

**Public Land and Private Fears:  
Reclaiming Outdoor Spaces in Gretchen Legler's  
*Sportswoman's Notebook***

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the struggles women often face negotiating wild outdoor spaces. Similar to the constraints a modern woman felt who wanted to wander the city anonymously, a contemporary woman alone far from settled areas is immediately suspect unless she has a socially sanctioned purpose, or is with a man (and often then is an unwelcome reminder of civilized manners and domesticity). Gretchen Legler's book, *All the Powerful Invisible Things: A Sportswoman's Notebook*, provides a nonfiction account of one contemporary American woman who is successful at hunting, fishing, paddling, and camping, yet is unable to achieve the same public privacy as men because she is always accompanied by gender specific fears (primarily rape). Feminist geographers have shown that cultural conditioning of women to feel most unsafe in public spaces (against all statistical evidence), and the internalization of the male gaze that censors her actions even when men are not present, are forms of spatial patriarchy still operating today. By using personal essays to explore these issues, Legler enlists the pastoral mode of nature writing in nontraditional ways that Terry Gifford terms "post-pastoral". Ultimately Legler's essays reveal not only the cultural impediments to American women accessing outdoor spaces on their own terms, but also the masculine and heterosexual bias within the traditional pastoral mode privileged in American nature writing.

*Keywords:* women and nature, flâneur, public privacy, pastoral, post-pastoral, spatial patriarchy, male gaze, wilderness, lesbian, rape, Gretchen Legler, Mona Domosh and Joni Seager, Terry Gifford, Annie Proulx.

I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in. (John Muir [1938] 1979: 439)

Not to have known—as most men have not—either the mountain or the desert is not to have known one's self. (Joseph Wood Krutch, qtd. in Zwinger 2002: 577–8)

I'm always afraid alone in the woods, but I push on. (Gretchen Legler 1995: 34)

Until recently, feminist discourse has concerned itself largely with recasting indoor spaces and reclaiming public spaces outside the home which are associated with political and economic power. A discussion of more natural or wild outdoor spaces has long been outside mainstream feminist attention. Literary critic Stacy Alaimo (2000) traces the ways most feminist theory distances woman from nature, due in large part to Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of how Cartesian rationalism set woman up as nature incarnate, passive and silent, thus without access to the benefits of power and voice that identification with the cultural side of the dualism affords white men. There is an important distinction to make between feminine spaces and "land-as-woman", a concept that Annette Kolodny argues is "the central metaphor of American pastoral experience" (1975: 158). Nature was not perceived as feminine space, that is, a space for women and their activities; nature was seen as *female itself*. This perception, which is still embedded in American culture, poses a problem for women if they wish to retreat to nature in the tradition of the literary pastoral, alone and unrestricted by city manners and customs, and leads Alaimo to refer to woman "as that which is mired in nature [and] outside the domain of human subjectivity" (2000: 2).

Such conflation with nature is a more intense version of the hurdles a woman faced to becoming a *flâneur*, a term originating in early nineteenth century Paris for a city stroller, a purposeless and anonymous crowd watcher. Though the term "has never been satisfactorily defined", according to Rebecca Solnit (2000: 198–9), "it can be concluded that the *flâneur* was male [...] with little or no domestic life". In much the same way women were mired in nature, Solnit states: "One of the arguments about why women could not be *flâneurs* was that they were, as either commodities or consumers, incapable of being sufficiently detached from the commerce of city life" (2000: 237). The acceptability of woman's presence, whether in the city or outdoors, has traditionally been linked with her task, and that task has been linked to domesticity. For instance, in frontier America it was appropriate for women to engage nature as gardeners or homesteaders – even without men (Domosh and Seager 2001: 147). In the early twentieth century, shopping allowed women greater mobility but, again, it was a "purposive mobility which [had] nothing to do with the detached and aimless strolling of the *flâneur*" (Wolff 1995: 102). Unless she cross-dressed like George Sand (Wolff 1990: 41), she could not lose herself in the crowd and enjoy the luxury of unaccountability because "any deviation from the evidence of such purpose immediately renders her suspect – a loiterer, an unrespectable woman" (Wolff 1995: 102). Thus, what has been called the "right to escape to public privacy" was not afforded to women (Wolff 1990: 40). This essay will extend the conversation of women's mobility in the modern city to women's mobility in

outdoor spaces removed from the garden or permanent settlement to show not only how one twentieth-century woman navigates the public aspects of being outdoors, but how she begins to access the public privacy which, as with city wandering, rests on her ability to move around without always feeling watched, threatened, or accountable to someone.

