

## **Inviting Conversations about ‘Friluftsliv’ and Relational Geographic Thinking**

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### ***Abstract***

Friluftsliv has been characterized as an engagement with the primal interactions of ‘free nature’—that nature which possesses original rhythms, intrinsic value, and is free from culture. From the perspectives of cultural geography, current theorizations of nature have shifted from dualistic worldviews to relational worldviews. The former entails an ultimate differentiation between Nature and Society, while the latter rejects distinctions between nature and human society. Thus, relational worldviews depict a reality in which humans and non-humans exist in networks that are concurrently very real, discursive, conceptual, practiced, social, and material.

This paper, and subsequent presentation, attempts to flesh out the associations between friluftsliv and relational thinking in cultural geography, not only in regards to the ideas of nature, but how such ideas are translated into practice. As such, this paper considers friluftsliv from an interdisciplinary angle and invites a conversation about the nature of friluftsliv’s ‘nature’.

*Keywords:* nature, relational worldviews, cultural geography

## Inviting Conversations about ‘Friluftsliv’ and Relational Geographic Thinking

### *Introduction*

Bryan, the first author, has yet to be in Norway. And, in light of the troubles associated with transplanting friluftsliv to contexts outside of Norway and Scandinavia (Brookes & Dahle, 2007), he would be hard pressed to say with certainty that he knows the free-air life represented in friluftsliv. Bryan has, however: journeyed extensively through Canadian landscapes by canoe; glided with more or less success to campus on skis during winter snow storms; smiled and relaxed his shoulders to embrace cleansing rains while commuting by bicycle; walked barefoot into a roadway food service centre after having grown accustomed to strolling with naked feet upon the Earth; shared the values and lessons of outdoor life with others; and reflected upon the meanings embedded within such experiences (Grimwood, 2005, 2008; Grimwood & Fennell, 2008). More important than these ordinary encounters with the world, he thinks, is the willingness to learn more about relationships among people and natures, as in friluftsliv, and to contribute to their conversations.

This paper grew from a seed planted by Aage Jensen during his keynote address and presentation at the September 2008 conference of the Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (Canada). Conference Organizer, Bob Henderson, invited Aage to bring to the Canadian gathering Norwegian perspectives to outdoor education (1) (see [www.coeo.org](http://www.coeo.org)). At this meeting, dozens of outdoor education practitioners, teachers, students, and researchers enthusiastically embraced the friluftsliv philosophies discussed by Jensen. A notable message within these talks was that, from a philosophical perspective, friluftsliv is concerned with the Cartesian imagination that posits nature and culture in opposition to one another. What Bryan took from Jensen was

that friluftsliv provides an effective union of culture within nature and thus responds to the dichotomous Cartesian split.

Jensen's address came at a time when Bryan was one year into his PhD in (human) geography and seeking out literature that was, likewise, captivated by the tensions of the great nature – culture divide. It seemed that friluftsliv resonated with but also diverged from some of the themes being fleshed out among various English language human, cultural, and critical geographies, such as Braun and Castree (Braun, 2002, 2004; Braun & Castree, 1998; Castree, 2005; Castree & Braun, 2001), Whatmore (1997, 2002, 2006), Hinchliffe (2003, 2007), Harvey (1996), and hosts of others (Croke & Jones, 2003; Croke & Perkins, 2005; Demeritt, 2001, 2002; Figueroa & Waitt, 2008; Proctor, 1998a, 1998b, 2009; Waitt, Figueroa, & McGee, 2007; Watson & Huntington, 2008). Bryan figured that an introductory conversation between friluftsliv and these geographies was in order to see what would converge, diverge, and emerge. He enlisted Bob Henderson's support (Henderson and Vikander, 2007) to help formulate an appropriate route for discussion.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to initiate a conversation about the possible parallel and opposing approaches for responding to the Cartesian divide contained with philosophical friluftsliv and contemporary geographic scholarship. We are wondering, specifically, about the nature of friluftsliv's 'nature'. The aim here is, certainly, not to disprove any foundational beliefs, but to work critically towards teasing out some useful and beneficial insights about ideas and practices of nature that contribute to the projects of both friluftsliv and human geography (Harvey, 1996). The paper begins with general remarks regarding the 'nature' of friluftsliv, which helps us along to our subsequent section concerning dualistic thinking. The final section

introduces relational thinking in human/cultural geography, which is by and large intended to deny binaries such as nature-culture.

