

## **Engendering Wilderness** *Body, Belonging, and Refuge*

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### **Abstract**

This study considers how some people with non-heteronormative genders and sexualities experience their bodies and their gender(s) in wilderness and what these stories might reveal about the broader implications of gender difference in U.S. society as well as the distinctiveness of wilderness settings. We use a post-structural feminist framework to understand the subjective experiences of gender; by deconstructing the category of 'woman', for example, we open a space for the telling of alternative wilderness narratives. Insights were gathered from twenty participants through a series of in-depth/semi-structured interviews and feminist-oriented grounded theory analysis. Their stories reveal how and why we can find ecological belonging and refuge in wild places. Ethical implications concerning human-wilderness and human-human relationships are suggested.

*KEYWORDS: Wilderness, gender, body, refuge, glbtq, ecological belonging*

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Wild places are often sought out for escape from social constraints since ways of being in wild places are quite distinct from those experienced in everyday life (Driver, 1983; Manfredo, Driver, & Tarrant, 1996). Wilderness, for example, is often considered a “push back” against society and encompasses aspects such as freedom from structure, sanctuary away from social control, and immersive experiences. Gary Snyder describes wilderness as a place “where the wild potential is fully expressed, a diversity of living and nonliving beings flourishing according to their own sorts of order” (1990, p. 12). In particular, bodily engagements in wilderness may be quite different, in contrast to how most North Americans fill their days with routines, schedules, and entertainment that often alienate people from their bodies. Moreover, how we engage and express our bodily selves has much to do with our gendered identities (Grosz, 1994; Butler, 1990) and how we are situated in contexts of normative gender expectations, discrimination, oppression, and social surveillance (Bordo, 1993; Bartky, 1988; Foucault, 1977). Johnson and Kivel (2007), for example, urge leisure and sport scholars to “ask how lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people are policed in their leisure and sport, especially when the space is constructed in and among heterosexual discourses” (p. 103). We believe that wilderness experiences can offer a different kind of “perceptual orienteering, a different way of locating oneself in relation to one’s environment” (Gaard, 1997, p. 17). These experiences sensually engage our bodies with the natural world in relation to space, energy, sight, smells, sounds, and sense of time (Gaard) while also providing space away from social surveillance as it relates to gender, sex, and sexuality.

Because gender is a construct that is historically and culturally defined (Butler, 1990), attempts to interpret one’s experience based on conventional definitions of what it means to be a woman or a man might be limiting. This study therefore uses a poststructural feminist framework to allow alternate tellings of gendered experience in wilderness.<sup>1</sup> We begin with this theoretical frame, thereby explaining central concepts such as transitivity, performativity, “Othering,” and subjectivity. We then situate this study in literature on wilderness and gender. Next, we outline and describe our methodological approach including our use of in-depth/semi-structured interviewing and feminist/constructivist oriented grounded theory. Pulling from our interviews we then describe why and how we find ecological belonging in wild places by looking at experiences of bodily awakening, vulnerability, and connection. As part of these narratives, we will also discuss why and how wilderness can be experienced as a refuge from normative gender as well as how gender identity and gender negotiation influence leisure. We will close the paper with a discussion of what these stories reveal about the human-wilderness relationship and the broader implications of gender difference and belonging in American society.

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<sup>1</sup>For most participants in this study, the definitions, experiences, and meanings of wilderness extend far beyond those of legal designations. The terms *wilderness*, *wilderness setting*, *wild places*, and *wild lands* will therefore be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

## Theoretical Framework

We employed a poststructural feminist framework for this research. This informed our conceptualizations of gender, wilderness, and identity as well as our methodological choices, approaches, and imperatives. As others have argued, poststructural feminist theory can contribute much to our understandings of gender in leisure contexts (Aitchison, 2000, 2003; Fox, 1992; Henderson & Hickerson, 2007; Johnson & Kivel, 2007) and has the potential to increase theoretical sophistication within the field of leisure studies (Aitchison, 2000). Poststructuralism is a way of thinking and theorizing subjectivity by disrupting and deconstructing the grand modernist narratives that depict universal truths across culture, history, and time (Aitchison, 2003). Further, poststructuralism “seeks to reveal the power relations upon which the construction, legitimation and reproduction of modernist society depends” (Aitchison, 2003, p. 31).

Poststructural frameworks help us to challenge our taken-for-granted assumptions of what is, and how we arrive at, truth, power and knowledge. The concept of “Othering,” for example, is foundational to poststructural, postcolonial, and postmodern theorizing (Aitchison, 2000) and can be characterized by dualisms such as men/women; nature/culture; heterosexual/homosexual; researcher/researched; or mind/body. Val Plumwood (1998) and Marilyn Frye (1983) describe these dualisms in terms of dualistic polarities which include *radical separation* and *homogenization* that emphasizes difference between dualized pairs and sameness within each of the pairs, thus creating distance between the two groups and naturalizing domination. As Aitchison describes: “the process of representing Others inevitably defines norms and deviants, centres and margins, cores and peripheries, the powerful and the powerless” (2003, p. 81). Deconstructing the category “woman,” for example, reveals the cultural codes that construct, legitimate, and reproduce binary gender categories and hierarchies (Weedon as cited in Aitchison, 2003). Moreover, a project central to poststructural feminism is to deconstruct the idea of fixed identities and refute, “the notion of a single theory or grand narrative capable of explaining women’s position throughout time and space” (Aitchison, 2000, p. 134). Identities are thus seen as unstable categories which are historically and socially produced (Grosz, 1994; Foucault, 1977; Wearing, 1998). In this way, we open up new possibilities for female subjectivities that are dynamic and context-dependent and that allow us to expose alternative “female” narratives. We seek to demonstrate the importance of leisure research on gender beyond its relevance to just ‘women’ (but still inclusive of women); and to, thus, reveal multiple meanings of wilderness in contemporary America.

## Relevant Literature

### Gender, Body and Oppression

In speaking of how genders, and gendered bodies, are experienced in wilderness, we necessarily speak of normativity, dualisms, and oppression. Indeed, there is little room for transitory gender identities in either mainstream American culture or in current leisure research. Contemporary binary conceptions of gender,

sex, and sexuality (masculine/feminine; male/female; heterosexual/homosexual) are problematic because they constrict self-expression and often support oppressive social and institutional structures. In such a system, women, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, and queer (glbtq) people often face discrimination, ridicule, violence, moral damage, and estrangement. Clearly, oppression is not just about suffering and limitations—it is about power, control, and dominance over “Others” (Warren, 1990). Broadly defined, oppression is a “system of institutional forces and processes that keep the members of some social groups from full participation in their society” (Lindemann, 2006, p. 31); oppression can thus limit our livelihoods, our movement, our relationships, and quite literally—our corporal self-expression.

Cultural and social situations affect how we experience our bodies and our genders, or our ‘bodies in situations’ (de Beauvoir, 2010; Young, 1980). What we do through speech, body language, dress, and so on reflect how we continually negotiate “masculine” and “feminine” ways of being, acting, and relating. Borrowing from Foucault’s (1977) concepts of “regulative discourses” and “disciplinary techniques,” Judith Butler (1990), theorizes the ways in which gender, sex and sexuality are performative and culturally constructed over time. She says that gender is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 1990, p. 33). Gender therefore appears as an essence or as ontologically coherent with a fixed sex and sexuality.

Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) further challenges the idea that sex is purely biological (i.e., also a social construction). She writes,

If the state and legal system has an interest in maintaining only two sexes, our collective biological bodies do not. While male and female stand on the extreme ends of a biological continuum, there are many other bodies . . . that evidently mix together anatomical components conventionally attributed to both males and females. (2000, p. 31)

Thus, gender is understood not as a fixed, natural, and innate reflection of a person’s biological sex, but rather as something dynamic, constructed, molded, and influenced by social discourse.

Like gender identities, sexual identities also depend on social constructions of sexuality. Heterosexuality is built on polarized gender categories that correspond to polarized sex categories. That is, sexuality is most often defined by sexual acts between persons of the opposite sex. Foucault (1978) explains that these polarized sex categories create an “artificial unity” through acts of sex; this “artificial unity” normalizes and naturalizes heterosexuality. In this way, heterosexuality also becomes compulsory and is used as a powerful method of social control to subjugate non-heterosexuals (Johnson & Kivel, 2007; Rich, 1993).

In summary, the experience of gender necessarily confronts set and distinct constructions of masculinity and femininity and male and female, and the normative sexual unions between them. Gender identity need not be in line with normative expectations of biological sex or heterosexuality and frequently entails active construction, negotiation, and expression. Resisting binary constructions allows for more fluid and expanded conceptualizations of gender, conceptualiza-

tions which are important and necessary if we are to fully understand the experience of gender in wilderness.

### **Wilderness and Gender**

The 1964 Wilderness Act defines wilderness as “an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions” (1964, Public Law 88-577: section 2(c)). This section further defines wilderness as having “outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.” The Wilderness Act can also be understood as a response to growing concerns about the domination and control of nature by human society. Section 2(a), for example, reads: “In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States” (1964, Public Law 88-577). As such, wilderness is most commonly understood to protect the earth and its community of life from humans and from human objectives such as development and environmental modification. These understandings of wilderness, however, have led some to suggest that wilderness perpetuates a dualistic split of humans apart from nature (Callicott, 1991; Cronon, 1995).

However, conceptions of wilderness have evolved significantly over the last 20 years, particularly in relation to gender and race. While wild lands were once seen as territories of men, virility, aggressiveness and masculinity (Henberg, 1994; Nash, 2001; Neuwirth, 2009; Martin, 2004; Plumwood, 1998; Roosevelt, 1998), we now see research that documents the experiences and narratives of women in wilderness (Angell, 1994; Bialeschki & Henderson, 1993; Cole, Erdman, & Rothblum, 1994; Gaard, 1997; Griffiths, 2006; Hart & Silka, 1994; Henderson & Bialeschki, 1986; Kohn, 1991; McDermott, 2000a, 2000b; 2004; Mitten, 1994; Plumwood, 1998; Pohl, Borrie, & Patterson, 2000; Powch, 1994; Stopha, 1994). There is now also much work which critiques the Eurocentric construction of wilderness (Bayet, 1994; Birch, 1990; Cronon, 1995; Gaard, 1997; Johnson, 1998; Langton, 1996; Martin, 2004; Plumwood, 1998; Rose 1996; Taylor, 2000).

Empirically, however, most of this research on gender and wilderness focuses on empowerment, resistance, and improving the lives of women. In contrast, little has been done to problematize gender and look at transitory gender categories or to include the voices of glbtq people in wilderness research. Warren and Loeffler (2000), for instance, advocate for social justice research that looks critically at the experiences of oppression and emancipation; research that allows marginal voices to play a part in knowledge construction (p. 86). As Pohl, Borrie, and Patterson point out, “Although past research has chipped away at many of the ambiguities surrounding the therapeutic value of wilderness, researchers fail to completely explain not only the full therapeutic potential of wilderness, but also the potential value of wilderness *in relation to gender*” (2000, p. 417). And an increasing yet still underexplored area of study looks at how women experience their bodies and physicalities in the outdoors (McDermott, 2000a, 2000b, 2004).

Our research diverges from previous foci on empowerment to look at the meanings and experiences of glbtq “women.” We follow the calls of Birch (1990), Gaard (1997), and Plumwood (1998) to re-conceptualize human relationships

with the wild “Other.” Alienation is experienced quite differently, for example, depending on where a person is positioned in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and species. Fear of sexual assault/abuse may be factors that contribute to women’s alienation from nature and wilderness (Gaard 1997, p. 10). Further, internalized homophobia can cause people to become alienated from their bodies and sexualities and “like those subordinated by gender, queers may also fear the wilderness as a place where culture’s very few restraints on hate crimes will be entirely unloosed” (Gaard, 1997, p. 11). We wish to add to this literature by sharing some of these “Other” perspectives that have not yet been elucidated in leisure research. As Fox (1992) points out, “the goal of feminist scholarship is not control or prediction but understanding, inclusion, and social change” (p. 342).

## Methods

### Overview

The purpose of this project was to explore, describe, and explain how people experience gender and body in wilderness settings. The guiding evaluative criteria for this analysis include credibility, resonance, usefulness, and originality (Charmaz, 2006) as well as quality (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To understand interviewees’ subjective experience, we chose a qualitative interpretive paradigm for the overall research approach, employing in-depth/semistructured interviews to collect participants’ stories. With permission of interview participants, the results and analysis for this paper were drawn from 20 interviews and three follow-up/post-interview letters from one interviewee.

Based on the gaps in the literature on gender and wilderness, the current context of gender oppression, and the potentiality of wilderness—the following research questions were formed for this project:

- How do glbtq persons describe their wilderness experiences?
- How do participants experience gender and body in wild places and how might wilderness experiences allow people to transcend the social categories of gender?
- What can wilderness experiences tell us about gender and gender oppression in American society?

### In-depth/Semistructured Interviewing

Oakley (1981) demonstrates that in-depth and semistructured interviews are two-way conversations involving the give and take of information for both interviewer and interviewee. Interviewing in this way can critically address the power relations between the researcher and the researched by tackling issues of authority and representation (Letherby, 2003; Phoenix, 1994; Scharff, 2010). To some degree, this helps to reduce the “Othering” of research participants. Sharing information, for example, is about sharing experience and validation of those experiences—it’s about sharing joy and humor in the things we love while also sharing frustration and anger in the face of opposition. These exchanges build trust and rapport, which are arguably what it takes to do research in an honest and ethical way. Still though, interviewers should use discretion by looking carefully at the

*impetus to speak* (Alcoff, 1995) and the *impetus not to speak* (Scharff, 2010) in order to avoid further silencing oppressed groups and/or positioning oneself as an authority on a subject (such as gender or wilderness).

For this research, we used grounded theory analysis to identify overarching themes in the interviews; to build theory and knowledge from lived experiences; and to expand the theoretical and empirical knowledge about how people experience gender and body in wilderness settings. We believe grounded theory has post-modern/poststructural and feminist potential because it is perspective oriented and thereby recognizes situated knowledge(s) and is committed to presenting the emic perspective (Clarke, 2007; Haraway, 1991, 1997). Like other researchers who use grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000; Clarke, 2005, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Locke 2001), our research departs somewhat from traditional grounded theory in that we take a more feminist and constructionist approach (i.e., a single shared reality does not exist). We do not, for example, seek to build formal theory (i.e., truth) or expel or label “negative cases” in theory building. We also do our best to incorporate reflexive methodological practices and we move away from traditional grounded theory in that we don’t follow a precise methodological formula or focus as much on dynamics of social interactions.

