the pandemic has limited the ease with which travel is possible to engage with the experience economy, these experiences hold personal and ideological value to this community and hold cultural weight.

A straightforward way to establish your position, skill, and seriousness within these experiences is to demonstrate the cultural capital you have: embodied, objectified, or institutionalized. For example, showing your positions and – technical skill during a run or with freestyle moves, displaying your gear and other equipment: even the stickers many boaters carry on their cars and sometimes paddles and boats. Additionally, having specific certifications or

⁵¹ See Fletcher. (2012)

⁵² Fletcher. (2014). Pg. 62

demonstrating knowledge in CPR, First Aid, or having guiding or other certificates is often a good indicator of both skill and experience. Finally, many kayakers will have a membership to white-water organizations, even insurance. These are examples of cultural capital but often also participate in the experience economy, as no amount of material goods will overcome a lack of time in the water. No amount of gear or certification will trump a boater who has put in hundreds of hours running challenging rapids. I heard numerous stories during my interviews of people receiving invitations to exclusive white-water festivals or runs with pro boaters simply because they had put hours in the water, had improved, or had managed to navigate challenging runs safely. Even where they were not talented, the experience could be traded for other experiences that brought them further into the community.

Productive Leisure in Encounters with Nature

Experiences with nature, and the cultural capital which go along with them, can create a form of productive leisure that can challenge or reaffirm middle-class ideologies.⁵³ Literature such as Satsuka's ethnography Nature in Translation⁵⁴ further affirmed this idea, suggesting the emotional connection and drive behind who, why, and in what way people interact and value experiences with nature, particularly the link between middle-class pressures and ideologies which spur a drive for freedom and authenticity. The idea of productive leisure is visible in how my participants were pulled towards experiences in nature and how fears of precarity within the larger society, such as changing class structures and environmental concerns, play into the valuation of those experiences. Fletcher observed that among the middle-class, there is pressure

⁵³ Fletcher. (2014). Pg. 75

⁵⁴ Shiho Satsuka. *Nature in Translation: Japanese Tourism Encounters the Canadian Rockies*. (Duke University Press, 2015).

to spend one's leisure time 'productively,' stating that members of the educated class must prove they are serious about whatever they are doing. The idea of leisure having to be productive, or that one must be serious and have expertise in the activities they engage for fun, is a particular quirk of middle-class culture. This runs contrary to typical leisure encounters with nature, which often emphasize relaxation and a certain type of passive consumption. Consequently, it is not surprising that experiences with nature like kayaking, emphasize productive leisure, discipline, and devaluing the accumulation of material commodities through productive labour as the mark of success.⁵⁵ What this means, is that instead of accumulating more and more “stuff” (other than necessary gear), kayaking encourages the accumulation of experiences and expertise through more unique or difficult white-water runs.

Additionally, Satsuka's text explored middle-class Japanese tour guides in the Canadian Rockies and expanded on the idea of a 'leisure class,' as previously mentioned in connection to Hines's ethnography of the Post-Industrial Middle-Class or the 'leisure class.' While there are differences between class ideologies in the Canadian young middle-class and the middle-class Japanese tour guides, by and large, a lot of the same feelings of tension between work and personal life are echoed here. Satsuka discusses the idea that a middle-class lifestyle emphasizes work as central to one's life, where a good portion of your day is spent at work, thinking about work, or commuting to work. A life where, as Fletcher echoed, dedication, skill, and productivity are deeply valued. Consequently, if one is dissatisfied with their work or work/life balance, it significantly interfered with one's quality of life. My participants repeatedly echoed this as a significant reason they kept coming back to experiences with nature and why they held those

⁵⁵ Fletcher. (2014). Pg. 75-76

experiences in such high regard. Additionally, as I will discuss later, the delineation of work and leisure-self played an essential role for many of my participants in how they viewed themselves and their identity, managed feelings of authenticity, and negotiated ideas of success and freedom.

