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# Purifying Practices: How Consumers Assemble Romantic Experiences of Nature

ROBIN CANNIFORD  
AVI SHANKAR

Prior consumer research theorizes nature as an ideal stage for romantic consumption experiences by framing nature as external to culture. The same studies, however, problematize this framing by highlighting the consumer-cultural resources through which nature is harnessed and interpreted. Through an ethnography of surfing culture, this article theorizes consumers' experiences of nature as emerging from assemblages of heterogeneous resources. A theory of assemblage shows that material geographies are vital to the reproduction of romantic discourses. Assemblages of nature are characterized by fragility and contestation, however, due to service structures, technological resources, and social tensions that betray the ideal of external nature. Consumers overcome these contradictions through purifying practices. Purifying practices preserve romantic beliefs that nature is external to culture by masking or purging problematic elements of assemblages. The negative environmental effects of these practices are discussed and compared with sustainable purifying practices that redress the damaging impact of consuming nature.

The distinction between nature and culture is an enduring dualism that shapes consumers' experiences and representations of the natural world. At first glance nature is that which preexists culture: untouched wildernesses devoid of human influence, where consumers can quit everyday life and enjoy transformative pleasures or sacred rituals of rejuvenation (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002). However, nature/culture, like other culturally pervasive dualisms, does not reflect inherent characteristics of reality (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). On the contrary, distinctions sustained by dualisms are historically constructed through fields of socioeconomic interests (Mick and Fournier 1998) and reproduced by consumers as a means to organize and understand their lifeworlds (Kozinets and Handleman 2004).

The nature/culture dualism is an especially complex and

contested phenomenon, not least because consumers imagine, manage, and experience nature through a variety of cultural discourses, practices, and technologies (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002; Tumbat and Belk 2010). The presence of these cultural resources therefore problematizes consumers' ability to conceive of and experience nature as the opposite of culture (Thompson 2004). Nevertheless, many consumers sustain romantic experiences of nature as "wild, clean, natural, isolated" (Arnould and Price 1993, 29). Our primary research question in this study is, therefore, what are the processes by which consumers overcome contradictions within romantic experiences of nature?

Through data gathered during an 8-year ethnography of surfing culture, we answer this question and make three contributions to consumer research. First, we theorize consumers' experiences in nature as an outcome of hybrid consumption assemblages in which romantic cultural scripts are skillfully combined with material geographies and technological resources. Second, we use this framework to systematically identify contradictions and social tensions that occur within assemblages of diverse consumption resources and show how these can betray consumers' romantic experiences of nature. Third, we explain that consumers sustain romantic experiences of nature through "purifying practices" that mask, purge, or redress problematic features of consumption assemblages.

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Robin Canniford (rcan@unimelb.edu.au) is lecturer in consumer culture and marketing, Faculty of Business and Economics, University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia. Avi Shankar (A.Shankar@bath.ac.uk) is professor of consumer research, School of Management, University of Bath, BA2 7AY, UK. The authors extend thanks to the editorial and review team, Dean Pierides, Eric Arnould, Linda Price, Markus Giesler, and The Surfing Heritage Foundation.

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## CONSUMING ROMANTIC NATURE

Prior studies identify how experiences of nature are constructed through romantic discourses. We explain that sublime, sacred, and primitive discourses are unified into a romantic ideology of consumption through a nodal point (Kozinets 2008) of “external nature,” where nature is the opposite of modern culture (Illouz 1997; Macnaghten and Urry 1998). We then identify the contradictions and challenges consumers face in reproducing a romantic ideal of external nature during market-mediated experiences. Finally, we explain how assemblage theory enables our analysis of how nature is consumed and how contradictions that emerge during this process are overcome.

### Experiential Nature

*Sublime Nature.* A recurring discourse in experiential consumption in nature is the sublime—the blend of pleasure, terror, and beauty that nature can inspire (Burke 1757/1987). During the eighteenth century, sublime discourses reframed wilderness geographies from places to be avoided to places to be sought out for feelings of fear and risk that were viewed as conduits for improved self-knowledge and existential authenticity (MacFarlane 2003). The idea that nature is a place to test oneself in ways that improve self-awareness and authentic identity remains key to studies of extended service encounters and of consumption fantasies. The rewards and restorative powers of river rafting and skydiving stem from the primal thrills of fear and survival in nature that enhance consumers’ sense of self-efficacy and, hence, improve abilities to cope with fear and anxiety in everyday life (Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993). The sublime need not involve immediate contact with dangerous natural forces, however. Indeed, mountain men also appreciate the magnitude and power of nature, albeit from a safe distance (Belk and Costa 1998). Thus, in addition to physical tests, sublime nature is also constructed through mythic and historical scripts that supply a textual playground for heroic and magical play (Arnould, Price, and Tierney 1998; Belk and Costa 1998).

*Sacred Nature.* Sublime nature is sometimes regarded as so awesome that it prompts “nature worship” (Belk and Costa 1998). In such cases, nature is observed as a “kratophanous power” (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989, 6) that, much like sublime experiences, supplies a blend of pleasure and fear that leads to perceptions of self-improvement. In contrast to sublime experiences, however, consumers’ experiences of sacred nature are characterized by an alternative “metaphorical world” in which nature is understood as a divine entity (Arnould, Price, and Otnes 1999, 56). These encounters are conceptualized as consumption magic, an occurrence that restructures thoughts and emotions within a pre-Cartesian worldview such that consumers feel “at one” with nature. Indeed, experiences of consumption magic remove perceived barriers between mind, body, and environments, thereby “enhancing experiences of interrelatedness of

all things in the world” (St. James, Handelman, and Taylor 2011, 635). In particular, this possibility enables consumers to redevelop virtues of confidence and hope and to transcend social barriers of contemporary urban life (Arnould and Price 1993).

*Primitive Nature.* Primitivism unites the powers of sublime and sacred experiences of nature in order to discursively construct an escape from modern, urban culture. Primitivism emerged during the eighteenth century as an expression of dissatisfaction with the stress, ecological degradation, and other unhealthy consequences of industrialization and urban living. The primitive solution to these ills was a life modeled on premodern cultures that were seen to exist in harmony with nature, free from civilized constraints and ignorant of rationalistic logic (Arnould et al. 1999; Canniford and Shankar 2007). Various consumption contexts reproduce primitive ideals. Natural health consumers strive for the possibility to live more harmoniously with nature in order to ameliorate the unhealthy consequences of contemporary lifestyles (Thompson 2004). Mountain men recreate the rugged self-reliance of American frontier life to reinvent identity through premodern scripts (Belk and Costa 1998). Rafter embed themselves in and meditate on landscapes that were once populated by indigenous peoples (Arnould and Price 1993). Also evident in primitive experiences of nature are desires to undo restrictions of civilization by way of carnivalesque rituals and gift economies modeled on “tribal” cultures (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002; Sherry and Kozinets 2007).

### External Nature Underpins Romantic Experience

The romantic discourses that frame experiential consumption in nature offer consumers diverse meanings and experiences. Nevertheless, we note that all three views of nature rely on and reproduce the nature/culture dualism by framing nature as external to culture. Burning Man organizer Larry Harvey describes the desert location of the festival as “400 square miles of nothing” (Kozinets 2002, 21), a geographic antithesis to urban space where primitive rituals and artistic expression naturally follow from the distance that consumers gain from consumer culture (Sherry and Kozinets 2007). Likewise, Arnould and Price (1993, 29) describe how consumers observe nature as “clean, with no signs of civilization, other than ourselves, to be intruding on the pristine environment.” From this standpoint, mountain meadows, river canyons, glaciers, or deserts are valuable contexts where consumers cross the frontier between society and unspoiled wilderness (Arnould et al. 1998).

This ideal of external nature as a pure zone beyond the reach of culture acts as a nodal point that articulates cultural discourses into a more general romantic ideology of consumption (Kozinets 2008; Thompson 2004). Consuming in untouched, isolated places that appear to be free of human marks enhances the existential risk and danger essential to sublime experiences (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002). Equally, places where consumers will not encounter everyday cultural objects, hierarchies,

and responsibilities are considered ideal to establish magical links with sacred nature (Arnould et al. 1999; Belk et al. 1989; Sherry and Kozinets 2007). Finally, the antimodern quests of primitivism also depend on apparently undefiled places where consumers can realize self-reliance, heroic ruggedness, and harmony with nature (Belk and Costa 1998; Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002). Yet, at this juncture, contradictions in consumers' experiences of nature emerge.

### The Contradictions of Romantic Nature

Prior studies illustrate that romantic experiences of nature are "inevitably and ironically molded to the commercial context" (Arnould et al. 1999, 60). Encounters with sublime and magical nature are assured through carefully managed service contexts in which consumers are guided through the discourses and rituals that mediate their quests for magical transcendence and self-improvement (Arnould and Price 1993; Arnould et al. 1999). Despite their espoused primitivism, rendezvous and Burning Man attendees fly and drive from all over America to "wilderness" festival sites, whereupon they register and sign in with a swipe of a credit card (Kozinets 2002). Finally, the locations of nature in which these events occur are often culturally institutionalized areas such as national parks or sites of scientific interest (Soper 1995).