**Interview process and analysis.** Before each interview, participants were given a brief explanation of the research and a consent form. Initial correspondence through e-mail included the interviewer’s (primary author) disclosure as a queer person and the availability to answer any questions they might have concerning the research project. We use the re-appropriated term *queer*, which Johnson and Kivel (2007) explain “subverts the privilege, entitlement, and status obtained through compulsive heterosexuality and questions how heteronormative behaviors enacted by both heterosexuals and homosexuals function to maintain heterosexuality’s dominance” (p. 102). The disclosure of the interviewer’s queer sexuality to potential participants was an attempt to help them feel more comfortable and safe.

We used theoretical sampling throughout the study; analysis therefore started as soon as data collection began, which was followed by more data collection and analysis until the researchers believed categories were well described (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To facilitate analysis, the researchers implemented analytical strategies and techniques such as making theoretical comparisons (comparing categories), making constant comparisons (comparing pieces of data), coding and using in-vivo codes, looking at context and process, drawing upon personal experience (confronting assumptions), and using integrative diagrams. The written results and analyses were sent out to all interviewees for their feedback.

### **Study Participants**

We recruited participants based on three loosely defined criteria: (a) self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer; (b) self-identified at any point in their life as “female”; and (c) had recreated or worked in wilderness. We chose to limit the sample in these ways not because we believe people who fit these three criteria share the same experiences but because we felt they often had unique and diverse experiences and perceptions relating to gender, including confronting discrimination and negotiating/navigating gender (and sometimes sex and



sexuality) in different cultural contexts. Participants were recruited from the interviewer's friends and/or acquaintances (four); recommendations from colleagues, friends or acquaintances (five); from responses to posters hung at recreation facilities, on campus, or glbtq community centers (one); and from responses to postings on Internet listservs or sites for glbtq organizations (four). By using a snowball technique, we were able to enlarge the sample to include six more interviewees.

Participants ranged in age from 22 to 66 years of age. Of the 20 interviewees, 13 participants were interviewed and were living in a state in the Western U.S. Seven phone interviews were conducted with individuals living in Washington (two), Idaho (one), North Carolina (one), Kentucky (one), California (one), and Nevada (one). Nineteen were of European-American heritage and one was of Eurasian and Mediterranean descent. One of those 19 was also Jewish. There was a wide range of gender and sexual identities in the sample; no one, however, identified as just heterosexual (see Appendix B). At the time of the study, 16 of the participants identified their biological sex as female; two as male; one as transsexual male; and one as female first, then transsexual. Two women mentioned having children and at least 13 had no children. No one mentioned having/experiencing a physical or mental disability beyond long-term or chronic injuries and pain. At least 11 study participants had a college degree at the time of the interview.

The following results section is an in-depth examination and summary of the interviews as they relate to the guiding questions about how interviewees experience gender and body in wilderness settings. The structure of the results section is quite deliberate in that it reflects part of the analytic process (examination and summary) and is organized around the main categories that surfaced in the interviews.

## Results

### Overview

Based on interviews with participants, we developed an overarching theme—ecological belonging—which refers to the overarching wilderness experience for most participants. As part of this overarching theme, we identified four interrelated subcategories. These subcategories include aspects of the wilderness setting/experience, feelings/experiences of connection and bodily awakening, feelings of vulnerability, and feelings/experiences of refuge from normative gender. The first, “wilderness setting,” describes participant definitions and meanings of wild places; these places and meanings inform participant experiences of gender, body, and belonging. “Feelings of connection and bodily awakening” and “feelings of vulnerability” explain part of how and why participants experience belonging in wild places. “Feelings of vulnerability” also explains the differences/variations between vulnerability as a human-animal and vulnerability as a gendered body. Experiencing wilderness as a “refuge from normative gender” provides a nuanced account of “belonging” by looking at how and when wilderness offers protection from some of the predatory forces of oppression.

Although we have presented the results here as distinct categories, we would like to point out that these categorizations are themselves constructions; they are



a way of presenting our findings coherently but they do not necessarily impart the true interrelatedness of the categories themselves. All categories inform and are a part of one another. For example, because wilderness is simultaneously a place and an experience full of meanings, metaphors, and memories, the descriptions of the “wilderness setting” inevitably overlaps with participant feelings and experiences of connectedness, vulnerability, and bodily awakening that happen in those spaces. Further, our presentation of participant quotes is necessarily filtered by the researchers’ interests, intuitions, and sense of the whole.

### **Ecological Belonging**

Participants experience a sense of ecological belonging in wild places as a sense of connection to their bodies and to their physical environment away from the social pressures and obligations of everyday life. This sense of belonging is possible in part because wilderness provides opportunities to escape (to escape structure, judgment, and technology) and to experience bodily awakenings and connections (kinesthetic awareness, sensory engagement with natural processes). Sage’s description of a refreshing swim after a long and hot hike sheds light on how the wilderness setting—because it offers distinct opportunities for escape and bodily awakening—facilitates feelings of connectedness and belonging through bodily experience. She says:

And when we got there—we were hot and tired and dirty and we hadn’t seen water like this in a while. And so we all just stripped off our clothes and you know threw down our packs and stripped off our clothes and frolicked in the water. And we felt—to me—it was like such perfect embodiment of—we were so animal in our bodies at that point. They were our tools, they were our engines, they were the things that were sustaining us, they were us. And we were a community of that together. And ah—in a way that felt like wow—I’m not gonna get to glimpse this kind of connection to myself and connection to others and connection to a landscape simultaneously. (Sage, personal communication, February 3, 2010)

The wilderness setting thus allows for participants to feel connected to their physical environment, to their animal-self, and thus to the earth’s ecological system (feeling a “part of everything”). “For humans in relationship with wilderness,” for example, “there is an emphasis on and heightened awareness of the experiential data perceived through human bodies; it becomes evident that, as a consequence of our embodiment, humans are animals” (Gaard, 1997, pp. 23-24). To be sure, experiencing one’s animal-self does not refer to a universalizing human-animal experience but rather to a self who experiences internal and external balance and cohesion, particularly with feelings of awareness. Ouzel describes:

It feels like that line at my neck that separates the animal-self and the intellect self is gone. Like that I’m integrated. It’s not that my brain is turned off, but it assumes a natural proportion with the rest of me. Where there’s intelligence and knowing and presence in my heart and in my gut and in my limbs and in my digits. Where I’m really aware of being this whole system. (personal communication, February 4, 2010)

## The Wilderness Setting

Across the participants, people make the distinction between society and wilderness—not based solely on legal designation—but based on features of wildness (unpredictability, pristine nature, boundless, exploration, unpatrollable, lawless); opportunities for escape (from structure, people/judgment, technology); and opportunities for different physical connections (body as useful, learning abilities, vulnerability, kinesthetic awareness, close to natural processes, animal-self). These distinctions and key features of the wilderness setting help explain where, how, and why participants experience a sense of ecological connectedness, awakening the body, and refuge from normative gender.

**Features of wildness.** Participants described the wilderness setting as a wild place. Most often wildness was characterized as a feeling or an emotion where there is pristine nature, no pollution, and lack of human influence. Other features of wildness that participants mentioned include unpredictability, boundlessness, exploration, potentiality, lawlessness, and unpatrolability. Being immersed in wildness also provides opportunities to touch what is wild within us. As S. Margeaux describes, “It supports the wildness that’s beyond human culture within me” (personal communication, January 14, 2010).