Gretchen Legler's (1995) book *All the Powerful Invisible Things: A Sports-woman's Notebook* is described as "part nature guide, part family history and part feminist tract" in which Legler, "who has spent the better part of her life hunting and fishing, considers herself an outsider in the male world of the outdoors" (Hughes 1996: 25). It is a postmodern woman's pastoral that frames each essay with an excursion outdoors designed to let the writer reflect on her relationships with family, husband, lesbian lovers, and self. As such, Legler's book falls under the classification of contemporary nature writing, which according to ecocritic Don Scheese "has become [...] the most popular form of pastoralism" (2002: 6). Characterized by a non-fiction account of a writer's outward and inward journey in a "predominantly nonhuman environment", Scheese says, "nature writing is a descendant of 'natural history' and 'spiritual autobiography'" (2002: 6).

While two essays received Pushcart Prizes,<sup>1</sup> the book has not received critical attention from scholars of American nature writing. Perhaps this is because the essays offer little in the way of natural history, and, though her eye is keen and her description vivid, the nonhuman environment at times seems more a framing device or mere setting than understood as having its own legitimate interest. And though she demonstrates a mature biocentrism, environmental responsibility receives little emphasis. Here the otherness the writer is most concerned with is her own. But Legler's work may also get passed over because a book full of woman's issues is not what we expect in nature writing.

Critic Lawrence Buell reminds us that, though women's presence in the nature writing tradition may not receive much attention,<sup>2</sup> "pastoral modes have functioned as a means of empowerment for women writers" (1995: 44). Perhaps because anthologies of women's nature writing are appearing with greater frequency,<sup>3</sup> the editors of a collection of critical articles on U.S. women nature writers explain that critics have begun "re-examining genre and genre expectations" (Edwards 2001: 4). They claim that "much nature writing in America has

1 Awarded annually by inclusion in a collection of poetry and prose from "the Best of the Small Presses" in America published by Norton.

2 Indeed, Susan Fenimore Cooper's book *Rural Hours* (1850) was hugely popular – even Thoreau read at least some of it before writing *Walden* – yet only *Walden* is read in American classrooms. See Johnson 2000.

3 For examples see Anderson 1991, 2002, and 2003; Hogan 1998 and 2001; and Rogers 1994.

followed a pattern of separation, whether through travel, or isolation, or both”, a pattern that also separates nature and culture; such “philosophical assumptions” have often meant overlooking the “women authors [who] experience nature as intimately connected to culture” (Edwards 2001: 2).

Terry Gifford, a proponent of the continuing importance of pastoral modes in this age of environmental degradation, agrees that this is the way it has been, but that “post-pastoral literature”<sup>4</sup> conveys “an awareness of both nature as culture and of culture as nature” (1999: 162). Likewise, Gifford posits that further elements to look for in a post-pastoral work include: “recognition that the inner is also the workings of the outer” and “that the exploitation of the planet is of the same mindset as the exploitation of women and minorities” (1999: 156, 165). He continues, “for many post-pastoral ecofeminist writers, Arcadia might be located within the body, were ‘the body’s world’ less damaged, environmentally and socially” (1999: 166). This perspective allows, it seems to me, for more than just spiritual autobiographies in nature writing, but actual bodies and desires. It calls for more self-conscious reflection on how the body we are given – woman or man – is an extension of the earth, and how the expectations society attaches to our bodies travel with us into the woods and beyond. While through a traditional pastoral lens Legler’s essays might appear sentimental, from Gifford’s perspective her retreat to nature to understand her body, and the fears, desires, and expectations it carries, at times achieves post-pastoral status.

When I call *A Sportswoman’s Notebook* a woman’s pastoral, it is not because it is written by a woman, but because her content stems from the body she was given, calling attention to how one woman’s body navigates the masculine space of wild America. Legler’s problem is not so much accessing such spaces, but accessing them on her own terms. One of the main obstacles to her feeling like she belongs is how the spaces she occupies while hunting, fishing, and camping are culturally constructed as public, especially in the sense that they are separate from the private world of home, family, emotions, and responsibilities. My analysis charts the ways in which Legler is made to feel that her presence in such spaces is unwelcome and unnatural, and then shows her struggles to be outdoors without being controlled by fear, instead slipping from self-consciousness into a public privacy that can be shared with others and the earth.