These market-cultural features have important implications for theory that regards nature as external to culture, a pure and sacred zone where consumers escape contemporary urban life. Tumbat and Belk (2010) challenge this possibility in consumption experiences by examining the case of climbers on Mount Everest for whom consumption in nature neither reproduces romantic ideals nor latent virtues of self-efficacy. On the contrary, the expense and congestion experienced on Everest frames nature as a scene to be dominated in the competitive and individualistic pursuit of positional symbolic capital. The managers of climbing parties do not create the pristine, magical, and communal experiences of nature that are carefully crafted by rafting guides (Arnould and Price 1993). Rather, they leave detritus strewn about the mountain; compete for status; and, by arranging almost everything for their clients, they negate the self-reliance esteemed by rendezvous and Burning Man attendees (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002).

Tumbat and Belk's (2010) critique is a powerful rejoinder to research that frames extraordinary experiences as examples of antistructure that reproduce dualisms of sacred/profane or nature/culture. Nevertheless, though their critique of antistructure at the etic level is cogent, they are careful to stress that in circumstances where "there is less conflict and the service context is less extensive," antistructural experiences may still occur for consumers (Tumbat and Belk 2010, 58). At the emic level, therefore, the findings of previous studies remain relevant. Thompson (2004), for example, illustrates that contradictions in romantic discourses do not allay consumers' enthusiasm and belief in the purity of nature. Similarly, Arnould et al. (1999, 61) explain that although "it is surprising that anyone experiences river magic," the com-

mercial service encounter does not preclude experiences of nature as a romantic opposite to culture.

Indeed, despite the logical contradictions and social tensions that occur during experiences of nature, the distinctions between nature and culture that underpin romantic consumption experiences do not evaporate. On the contrary, the nature/culture dualism remains "ingrained in Western culture . . . organizing the imaginations of ordinary people" (Castree and MacMillan 2001, 208). Even when access to nature is tightly regulated and market facilitated, encounters in nature still enable consumers to transcend the "rational order of the normal bureaucratic and corporate existence" (Belk and Costa 1998, 234) and enjoy transformative, healing experiences (Arnould and Price 1993).

### Theorizing Nature for Consumer Research

Our primary goal in this article is to understand how consumers preserve romantic experiences of nature despite the presence of the technological, discursive, and service structures that problematize the ideal of external nature. To explain this, we use a theory of assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 2008) as a framework to consider how value emerges from networked associations established between diverse kinds of resources (Collier and Ong 2005; Rabinow 2003). Assemblage theory bears similarities to semiotic readings of culture in which the meanings of words and texts depend on their relationships with other texts (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Theories of assemblage, however, extend this logic beyond textual association toward a "material semiotics" in which the meanings and uses of any consumption resource are a "continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located" (Law 2009, 141). Much as semiotic theories assign meanings as relational effects of the totality of signs in a sign system, assemblage theory suggests that meanings, uses, and encounters of nature emerge in process, from a totality of multiple elements (Bennett 2010; Latour 1993).

We draw on this facet of assemblage theory to develop and extend our knowledge of the processes by which a variety of consumption resources are orchestrated by consumers in nature. Prior consumer research shows that these resources include mythic narratives, discourses, and technologies, as well as ritual and embodied practices (Arnould et al. 1998, 1999; Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2003; Thompson 2004). However, the manners in which these resources are handled relative to the physical features and forces of material geographies during romantic experiences remain unclear. Assemblage theory allows us to bridge this theoretical gap and explain how consumers marshal discourses and technologies with material geographies in order to experience the transformative effects that prior studies have shown to occur in nature.

Assemblage theory also provides a framework to consider how networks of consumption resources can fail to generate value. Assemblages are, more often than not, enmeshed in processes of contestation and change (Marcus and Saka 2006). Such changes within networks of associated resources can

alter the meaning and value generated (Epp and Price 2010; Law 2009) or lead to situations of “betrayal” in which consumption resources fail to match in useful ways or generate social tensions that thwart the desired purpose of the assemblage (Callon 1986, 221). Prior consumer research tacitly acknowledges that nature moves and changes: a river may be too low for a thrilling rafting ride (Arnould and Price 1993), harsh winds and extreme temperatures make living in the desert difficult (Kozinets 2002), and there are limited climatic windows during which climbing Everest is possible (Tumbat and Belk 2010). Assemblage theory offers a means to place these and other qualities of nature at the center of our analysis (Bennett 2010). In so doing, we are able to track and understand specific betrayals that occur when consumption resources fail to assemble nature in useful ways (Callon 1986). Furthermore, this approach enables us to attend to the methods by which experiences of nature undergo filtering (Newton 2007) and “purification” to hide the hybridity of nature and culture (Latour 1993, 11), thereby sustaining the integrity of romantic experiences of external nature in spite of discordant consumption resources and social tensions.

## RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Our context to explore how consumers assemble romantic experiences in nature is surfing culture. Despite a lifestyle chic that sustains global fashion brands and tourism markets, romantic experiences of nature remain essential to the appeal of surfing (Ford and Brown 2007). Hence, surfing is an ideal context to examine how consumers mix geographic materials of nature with a variety of consumption resources to produce valuable experiences as well as how betrayals in these processes are managed.

Research began with an extended multisite ethnography to assess the manners in which value is attributed to surfing and the various flows of consumption resources that reproduce surfing cultures (Burawoy 2000; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006). Between December 2002 and December 2008 the first author entered into iterative periods of participant observation in multiple surfing locations around the world. Varying from 3 weeks to 2 months, these periods involved going surfing, “hanging out,” and participating in daily life with surfers in their home, work, and travel environments. At this stage, sampling was nonpurposive. Data was collected as fieldnotes, ethnographic interviews, and photographic evidence (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Belk et al. 1989). Between periods of participant observation, both authors triangulated data with other visual and textual sources drawn from surfing magazines and videos, news media, museums, online surf shops, Internet surf reports, as well as personal and public web space (Kozinets 2002; Schau and Gilly 2003).

This multilocal, multivocal mosaic of sources was coded and analyzed with constant comparative techniques (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Emerging themes prompted secondary phases of research and analysis to probe interpretations in more detail (Schau and Gilly 2003). At this stage we focused on the ways that surfers harness the material forces and

geographies of nature among other consumption resources and how they manage the contradictions and problems that emerge during these processes. To examine this theme further, secondary phases of participant observation took place in which the first author returned to locations visited in the initial phase of research. These locations were sampled to include urban beaches, remote country beaches, as well as commercial surf camps and boat charters that offer isolated, sometimes private, surfing experiences.

Semistructured interviews lasting 1–2 hours were carried out with surfers previously contacted at these locations (see table 1). Interviews began with “grand tour” questions designed to elicit accounts of surfers’ experiences of surfing (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989) before probing specific topics of interest. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. In addition, fieldnotes, autoethnographic notes, surfers’ photographs and diaries, as well as guided introspections were collected and triangulated to provide emergent levels of insight (Schau, Gilly, and Wolfinbarger 2009). The research process sought cross-validation between methods (Arnould and Price 1993) and among researchers (Belk et al. 1989; Celsi et al. 1993; Muñiz and Schau 2005). Member-check procedures were used to audit theoretical interpretations and representations (Fischer and Otnes 2006; Thompson et al. 1989).

## ASSEMBLING NATURE

Our data are organized to represent how consumers experience nature by orchestrating assemblages of heterogeneous consumption resources. During coding and analysis, three categories of resources appeared salient in the assemblage of nature. These are discursive resources—the cultural scripts that frame desirable experiences of nature, material resources—the geographies and physical

**TABLE 1**  
PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Nationality
Jake	28	Filmmaker	USA
Tina	23	Pro-surfer/model	USA
Zak	22	Student	USA
Chip	38	Writer	USA
Tom	45	Journalist	USA
Arthur	58	Surfboard shaper	USA
Gary	38	Importer	UK
Matt	23	Artist	USA
Mitch	59	Investor	USA
Ben	67	Surfboard shaper	USA
Jon	25	Surf shop employee	AUS
Sean	40	Musician	AUS
Len	31	Chef	UK
Mal	24	Model	UK
Roy	46	Tradesman	AUS
Flip	83	Retired	USA
Buck	28	Restaurant manager	USA
Evan	24	Bartender	USA
Steve	70	Journalist	USA
Vern	60	Builder	UK

forces of nature, and technological resources—any apparatus by which the forces of nature are harnessed. In keeping with prior research, this section begins by showing how surfers reproduce discourses of nature in their accounts of their surfing experiences. We note that the materials of nature are vital to the reproduction of these discourses; moreover, we find that surfers exhibit practical skills and discipline in matching discourses with suitable material geographies. Finally, we illustrate the role of appropriate technologies in cementing the value of experiences of nature that emerge only when surfers can establish effective relationships between all three categories of consumption resources.

### Discursive Nature

*Sublime Nature.* Surfers often reproduce romantic conceptions of sublime nature. Jake, in particular, considers nature as a place to experience and overcome fear:

I moved up to Central California and stepped into a whole new realm of fear . . . session after session, surfing 20-, 30-foot waves, getting humbled! . . . When I overcame [the fear], it was like taking another giant leap in my personal development that I'm sure reflected back on my day-to-day life and opened me up to overcome fears that I had when I was in school or when I was at my job or whatever . . . because I would reflect back and go, "I just got pounded by a 30-foot wave and I lived." Like whatever, you know, "I can deal with this." . . . You know, most people are trying to take what they've achieved in the water and their awareness and their connection to what they are doing, and they're trying to take that, what they've learned in the water, back to land and apply it to whatever else they are doing and live that type of perfected life back on land.

In line with other sublime consumption experiences, Jake experiences a fearful detachment from daily life that enhances his self-awareness and self-efficacy (Arnould et al. 1999; Celsi et al. 1993; Kozinets 2002). Indeed, Jake acknowledges that overcoming risks, dangers, and challenges in nature is a way to achieve what he calls a "perfected life." Sublime interpretations of nature are common in surfing media (Booth 2008) that valorize images of surfers getting "tube rides" (see fig. 1) accompanied by copy that emphasizes the intensity of these situations, portraying nature as a raw, terrifying power.