The delineation between work and personal life (leisure time) is used to regulate time-space and reinforce boundaries between the self as a worker and the individual self to carve out some sort of freedom, individuality, or authenticity. Nature and wilderness experiences act as an outlet for those emotions and beliefs to be projected. In the case of my participants, those experiences help them negotiate individually and collectively what it means to be members of the young middle class during a time of increasing uncertainty. However, experiences with nature are not simply a way to challenge and change identity; members also use it to affirm their status as middle-class. Fletcher argued that this is one reason why experiences with nature emphasize productive leisure, discipline, and devaluing the accumulation of material commodities through productive labour as the mark of success. For example, as many of my more technically skilled participants noted, while kayaking was something you did for the thrill of the sport and the love of the experiences had in nature, it required intensity, focus, drive, patience, the ability to manage your emotions and safely manage your bodies responses. Lastly, it required enough disposable income that the activity is very rarely accessible to those within the working class.

Within the ideology of the leisure class, the concept of nature plays a significant role in the pursuit of freedom and subjectivity away from middle-classness:⁵⁶ one where some of the

⁵⁶ Satsuka. Pg. 45

daily and mental burdens could be lifted. This was also seen in Nash's text, where the frontier presented itself as a space of imagined freedom where traditional community and social responsibilities were lifted in exchange for the perception of a more honest or authentic life without the same constraints as undergone in 'civilized' life. This encapsulated nature as restorative and purifying from the burdens and stresses of work and daily life and nature as a freeing and authentic experience. How my participants as the young middle class conceptualize experience and authenticity are essential to the value they place on encounters with nature and the processes of identity negotiation that occur as a result.

Chapter 6: Precarity, Performative Class, and Dirtbag Culture

Themes and Insights

The major themes that arose during my ethnographic fieldwork and my interviews were community and family, authenticity and freedom, and the performative nature of class and class negotiations.⁵⁷ Existing literature indicated that the ideological conceptions of what we call nature, how we value the physical aspects, and the meaning we place on interactions with nature, wilderness, the ‘outside’ or however else it is defined, is complex and multidimensional. Nature as a place, an escape, and a restorative practice has deep meaning for the middle-class, and literature reaffirms that from the last several decades. However, something different for the young middle class in 2021 is that they are coming of age during a time of intersecting crises and global precarity. Coming of age is already a time of identity and class negotiations, and growth from adolescence to adulthood often brings with it a fair amount of economic precarity, even for the otherwise affluent young-middle-class. However, the young middle class is facing an unprecedented level of environmental disaster. The Covid-19 pandemic has not only strengthened feelings of precarity but has also created more economic and social instability and emphasized existing environmental change.

In other generations, feelings of economic precarity might have driven the young middle class to maintain the status quo for fear of falling into poverty. Alternatively, climate disaster and instability might have encouraged a departure from the norms of the middle-class lifestyle

⁵⁷ For examples of performative middle-class culture in nature, see Slaney Gose, Emma. *Belonging to the Wilderness: Saskatchewan's Prince Albert National Park and Settler Cosmologies* (2011).

trajectory towards the exclusive pursuit of experiences with nature. However, my participants as a group face both simultaneously. They are confronted with significant economic instability and multiple environmental crashes. The housing market is a constant and deepening struggle. Job stability has been further compromised by a global pandemic that emphasizes precarity in all other areas of life. Simultaneously, climate change and environmental disaster are increasingly present in their day-to-day lives and threatens to permanently change access the young middle class has to experiences nature, as well as to erase countless opportunities to experience some aspects of it. The United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported on the extremely dire climate situation, calling it a “Code Red for Humanity,” conclusively citing human actions as the cause. USA Today⁵⁸ released an article that quoted said Frances Moore, a professor of environmental science and policy at UC Davis, who stated on the outcome of the report, "We do not have the option now of going back to a world with no climate change impacts. The report makes that clear that changes that already happened are essentially irreversible.” This amounts to the young middle class being constrained between two driving forces – economic and environmental instability. In addition, the epidemiological Covid-19 pandemic further stresses the precarity they feel. Coming of age during a time of global and local precarity further emphasizes the difficulty of identity negotiation and affirmation processes they experience through experiences with nature. As a group who primarily had their encounters with nature on the water and in deeper forested areas, they saw the impact of climate change and environmental degradation firsthand, and the precarity was never far from their minds.