Legler guides us through her exploration of the “spatial expression of patriarchy” out-of-doors (Domosh and Seager 2001: 100), that is, behavioural responses shared by many women when engaging in activities that occur in

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4 Gifford defines the post-pastoral as an “alternative [...] vision” that goes “beyond traditional conventions” and limitations “of the pastoral and anti-pastoral” which encompasses “the best new writing about nature” (1999: 4–5). He identifies six main qualities, discussed in detail in Chapter Six, of which I only refer to a few.

outdoor spaces where a woman's presence is not traditionally expected or accepted. In addition to literary critics, historians, and philosophers, I will rely on the work of feminist cultural geographers who can help us better understand how "the decisions that are made about our everyday lives, based in outmoded ideas of gender, are fixed in our everyday places and spaces" (Domosh and Seager 2001: xxiii).

### 1. No Girls Allowed

One of the ironies of outdoor spaces in the United States is that much of the land we recreate in and on is public, supported by federal or state taxes paid by men and women. Yet since the time of Teddy Roosevelt, the more rugged and removed the natural spaces, the more they were considered as a resource for American men so they did not lose their "virility" by becoming "overcivilized" as the frontier diminished (Nash [1967] 1982: 149, 150). So in many ways they were a private public space, preserved as a "wilderness cure" (Nash [1967] 1982: 151) that women did not need, presumably because it was considered impossible for a woman to be overcivilized. Her job was to stay home and instill strong moral values in the children until the boys were at the pivotal age when a mother's influence became detrimental; then men whisked them off to learn to hunt and gain additional education consisting of the "savage virtues" (Nash [1967] 1982: 152).

Obviously this general cultural attitude based in outmoded ideas of gender has not kept women from recreating in public land. In fact many women are introduced to wilderness activities by men. Legler was taught to fish by her father and goes hunting with her husband, Craig. Craig is an important figure because he portrays an alternative male way to be outdoors, a contrast to the men who threaten, judge, or dismiss Legler. The first essay, "Border Water", is a narrative about a yearly spring fishing trip to the Rainy River that introduces Legler, Craig, and the conflict at the heart of the collection. "I used to hate being a woman", Legler states, recalling how she had always liked being one of the guys (1995: 8). "All my friends were men. I am thirty years old now, and I feel alone. I am not a man. Knowing this is like an earthquake. Just now all the lies are starting to unfold" (Legler 1995: 8). While the reader does not yet know what lies she refers to, her reconnecting to herself as a woman explains why Legler says, "Until recently it never occurred to me to wonder why I was the only woman I knew who walked in the woods with a shotgun looking for grouse, or sat in a duck blind or a goose blind, or crouched up in a tree with a rifle waiting for deer, or went fishing on the Rainy River" (1995: 8).

Rather than her three years of taking this trip and her many more years of general fishing experience increasing her comfort level, this new awareness

of herself as a woman makes Legler “uneasy” about the fishing weekend (1995: 5). Consequently, she portrays the three main physical spaces she inhabits during the weekend in ways that illustrate three aspects of her fear. Her depiction of the campsite demonstrates why she fears a physical threat to her body; her depiction of the boat/river space shows why she fears being judged and publicly ridiculed; and her difficulty in gaining entrance to the fish house attests to her feeling she is unwelcome and her fear of what she might become if she tries to belong on their terms.

The couple stays, as they have past years, at Franz Jevne State Park in Minnesota, which is only “a few dirt pullouts and two outhouses” without paved roads or street lights (Legler 1995: 6). Their small site “is in the middle of tall evergreens,” but that is not the reason she feels “surrounded” and “vaguely gloomy” (Legler 1995: 6). Legler is aware of the men in the other campsites “lighting lanterns, starting campfires, firing up cooking stoves” (1995: 6). Even though the tasks she lists are domestic, they are accompanied by “muffled, rough voices” that remind her she is “the only woman here” (Legler 1995: 6).

The fact that they have a “women’s outhouse” suggests that women do camp there, and even in the absence of other women it might be one place Legler feels like she is on her own turf (1995: 6). But this too has been claimed by at least one male with a “thick black marker” whose grotesque picture of a woman’s vulva is accompanied by the message: “I want to fill your pussy with a load of hot come” (Legler 1995: 6). This and the accompanying graffiti leave Legler so “terrified and sickened” that she “can’t pee anymore” (1995: 6). She rushes to pull up her many layers, and though Legler is “happy to be outside” she looks over her shoulder and into the woods, feeling watched and unsafe (1995: 6).

The threat Legler hears is “*I want to rape you*” (1995: 6). She has literally seen the writing on the wall, but even without the evidence of such a threat, the fear of rape is so pervasive and insidious it leads “most women” to live under “self-imposed” restrictions (Domosh and Seager 2001: 100). According to geographers Mona Domosh and Joni Seager, women “avoid walking in certain places, at particular times, and often will not go out alone” (ibid.). This reaction to a gender-specific fear is the dominant “spatial expression of patriarchy” according to geographer Gill Valentine, “since it reflects and reinforces the traditional notion that women belong at home, not on the streets” (Domosh and Seager 2001: 100) – or, by extension, in the woods, rivers, or mountains. Yet psychologists and geographers agree that this “female fear feeds on misinformation about rape” (Gordon and Riger 1989: 6).