*Sacred Nature.* Surfers' sublime experiences are simultaneously pleasurable and terrifying, an emotional conflation that leads to the construction of nature as a sacred power (Belk et al. 1989). Like other consumers of nature (Arnould et al. 1999; Kozinets 2003), Jake values opportunities to experience unity with nature, which he sees as a divine force, claiming that surfing is "a way to get closer to what I felt was kind of divine. Kind of what the divine is all about; it's just a connection with nature and yourself." Our interview with Tina, a professional surfer, revealed that she too considers nature as an immanent and living power. Her introspective diary romantically describes her relationship with

the ocean as mystical, enrapturing, and fantastical and hints at both the benign and menacing possibilities of encountering this transcendent entity (Belk et al. 1989): "Intoxicating tendrils of moisture wind themselves around me, inviting me to dive down deep and immerse myself in coolness. . . . My lungs full of the briny sea vapors, and my body surrounded by the lavish liquid, I merged with the ocean in an intense marriage of flesh and saltwater. Cradled in the arms of my favorite lover, I swam to the harmony of the ocean's lullaby. I didn't care anymore about my life above the Ocean's face. . . . The life I led imprisoned by insensate concrete, limited by unyielding obstacles."

Tina's introspection reveals that her magical experience is related to the ethereal materiality of the sea that flows around, yields to, and embraces her body, a stark contrast to the insensate and limiting obstacles of urban life. Tina interprets this unfamiliar materiality in order to feel divorced from culture and married to the living forces of nature. Feelings of love toward consumption objects can result in a merging consumers' sense of self with the object of affection (Ahuvia 2005). Indeed, Zak also interprets surfing as an opportunity to connect with nature through a loving relationship:

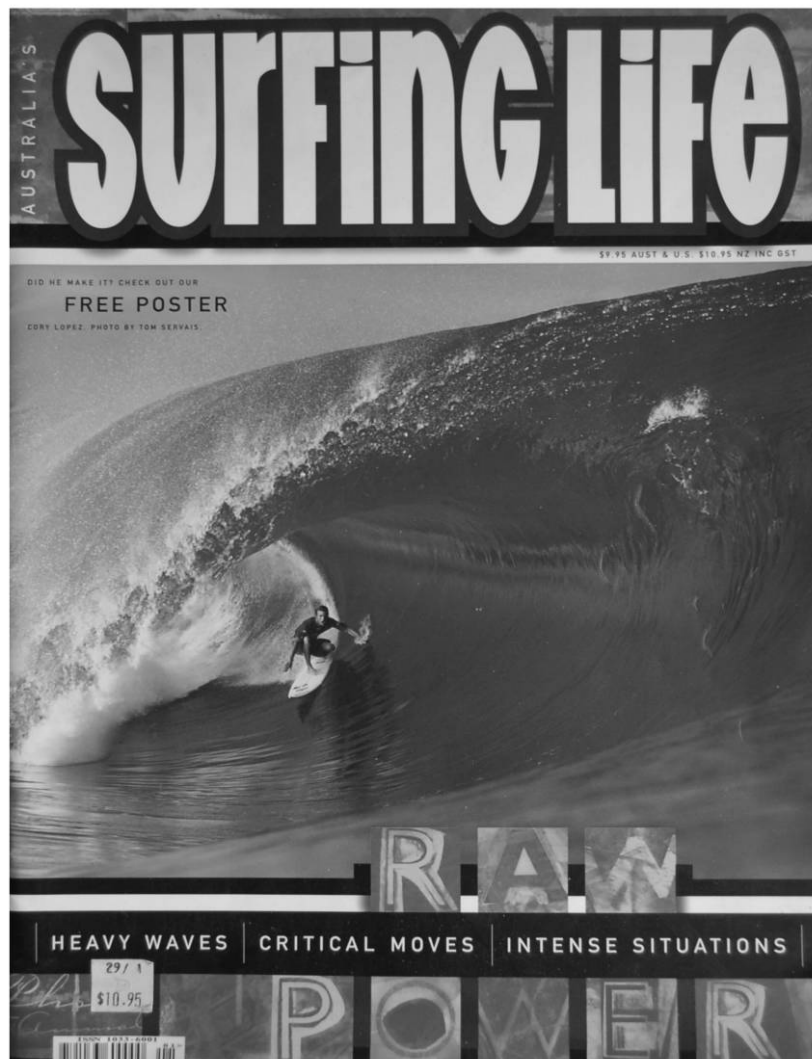
Part of the goal of every session is to forget the things that are bothering me and just live in the moment. It's my time of escape, meditation, and connection with nature. . . . You know, sometimes I'll think or I'll kind-of talk with the waves or, actually just talk with the ocean. . . . I'll say "if you come, I will love you as much as I possibly can," like to the wave and, yeah, I think it's . . . that feeling of interacting with the wave and kind-of having that sort-of union with the wave. . . . I have this relationship with this one wave. . . . I'll expend a lot of energy getting to that spot, and even if I don't surf but I go there like six times, I think that the ocean notices that and will, hopefully, give me some really good waves at some point further down the line.

For Zak, nature is not an inert stage on which to perform identity work (Belk and Costa 1998) or a setting to triumph over (Kozinets 2002; Tumbat and Belk 2010). Rather, he feels that the ocean hears and acts upon him through a reciprocal union of "participation" (Lévy-Bruhl 1985). Moreover, in both Zak and Tina's descriptions of a sensuous, loving relationship with the sea, we can observe narratives of harmony and communion with nature, both of which are key tropes of primitivism (Torgovnick 1990).

*Primitive Nature.* Primitivism looks to history for benchmarks from which to criticize present conditions and to model a more fulfilling future (Belk and Costa 1998; Canniford and Shankar 2007). Some of our respondents expressed that surfing is an antidote to fears about ecological degradation and the global financial crisis. In these cases, nature is valued as a source of energy, food, and fun, all of which sustain a lifestyle in which surfing, "nature," art, and literature are interconnected forms of inspiration and expression (Howard 2008). In these cases, surfers portray themselves as beach-

FIGURE 1

MAGAZINE COVER WITH SURFER TUBE RIDING



combers who eschew many material trappings of civilization in favor of sustainable, ecological lifestyles.

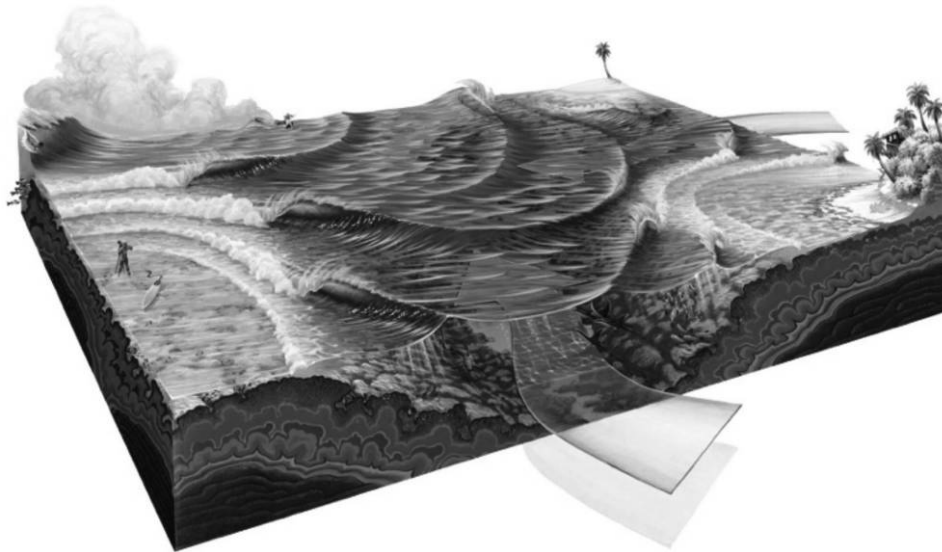
Guided by a desire for escape from everyday life that he calls a “wilderness surfing aesthetic,” Chip discussed how books by Thoreau, Emerson, and London help him to frame surfing as “a call of the wild” experience of nature. During our interview in 2007, he was building a wooden sailboat according to an ancient design from Scotland’s Shetland Islands. In this primitive craft, he intended to explore isolated stretches of the Californian and Mexican coast. Chip’s abstract contemplation of nature as a frontier beyond the reach of urban culture is shared among many surfers we interviewed. Tom, for example, uses nature as a critical counterpoint to everyday schedules:

The time signature of your surroundings is impossible to ignore. You can be at a place for 72 hours and it feels as if you’ve been there for two weeks, because you’re shutting out all noise. I like getting away from the human stain, and surfing, at its best, meaning surfing alone or with one or two others, gives me that. . . . You take yourself away from clocks and computers and televisions and radio and wrist-watches and put yourself on a program where you wake up when the light comes through your tent and . . . you eat when you’re hungry, not when stress tells you to eat. And the change from your patterns in society and your patterns in the wilderness happens in a blink.

Within the isolated spaces that he seeks out, Tom con-

FIGURE 2

## DIAGRAM OF SURFING GEOGRAPHY



NOTE.—Diagram courtesy of artist Phil Roberts.

sciously exchanges daily experiences of noise, stress, and lack of privacy for contact with pristine nature that links his body to natural stimuli such as dark and light, wind, and tide and swell (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2003). Attention to and alignment with these features of material geography enable him to live according to different temporal schedules from those familiar in his working life. In this way, Tom is “absorbed in an intense gaze of nature” (Illouz 1997, 95), a primitive and nostalgic experience of space and time beyond the modern influences of clocks, computers, and urban crowds.