58 Mendoza, Jordan. “UN's Climate Change Report Issued a 'CODE Red for HUMANITY': Is There Anything We Can Do to Fix It?” (USA Today. August 10, 2021).

Performative Class and Dirtbag Culture

During the last few hours of my fieldwork, I witnessed a different side of the group. When everyone was out of the water, their boats loaded in neat, if slightly ungainly looking piles on cars, with wet hair and street clothes back on, I saw the transition from rugged, focused but overjoyed youth to the more formal presentations they might show of themselves at work or school. When all the gear was loaded into the cars, and Jennifer, Jake, and Liam had left, the rest of the group filed down the pathway that ran along the falls to where the public bathrooms were located to clean up and get into their street clothes. The transition within the group was startling, and I was struck by the visible differences in how the group spoke and interacted outside of the water. With her hair in a messy braid with two distinct strands pulled out the side during the run, Torri now wore a slick bun, expensive sandals, and a cleanly tailored blouse. Adam, who had been wearing a graphic t-shirt and vibrant pink shorts, was now wearing well-fitting jeans and highly shined loafers. Sarah and Savvy, who had been over-joyed to ‘wrestle’ with their paddles on the water and consequently go covered in a greenish-brown mixture of river water and mud, looked completely polished and clean now. Both had brushed their hair, cleaned up their arms, and stood by the cars wearing neat dresses. The transformation I saw was not just a change of clothes– it was the shift in behaviour, dress, and ways of being from ‘dirtbag’ to young professional.

Dirtbag is a term used by many adventure sport and wilderness communities and has a complex backstory and can mean slightly different things to different groups. Simplified, however, to be a dirtbag is a term of endearment in the white-water community that indicates a full commitment to the lifestyle. Dirtbags are not exclusively kayakers and can be found in all

styles of adventure sports and activities, usually with a fair amount of crossover. A dirtbag can be a skier, climber, hiker, or paddler and is defined by the departure from a 'typical' life to pursue enjoyment actively and exclusively in these types of experiences. The typical dirtbag is often shown in the literature, such as in Hines' ethnographic piece on the Permanent Tourist.⁵⁹ In most ethnographies, and in the stereotypical understanding within the community I studied, dirtbags are often middle-class people who, either in their youth or after they have established careers and economic capital, shun standard employment to live a more nomadic life chasing experiences with nature. They are often portrayed as couch surfing, living in a van, or otherwise wandering after the next experience without family or many societal ties and dedicating their lives to their pursuit. The way the dirtbag is conceptualized within my participant group is of a free person capable and committed to following their passion, throwing off the perceived phony lifestyle of typical society to get back to a more spontaneous and authentic lifestyle of pursuing nature experiences. While hippie in the traditional sense does not encapsulate the dirtbag culture, it is not far off. The typical dirtbag would wake up early, grab their gear from their van, wash their hair in the nearest body of water and spend the rest of their day pursuing their passion. Only stopping to act as a guide for a few hours, or maybe if the person is flexible enough with the definition, work in a gear shop or greasy diner for a few months, before moving on to the next run, climb, or hike. They would get invited on runs based on chance encounters, squat and freeload their next meals. They would always be moving, constantly gathering experiences, and almost always staying unrooted and firmly unbound.

59 Dwight Hines, J. "In Pursuit of Experience: The Postindustrial Gentrification of the Rural American West." (2010)

Everyone I interviewed had some homage to the dirtbag on their car, gear, or personal belongings. I saw stickers that portrayed actual bags of dirt, several stickers with some form of sexual innuendo involving paddling or water, and even more, involving beer. Several of the group had Ottawa-river-specific stickers or eco-badges encouraging the protection of oceans and lakes. Many also had stickers that noted major runs they had done, and I noted one that said in faded letters, “I feel sorry for people working right now.” The dirtbag was a nexus for the ideal lifestyle for those passionate about experiences with nature, a sort of ultimate target for everyone in the group. However, the reality is often quite different. Even within the current ethnographic literature, the dirtbag lifestyle often comes crashing to a halt when an inevitable emergency, such as unexpected pregnancy, family obligation, or health crisis arises. After all, very few dirtbags have dental care, even if they are following their dreams.