The word *wild*, however, can also carry different (less positive perhaps) connotations. Some participants feel as though wildness has become a romanticized notion of wilderness and that there isn’t much wild remaining because of human influence. Others point out that wildness carries particularly gendered notions of wilderness. Sage says, for instance:

So those feel to me like a very masculine approach to a wilderness. . . And I mean that in the archetypal sense—not that physically men would say that. But it’s a—it almost feels like an adversarial relationship to wilderness. Yeah—it doesn’t really. Those would not be words I would use for my experience . . . So I think those words in addition to the gendered piece sort of create a feeling in me of isolation, you know. When I think of nature as raw or wild—I think of me all by myself against nature and I guess for me a lot of my experience in nature has been breaking that sense of isolation and replacing it with one of connection—which could also be gendered in a way. (personal communication, February 3, 2010)

**Opportunity to escape.** Escape surfaces in the interviews through three main outlets: escaping structure, escaping judgment, and escaping technology. Escaping is an important part of wilderness experiences for the individuals in this sample as many live highly structured and controlled lives in close proximity to other people (with the attendant judgments and distractions), to infrastructure (with feelings of being trapped), and to technology (which is designed for comfort, convenience, and distraction).

In wildness, for example, we find the breaking down of social systems, structures, and rules. As Margret says, “It’s in part an escape from society and from you know social definitions or interactions . . . It’s this kind of escape but it’s also. I guess I go into wilderness because for me it’s like a more pure existence and it

makes me feel more alive” (personal communication, February 24, 2010). In wilderness, we are also not always so goal driven and we may find that things slow down and thus we find more time for reflection and relaxation. But we also find unpredictability, vulnerability, challenge, and a way to live our life in the moment. Sasha explains escaping structure and living in the moment:

I think it feels very freeing. I think there’s a contentment or satisfaction that comes from you know being present or just feeling like you know today I have to chop wood or today I have to build a fire. Now I have to eat . . . or go do whatever I’m doing. Go climb to the top of this summit. So it’s very day to day—moment by moment—which is very different from how our society is structured. (personal communication, February 1, 2010)

People also want to escape a society driven by consumerism and technology that feels destructive and artificial. Raven explains how wild places offer ways to experience ourselves as part of an ecological system, as part of the food chain rather than as consumers. Reflecting on ‘being put back into the system in a natural way’ she says,

Even if it wasn’t like a predator. Even like I get happy when mosquitoes eat me. Maybe that idea of being able to contribute in real ways. And I guess part of that too came from the sense that I just consume . . . and my existence hurts the places that I love and the things that I love and so that sense of I mean just my—just by being here I’m using all these resources and sometimes that just makes me feel badly. . . And that we always have an impact. You know there is no untrammelled. (Raven, personal communication, February 2, 2010)

Eva also describes escaping appearances and “being seen,” both of which involve judgments, patrol, and/or self-surveillance. Her experiences demonstrate how wild places offer an escape from negotiating appearances and the constructs of femininity in America. She reveals how the lack of judgment and surveillance in wild places as well as the awareness of her own mortality (escaping comfort and convenience and experiencing vulnerability) allow her to reconnect with her body as an animal-body in an ecological system. She says,

Definitely. Definitely. And I feel more comfortable in my skin. Absolutely. I think I really have a daily unconscious disregard for my physical being during the day of my regular life. I think I’m far more concerned about my outward appearance for just the usefulness of, you know, going to work. The requirements that I have—I’m more concerned with does my hair look neat, do I look clean. You know. Am I fat? I think I’m more concerned with those kinds of things when I’m in town. And there is nothing like a wilderness experience again—my fragility really makes me you know value my existence. I mean I don’t think it’s excessively fragile but it definitely puts it into perspective. You know we’re kind of like just little scrambling mammals on this giant globe. You know and I definitely—I definitely feel myself—definitely reconnected with my body. Definitely with a little time outside. (Eva, personal communication, February 9, 2010)

Another subset of participants also voice escaping the specific structures and judgments of gender categories—they want to shed their social skins and escape people who discriminate against or don't accept them because they do not conform to a two-gendered system of male or female. More than just people, they want to escape the prescribed notion to self-define as well as the means to do so. In wild places they are able to escape these structures most significantly because of the lack of people, lack of judgment, and indifference of nature to our social constructions of gender. As Beatrice describes,

Wilderness is a place away from society . . . kind of at times away from reality. It's a place for me where I can be comfortable being myself and not fitting into anything and really a way just to get away from life, get away from everything—just relax . . . And early on I didn't know what it was. I didn't know what I was feeling. I didn't know why I felt comfortable. And really I think a big part of it was I was just really comfortable in not having to look at myself as male or female or straight or gay or lesbian or bisexual. It didn't matter. It really didn't matter. I was just another creature out in the woods. (personal communication, February 15, 2010)

**Opportunity for different physical connections.** Participants talk of using, feeling, and experiencing their bodies in a particular way in wilderness. Instead of a physicality based on comfort and convenience as is often found in our urban and sedentary lifestyles—participants find they must rely on their bodies, take care of them, and love them in ways that aren't necessarily part of day-to-day care outside of wild land settings. For example, participants talk about experiencing kinesthetic awareness (feeling muscles and movement); learning about physical abilities (of mortality, age, challenge, exhaustion, injuries, and strength); and learning to love and appreciate one's body as useful (beyond sexualization and/or something we place secondary to our minds). Kinesthetically, participants talk about using and feeling different muscles, feeling different aches and pains, and having a bodily awareness that involves meditative movement and rhythm. Granite describes this awareness as:

Being more aware of my body, feeling like even the choices of movement (I: deliberate movement?) . . . yeah, deliberate movement or there's a rock there, move my foot this way, um, again the awareness of sun on skin, breeze on skin, that my body becomes maybe kinesthetic becomes more important than you know that mind stuff—is what it's all about. And there's something about the rhythm, the walking, the strength. I mean I can feel my body being sore even and there's the awareness of that, if I've walked a long ways. (personal communication, January 23, 2010)

Sage describes bodily awareness in terms of safety as well as the rewards of sensory engagement (different physical connections) and feelings of wholeness (connectedness):

You need to tune into what your body is experiencing or you won't be safe in that environment. It also I think rewards you with sort of the rich-

ness of—of experiencing . . . . You know just like oh my gosh when do I feel so whole and as I maneuver through the world. And this is—this is great and I can only do this while I'm out in this environment where I can you know feel the sun, smell the air, and you know feel the cold on my face and the difference on the sunny side from the shady side. I don't know—it just gives you all these places to be like, can you feel this? Can you feel that? (personal communication, February 3, 2010)

Eva explains how a different physicality demands a different set of priorities. As a self-identified woman, she expounds on the relationship between gender, appearances, and wild land settings:

And you know it's really more about doing than appearing. Appearances for my outward gender identity absolutely makes no—is absolutely not important to me when I'm in the woods. I feel—you know gender neutral is kind of a weird phrase to me but I don't know how else I can describe it. I'm definitely a woman and I feel like a woman but all that outer dressing, frosting, stuff, all that stuff just falls away 'cause everything has to do with action. You know. Actions I take are going to determine the level of comfort that I'm going to experience. So, I feel like a woman but without all those trap-exterior trappings. That's just me. I don't know if I feel like any other women. I just feel like I'm more in my natural state. (Eva, personal communication, February 9, 2010)