### Material Nature

In the previous section we explained that surfers reproduce discursive frames of nature that are familiar within consumer research. Within our data, however, we detect a vital role for the materials of nature. Jake understands that his sublime experience is enhanced by the fact that he can never control or master the raw power of a 20-foot-high wave. Similarly, the magical union with nature that Zak and Tina describe depends on the flowing material qualities and unpredictability of the ocean environment they immerse themselves in. Moreover, Tom boosts his primitive vision of nature as the frontier of society by allowing himself to be consumed by the temporality of the moving materials of wind, tide, and swell. In this section, therefore, we probe further the processes by which surfers consume material nature. We find that the material resources of nature desired by surfers result from specific and transitory geographic coincidences.

Surfers develop local knowledge, sensory vigilance, and temporal discipline to locate themselves in areas where these coincidences are most likely to generate good waves. We also show that the embodied and sensorial processes by which surfers manage these qualities of material nature enhance the drama of the discourses that they reproduce.

*Contingent Materials of Nature.* Surfers are well aware that the material geographies that they consume are fragile and temporary. Arthur, a surfboard manufacturer, explains that “surfing is different than playing tennis or golf or something where everything’s stationery, everything’s very predictable and so you can practice it and it’s organized and it’s tangible. Surfing does have that element of wildness and unpredictability.” In contrast to many urban leisure activities that take place on permanent locations, Arthur explains how waves depend on temporary coincidences of material conditions that are often difficult to predict. Figure 2, taken from an oceanography manual for surfers, represents how swells generated by oceanic storms meet a coral reef, creating waves that plunge toward the beach. Not only are the right combinations of waves and seabed required but off-shore breezes are also needed to groom ragged waves into smooth regiments over which surfers can easily slide. Finally, tides hide or expose the reefs and beaches over which waves break, amplifying waves or knocking them flat.

*Searching for Nature.* Such complex configurations of material geographic conditions mean that surfing is a precariously transient activity that often lasts only a few hours



before conditions fail. For this reason, surfers search around, trying to locate the optimum locations where the contingent materials will assemble. Gary, a South African surfer who now lives on an isolated coast of the United Kingdom, explains that he is “always working out where that perfect combination of wind, tide and swell are going to come together”:

When I moved here it was a real challenge. On any given day there's often waves but there's normally a lot of wind about too. But the coast faces in so many different directions, that somewhere the wind's going to be offshore. The problem was that there's a million little coves and beaches, and finding the roads to get to all of them . . . it took me years to work it out. But now I have though, you know, whatever the wind, the tide, the size of the swell, I know where it's going to be cooking.

Gary describes how he has developed local knowledge of beach topography, tidal movements, wind, and swell directions. Despite his inability to control the convergence of these factors, by learning how to estimate where and when surfing waves are likely to occur, Gary is not entirely at the mercy of geographic conditions. On the contrary, his skilled use of local knowledge, garnered over many years, allows him to imagine where material nature will align into desirable configurations to produce waves that he and others describe as “cooking.”

*Sensing Nature.* To gather the information necessary to create this local knowledge and to put it into effect, Matt, a graphic designer from Southern California, explains that surfers exhibit sensory vigilance toward material nature: “A good surfer is more in tune with the earth as opposed to someone that just goes and sits in an office all day, like we're noticing the winds, we're noticing like the feeling of the air, we're noticing tides, you know, everything, like a good surfer is like so in tune with the environment . . . you almost kind of know when it's going to be good just by the way everything looks, with the lighting or like, you know, how much the waves are moving.”

Matt believes this awareness keeps him vigilant to the occurrence of waves. Feeling the wind direction with a hand in the air, smelling the rotting seaweed at low tide, watching clouds for changes in the weather, and listening for the surf in the darkness before dawn, Matt commits to a multisensory relationship with nature (Lévy-Bruhl 1985; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007), establishing pleasurable connections between his body and material geography that build knowledge and fuel his desire to experience nature.

*Waiting for Nature.* Many surfers regard waiting for the weather to align into the right configuration as part of their surfing experience. Mitch, for instance, makes an annual pilgrimage for several months every year to live in an ancient farmhouse on a mid-Atlantic island. Here, he devotes himself to surfing a wave known as The Garden. For much of the time that he spends here there are no waves, yet Mitch considers his discipline of waiting patiently to be one of the

most rewarding aspects of surfing: “To surf properly you need time. . . . If it's something that's squeezed into too many things for sure you may get the waves, but you miss out. . . . It's almost about having that time in place, waiting for something to come, and it's almost the opposite of this modern idea that you can just go and buy the commodity of the vacation. . . . For me it's the idea of going for a season, and waiting to see what the season brings.”

In devoting prolonged periods of time observing, interacting, and submitting to the power of the ocean, Mitch feels that he is adapted to the seasonal patterns of weather and waves, an experience that Benjamin explains as an opportunity for “taking that watch off and letting yourself go back to nature” in order to reestablish a “true life rhythm.” In this sense, surfers' attention to the changing materials of nature can liberate them from the schedules of working life (Arnould and Price 1993) and reorient them to a “circular timestyle” that reflects the temporal character of primitive societies (Bergadaà 1990).

## Technologies of Nature

So far, our data show that the qualities of geographic nature, and the ways these materials are handled, enhance the discursive resources that surfers reproduce in their experiences of nature. The possibility to experience sublime nature is enhanced by the contingency and power of surfing conditions that threaten surfers and encourage them to search for wild, out-of-the-way places. This process of searching out waves also leads surfers to learn and apply local knowledge, sensory vigilance, and temporal discipline such that material nature and the surfers' bodies interpenetrate, orienting them to alternative, primitive forms of time that stem from the movement of material nature. In short, through contact with the materials of nature, surfers enhance the meaning and power of consumption experiences that separate them from daily life. In addition to the valuable relations established between discursive and material resources, however, a variety of technological resources are also necessary to assemble experiences in nature. In this section we discuss how technological resources are matched carefully with both the geographic and discursive elements discussed so far.

*Technological and Geographic Nature.* Most obviously, surfers use surfboards to harness the forces and power of nature. Surfers often own a selection of different boards that are useful depending on the material nature they choose to harness. Jon, a surf-shop employee, explained the appeal of a variety of different boards:

Some of it is purely functional. Different boards fit different waves, right? So these guns paddle fast, get you in early, get you down the face of a wave that with a regular short board [the wave] would just suck you back up and smash you. Where the shorter boards let you move around more, let you do bigger turns in smaller waves, or move better inside the tube. . . . But yea, there's a fun side to it too, like if you have a fish, you know, those boards let you surf way better

in small waves, and then there's these funboards that let you surf good if you're carrying too much weight, and longboards give you . . . that old-school feeling.

Jon believes that different kinds of waves demand that surfers use certain boards. "Fish" boards designed for smaller waves are built to be light and feature curves and contours designed to generate speed and maneuverability. These, however, do not work well in big waves, for which "gun" boards are made heavier and longer in order to move faster and more predictably. Beyond these "functional" properties however, Jon recognizes that old-fashioned boards afford nostalgic experiences of surfing by harnessing material nature in historically appropriate manners that can enhance discursive effects such as primitivism.

*Technological and Discursive Nature.* Just as surfers match material geography to discourses, they also match technologies with discourses. Choosing the right kind of board is key to mobilizing primitive experiences, for example. Many surfers who seek out primitive meanings in nature resurrect the kinds of dated equipment that Jon talked about. In particular, these objects allow surfers to reenact surfing styles of the past and to preserve the folklore of a bygone beach culture imagined as purer and less commercialized. Southern California's San Onofre beach is one location where this retroscape interpretation of surfing is lived out, as these fieldnotes illustrate:

The gentle waves at San'O are ideal for riding "logs" and "displacement hulls" [surfboard designs from the 1950s and '60s]. . . . Few surfers pay any attention to the twin domes of the cliff-top nuclear power plant. Rather, multiple generations enjoy all-weekend beach picnics during which phatic communication, objects, and fashions associated with mid-twentieth-century surfing culture bolster a nostalgic beach fantasy. Just as it was 50 years ago, a new board is described as "bitchin'"; so are the classic "woodie" cars and "kombi" vans in which these surfers change into dated "beaver-tail" wetsuits. The guys even grow retro mustaches! (Fieldnotes 2007)

Surfers report that surfboard designs from the 1960s alter their experiences of nature, encouraging them to glide with the wave and recreate relaxing, meditative feelings of surfing that they associate with the beach life of previous generations. For this community of surfers, primitive objects and texts are deployed to "nostalgically romanticize the past and revile the present" (Belk and Costa 1998, 236). In so doing, the beach is coassembled as a frontier of modern life so as to evade other communities' constructions of surfing that they see as competitive and commercialized (Schau 2003).

*Predicting and Managing Nature.* In addition to these basic tools for harnessing wave energy, surfers also use a variety of technologies to manage their experiences of nature around other schedules and demands in their lives. The complex conditions that produce waves and the skills and attention needed to predict them offer market openings for online surf-prediction websites. <http://www.Magicseaweed>

.com and <http://www.Swellnet.com>, for instance, offer real-time meteorological data and surf forecasts. Figure 3 shows an example of one such web tool that represents geographic coincidences of nature and instructs surfers whether they are likely to find good waves, when they should schedule their surf, even the type of board that will optimize their experience.