Within this group, the dirtbag was a character held on a pedestal as the ideal lifestyle of everyone passionate about the sport and the perceived authenticity of the experience. Nevertheless, not one of my participants was actively trying to attain the true dirtbag life. There has been a shift in the broader community for dirtbag to encapsulate a state of mind more than a state of lifestyle, which was visible within my fieldwork. Although every person I interviewed valued the dirtbag imaginary and often the aesthetic, none felt they were in a position to leave their lives behind simply. A great deal of this was due to the precarity they felt economically, socially, and environmentally. However, much of it was that my participants felt equally passionate about their jobs, if not always emotionally accessible or authentic. Equally important, several of my participants also enjoyed the relative stability of having middle-class jobs. However, this created an additional sense of inauthenticity for some of the group. After all, the

dirtbag did not return to work on Monday as a computer engineer. This resulted in the community's performance of dirtbag culture while also upholding some of the characteristics of the middle-class lifestyle that was supposedly at odds with it.

Authenticity and Identity Negotiations

At the end of my fieldwork, the group all found spots at the benches located a few hundred meters from the falls, brought out their lunches and backpacks, and I was introduced to the bougie side of the community. The group, which had been extremely loud and outgoing before, always focused on each other or the experience was replaced by a group that slowly but surely broke into smaller groups of twos and threes, who quietly spoke or distracted themselves on their phones. Out went the cheap beer, and instead, the group spent the next several hours drinking alcohol that cost more than the gas it took the group to haul their boats here. Likewise, the cheap fruit snacks, crinkled water bottles, and power bars the group had been snacking on were gone. Instead, it was replaced with such a humorously out-of-place charcuterie board, filled with fruit, cheese, meats, and various crackers that I could not help but laugh. When I asked Cole and Abby why the sudden change, I was met with the somewhat defensive statement, “Even dirtbags like decent food,” which sent the group into laughter for several minutes.

Nevertheless, there was something to that statement that caught my attention. As someone who had grown up in poverty, I wondered if they were aware of the stark differences in how they acted as dirtbag kayakers, verses out of the water and away from those encounters with nature. Out went the dirty, rowdy, more flexible group, and in its place was a group of more restrained, opinionated, and inattentive group of young people. The transformation from dirtbag

to young professional was also the transformation between challenging traditional class identities back to perhaps not affirming, but a gentler negotiation of class boundaries. The performance of the dirtbag kayaker, with its dirty clothing, messy hair, and a rather loose understanding of edible foods and cheap alcohol, was shed. In its place was the professional young middle-class worker, wearing expensive clothing (rather than the cheap clothing – expensive gear that was part of the dirtbag identity), with far more refined and bougie tastes. For better or worse, the change was stark and, in my mind, led to broader discussions of what authenticity within this group looked and felt like.

During my fieldwork, the ways authenticity was discussed and understood varied from what the conventional literature about the middle-class and understanding of authenticity with nature would suggest. This was apparent in the transformation from the performance of dirtbag culture back to more traditional understandings of young middle-class presentation. Traditionally, when exploring themes of authenticity within experiences with nature, nature is explored in opposition to society or civility. It is often portrayed as a balm or fix for the troubles of daily life. This was present to some degree for my participants; however, what was striking was that the people within the community I interviewed were by and large driven by a need for balance between authenticity of experience in nature and the drive and passion they felt for their work or education; a balance between dirtbag and bougie member of the young middle class, if you will. Much of the older literature on this topic portrays the middle-class worker as desperately trying to shake off the shackles of a 9-5 job, until eventually, with the economic stability provided by that job, they are able to quit or change jobs and throw themselves entirely

into experiences with nature as things like guides, teachers, or even things such as park rangers.⁶⁰ However, for most of my participants, their reality was different. Some of my participants argued that instead of what some older literature indicates, kayaking and experiences with nature were not an escape or a 'getting back' to nature. Instead, it was a more complicated mix of balancing different aspects of their lives and maintaining feelings of authenticity when the world felt unstable.

