

The Sublime Reimagined: Moving Towards Deeper Human-Nature Relations in Outdoor Adventure Education

Abstract

Background: Current research in outdoor adventure education advocates for deeper attention to place and the role that place and the more-than-human world play in pedagogical processes. However, historical and socio-cultural analysis of the roots of OAE reveals an educational approach that encourages adversarial human-nature relations towards the pursuit of anthropocentric outcomes. Use of sublime environments towards these ends does not naturally align with the more recent attempts to foster environmental behaviors through OAE. **Purpose:** This research addresses ambiguity between “place” and “pedagogy” to suggest a reimagined role of the sublime that fosters more empathetic human-nature relations.

Methodology/Approach: This research utilizes philosophical phenomenology and post-qualitative analysis to develop an argument for engaging with sublime environments in ways that cultivate empathetic human-nature relations. **Findings/Conclusions:** I argue for an awareness of the *material* aspect of sublime experiences that precedes construction and can inspire empathetic and reciprocal human-nature relations. **Implications:** Reimagining the sublime as a material phenomenon that is relational and promotes virtues of humility, respect, and care for the more-than-human world.

Keywords: philosophical foundations, outdoor adventure education, place-based education, human-nature relations

Context

The role of the outdoors in OAE pedagogy has been studied from a variety of angles and within many different disciplines (experiential education, human geography, ecopsychology, environmental philosophy, etc.). Research suggests that the outdoor environment enhances student relationships with the more-than-human world (Daniel, 2010; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Some studies have utilized quantitative methods to analyze human relations with the more-than-human world, employing various surveys and tools to measure human-nature relations (Nisbet et al., 2009; Mayer & Frantz, 2004). Other studies have used qualitative methods to consider how OAE experience can foster a sense of place (Martin, 2004). However, described further below, the literature also suggests ways in which OAE experiences are rooted in adversarial relations and false dualisms between humans and nature.

The Sublime in Outdoor Adventure Education

Roberts (2012) contends that OAE experiences are often located in sublime environments. The sublime is a complex phenomenon, one that Kant called “negative pleasure” (Brady, 2013). With this phrase Kant was attempting to describe a sensation that is both aesthetically pleasing and yet often simultaneously terrifying or incomprehensible due to its vastness (Brady, 2013). The sublime often elicits fear—real or perceived—due to its sheer magnitude, power, and “otherness.” Thus, in the early 1900s, when OAE was in its infancy, the sublime seemed an idyllic environment against which “man¹” could test his skill and courage.

¹ “Man”, followed by the pronoun “his”, is used deliberately here as these early programs were exclusively for the male identifying population.

Driven by militaristic ideals (among other things), the more-than-human world became the adversary William James (1911) called for in his *Moral Equivalent to War* (Martin et al., 2017).

Recent scholarship in modern philosophy maintains that the sublime is outmoded, with the most damaging claim suggesting that sublime experiences are naturally dualistic and hierarchical, setting humans apart from nature and ultimately valuing humans over nature (Brady, 2013). Much of Kant's writings and the writings of the 1800s Romantics, for example, point to egoism and the humanizing of nature as a way to understand the self. Some, for example, suggest the sublime results in an elevation of the human mind, which at times can be construed as a kind of self-admiration (Brady, 2013). In this way, experiences of the sublime often position nature as an alien "other"—something to conquer, control, and colonize.

Methods

Stemming from my theoretical position in post-qualitative analysis, this study focuses on phenomenological enquiry from a philosophical tradition based in existential phenomenology. Post-qualitative analysis "refuses method and methodology altogether and begins with... major philosophical concepts" (St. Pierre, 2021, p. 166). Thus, I employed philosophical analysis through a desk study that involved three parts: (a) an analysis of Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue (1970), (b) an enquiry into the phenomenological features involved in experiences of the natural sublime, and (c) a survey of relational and Indigenous ontologies. This desk study aimed to synthesize the phenomenological features of the natural sublime with Buber's notion of an I-You encounter through a lens of Indigenous ontologies.

Before stating my findings, and particularly in light of my attempt to highlight Indigenous ontologies, I acknowledge my standing and privilege as an educated, white female. I have attempted to reference Indigenous scholars directly, to the extent their research is accessible.

Findings

While my findings within the overall study are multi-layered, here I focus specifically on the phenomenon of the sublime and the ways in which experiences of the sublime in OAE can be reimagined to promote pro-environmental behaviors. Considering the literature, it could be argued that OAE should steer clear of experiences of the sublime. If these experiences serve to create adversarial relationships and false dualisms between humans and the more-than-human world, then perhaps critics of the natural sublime are right and this concept is outmoded.

This argument, however, seems short-sighted in terms of the complex phenomenology of sublime experiences. In my analysis of experiences of the natural sublime in OAE, the argument is relevant as it relates to *constructions* of sublime experiences that have been largely anthropocentric in nature. However, a *material* experience of the sublime escapes these anthropocentric judgments. By “material” I mean this: there is a relational and embodied component to sublime experiences that occurs before our epistemological constructs engage to make sense of the experience. Embracing the ontological primacy of this materiality allows for the potential to construct these experiences differently, through a lens of relationality.

Take, for example, the experience a rock climber might have when gazing at El Capitan for the first time. The sheer height of the wall can feel overwhelming, almost defeating due to its enormity. Constructed through a substance-based ontology, the object of the sublime can either be the cliff or, from a Kantian perspective, the climber. However, if the climber allows the

materiality of the experience to permeate a bit longer, it's possible for the "object" of the sublime to become the *relation between* the climber and the cliff. Combine this with the embodiment of actually climbing El Capitan—feeling the contours of the rock and acknowledging a dependency upon these features—and a sublime relationship can emerge that is reciprocal in nature. This is further solidified by applying concepts from Martin Buber's (1970) philosophy of dialogue and Indigenous ontologies (Watts, 2013; Salmón, 2000).

Implications

Reimagining the sublime as a material phenomenon that is relational and embodied allows for epistemological constructions that promote virtues of humility, respect, and care for the more-than-human world. The resulting spirit of reciprocity engages a sense of responsibility that can drive pro-environmental behaviors, stemming from a virtue-oriented ethic.

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