### ***The ‘Nature’ of Friluftsliv***

Friluftsliv has been characterized in Norwegian and Scandinavian traditions as an engagement with the primal interactions of ‘free nature’—that nature which possesses original rhythms, intrinsic value, and is unbound from human manipulations (Henderson & Vikander, 2007). The idea of free nature is fundamental to the practices of friluftsliv, which champions simplistic and masterful meetings with the out-of-doors (Henderson & Vikander, 2007), slow and genuine (Gelter, 2007) at times and courageous, independent, and adventurous at others (Repp, 2004).

The diversity within meanings of friluftsliv (Henderson, 2007) is an apparent feature of its landscape. Some friluftsliv traditions, for example, may see nature-life as mundane, familiar, and local while other perspectives view nature-life as exciting and adventurous pursuits of discovery (Brookes & Dahle, 2007). In many respects, the triumphant physical and intellectual journeys of Nansen (Repp, 2004) exemplify the latter while Gelter’s (2007) conception of “Genuine Friluftsliv” may be more representative of the former. In short, both an Arctic expedition and a morning routine walking your dog may constitute friluftsliv. Regional and national variations also characterize friluftsliv traditions, for instance between Norwegian and Swedish perspectives (Backman, 2008; Tordsson, 2007), appealing thus to place-based and context-sensitive understandings of friluftsliv, aptly referred to by Brookes and Dahle (2007). Indeed, as Backman (2008) observed in his literature review, friluftsliv definitions are often distinguishable by understanding where, how, and with what purposes friluftsliv ought to be practiced.

Fundamental to each of these multiple traditions of friluftsliv is the concept of nature. While friluftsliv translates into English as ‘free air life’, ‘nature’ as an idea, as practiced, or as approached—that is, the way one meets nature—seems to be wrapped up in all the forms of friluftsliv. In other words, ideas of ‘Nature’, along with its binary partner ‘Culture’, seem to serve as an unquestioned foundation of friluftsliv, at least in the way it has been translated into English language literature. Faarlund (2007) demonstrates this reliance: for example, in articulating the need for play in free nature, he maintains a distinction between human (i.e., cultural) values and nature values. Indeed, this distinction is rehearsed when Faarlund proposes that, *guidance in friluftsliv attempts to enliven the meeting with free nature in the steps of the traditions of the cultures that are close to nature* (p. 60). For Faarlund and others the friluftsliv goal is for cultures to embrace the oft-quoted epigram: *Nature is the true home of culture*. However, while Faarlund appears to be advocating for restoring a sense of connection to nature, one that has been lost among so-called modern cultures, others find this orientation emblematic of dualistic thinking, which will be explained next.

### *Dualistic thinking*

Air and water pollution, global warming, forest habitat devastation, contamination of sea life, and biodiversity extinction are all examples of large-scale human-induced environmental change. Crutzen (2002) described the extent of these changes as equivalent of a new geological era, which he aptly titled the ‘anthropocene’. Many of these changes threaten the livelihoods of humans and other earthly passengers. Indeed, Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme’s (1994) eco-zoic era denotes spiritual revelation for the change we need and a possible ecologically wiser future.

But what is often considered at the heart of the anthropocene is the notion that human societies—our technologies, sciences, politics, economics, worldviews, etc.—have become detached from those natural processes that make the planet inhabitable. This culturally normal premise is described by Haraway (2008) as human exceptionalism, the fantasy that humanity alone is different from all other entities that exist on the Earth. This division between humans (culture) and all others (nature) is repeatedly attributed to the philosophy of 17<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Rene Descartes and has been more persistent in Western traditions of understanding the world ever since. But not only has the Cartesian divide placed culture and nature in opposition to one another, it is also implicated in magnifying other distinctions such as self/other, mind/body, male/female, object/subject, human/animal, civilized/primitive, right/wrong, God/man (Haraway, 1991). These kinds of divisions illustrate what we mean by dualistic thinking.