One of the great misconceptions that continues to propagate the separation of the private-female sphere from the public-male sphere is the notion that women are safer in the home, under the protection of a father or husband, or

at least with walls and locks between them and what is wild. The irony is that our protectors, those whom we allow into our private space, statistically are our greatest threat of physical assault. Fearing the stranger crouching behind the bushes is all out of proportion to the occurrence of stranger rape, a risk that has been “exaggerate[d]” to keep women “in their ‘place’”; the result is that “although most violence against women is actually perpetuated in the private spaces of home, it is those spaces defined as “public” that the majority of women fear most” (Domosh and Seager 2001: 100). Through the scene in the campsite and outhouse Legler gives the reader her experience of how such cultural conditioning is perpetuated.

The trees, tent, and darkness afford the campsite a modicum of privacy compared to being in the jig on the river. They have found a good spot for fish so it is “crowded” with “boats push[ing] together” where again there are no other women, and many of the men are “swigging beer” and smoking cigars (Legler 1995: 7). The common references to “drunken” men Legler encounters add further credence to her perception of them as “dangerous” and illustrate how the expectations of civilized conduct do not exist here (1995: 5). This is where Legler most feels the male gaze, as does Craig: “We watch ourselves being watched. He says, ‘All these guys are out here to get away from their wives’” (1995: 7).

Legler’s unexpected presence has interrupted the men’s pastoral idyll much the way the sudden “shriek of the locomotive” (Marx [1964] 2000: 16) brings Nathaniel Hawthorne’s musings away from a “simple pleasure fantasy” of nature and back to the industrial world and society (Marx [1964] 2000: 15); instead of a “machine in the garden” (the boats, after all, have motors), Legler’s body disrupts the wilderness fantasy, simply by being female and representing the world of family, civility, and responsibilities the men wished to escape. As literary critic and Americanist Leo Marx, who coined the expression, states, such an interruption brings “tension, conflict, and anxiety” ([1964] 2000: 16). A man’s presence outdoors represents conquering while a woman’s presence represents civilizing (Domosh and Seager 2001: 147), so in this way the men’s public privacy is shattered. To the men, Legler represents the gaze of polite society, of wives, but through sheer numbers and a sense of entitlement that culture has conditioned into them, the men have no trouble turning the gaze back on the couple.

In this situation Legler would rather not be noticed. Probably from a mix of choice and necessity, her clothes disguise her gender: Craig asks her if, dressed as she is, she thinks anyone knows she is a woman. She ponders what would tip them off: “[M]aybe when you lean over in the boat and kiss me. Then maybe they would think I was a woman. But I wouldn’t necessarily have to be” (Legler 1995: 7). The fact that Legler is not alone, that she is with a man, is what

removes any possibility of her moving about anonymously. Yet being with a man is also what allows her easier access along with some protection – his presence is a sign that she is claimed, not loose. A loose or wild woman would carry the connotation of sexually immoral, uncivilized and therefore not deserving of society's protection. It is interesting to note that Legler's account lacks any preoccupation with her physical appearance and femininity, a topic to which women's backpacking guides often devote whole chapters.<sup>5</sup> The male gaze she feels is not voyeuristic but mocking.<sup>6</sup>

Although she claims that they are being watched, it is important to note that at no time in the essay does Legler show any evidence that men are judging her, nor does she argue that they are. What she does is recount the situation so that we can see that she has *internalized* the gaze so pervasive in western culture. Spatial patriarchy perpetuates itself much like Foucault's Panopticon. In order to gain a "social presence" in the "limited space" to which they have been allowed access (Berger 1972: 46), women have had to learn to anticipate the male gaze and act so as to earn or keep its favour. Art and cultural critic John Berger claims that "this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split in two" (1972: 46). The last scene on the river demonstrates this phenomenon.

When Legler takes the boat by water to the landing while Craig brings the van around, she is anxious to do it well. She expects Craig not to trust her with it and he does not understand her misgivings. When all is going well, the water and wind blowing in her face and hair, she feels at peace: "My image of myself and my self come together here" (Legler 1995: 11). But then the propeller scrapes loudly against rocks. Legler makes it to shore "where men line the banks" and immediately starts to lecture herself: "I have fucked up. I never should have been trusted with this [...] It is not my place to drive a boat. It is too big a thing for me. Too dangerous, too demanding" (1995: 12). This response continues, though Craig's reaction is not the angry one she has been taught to expect. He even takes some of the blame for her not feeling confident in the task, realizing he must step back and let her practice (away from strangers) driving the boat and trailer, as well as lighting the lantern and stove.