Wilderness settings also offer the opportunity for different physical connections because wilderness experiences happen close to natural processes (sensory engagement) and are based on interactions with other living things (nature and nonhuman animals in particular) rather than with infrastructure and technology. These physical connections in wild places help to awaken the body and facilitate feelings of ecological belonging. How your body feels phenomenologically when you walk on dirt, snow, or permafrost, for instance, is much different than how it feels when you walk on concrete or Astroturf. Zara describes an experience of picking blueberries on the tundra of the Arctic circle:

Just the whole act of walking and sinking 8 inches into the squooshiness of the tundra. I mean it was kind of a surreal type of environment—going through burns where it caught on fire I mean I remember taking a picture of my hands after I'd spend a couple hours out there and it was just completely darkened and black from the burn and just completely purple from all the berry patches I'd been going through. (personal communication, February 1, 2010)

Granite provides a good example of a distinct sensory experience in wilderness:

But I especially—there's something about granite rock, walking up granite rock and the heat of that. And the lakes—all that. One experience that I once had that I don't think I could ever have in town is I was on a granite rock and it was nighttime and I was looking into the lake and it was a clear night and the stars were reflected in the lake. And it was like if I dove off that rock I would dive into the sky. (personal communication, January 23, 2010)

## Feelings of Connection and Bodily Awakening

“Feelings of Connections and Bodily Awakening” explains part of how and why participants are able to find a sense of belonging in wild places. Awakening the body can also be described as “feeling alive” or “integrated” and includes concepts/experiences such as “being in my body” (kinesthetic awareness, being present, and emotional responses); “bodily engagement and sensory perception”; “learning physical abilities”; and “body as useful.” Many of these concepts overlap, which makes teasing out the distinctions between them difficult to articulate. Moreover, many of these experiences/concepts are intertwined with the physicality and physical connection descriptions in earlier sections on wilderness settings. We believe that this interrelatedness recounts how participants experience wholeness and integration, where everything (body interacting with surroundings in a dialogic relationship) is working together to awaken the body and bring about feelings of connectedness.

Participants often mention that “getting out of balance” is quite easy to do in a society that focuses so much on mental and intellectual tasks and priorities. In wild places many participants feel an awakening of the body not felt in their day-to-day lives. But wilderness experiences are not purely physical—it is described that they integrate the physical, mental, and spiritual. SC describes, for example, “Well, my body feels most normal when I’m in wilderness. Healthy. I’m quite in-tuned with my body when I’m out in the wilderness. And my mind, my surroundings. . . . And I guess for me it’s physical and mental and spiritual. They all coincide with one another” (personal communication, February 5, 2010). Almost all participants mention “being in my body” in wild places and how good that makes them feel as if they have been disconnected from their bodies, from themselves. The notion of “being in your body” allows people to feel a sort of integration of mind and body (and spirit for some people) by being present (or in the moment) and aware—both internally (kinesthetically) and externally (surroundings).

Part of ‘being in your body’ involves trusting your body to act instead of churning over decisions in your head before acting. Sage says, for instance,

I’m a big cross-country skier and there are times when I’m you know like coasting down through some unbroken snow on a gentle decline and I’m just like—it feels like every fiber of my body is like in sync and I’m um it’s almost like dancing—some sort of dance. And that—that feels very primal to me because again it’s like I’m not thinking, I’m acting. And I’m trusting my body’s ability to act and that feels primal in a very sort of like sweet way. (personal communication, February 3, 2010)

**Being in body and being seen.** Part of what prevents people from being in their bodies is judgment from others who are looking or “gazing” on our bodies; or at least the perception that they are doing so. Foucault (1977) uses the metaphor of the “Panopticon” to demonstrate how modern “disciplinary” societies monitor and normalize bodies and behavior, including and extending to self-surveillance. This surveillance or patrol is minimal in wild places; participants are not “being seen” by much of anyone, which allows for a certain freedom of expression in the

way participants carry or expose their bodies. Sasha ties together this concept of being seen, being in your body, and being present in the following quote:

Yeah. That's interesting. 'Cause I feel like wilderness is a chance for people to be kind of invisible so you kind of just escape there and there aren't always people with you or there certainly no mirrors or you know. You have to kind of wear the same clothes for a long time; you get to smell your smells and all of those good things. So I think there's that, but there's also this presence I think when you're in wilderness that it's very easy to not—at least for me to not be present in my own body or in my own life like while I'm here. But I think if you're out in the woods you can't hide from yourself. You kind of you get in touch with your own stuff really fast. And so there's a presence of mind and body that happens when you're in wilderness that's a lot harder to achieve when you're in town. (personal communication, February 3, 2010)

Away from rules about social acceptability (escaping), quite a few participants also talk about nakedness or exposure in wild places and the ability to engage fully with an environment without judgment. As Patsy says, "when you're naked—that's kind of like connecting. Often we don't like really experience ourselves without material on us" (personal communication, February 4, 2010). Swimming naked in bodies of water is mentioned in reference to both feelings of connectedness and physical sensations between body and nature as well as the type of privacy (away from being seen or judgment) afforded in wild places. In response to a question about physical immersion Raven says, "Being in a place that's remote enough that if you want to be naked you can be naked and you know bask in the sun or swim in the rivers or whatever" (personal communication, February 2, 2010). Similarly, Margret says:

That just brings to mind to me jumping into a high alpine lake naked. And that's an experience that I've had and I just like swimming in natural bodies of water without feeling like people are around who are gonna look at you or judge you or whatever. Just being isolated and free and having that—that's like what it is about. . . Or even just like the way that somebody is watching me might sexualize my body if I was naked in front of them. Which doesn't exist in wilderness because there's nobody there or if there is somebody there it's people who you know and like trust and you can be comfortable with. You know what I mean. It's not—so I guess that's what I'm talking about that-those weird like puritanical judgments that people put on other people or even on themselves, too. You wanna behave right in society you know. (personal communication, February 24, 2010)

### **Vulnerability**

In wild places, interviewees also become aware of their vulnerability to dangers or threats. For this section, we would like to focus on interviewee responses about human vulnerability to predation and to natural elements (weather, exposure)—most of which involve a keen awareness of one's own vulnerability as



part of the food chain (bodily responses such as fear). Pintler describes this as: “Vulnerability in a good way” (personal communication, December 6, 2010). In wilderness, for instance, notions of being seen become largely about human vulnerability (predator-prey relationships, heightened senses) and/or connection (as animals in an ecosystem) rather than a largely negative gendered vulnerability which occurs mostly outside of wilderness (discussed in subsequent gender and wilderness section). At the heart of vulnerability is control and in wild places—humans are no longer in control. When asked what it feels like to be physically immersed in wilderness Zara has the following response:

Trick question. Do you have a shotgun and bear spray on you or not? (Laughs) ‘Cause that would change the whole scenario actually. For me it would. The places I go are usually pretty high risk. You know god forbid I’d ever have to shoot or spray at anything. But you know if I was without protection then that puts a whole different aspect on it. ‘Cause then all of the sudden it’s the hunter prey and you’re prey and you’d better watch your butt. I’ve run into so many bears that it’s just—it’s pathetic at this point. I swear I have a bear magnet written on my forehead. So—that can be a scary aspect . . . (I: What is it about the high-risk element that you seek . . . that you like?) . . . It’s exciting. I’ve always been one to live a little on the edge. I tend to get bored easily. So—for me going by myself in the backcountry and like say an area of high concentration of grizzlies. To me—that’s exciting. You know and it’s scary ‘cause you could die and I think that’s the allure of it to me. It’s because you’re not in control of everything as we are in this society. The rules change. The games change. (personal communication, February 1, 2010)