One likely reason for the international interest in friluftsliv is its rendering of the human and nature relationship such that the duality between nature and culture is resolved. Certainly this is a high order aspiration. As mentioned, friluftsliv's nature is considered the true home of culture. Humans are part of nature. As anthropogenic environmental change reaches global extremes and harnesses greater popular attention and understanding, friluftsliv encapsulates a bond with—or better—an approach to nature that many aspire to. In other words, friluftsliv offers lessons for healing our split from nature (Duenkel, 1994). For many outdoor educators and researchers, friluftsliv constitutes a fresh way of educating new views of nature; views that Tordsson (2007) suggests must *convey to new generations an understanding of nature that will not result in a repetition of [contemporary environmental problems]* (p. 72). As such, friluftsliv

may contribute importantly to the ontological assumptions (i.e., our beliefs about reality) of nature on which future environmental histories will be made (Brookes & Dahle, 2007).

However, in so far as friluftsliv embraces ideas of ‘free’ nature and lifestyles that are anti-modern by folding culture into nature, it may be said that friluftsliv follows what Proctor (2009) describes as an ineffective tale of environmentalism. This tale entails ideas of connecting or reconnecting to nature, is set within popular notions of nature as the biophysical world, and laments modernity’s rejection of its dependence on nature. It is a tale that Proctor suggests recreates and reaffirms the dichotomy between nature and culture. These arguments are discussed next.

Generally speaking, the problem with dualistic thinking is that it establishes a relationship between two things whereby one is more dominant than the other (Haraway, 1991). For example, dualistic thinking leads to at least three uneasy ways of conceptualizing the relationship between nature and culture. First, nature can be viewed as an independent state that is threatened by invasion of human society (Hinchliffe, 2007). Nature is on the verge of being engulfed by culture, thus marking the *end of nature* as McKibben (1989) phrased it. This is the view that typical conservation and preservation campaigns adopt: nature is threatened so it must be protected.

Second, nature may be perceived as a state dependent on the actions and orderings of humans, which suggests that nature does not exist prior to social relations (Hinchliffe, 2007). Here, nature is considered to be inescapably social, a result of both the material and conceptual constructions of human culture (Castree & Braun, 2001). Similar ideas are expressed by Cronon (1995) in his well-known social construction critique that designating wilderness areas prevents us from valuing the natures available in our everyday lives.

Finally, dualistic thinking is also couched within the impulses of cultural ecology, the understanding that nature and culture ought to exist in homeostatic balance (Braun, 2004). This orientation tends to view the world as an organic system—akin to Lovelock's (1995) *Gaia hypothesis*—whereby culture is essentially collapsed into nature and must function in accord with natural law (Braun, 2004). This *culture within nature* standpoint, as we have said, is where friluftsliv seems to fit. What Proctor (2009) and his advisers (see e.g., Harvey, 1996; Latour, 1993; Whatmore, 2002) would argue is that such a view resonates with totalitarian regimes, where individual rights are denied in favour of the health of the organic system determined by those with the political, technological, and scientific expertise to do so. These authors contest that the world is much more complex than purified notions of nature and culture lead us to believe.

### ***Relational Thinking in Geography: A Response to Dualistic Thinking***

Relationships between nature and culture have been a central subject of inquiry within the Anglophone traditions of human and cultural geographic scholarship. In 1920's USA, pioneer cultural geographer, Carl Sauer, established that a cultural landscape results from culture's actions upon nature, a response to the environmental determinism that reigned the day (Schein, 2004). Since World War II, various currents of thought have elaborated upon Sauer's foundations to articulate understandings of nature – culture relationships (Braun, 2004). A review of these, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. Our attention is committed to a more recent turn of events.

In many contemporary circles, human and cultural geographers are dedicated to destabilizing the relationships of dominance found in dualistic thinking and are, therefore, questioning the very meaning or ‘reality’ of nature and culture. These geographers argue that the

categories of nature and culture are no longer effective ways of understanding, representing, or engaging in the world. Drawing significantly from authors in science and technology studies, such as Bruno Latour, John Law, and Donna Haraway, geography has experienced what may be called a *relational turn* (Braun, 2008), one that opposes the distinctiveness of nature and society implied in dualistic thinking and favours instead projects that attempt to reveal worlds that are more-than-social but less-than-natural (Castree, 2005). For example, rather than explaining a forest as a purely natural phenomenon, these geographers are inclined to describe how the forest is a product of countless entangled human and nonhuman relationships that are at once conceptual, ideological, real, discursive, practical, dynamic, and political. In this way, an identity—such as a forest—is constituted temporarily through more or less stable interconnections with other important elements (Massey & collective, 1999) that are more than ecological connections referred to in the ‘web of life’ metaphor. A forest, therefore, is not defined in terms of being ‘natural’ or ‘unnatural’, ‘pristine’ or ‘contaminated’, but instead in terms of its relationships with other social-material phenomena (Castree, 2005). The Western imaginary of divisions—such as either/or, outside/inside, object/subject, body/mind, or nature/culture—are refused in favour of imaginations of impure, mixed-up and hybrid worlds (Castree, 2005; Massey & collective, 1999). From this perspective, humans are embedded within integrated networks of diverse, interrelated, and contingent socio-ecological beings whereby, for instance, a so-called ‘environmental’ health problem like cancer is only treatable when we treat environmental/body toxins beyond seeing the body as ‘other’ to nature. Tell this to the canvassers traveling door-to-door seeking monies to advance cancer research on the body. Tell them you address this problem with funds towards environmental toxin eradication and see the culture/nature – body/nature duality at work.