When asked about these resources, even the ever-vigilant Matt admits using web technologies to schedule surfing in between work trips abroad. Beyond these online tools, management technologies also include surf camps and surf charters, service providers that organize surfers' travel and safety in isolated surfing locations around the world. Surfers who employ these services pay guides to organize every aspect of the experience they desire. However, it is features such as these and various other phenomena that highlight problematic tensions and contradictions in surfers' assemblages of nature. It is to these problems that we now turn.

### Betrayals in Assemblages of Nature

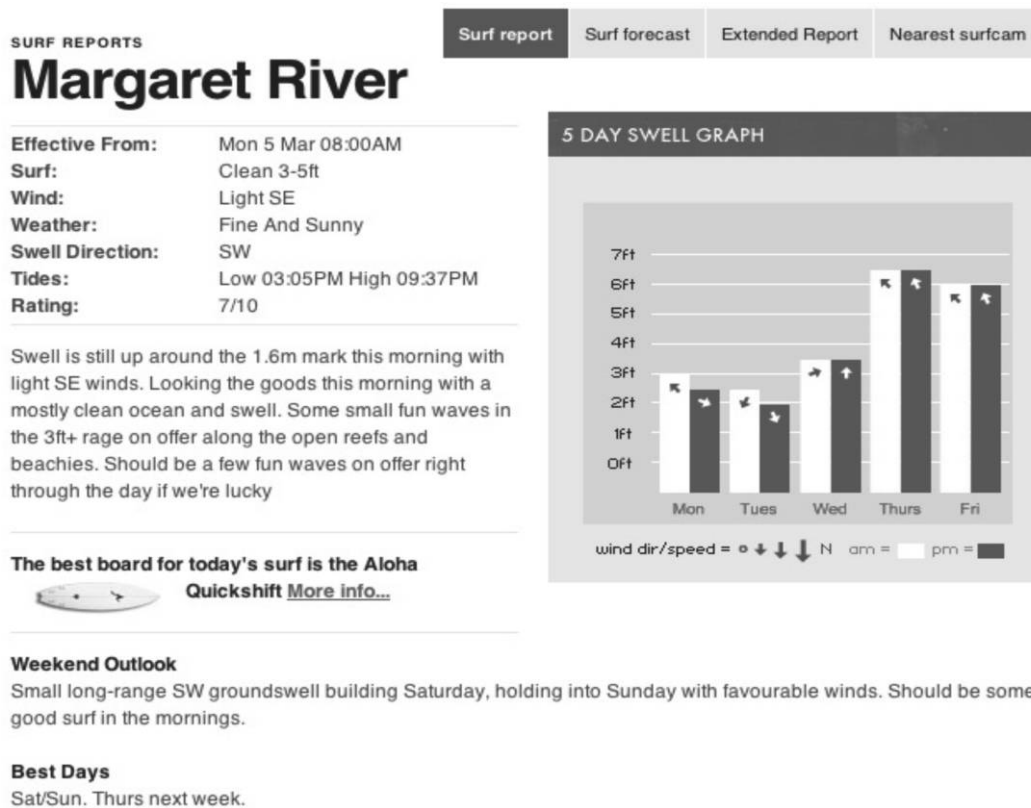
In the previous section, we described how surfers unite discursive, material, and technological resources to assemble valuable experiences in nature. However, the processes of assembling relations between consumption resources are often fragile and socially contested. Resources often fail to work together, threatening to thwart experiences; moreover, consumers disagree on the way nature should be consumed. To explain these effects, we now explore instances of "betrayal" (Callon 1986) that occur when incompatible resources meet and illustrate how these problematize the ideal of external nature that is so crucial to romantic consumption experiences.

*Geographic-Discursive Betrayals.* Previously we explained that the materials of nature lie beyond surfers' control. The transience and changeability of surfing geographies mean that betrayals regularly occur between material nature and the discourses that surfers reproduce during surfing experiences. Sean describes how even small changes in the geographic materials of nature can alter experiences in nature: "The weather can change the whole feeling of surfing. I mean sometimes when it's sunny it can just be so nice, and then the wind gets up a bit, and the clouds come over, and exactly the same waves are all of a sudden menacing. You know, just a small change like that can really change how the situation feels."

Despite desires to assemble nature for sublime, magical, or primitive experiences, the materials of nature do not always match these discourses or the technologies that consumers use to harness nature. For example, small waves are seldom seen to be sublime. Likewise, cold, wind, and rain, though completely expected in nature, are rarely recalled as delivering surfers with magical experiences. In this way, surfers' choices and experiences are circumscribed by a changeable network of consumption resources over which full control can never be exerted (Callon 1986; Epp and Price 2010).

FIGURE 3

## WAVE PREDICTION WEBSITE



Geographic-discursive betrayals also arise when surfers seek to deploy different discourses in the same geographic area. Like other public spaces, nature is consumed by communities who favor incompatible ideologies (Visconti et al. 2010), the application of which leads to counterassemblages of nature from which contradictions and social tensions arise. In particular, surfers like Zak or Tina, who apply magical and primitive discourses to their assemblages of nature, sometimes face hostility from surfers who view surfing as nothing more than a competitive sport in which athletic performance is valued over and above ideals of transcendent contact with immanent nature, as Len describes: "When I'm out there I'm performing. You get so many kooks just floating around in the way but once you've shown them that you surf good, they tend to get out of your way and you get more waves. And your mates are watching too, so there is that aspect of competition. Like, every time I take off on a wave and do a good turn it's like 'ka-ching' I'm doing a deal, like I'm earning points or something when I do a big turn."

In Len's description of surfing as a competitive arena, we can detect instances of "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu 1984), the use of consumption styles to establish and maintain dis-

tinctions of hierarchy over less skilled surfers. Surfing media often reproduce this hierarchy, stressing the ability to complete radical maneuvers in sublime waves (see fig. 1), but rather than combining this with sacred, primitive, or magical experiences, the sea becomes an arena for displays of the conquest and domination of nature, from which hierarchical symbolic capital is accrued (Tumbat and Belk 2010). Communities of surfers who ride dated surfing equipment and reproduce primitive values are often derided as "kooks" who do not deserve to share space with surfers who assemble nature as a space to exhibit aggressive displays of athletic skill.

*Technological-Discursive Betrayals.* Connected to contradictions between discourses that different surfers bring to assemblages of nature are contradictions between discourses and the technologies that surfers use to harness waves. Web-based weather prediction tools are seen to replace the use of sensory vigilance and local knowledge. Moreover, many surfers express concern that their surfboards are made from toxic polyester resins, that the wetsuits that keep them warm in chilly climates are made from oil-based rubber, and that their air travel will damage the environments with which

they espouse intimacy. All of these examples contradict surfers' expressed desires for harmony with nature by linking surfers with energy-hungry processes that betray the ideals of primitive, antimodern experiences. Mal explains his dissatisfaction with his consumption, which, in connecting him with nature, leads to the destruction of nature: "I don't like the thought that every time I want to [go surfing] it has to cost the world. I hate that feeling. We fly all the time. I've taken five flights since September. I hate it. It breaks my heart every time I get on the plane because we're cheating. There's got to be repercussions to using that much energy."

The economic value created by primitive kinds of technology creates another problematic contradiction. Almost every resource associated with surfers' retroscape assemblages of nature is commercialized. Dated equipment that was once the preserve of garage sales now fetches high prices at collector's auctions; likewise, mainstream fashion media praise products designed by beachcomber-surfers (Eisner 2004). Commercial links like these can dilute the primitive meanings of experiences in nature by reproducing the structures from which consumers seek escape (Canniford and Shankar 2007).

The commercial value of surfing also leads to other technological-discursive betrayals. The financial gains that surfing can bring are increasingly grasped by local authorities globally, many of whom have built changing rooms, toilets, and car parks where previously there were only rough tracks to the beach. "Bad roads bring good people; good roads bring all kinds of people," commented one participant when asked about these changes, which many surfers interpret as the encroachment of urban culture and management practices on what were previously semiautonomous zones (Kozinets 2002). Roy, a longtime resident of a beach town in Australia, complained about not being able to strip naked at the beach anymore, due to new local bylaws that demand that surfers use the newly built changing rooms. Such instances threaten the value of nature as a place to experience primitive "freedom from" social mores that consumers can enjoy in nature (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002; Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

*Geographic-Technological Betrayals.* We explained above that technologies are used to enhance different discourses that surfers apply in nature. It follows, therefore, that another source of conflict in surfers' experience of nature stems from different communities using different kinds of board in the same location, thereby compounding counterassemblage problems that occur between communities. One elderly surfer, Flip, lamented, "Everybody hates everybody else. . . . Shortboarders hate longboarders, longboarders hate stand-up paddleboarders. Everyone hates kitesurfers and kitesurfers hate windsurfers." Here, Flip expresses the intolerance exhibited by surfers concerning the different kinds of technology commonly used to harness waves.