Participants express feelings of freedom (sometimes satisfaction), for example, in accessing parts of ourselves that stay hidden in a society so concerned with control, structure, comfort, and safety. Sharrel expresses the thrill of feeling not totally in control while on the water:

Oh—that brings me back to love of water (laughing). There’s nothing compared to the excitement and the adrenaline of being on the water in the middle of nowhere (laughing) with no one in the immediate vicinity to help you. It’s just exciting and it’s challenging. It’s just uhhhhh! It’s exhilarating. It makes you feel . . . well it makes me feel more alive to be on the water in the wilderness than I can feel anywhere else. Because I have some small measure of control as far as steering the boat or whatnot but water always has that unknown element—it just never acts the same way twice. (personal communication, February 24, 2010)

Vulnerability thus can manifest in very positive ways in the wilderness. Interactions with predators and natural elements can be both terrifying and exhilarating. Together with feelings of connection and bodily awakening, this type of vulnerability can open up the potentiality of feeling more fully human and more a part of the ecological world.

### **Wilderness as a Refuge from Normative Gender**

“Refuge from normative gender” explains a nuanced account of “ecological belonging” by looking at gender in wild places and how and when wilderness offers protection from some of the societal forces of oppression. The interviews suggest people experience wilderness as a refuge from certain types of people and structures. In particular, participants who do a lot of gender negotiation in society find refuge from normative gender in wild places. They experience refuge because wilderness is often “unpatrollable” (July, personal communication, April 1, 2010) and as one respondent describes: a “gender-free land.” They can find refuge in wild places from unaccepting people and judgment because wilderness is a sort of “holding environment” for freedom of expression and safety in change and transition. Sophia Margeaux says:

I’m either this guy or this guy dressed as a woman or something, and the one unknown and scary, creepy, freaky and weird. So is it any wonder I choose to recreate alone in the wild places for at least then I can engage my own gender congruence (or delusion) without the threat of a disbelieving or disapproving public. (personal communication, January 18, 2010)

For some interviewees wild places therefore become a refuge from unaccepting people, discrimination and oppression, objectification/sexualization, gender negotiation, and rigid and normative gender categories, roles, and expectations (and the inherent stress that comes with this predation).

**Gender identity, expression and negotiation.** Interviewees conceive of gender, and thus their own gender identity, in diverse ways (See Appendix B). What is at the root of this diversity is whether or not individuals make separations between sex, gender, and sexuality. Overall, respondents view gender identity in the following ways:

- gender and sex are the same in that gender is a reflection of biology,
- gender is a sociological construct and sex is biological,
- gender identity is flexible and/or not fixed, and
- gender includes sex and sexual identity (i.e., female and lesbian).

Most participants, however, feel their gender expression/identity is not in line with the normative gender expectations of their biological sex. While many participants voice that genders are and should be flexible, not all feel that they could easily express this flexibility, particularly those people who identify as transgender or transsexual. They feel more constricted by society’s judgments in their expression of their genders and thus experienced a good deal more of what we call gender negotiation in their everyday lives. Gender negotiation might be in the context of career choices, family pressures, alienation, a lack of room for transitory genders, everyday encounters (bathrooms for example), and religious rigidity. As Sophia-Margeaux describes:

I feel like I’m doing gymnastics all the time in my head, with my emotions . . . . I function as a man mostly out of necessity ‘cause I’m not gonna pass as a woman given my height and how I look (laughs). Within

social settings—that's where wilderness refuge comes in. It allows me to express that other spirit that I feel resides within me. I wonder if it doesn't reside in all humans . . . you know if I could, I would live my life as . . . a female gendered identified person, but I can't . . . so I don't. I'm a pretty practical guy in a lot of ways and I make those concessions . . . wilderness is a place where I can freely express myself without the trouble of others. (personal communication, January 14, 2010)

Moreover, for most interviewees, gender is not just a label, but also a position within society as an oppressed minority. Almost all participants have experienced discrimination because of their gender identification and/or sexual identification. Interviewees have experienced this discrimination at work and school, with family and strangers, and in public restrooms and locker rooms.

**Gender and wilderness.** Most interviewees do not feel that gender is present in wild places. They may speak of “feelings of gender neutrality” or gender as nonexistent. Most of the time most interviewees often don't think about their gender unless people are around (in-group and/or out-group); they feel vulnerable in terms of violence and/or rape; or they experience discrimination while working. We might think of this as a particular gendered vulnerability, a feeling of vulnerability which can be heightened when traveling alone (without a dog) in wild places. Participants feel vulnerable either because of their gender as a woman; because of non-accepting humans in terms of their gender ambiguity or transgender appearance/identity (i.e., cross-dressing and/or mixed array of secondary sex characteristics); or because of their gender/sexual orientation as gay or lesbian. July says, for instance,

I mean most of the queers that I know that go to say \*\*\*hot springs, which is highly trafficked and right off the road, deliberately time it so that they're there on a week day, on a morning, they're not gonna run into to other people you know. So that they can have that feeling of not having to negotiate it like that. But if those people showed up, you know they hop out and put their clothes back on and leave. (personal communication, April 1, 2010)

Sophia Margeaux says:

Even in wilderness it's like I go on the total full on animal awareness. Like I am totally keyed. My senses of sight and hearing and smell are heightened to where I can smell people, particularly if they are on horseback, coming along the trail. And I'm off the trail and they pass me unseen. (personal communication, January 14, 2011)

Despite this fear and sense of gendered vulnerability, however, some people experience wild places as way to connect with their gender (as female or transgender or as not fixed). This connection may be experienced because they have the freedom to express a gender they feel is stifled in society; they connect to what they feel are the more positive traits of their gender; or they may connect to their gender through their body. Sage explains that:

The socialized cues that we give or try and I guess to sort of project our gender identity—that language gets taken away somewhat in the wilderness. And so it feels like the expression of gender becomes truer and unique to the individual . . . Like I feel like I get to be in my body as it exists—um, which is different from how the other person who is naked running through the stream besides me is—you know what their body looks like and how they exist. It feels like there is so much room for both of us to be whatever exactly we are at that moment. (personal communication, February 3, 2010)

MSU describes the freedom associated with gender expression in wilderness:

But when I was, uh, before I transitioned and I was still doing wilderness jobs, I remember like telling my friends about how much I love that kind of work because I would go to work and it was just like this gender-free land. (personal communication, January 26, 2010)

“Being seen,” for example, is fundamental to the meaning of gender in our society because gender is an outward expression affirmed, denied, and negotiated with other people. Not fitting neatly into one or the other gender categories either by choice or happenstance can compel people to seek spaces and people where they will be “accepted without judgment.” Wilderness is one of those spaces. In wild spaces, participants are able to connect with self (and surroundings) and not focus so much on who is watching. They can also connect to the gender they feel is within them, they can express the gender (s) they choose, or they can be free of gender all together. Sophia Margeaux says,