A recurrent departure point for many relational thinking geographers is the book by French science and technology studies scholar, Bruno Latour (1993), *We Have Never Been Modern*. Latour argues that to be modern means that we consider separately the practices of purification (e.g., what is purely ‘natural’) and translation (e.g., how something ‘cultural’ is considered to spoil the ‘natural’). Thus, drawn in to purification are modern assumptions that real and actual separations exist between pure forms of Nature and Society, and between their respective counterparts object and subject, non-human and human. These dichotomies contribute to the establishment of subsequent separations between science and politics, past and present, facts and values, and God and the world. While moderns seek out purification, hybrid forms flourish (i.e., translation) but are rendered invisible, unrepresentable, and unaccounted. According to Latour, practices of purification and translation result in modern myths that enable some humans to perceive themselves as separate from ‘things’, that considers morality something only society brings to the world, and that affords scientific ways of knowing uncontested truths based on fact.

These problems associated with modernity are exemplified in Braun’s (2002; see chapter 4) account of nature-based tourism on the west coast of Canada. Drawing from the itinerary, substance, and promotional materials of a commercially operated multi-day ocean kayaking tour, Braun observes that travel of this kind produces subjects (i.e., travelers) who experience the present in terms of loss. According to Braun, these paradoxical events frame that which is lost (an original, pure nature or culture) as an impossibility to discover. Consequently, travel becomes a commodified source of pleasure that renders pristine ‘nature’ as a space trapped outside or prior to modernity. This has the effect of producing modernity (i.e., urbanization) as the final destination to which all cultures eventually end up (Braun, 2002). By extension, the

First Nations Peoples who live in these non-historical ‘wilderness’ spaces are systematically denied their particular histories, their right to self-determination, or a suitable place to contribute to modernity. Accordingly, First Nations are often confined to travelers’ romantic and problematic notions of primitive or noble savages. Following Braun, nature-based travel experiences can reproduce landscape narratives of mourning that deny First Nations opportunities for creating spaces and adapting their own identities to contemporary settings.

Thus, credence to the myths of modernity—that is, purification and translation—according to Latour (1993), leaves us ignorant of the world’s inherent messiness, where identities such as people or things, humans or nonhumans, cultures or natures, ocean kayaking tourists or First Nations are, in fact, not distinct or pure. As such, Latour contends that modernity has never happened, nor has it ever functioned according to the rules of its constitution. For that reason, he argues, there is nothing more modern than to reject modernity by collapsing culture into nature (Braun, 2004).

### ***Conclusion***

Both Bob and Bryan enjoy experiencing outdoor life. We value opportunities for activities and contemplation outside with other people, and practicing these things with skill, respect, responsibility, and in a way that cherishes and celebrates living a good life in the world. Neither of us are hostile towards those things we typically call nature. As Bob (2005) has written, every trail has a story. We care about the complex trails and stories of ‘natures’ and ‘cultures’ and through this paper we seek to contribute to a conversation about their relational dimensions.

What is the nature of friluftsliv’s nature? How is this related to dualistic thinking and modernity and their associated challenges? What alternative perspectives exist that can inform,

expand, or make possible more meaningful and creative friluftsliv? What implications do these alternatives have for friluftsliv, outdoor learning and living, and livelihoods? These are important questions to reflect upon and discuss. Although this paper has provided some routes of exploration, many more remain. As the authors of this paper, we look forward to mapping out some of these with you during this celebratory trek.

- (1) A. Jensen drew on the work of Jay Griffith and Arne Naess to consider issues of time and boredom, and “activeness” versus activity in outdoor education.

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