Many of my participants felt that they did not or had not fit in other areas of their lives, particularly within the cultural aspects of their work. Abby, Adam, and Liam all discussed how they were expected to reflect high levels of professionalism within their careers that often felt autonomous and lifeless, and that often drove them to continue seeking experiences with nature. This connects back to Hochschild's⁶¹ view of how authentic emotions are valued over the deep acting and emotional labour required for the middle-class in their careers. Hochschild's research found that due to the increasing requirement of managing one's emotions at work, there is a greater virtue now attached to what is natural or spontaneous in the emotional realm, such as the experiences and encounters with nature my participants felt during white-water kayaking. However, most of my participants felt equally passionate about their jobs. While they noted it was less mentally and physically 'freeing' compared to their experiences with nature, they were by and large passionate about their careers and unwilling or unable to shirk them. What this resulted in was a sometimes-dichotomous push/pull between experiences with nature and their careers.

⁶⁰ See Hines (2010); Fletcher (2014).

⁶¹ Hochschild. (2012). pg. 22

My participants shared a key view that the skills and experiences with nature, particularly the more complex, remote, or geographically far runs, gave them some form of cultural capital. Both within the community and outside of it, the perceived exclusivity and cultural capital helped the group to find and define their authenticity and identity within the world. Having been to certain places, such as Bidwell, British Columbia, Cataract Canyon in Utah, Chattanooga River in Georgia, or Gauley River in West Virginia, gave them credibility as a kayaker. The difficulty, the exclusivity, and to an extent, the transitory and fleeting nature of these experiences were all something to be proud of and something they felt set them apart from others within similar age or class groups. Liam, Torri, and Abby felt that having these experiences made them unique amongst their peers. Liam put it like this,

“If you tell your friends or coworkers about the rad boof you did, or how you got sucked out of your kayak and spent the weekend swigging bootie beers as penance, you quickly realize that the norms see your weekend plans as wild or even a waste of time. They worry. All they see is the expense or the danger in it. And like, that’s fair, but they don’t see the purpose or the passion. But I think they do see the uniqueness. Like, they do think it’s cool and they see you in a different light than the rest of your coworkers who like went to brunch or the farmer’s market. They see this difference in you and it feels pretty great, even if they don’t get why.”

What Liam recounted was echoed by my other participants. Outside of the community, the devotion to experiencing nature is often misunderstood. However, my participants felt that it

positively set them apart from their coworkers and peers who did not engage with nature experiences in that way. In other words, it helped to challenge their identity as middle-class members and allowed them to negotiate their position as, in Abby's words, “the resident dirtbag,” which allowed them to negotiate feelings of authenticity within their careers and regular social lives.

Community and Family

The last thing I want to discuss is the recurring theme and a reason stated by all my participants for why they valued the experiences with nature, and this was the feeling of community created outside of their work - in some ways, even outside of their everyday social lives. This was a community created at the intersection of love of nature, competitiveness, feelings of inauthenticity within their regular lives and within their jobs in some cases, and through feelings of loss and fear over climate change. However, it was also a community at the outskirts of their regular social circles. As strange as it was for me, an outsider, to hear, several people within the group described how these people they spent 48-72 hours with almost every week were not really their *friends*. They described how they knew about each other's personal lives, their jobs, and life stresses. Nevertheless, they often only saw each other while engaging with nature, on hikes, climbing, biking, and of course, kayaking. They would grab food and a beer with them during their excursions, spend their weekends in dangerous and intense activities... yet still, they described how they probably would not go to the movies or grab brunch together.