Technology at the beach can also ruin the geographic materials of nature that surfers wish to consume. At the beginning of our data collection, The Garden offered a case in point. The Garden was popularized during the 1990s when surfers discovered perfect waves surrounded by magnificent

views of ancient whitewashed villages and high cliffs that tumble into the crystal blue sea. The location offers a palpable sense of severance from everyday life for surfers like Mitch and Zak, who return there year after year. Since 2003, however, despite local protests and sustained pressure from nongovernmental organizations such as Save the Waves Coalition and the Surfrider Foundation, the island government has built coastal management technologies under the rubric of protecting villages and improving tourism facilities. Some of these developments have ruined surfing locations. In particular, a sea wall and promenade development at The Garden covered the beach with hundreds of large concrete cubes that make entry and exit from the surf extremely dangerous. The Garden now stands as a gloomy reminder for surfers who see increasing occurrences of beach developments due to the rising price of coastal land (Schau 2003). A magazine editorial explained the situation: "Anyone who's ever battled a developer, called out a polluter or even picked up trash off the beach knows all environmental victories are temporary. The forces of evil, greed or just plain ignorance keep plowing forward, and even if you lay down in front of one bulldozer, if the spot is that valuable, there's probably a few more revving up their engines behind it" (<http://www.surfingmagazine.com> [accessed August 2003]).

In summary, various kinds of betrayals can occur between any of the consumption resources that consumers assemble to experience nature. Many of these betrayals contradict the discourses that frame consumption in nature. Moreover, they highlight the cultural aspects of consumption in nature in ways that problematize the ideal of external nature that is so important to romantic consumption. Sublime experiences can be interrupted by the encroachment of urban life and management technologies on previously untouched beach spaces. Magical merging with nature is thwarted by the presence of web technologies that remove the necessity to exercise sensory vigilance, local knowledge, or temporal discipline. Finally, primitive fantasies are disrupted by the presence of technologies that manage and modify geographic nature or by crowds of surfers who bring aggressive attitudes to the beach, counterassembling nature as a profane space replete with symbolic violence and incompatible board technologies.

## Purifying Assemblages of Nature

In this section, we discuss how surfers manage the contradictions and tensions that occur when material nature does not align with discursive frames or when surfers apply contradictory discourses or technologies in the same geographic space. We show how surfers handle each of the betrayals we described in the previous section through "purifying practices" that help to preserve romantic experiences of external nature.

*Geographic-Discursive Purifying.* Contradictions between discourses and material geographies are often overcome by surfers who argue that the discourses they reproduce are dic-

tated by nature. If the waves are large and stormy, for instance, sublime discourses apply easily. Equally, if the waves are small and fun, it is more appropriate to live out primitive and magical fantasies. Geographic betrayals that completely thwart surfers' experiences are also incorporated into this view of nature. The changes of wind direction or tides, which Gary explains can spoil surfing conditions, are interpreted as reinforcing the idea that the ocean is a sublime or divine force that is beyond rational human control. Zak, for instance, regards the uncontrollable character of nature as a magical aspect of surfing. During a period of bad weather and no waves, he explained: "It's all so transitory. It's there one minute. It's gone the next. We've got onshore [wind], pissing with rain all this week, and then probably in two weeks' time these guys will be scoring perfect waves or something. Is there something about that transitory impermanence that we just cannot control that weaves some kind of magic spell?"

Such evidence suggests that some geographic-discursive betrayals can enhance the experience of external nature. Other betrayals, however, are less welcome. We noted above that surfers' contrasting discursive frames applied in the same geographical location lead to counterassemblages that trigger problematic social tensions. Like other material geographies, surfing waves are a limited public resource over which consumers compete in a zero-sum game (Tumbat and Belk 2010). Some surfers consider that these tensions can be overcome through subjective experiences such as flow and edge work that follow from handling material nature (Arnould et al. 1999; Celsi et al. 1993). As Buck explains, these effects focus surfers' attention on the task in hand, shut out all interruptions and contradictions that stem from counterassemblages, and suppress the reasoned detachment that could reveal betrayals: "When you're actually on the wave, if it's a really good wave . . . in your state of mind you're not like looking forward, looking back, you're just like, 'alright I'm doing this now' . . . it's like nothing else matters except what's going on in the water at that time. Because you have to be concentrating; you have to be paying attention to what's going on."

For Buck, the act of surfing a wave is an effective way to clear contradictions and social tensions from his experience. Despite the power of subjective states to focus surfers' attention away from potential betrayals, however, not all surfers are able to ignore experiences of crowding. Tom says that he would ideally surf alone or with a few friends, but surfing beaches regularly attract hundreds of surfers at a time. These situations increase the likelihood of clashes between different surfers' counterassemblages in which incompatible discourses or technologies occur in one geographic location. To overcome this betrayal, practices of "localism" are common. Local surfers leverage skills, styles, interaction rituals, coastal knowledge, and, as a last resort, physical violence to structure tight-knit subcultures and guard access to "their" waves (Evers 2010). Evan, a resident of a Californian seaside town explains: "I was a real asshole one time. Surfing this breakwater, it was kind of shitty for

hours but then I could see a good wave coming. One of the incomers had been waiting longer than me, but you can spot them, they ride fun-shapes, they look like Barney's . . . wear Texas, so I turned and paddled and dropped in on him. . . . 'That was my wave' he shouted. . . . 'NONE of these waves are your waves,' I told him."

Evan reads the "incomer" by virtue of his wearing the wrong kind of sandals and riding the kind of board used by surfers who do not show high levels of skill. Evan uses these measures of style to assign the other surfer the identity of a "Barney" (a derogatory comparison to the bumbling children's TV character), which justifies his ignoring the etiquette code that would normally let the visiting surfer enjoy a wave that he had waited patiently for. In this way, Evan reasserts his sense of authority and seeks to rid the beach of outsiders, such that his experience of nature is shared only with his "local bros."

*Technological-Discursive Purifying.* Technology often problematizes the romantic ideology of pristine nature. We have shown that surfers' experiences in nature are made possible by all kinds of technological apparatuses. Yet, the toxicity of surfing equipment, the urban encroachment that occurs at many beaches, and the management technologies surfers commonly utilize all tend to clash with ideals of magical harmony with nature and primitive escapes from modern life. How, then, do surfers overcome contradictions that emerge from the technological resources that they apply within assemblages of nature?

Despite being computer designed and built from toxic resins, the presence of surfboards rarely disrupts the primitive version of reality that surfers like Zak seek to construct. Indeed, just as Zak views waves as living, so too does he see his surfboards in this way, leading him to lavish them with attention and care. Surfboards are loved objects (Ahuvia 2005), fetishized with creation stories (Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011; Muñiz and Schau 2005). These narratives purify surfboards by sacralizing them as part of nature, as an article titled "The Magic Thread," found in one surfers' magazine collection, shows: "Since all the magic and beauty of surfing can be traced back to this oddly profound link between ourselves and the movement of a wave through water, surely the mechanism by which that link is achieved must carry some deeper significance for us than merely the price of a blank and half a gallon of resin" (Carroll 1998, 28).

This magazine article calls surfboard design "a religion" that links the scientific study of hydrodynamics with surfers' desires to surf waves. Moreover, the physical and psychological links that surfboards help to establish between surfers and "nature" (Dant 1998) justify their status as "techspresive" objects of deep significance (Kozinets 2008). Together these rhetorical strategies purify technological-discursive betrayals via a magical contagion where contact between objects results in the transfer of physical, mental, and moral properties from one to the other (Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011; St. James et al. 2011). In the case of this surfing magazine article, contact with material nature renders a surfboard more

natural than its constituent components would suggest is possible.

Beyond these rhetorical strategies, however, technologies are being developed to be more materially consistent with the ideology of pristine nature. Wooden boards copied from ancient Polynesian designs have recently become popular in retroscape surfing communities. Patagonia has begun using a limestone-based neoprene to reduce dependence on oil-derived chemicals that pollute the environments that surfers wish to enjoy and preserve. Biodegradable materials too are making headway in surfboard factories, and, by building sailboats, surfers like Chip and Mal seek alternatives to air travel. Magazine editorials have even begun to espouse the benefits of this approach to recover from the costs of high-energy consumption that Mal considers so destructive: "It's an accumulating petro-chemical debt we're acquiring. . . . We've become accustomed to the convenience of modern jet travel and reliance on the automobile—necessary indulgences for the pleasure of tube-rides. . . . Yet breaking from the two-week vacation mentality opens alternate possibilities: sailing to the other side of the world or bicycling to the edge of a continent. . . . By jumping off the fuel wagon and moving at the pace of the tides and the phases of the moon we might find ourselves more deeply sustained than we had imagined possible" (*Surfer's Journal* 2008, 112).

This editorial calls on surfers to consider the technologies that mediate their experiences of nature. Echoing Mitch's dislike of the "idea that you can just go and buy the commodity of the vacation," this is a manifesto to suggest that by improving the means by which surfers travel and consume, magical and primitive harmony with nature is more likely to be achievable. Though surf charters and camps are popular, many surfers do eschew extended service encounters in favor of what they call "feral travel," nonmainstreamed experiences of surfing locations in which surfers participate directly in a variety of local markets. Such practices foster similar self-reliance exhibited in other consumption experiences that reproduce primitive discourses (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002) and suggest that surfing will be increasingly rewarding if surfers can abandon the resources of culture and connect with the resources offered by nature.

*Geographic-Technological Purifying.* In the previous section, we saw that geographic-technological betrayals occur when surfers apply different types of technology in the same space. Localism is one way in which these problems are overcome by limiting the kinds of technologies surfers use at a particular location. Vern, a longboarder who likes to surf waves favored by shortboarders, complained that he regularly encounters verbal abuse. Indeed, communities of surfers often territorialize surfing locations according to the boards and styles that they agree on, thereby reducing the contact and conflict that occurs when surfers' counterassemblages clash: "'San'O,' 'Church,' and 'Lower Trestles' are within walking distance of each other, but the difference in the surfing equipment used at these waves is striking. Trestles is a more powerful wave and almost solely used by

shortboarders, many of them competitive surfers who attract company sponsorship. At the other end of the spectrum is San'O. Longboards predominate here, and the atmosphere is totally relaxed. Right in the middle is Church, where all kinds of boards are used. It's here that the most vocal friction between surfers seems to occur" (fieldnotes 2007).