Another thing I like about being out in wilderness is there’s no judgment there. As far as I can tell the physical universe is indifferent to the how and why of our human existence. Which is, to me, that’s refuge. That’s comfort. It may be cold comfort (laughs) but better than the evil looks I get otherwise if I’m amongst humans. (personal communication, January 14, 2010)

So, what is it about wilderness that allows for these potentials and these experiences of refuge? And why is this important? Perhaps it is in nature that we can find models of what it means “to be” in transition. July describes, for example,

I mean this is just one thing. But there’s a way that you watch animals and they have like a really stable existence as say a young deer or a blue jay or whatever it is, right? It’s not like they’re changing from one animal to another all the time but they also—their identity seems almost to be the congealing of everything that’s surrounding them into the negative space that their body makes in the middle of that everything. And it seems to—their presentation to the world, their attention, their aspect, and their degree of attention to one another and their degree of attention to you changes by the split second as the stuff around them changes. So in that way there something very dynamic rather than stable about being for them. And I think that being in those places made me be able to

think about—I don't know maybe be able to think about 'being' instead of identity. (personal communication, April 1, 2010)

Perhaps it is also the indifference of the natural world to our social constructs or to our existence at all—that we can find comfort and refuge. Our physical connection in wilderness is distinctive because it often does not involve “being seen” or being judged by other humans as a gendered person—either male or female (variations exist depending on presence and type of people). When I asked if she felt like her body was gendered in wilderness Beatrice says:

In some ways—no, my body is not gendered. You're just a person. And you're whoever you want. And if you wanna be female or masculine or feminine or male or any gender or non-gendered or trans or—you wanna be anything. (I: Laughing. Anything!) . . . a fucking rainbow of gender. You can be whatever you want. And what a deer is gonna look at you because you're dressed in women's clothes and you've gotta a penis? No, they're not. They don't give a shit. They don't care. (personal communication, February 15, 2010)

## Discussion

From these stories we can discern that wilderness can allow participants to experience their bodies without the social constraints of gender. With the presence of nature and without surveillance, we are better able to be in our bodies and to feel our bodies moving, sensing, reacting, and interacting. Without judgment and patrol, people find refuge and belonging in wilderness away from the constructs of society; away from prescribed and idealized ways we use and present our bodies; and away from the predatory eyes of oppression.

The results of this study suggest that the absence of judgment is an important part of refuge, particularly for transgender people. But is the absence of human judgment particularly significant for those who experience gender oppression or is it also important for how other oppressed individuals/groups experience wilderness? We cannot generalize across all socially oppressed groups because people experience wilderness and oppression in different ways. But perhaps a common underlying premise is that oppression alienates and excludes people from full participation in society and thus we wonder if the search for refuge, connection, and belonging might be common links among how “Othered” populations can experience wild nature. Saying this, we recognize that understanding wilderness as a refuge from other forms of oppression has limitations, particularly in terms of accessibility, histories of colonization, and assumptions of a singular able-bodied experience. It is important therefore to conceptualize wilderness as a dynamic socio-cultural and racialized space which necessarily recognizes the multiple and shifting meanings of wilderness experiences. In Australian contexts, for example, wilderness has been critiqued for upholding Eurocentric views of humans as separate from nature—views which do not accurately represent colonial histories or the stories and relationships of the indigenous people (Plumwood, 1998; Rose 1996; Bayet, 1994; Langton, 1996). Others have argued that viewing remote and pristine wild lands as universally desirable and important for defining U.S. history

overlooks the experiences of African and Native Americans who may associate wilderness with a history of colonization and domination (Cronon, 1995; Johnson, 1998; Martin, 2004; Taylor, 2000; Gaard, 1997).

From this study we can at least observe the importance of understanding how the social positions people occupy (in relation to sex, gender, and sexuality) affect the meanings people ascribe to wilderness experiences and the role wilderness plays in their lives. Sometimes these experiences speak to more than just a fun and adventurous trip into the woods, but rather to fundamental ways of being. On the one hand, wilderness as refuge from normative gender tells us the story of a significant but relatively small sub-population of people. On the other hand, it tells us something of what lies beneath one of the most central organizing systems of the human social animal—sex, gender, sexuality, and oppression. The narrative of wilderness as refuge from normative gender reminds us that in wilderness there is a model of emancipation and freedom.

This narrative also speaks to how we can re-envision the human-wilderness relationship in contemporary society. For example, we can apply the experience of wilderness from the perspective of “Otherness” as a way to break down fundamental constructions of wilderness as the “Other.” There are dualisms that perpetuate domination and unequal power relations between what is center and what is marginal—what is self and what is other (culture/nature; male/female; mind/body; rationality/animality; civilized/primitive; public/private; subject/object; white/non-white; heterosexual/other sexualities). Further, embedded in wilderness are notions of purity (empty/full; sacred/profane) and the absence of humans (visitor/resident). Ecofeminists such as Karen Warren (1990) and Val Plumwood (1993) have shown how these dualisms operate to perpetuate domination. In particular, they have outlined the conceptual links between the domination of women and the domination of nature (or those labeled as “Other”). Describing these dualisms in terms of *radical separation* and *homogenization*, Plumwood (1993) and Frye (1983) show how dualistic polarities emphasize differences between dualized pairs and sameness within each of the pairs. Part of re-envisioning human relationships with “Others” means rejecting this radical separation and “reclaiming the ground of continuity,” and reclaiming differences that have been denied in order to fit into either/or categories. Rejecting polarities does not ask us to discard difference (between dualisms such as nature and culture), as difference alone does not imply value judgments. Indeed, equating culture with nature does little more than extend value to everything cultural and human within nature. Instead, Plumwood (1998) argues that part of re-envisioning the multiple meanings of wilderness necessitates that we *do not* define wilderness as absence (of people, empty, opposite of culture) but as presence (of nature). Looking this way restores agency to nature—it gives meaning to nature beyond a marginal relationship to a cultural center. We believe this perception reflects purposes of the Wilderness Act to preserve wilderness character where “the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man (sic)”. Note here the presence of humans as part of, not dominant over, that community of life.

Along with Birch (1990) and Plumwood (1998) much of the recent leisure studies research on gender also looks at resistance and leisure as a political act for

women (Henderson & Hickerson, 2007). In many ways, this approach seems to imply that to connect with nature is to resist society and thus upholds the duality of nature and culture. However, we did not find connections between wilderness and resistance clearly articulated by interviewees. While the thought still lingers that there is something subversive to be found in wild places—wilderness does not appear to offer space for participants in this study to resist heteropatriarchy so much as it offers space for creative expression and to experience sensual engagement with other living, nonjudgmental beings. Perhaps our findings are a result of language limitations as most connotations of resistance signal opposition, confrontation, fighting, struggling, conflict, and very archetypal male or aggressive connotations. Most interviewees wished to avoid using or implying these connotations. In contrast, they describe wilderness experiences in terms of connection, integration, belonging, and refuge.

To this we might ask—what does it mean to define ourselves and our actions through a lens of resistance? Does this not echo the arguments for defining wilderness as a presence (intrinsic) rather than an absence of people/culture? As Mitch Rose (2002) points out, resistance is always defined as a reaction to something else, namely as an oppositional relationship to a stable powerful center (hegemony, heteropatriarchy, and so on). In some ways, this stance reifies the stability (the given) of a powerful center and leaves little room for agency, creativity, and self-definition beyond reactions to (resistance) hegemony. In other words, when you face direct opposition because of the ways you want to live your life (queer for example)—it can become a struggle to sort through “that which comes from within” and “that which comes from without.” This study supports looking beyond resistance models and dualisms to allow us to recognize the intrinsic value of Nature and our potential to self-define.