This community exists as a micro-community of their lives, despite taking up a significant portion of their time during the on-season of late spring-early fall; the community was, in many ways, isolated from the rest of my participants social and work lives. One of my participants described how during the Pandemic restrictions in the summer of 2020, their mental health suffered to the point of excessive drinking and self-harming behaviour. It was not their coworkers, partner, family, or close friends who pulled them out of it: instead, it was the community of kayakers who saw the physical and emotional danger they were putting themselves in. My participant's emotional state was not viewed as an individual emotional problem; instead, it was viewed as a community issue – if one person was to put themselves in danger (even unintentionally) the whole group would be in danger – so it was the kayaking community which helped to support them through their depression. While kayaking is theoretically an individual sport, the reality is that kayakers have to rely on other boaters to help scout, plan, and potentially rescue them from the water if something goes wrong. It was this micro-community that spent hours talking, comforting, and motivating this person to seek help, all while on the side of a river waiting for their chance at a run. In this context, my participants viewed themselves more as family, in the ways that they might not be involved in each other's day-to-day lives but were committed to one another's safety and improvement within the experience of kayaking together. This created a bond that helped to maintain the group in the off-seasons, as well as in other activities.

The community played a central role in the ability of members to challenge and affirm their status as middle-class during a time of perceived precarity – both socially and environmentally. Coming of age during a time of extreme precarity like the young middle class

has emphasized the complexity within identity and class negotiations, as well as complicated experiences with nature. Having a place where they could engage with nature, form community, and be active in dirtbag culture with other people was vital to how they understood what it meant to be the young middle class in a time where traditional markers, such as owning a home or getting married, were uncertain. However, as much as my participants valued their experiences with nature, the ongoing environmental crisis could not be ignored. What might have otherwise acted as a balm to soothe economic and identity insecurity has come with its own sense of instability. However, what was certain within this group is that the role of community was complex, mutable, and provided a sense of security, which helped combat the precarity they faced in other areas of their lives.

Conclusion and Thoughts for Future Research

This thesis aimed to understand how members of the young middle class used encounters with nature to create, maintain, and challenge conceptualizations of authenticity, emotional management, and feelings of precarity. The young middle class are coming of age during a time of intersecting economic, environmental, and now the epidemiological crisis in the form of the Covid-19 pandemic. My participants were young, middle-class white-water kayakers in and around the Ottawa area, between the ages of 20-29, who actively engage in encounters with nature through experiences such as kayaking. Prior to the pandemic, my participants sought out these experiences internationally, travelling outside of Canada to different white-water runs, or engaging in ecotourism activities. As a generation, questions of emotional control, authenticity, freedom, community, cultural capital, and the identity valuation of experiences with nature abound within my research.

By analyzing a community of white-water kayakers, I sought to understand what role experiences with nature play in identity creation and negotiation for my participants, particularly in ideologies of middle-classness. Through interviews and participation in several white-water runs, my research explored how perceptions of class and environmental precarity were understood within the young middle class, and consequently, how my participants were able to challenge, affirm, or negotiate those feelings. My participants valued white-water kayaking to distinguish themselves from others within the young middle class and affirm their status during a time of economic uncertainty. The role of emotional management within their careers was a driving factor to why they chose to seek experiences with nature like white-water kayaking, which comes with inherent risks, and why they sought out activities within nature that required a

high level of emotional regulation. Ideas of professionalism often collided with the casual, earthy, “dirtbag” mentality of kayaker culture, and my participants had to negotiate individually and collectively what that meant for them.

My research found that the young middle class use experiences with nature in complex and sometimes dichotomous ways. Rather than simply as an escape, experiences with nature often challenge and affirm their identity status. However, there is tension between feelings of authenticity, precarity, and the joy of experiences with nature and the drive towards career success and traditional middle-class values. Experiences in nature and kayaking specifically created a space where my participants felt they could challenge and negotiate who they were and where they fit in the world. My participants were able to negotiate and challenge feelings of inauthenticity and precarity through their experiences kayaking and within their community while at the same time affirming their status within their careers and personal lives. Despite coming of age during intersecting economic and environmental crises, my participants deeply valued their experiences with nature. Even with the added pressures of the Covid-19 pandemic, my participants found ways to continue to build community and challenge and negotiate what it means to be the young middle class today.

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