To overcome the more serious geographic-technological betrayals when urban encroachment actually alters the geographical spaces that surfers consume, such as the damaging effects of sea walls, surfers tend to employ two very different strategies. First, some call upon the ideology of pristine nature to frame the ocean as a borderline of emptiness beyond the damaging reach of culture. An illustration of this effect was found during member-checking procedures in 2011 when local surfers showed us that the coastal protection technology installed at The Garden is disintegrating. Some believe that in a decade or so, wave energy will erode the sea wall. This view of nature as self-purifying is a powerful expression of the belief in the ideal of external nature. For many surfers, the sea will always wash away cultural incursions and, in so doing, continues to offer respite from everyday life, as Steve expresses: "As the world continues to become more and more crowded, the value of surfing where you paddle out and the horizon is devoid of anything, people or structures, and so you're on the borderline of emptiness, that's a relief. . . . you feel sort of detached from normal activity into some kind of relationship with the natural energy. . . . It's so satisfying, it's like balm to the soul."

Despite the power and popularity of this view of external nature, not all surfers buy into this ideal unproblematically. A second means of geographic-technological purifying sees surfers handling the relationship between nature and culture in a more careful, complex, and active manner. Nongovernmental organizations such as the Surfrider Foundation, Surfers against Sewage, and Save the Waves fight developments that threaten surfing geographies, organize beach cleanups, and contest industries that pollute beaches. Moreover, brands like Patagonia and media vehicles such as the *Surfer's Journal* build awareness of environmental betrayals and rally surfers around the cause of preserving the romantic quality of surfing. Surfers who unite through these social movements and brands appear more aware of the fragility of consuming nature. Rather than reproducing a strong ideal of nature as external to culture, they treat nature as a resource that must be handled with care, left without a trace of human contact, and nurtured in order to preserve the romantic quality of surfing.

## DISCUSSION

### Nature as Consumption Assemblage

Consumers commonly frame nature as the opposite of culture in romantic consumption events that offer sublime, magical, or primitive experiences. We find, however, that experiences of nature transpire from assemblages of discourses, technologies, and material geographies. In this scheme, nature is not an ontologically separate category

(Newton 2007; Soper 1995); rather, it is constituted through disciplined procedures that orchestrate material nature with market-cultural resources. In examining the processes by which this constitution takes place, our first contribution is to extend our understanding of how material nature is implicated in the reproduction of romantic discourses during extraordinary experiences. Previous studies acknowledge the power of discourses in shaping and guiding consumers' experiences of nature (Arnould et al. 1998; Belk and Costa 1998; Thompson 2004) but fall short in explaining, first, the fragile matching that must occur between these textual frames and material geography and, second, that material geographies circumscribe the use of discursive resources.

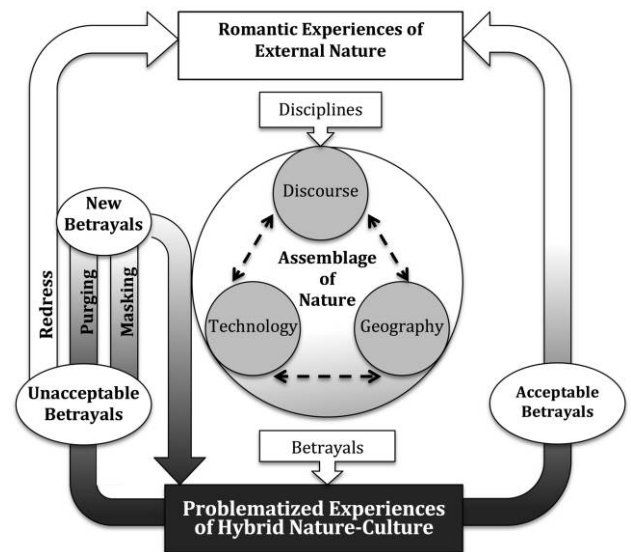
This study interrogates these relationships and how they are established in more detail. We find that consumers' agency in applying discourses is determined by a network of material-geographic conditions. The power of moving water and the risks of harnessing the attendant forces are essential to Jake's sublime experiences. Likewise, it is the contingency of material geography that necessitates sensory merging with consumers' environments that boosts Tom and Tina's magical and primitive harmony with nature. Since magical reasoning also occurs in response to complex situations of interrelatedness that can be difficult to control (St. James et al. 2011), we understand that the multifaceted changeability of material nature boosts Zak's belief that waves are enchanted entities.

We have also stressed that technologies must be matched carefully with discursive and geographic elements of assemblages if nature is to be consumed successfully. Our data show, however, that the complex relationships established between multiple categories of consumption resources often lead to betrayals. These mismatches of resources and associated social tensions challenge consumers' ideals of external nature and thwart romantic experiences. Our second contribution has been to chart these betrayals and provide a theoretical vocabulary to express the mismatches that can occur between consumption resources as well as the social tensions that result from different groups of consumers' counterassemblages. In so doing, as figure 4 indicates, we have discovered that betrayals can be divided into acceptable and unacceptable categories.

*Acceptable Betrayals.* Acceptable betrayals, although thwarting experiences in nature, strengthen the ideal of external nature and the drama of romantic consumption. In particular, the geographic-discursive betrayals that occur when material nature fails to match discursive frames serve two important functions. First, they reaffirm the nature/culture dualism by reinforcing surfers' belief that external nature lies beyond human control. Acceptable betrayals are interpreted as instances where nature pushes back against attempts to harness and manage the resources it offers. Thus, while surfers like Mitch and Zak are aware of the literature that frames their experiences and the technologies with which they harness nature, they also know that they have to wait for the correct coincidences of geographic materials for consumption to take place.

FIGURE 4

## THE PROCESS OF ASSEMBLING NATURE FOR ROMANTIC CONSUMPTION



The constant possibility that material nature will fail to align with discourses means that surfers do not take nature for granted. Rather, surfers like Arthur, Gary, and Zak interpret the uncertainty that stems from the uncontrollable materiality of nature as a challenge to be solved. This finding can be generalized to other studies. Harsh desert conditions do not spoil the Burning Man experience (Kozinets 2002). Rather, the raw isolation of the desert emphasizes separation from daily life and enhances the challenge of this antiurban encounter. Acceptable betrayals also enrich experiences for community agriculture enthusiasts who take delight in "the puzzle solving process that necessitates a close intuitive connection with the land and a skillful decoding of the subtle signs encoded in plants and soil" (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007, 145).

Importantly, we find that the manner in which the puzzles offered by nature are solved explains the harmony with nature that consumers enjoy. In particular, we find that to consume nature, surfers develop local knowledge, sensory vigilance, and temporal discipline. These effects are often interpreted as stemming from nature itself and lead to feelings of strong and intimate ties to nature (Lévy-Bruhl 1985). For some, this experience becomes a magical merging with nature as a cycle of desire (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003); Zak acknowledges the longing that motivates him to return repeatedly to the same location, trusting that nature will reward his discipline and devotion.

*Unacceptable Betrayals.* Unacceptable betrayals result from contradictions between assembled resources that make the hybrid status of nature and culture more obvious. In our

data we see a variety of illustrative instances, especially in the technological-discursive category. The encroachment of urban technologies contradict primitive and sublime discourses that require nature to be wild and isolated: electronic management technologies negate sacred discourses that frame surfers' magical merging with nature; primitive desires to escape culture are confounded by the toxicity of surfing equipment and the petrochemical debt that surfers feel they incur; and the inroads made by commercial service structures fracture ethics of self-reliant ruggedness.

By raising attention to the mismatches between different kinds of consumption resources necessary to consume nature, unacceptable betrayals destabilize surfers' views of nature as the opposite of culture. Similar occurrences vex consumers in other contexts. The scientific procedures that permeate natural health markets threaten romantic experiences of nature (Thompson 2004). The Everest experience (Tumbat and Belk 2010), in particular, is so riven with betrayals we label as "counterassemblages" that romantic interpretations become impossible. In short, when resources do not match within or between assemblages, fault lines can appear such that romantic experiences are problematized. Our third contribution is to explain how consumers handle unacceptable betrayals and maintain the ideal of external nature that underpins romantic consumption.

### Purifying Practices

Despite the existence of betrayals in consumers' assemblages, our data confirm that consumers continue to deploy romantic scripts in nature by sustaining the ideal of external nature as a pure zone. We find that this is achieved through practices that conceal, remove, or rectify the unacceptable betrayals that we have explained above. Such filtering maintains nature as separate to culture (Latour 1993; Newton 2007). Our data illustrate three kinds of purifying practices: masking, purging, and redress.

*Masking Practices.* As Law affirms, "every discourse sets limits to its conditions of possibility so it cannot recognize certain kinds of things that are antithetical to the discourse. But those realities exist and they have to be handled" (2009, 149). To handle many geographical-discursive and technological-discursive betrayals, consumers deploy masking practices that hide contradictions in consumption assemblages. In our data we identify two such strategies: experiential masking and ideological masking.