Experiencing ourselves as human animals is an important piece of this story. Gaard (1997) calls for a re-visioning of the human-wilderness relationship by re-defining human identity as an animal identity; she argues that this identity also dismantles the human-nature dualism because it locates humans in both culture and nature. She says that “One of the most valuable experiences wilderness provides is the opportunity for a different kind of perceptual orienteering, a different way of locating oneself in relation to one’s environment . . . From this altered perspective, humans may be better able to envision the kind of relationships that they would like to have with other humans, animals, and the Earth itself” (1997, p. 17). We believe our research demonstrates that a different way of locating oneself at the level of the body means wilderness experiences can make possible feelings of integration, connection, and bodily awakening. This is in line with David Abram who says, “Ultimately, to acknowledge the life of the body, and to affirm our solidarity with this physical form, is to acknowledge our existence as one of the earth’s animals, and so to remember and rejuvenate the organic basis of our thoughts and our intelligence” (1996, p. 47).

One set of insights in our research, those stemming from transgender and transsexual people, have received little to no previous consideration in the literature. We found those particular perspectives to not only support the promise and potential of wild places, but also to show wilderness as a space for transcendence



rather than resistance. Part of that transcendence means experiencing our embodied selves and escaping the social forces that can perpetuate gender oppression. Wilderness can thus provide space and opportunity for the fullness of self and the wildness within.

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## Appendix A: Example Interview Guide

- 1) Could you tell me how you define wilderness? (Use interviewee's wording for interview)
- 2) Could you tell me what wilderness means to you? Explore.  
 P1: According to response—probe on gender, body, push, pull.  
 P2: Explore spiritual aspects if mentioned.  
 P3: Explore refuge if mentioned.
- 3) Can you tell me about your most recent wilderness trip? And if there wasn't something recent, maybe one that is memorable for you?  
 P1: What sorts of feelings stand out in your mind from the experience?  
 P2: Could you tell me about the physical or bodily nature of the experience?  
 P3: How significant were sensations like smells, sounds, sights, textures, and tastes?
- 4) Could you describe what it's like to be physically immersed in wilderness/wildness?
- 5) Do you feel that wilderness experiences are wild, raw, or untamed?  
 P1: Explore why or why not  
 P2: Explore gendered nature of this language  
 P3: Explore how wilderness experiences help you to connect with your body in these primal ways? Ways perhaps that you felt connected to your own wildness?
- 6) Do you feel like wilderness is part of your identity?  
 P1: Can you explain how and why these experiences are part of your identity?  
 P2: Explore connections to gender if mentioned.

*(Note to participant: we're going to change direction just a little bit here. Still on identity, but we are going to move into gender. We can still continue to make connections to wilderness throughout.)*

- 7) Could you describe your gender identity to me? Explore where this leads.  
 P1: How do you feel like you express your gender?  
 P2: Explore clothing, behaviors, personality, physicality, career choices if appropriate.
- 8) Now if we were to take that conversation we just had about gender, gender identity, and gender expression and think about it in a different context—a wilderness context for example. What comes to mind when you think about your gender in a wilderness setting?  
 P1: Do you feel like your body is gendered in wilderness?  
 P2: Do you think about your gender differently when you are in wild places? Why or why not and when?  
 P3: What is it about wild places that allow or support this?  
 P4: Explore influence of other people on how you experience gender in wilderness.
- 9) Do you feel that wilderness teaches you anything about your body?  
 P1: Could you put into words what and how you learn these things?  
 P2: Why are they important to you?  
 P3: Do you think wilderness helps you to reconnect with your body? How?

*Note: "P" denotes some of the variety of probes used during interview*

*(Note to participant: I want to change directions just a little bit here to explore a particular concept)*

10) Can you think of any instances where you chose not to comply with or have actively gone against the dominant rules and views of this society? Explore.

P1: I think of this as another way of saying 'resistance' but this hasn't resonated with everyone so I want to understand what this term means for you. Does this term seem appropriate for the instances you just described? Explore resistance for participant.

P2: Can you think of any examples of how you might have used your body to resist these dominant views?

P3: How important is this resistance to your identity?

11) Do you feel that you go to wilderness, for instance, to resist anything that society will not let you do or will not let you be? Explore depending on previous responses.

P1: Is there a particular bodily experience that you're fleeing from?

P2: Is there a particular gendered experience that you're fleeing from?

P3: Is there a particular bodily experience that you're fleeing to?

P4: Is there a particular gendered experience that you're fleeing to?

12) Could you tell me about how often you visit wilderness? [Use this to get stories if haven't already]

P1: What types of activities/things do you do there?

P2: Do you go alone or in groups (same-sex or co-ed)?

*(Note to interviewee: The remaining questions are demographic questions. If you want to elaborate on any—feel free to, but if you don't want to answer any of them for whatever reason—that's perfectly fine, too.)*

13) What is your sex? (Or how would you describe your biological sex?)

14) Could you describe your sexual orientation?

15) Could you describe your race/ethnicity?

16) What is your age?

*That's all the questions I have for you but I generally open it up at the end in case there was anything that you wanted to say that you didn't get a chance to say. And if there's not—that's okay, too.*

Explore what participants would like to discuss.

Note: "P" denotes some of the variety of probes used during interview.

## Appendix B: Responses of Study Participants to Demographic Questions

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Race/ethnicity	Sex	Sexual Orientation
Pintler	47	Woman born woman	White and Jewish	Female born female	Queer/lesbian
Lee	31	Woman	Heinz 57	Female	Gay/depends on the day
Sophia Margeaux	57	Female/ Transgender	Anglo-European	Male	Queer/heterosexual
Granite	66	Female and lesbian	Caucasian	Female	Lesbian
MSU	31	Man/transgender	White	Male	Big ?/bisexual 'cause it's easier
Dover	60	Androgynous	White/Northern European mixture	Female	Lesbian
Marty	52	Female and lesbian	Caucasian	Female	Lesbian
Sasha	26	Woman	Whitey	Female	Queer
Zara	36	Lesbian and female	Heinz 57	Female	Lesbian
Raven	30	Female	Inbred NW European/White	Female	Gay
Sage	52	Female with flexibility	WASP	Female	Queer
Ouzel	47	Female	Caucasian/Celtic	Female	Lesbian
Patsy	23	Female	White/Mutt/European	Female	Bisexual if I had to pick a box
SC	24	Gay, androgynous, female	Caucasian/American	Female	Lesbian
Eleanor	22	Female	Caucasian	Female	Lesbian
Eva	44	Old fashioned 70s swinger	Eurasian-Asian/Mediterranean	Female	Queer
Beatrice	23	Female first	White/Caucasian/Norwegian	Female first then transsexual	Lesbian primarily/asexual
Margret	26	Female	Polish and White	Female	Bisexual or queer
Sharrel	27	Female/boyish female	Didn't get this information	Female	Bisexual at the moment
July	35	Not fixed	White/Appalachian	Transsexual Male	Queer

*Note:* These labels and categories should not be viewed as finite or resolute as the majority of participants do not view them as such.