Experiential masking occurs through the intense focus of attention that Zak, Tina, and Buck describe as part of encountering nature. Zak, in particular, finds that through his close connection with waves he is able to forget everything else. Buck too describes the experience of riding a wave as a present-focused moment of uninterrupted freedom and creativity. Instances of flow and edge work are important means of setting experiences in nature apart from experiences of culture (Arnould and Price 1993; Belk et al. 1998), since flow can merge consumers with their environments (Celsi et al. 1993). We find this merging, however, to be extended

beyond flow experiences to the periods of preparation and reflection that constitute extraordinary experience. Some of our respondents feel that these experiences flow from nature, unmediated by culture. From this standpoint, discursive frames are dictated by nature, disciplined sensory practices are adaptations of the body to nature, and knowledge of nature and the experiences found there result from leaving culture behind. Such beliefs, however, constitute a skillful filtering and interpretation of nature (Newton 2007). Indeed, closer readings reveal an effective vow of silence with respect to consumption resources that do not fit easily within this scheme.

For Eagleton (2002, 32), such silences indicate where texts are "ideologically forbidden to say certain things." We label these silences "ideological masking" and find they are a common method of hiding technical-discursive betrayals. Rendezvous organizers place cars, 4 × 4 trucks, and toilets out of sight (Belk and Costa 1998), a masking practice that preserves the primitive ideals of the camp. Consumers also mask contradictions in assemblages by switching between opposing ideologies. In fetishizing boards with magical contagion (St. James et al. 2011), Zak sweeps away the petrochemical-primitive contradictions in surfboard manufacture and ignores the damaging influence of this toxic industry on the environments toward which he espouses intimacy. In this case, surfers "simultaneously straddle opposing ideologies" (Kozinets 2008, 866), switching between notions of board, wetsuits, travel, and management technologies that are in one moment seen as destructive of nature and in the next as techpressive resources for crafting experiences with nature.

In such instances, ideological masking sustains concurrent scientific and romantic worldviews (Thompson 2004). As a way to resolve opposites, ideological masking is particularly evident when nature is viewed as a force that can rid itself of the influence of culture. As noted above, instances in which material nature fails to align with other consumption resources are interpreted as evidence of the inherent difference between culture and nature; the sea in particular is often viewed as the borderline of emptiness, the place where culture can reach no further (Helmreich 2011). From this perspective, the ocean is a self-purifying materiality that will wash away cultural effects such as coastal defenses. Nevertheless, in light of the damage already done to many of their surfing environments, some surfers find this self-fulfilling viewpoint untenable, leading them to enact strategies to purge unacceptable betrayals from their assemblages of nature.

*Purging Practices.* Masking practices make consumption assemblages stable but not static. On the contrary, figure 4 shows the process of assemblage as an ongoing, iterative process. In this model, masking practices enable consumers to filter problematizations, maintaining nature and culture as separate zones and preserving romantic experiences. Nevertheless, masking practices merely hide betrayals, maintaining dualisms despite the continued occurrence of contradictions and social tensions. For this reason, some surfers



see these as temporary solutions. Indeed, our data illustrates cases in which surfers seek to do more than merely mask betrayals. Rather, they seek to purge these phenomena from assemblages.

Community legitimation is a common means of purging. Our data show how communities of surfers who coassemble nature in different manners tend to territorialize surfing locations, in each case establishing and normalizing a different "legitimate blending of nature and technology" (Thompson 2004, 169). Trestles is almost exclusively used for assemblages of aggressive and powerful surfing displays, while nearby San'O is a refuge for a primitive retroescape in which surfers purge resources and behaviors that betray magical and primitive discourses. In other contexts, we see similar processes of consensus regulated by "dog soldiers" and "rangers" who police the way that nature is assembled. Consumers who do not participate in legitimate manners are ejected (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2002), thereby minimizing social tensions that occur between consumers who counterassemble incompatible resources in shared spaces.

Localism is a common method that surfers use to enforce consensus. By mobilizing a hierarchical community structure through conspicuous displays of surfing skills and consumption styles, established surfers "share in" (Belk 2010) material geographic resources within tight-knit communities. However, as figure 4 suggests, purging practices like this can further challenge romantic experiences by exchanging one kind of contradiction for another. Recurrent violence among surfers who wish to purge Australia's Gold Coast of crowds has led to police patrols on beaches, thus exchanging one betrayal of external nature for a new one. Equally, isolated surfing camps that limit numbers of surfers will fasten wild locations to privatized and lucrative entrepreneurial ventures, thereby perpetuating new contradictions to the ideal of external nature.

*From Purging to Redress.* Our data shows that masking and purging practices can reproduce contradictions and social tensions. Nevertheless, as figure 4 suggests, these new betrayals can be interpreted as an acceptable means to an end. Though Evan and Len appear slightly uncomfortable about their aggressive localism, for example, they accept that this is a common and effective means of keeping outsider cultures away from their territorialized spaces in "nature" (Evers 2010). By perpetuating new betrayals to purify external nature, however, surfers sustain a paradox that harbors a continued destruction of romantic experience. Indeed, as Soper (1995, 150) notes, "a romantic ideology may serve as the cover for the continued exploitation of nature."

Our data illustrate that nature is assembled differently by different groups of consumers, and some of these are not content with the new betrayals that emerge from masking and purging. Instead, these consumers treat external nature very carefully and seek redress by locating themselves on a nature-culture continuum. This is to say that these surfers are aware of the fragility of nature such that they replace the desire to strictly purify external nature with goals of carefully assembling nature-cultures (Latour 1993). These

are consciously hybrid experiences of nature in which the causes of unacceptable betrayals are considered and then replaced with improved resources that reduce contradictions and potential damage to material nature during consumption experiences.

Dissatisfaction with technological-discursive and geographic-technological betrayals motivates Chip to treat redress as a puzzling challenge that can improve his experience of nature and reduce his environmental impact. Member checking revealed that Mal too had begun fitting out a sailboat so as to redress the damage he feels he sustains during air travel. Practices of redress such as these offer opportunities to solve and overcome problematic contradictions in romantic experiences. Like the puzzles generated by acceptable betrayals, consumers enjoy the processes of keeping nature romantic. Indeed, as figure 4 suggests, the "miraculous blending" (Thompson 2004, 168) between nature and culture occurs through iterative cycles, where romantic experiences of pure nature are problematized and then creatively resolved through practices and resources of redress that sidestep contradictions and relieve social tensions. These procedures offer opportunities for play and discovery (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007), so that even unacceptable betrayals can improve consumers' experiences by encouraging innovation toward internally consistent and environmentally friendly consumption assemblages.

Limestone-rubber wetsuits, wooden boards, and biodegradable surfboard resins offer surfers resources to achieve this goal, atone for their "ecological sins" (Kozinets and Handleman 2004), and assemble nature in manners that harbor fewer betrayals. Improved demand for these resources also offers a rich seam of marketing practice in which companies become "purity suppliers" that help consumers to solve the challenges of assembling nature. Recognizing desires for technological resources that do not betray popular discursive frames or geographic nature, Patagonia offers a "footprint chronicle" for each of its products, enabling consumers to assess the impact of supply chains and production resources. Patagonia clearly grasps the competitive advantage of redress, stating "when we can reduce or eliminate a harm, other businesses will be eager to follow suit" (<http://www.patagonia.com>). Indeed, many companies appear to be purifying both resources and processes: outdoor clothing manufacturer Aigle eschews oil-based rubber for sustainable tree rubber, Colombia Sportswear has installed solar panels at their Oregon headquarters, and North Face incorporates recycled materials into products that are now validated against externally accredited environmental standards. Furthermore, as manufacturers begin to incorporate biomimetic materials into products, we expect to see highly innovative forms of redress targeted at discursive-technical betrayals.

Of course, purity suppliers tie experiences of nature back into the commercial culture from which consumers in nature so often seek escape. However, for the politically aware brand communities (Holt and Cameron 2010; O'Guinn and Muñiz 2009) that enact sustainable and ecologically aware consumerism, purity suppliers become "life-giving busi-

nesses" (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007, 144), rallying points for communities that treat external nature as fragile and always at risk of being subsumed by culture. In short, rather than seeking to mask tensions and contradictions of the romantic ideal of external nature, redress recognizes nature as interdependent with culture during consumption but seeks to advance practices and resources that will leave material nature as untouched as possible once consumption activities cease.

### Directions for Future Research

In the context of surfing, we have found that consumers assemble romantic nature in multiple, often competing, manners. It is clear, however, that not all consumers desire romantic experiences of nature (Tumbat and Belk 2010), thus further research could question how different ideological uses of nature are assembled and purified in the face of contestations from different stakeholders. Equally, further research could investigate how other culturally pervasive dualisms are assembled and purified. The uses of assemblage theory in consumer research could also be extended to connect multiple levels of contextual analysis. Rather like Russian dolls, analyses of assemblages can always be situated within investigations of broader global assemblages (Bennett 2010; Collier and Ong 2005) or augmented with material-cultural studies (Epp and Price 2010; Miller 2005) or actor network studies (Bettany and Kerrane 2011; Giesler 2012; Latour 1987) that focus in more detail on specific resources or processes that figure within an assemblage.

Assemblage theory, therefore, provides a powerful apparatus to meet calls to connect micro-social contexts of consumers' lived experiences to macro-social frameworks (Askegaard and Linnet 2011) such as changing global flows, market systems, and political-cultural institutions (Rabinow 2003). We believe that a variety of interests in consumer research could be further developed through this property of assemblage theory. In particular, recent developments in theories of networked agency (Epp and Price 2010) and identity in relation to life stages (Schau et al. 2009), changing material possessions (Ahuvia 2005; Epp and Price 2010), different languages (Luna, Ringberg, and Peracchio 2008), or contested space (Visconti et al. 2010) could all be further explored through the assemblage framework.

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