"Many women", Legler muses, "grow up believing they can't do anything"

5 See Farmer 1976, Nichols 1978, and Thomas 1980. A good rhetorical analysis of such guides is Glotfelty 1996. Even one book written by and for outdoor lesbians has a section on appearance that suggests dressing to suit your sweetie's taste (see Thacker 2002).

6 I have experienced similar feelings of inadequacy when camping on my own. Once I arrived at a campsite after dark and, while struggling to set up my tent, heard some men in the next site whispering and laughing. I felt sure they were making fun of my incompetence. I found out they were impressed that I could do it at all, and were laughing at how they would not have been able to.

(1995: 11). She does not want to be like that. “I know that I can learn to do this physical, mechanical task. What I regret is that I do not simply *assume* I can do it. I wish I could charge into it without reserve [...] free of doubt. Like a man might” (Legler 1995: 11). The pressure of being (or seeming) competent is the cultural albatross around male necks, and in outdoor spaces this means being able to protect and provide against more-than-human forces. The man in the woods, declared Stewart Edward White in 1903, “matches himself against the forces of nature” (qtd. in Nash [1967] 1982: 154). Confronting wilderness “is a test, a measuring of strength, a proving of his essential pluck and resourcefulness and manhood, the ability to endure and to take care of himself” (ibid.). This view of the male role when “in the woods” can be enacted unwittingly, as Craig reveals. Unlike patriarchal society in general, he is not threatened by his wife gaining equal competence or becoming able to take care of herself, yet he and Legler automatically fall into the routine of him handling the mechanical tasks with technical gadgets. It takes a conscious effort to break the pattern. This is the same conditioning that prompted Miriam O’Brien Underhill, a renowned early twentieth-century American climber, to decide she must climb without the company of a man in order to reach her potential as a mountaineer. She explained that “in any emergency, particularly in an outdoor sport [...], what man wouldn’t spring to the front to take over?” (Loomis 2005: 4).

But since women are generally discouraged from being responsible for their own survival, there is often an element of spectacle when one, by necessity or choice, goes about such tasks in public. So much of what men do is physical and happens in public spaces – by adulthood they are accustomed to it (even those who may not like it). However, most girls grow up under the assumption that much of their social role is passive or occurs in private, except for – now – in sports where public, physical success and failure are practiced. Molly Loomis points out how, when climbing with her girlfriends, “we still encounter comments ranging from complimentary and kind to condescending and rude, their message being that we are women and we are climbing, a combination unusual enough to warrant commentary” (2005: 3).<sup>7</sup> This scene on the river exposes the ways in which one woman feels herself *performing* male tasks in front of a group of strange men, and how there is no need for them to say anything aloud or openly heckle her because she is judging herself already, possibly in ways more harsh and cruel.

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7 My experiences backpacking alone, climbing, and paddling have been similar. It was especially apparent when I worked as a raft guide. Large, strong men – often military types – resisted being assigned to my boat. Once on the river, they did not initially listen to my commands, having more faith in their brawn than my knowledge and skill.

When Legler goes to the fish house we find the most overt example of her not belonging due to gender conditioning – in this case to always be polite. A group of men are already inside talking and filleting, and she asks if there is room for someone else. Legler is told it is “kind of cozy” and chooses to wait at the door, but another man arrives and “barrels” past her, and, of course, the men make room at the table (1995: 13). When Craig asks if they would not let her in, the answer is not a simple yes or no. She is furious at herself for not doing the same thing the man did, and furious at him for not showing basic manners when he saw her standing there. Legler tells Craig, “there’s no room for a goddamned girl in that fish house” (1995: 13) and describes setting up a make-shift station on the ground and angrily, rather than reverently, cleaning and slicing her catch.

I am saying to myself, “I can do this better than any of those bastards. Better than any of them.” I feel defiant and confident, proud and suddenly cruel. When I do this, I realize, I am leaping across a line between the fish’s life and mine [...] And I can do it as well as any. I can move as easily as anyone across this space. (Legler 1995: 13)

She has achieved access and competence in the task, but still does not belong.

In the van Legler tells Craig “I should give up and stay home [...], the worse it gets the more I see I don’t have a place out here” (1995: 14). Craig quietly responds that if she does not take her place then she will lose it. And the necessity of *taking* her place is the crux of the matter. Rather than the birthright that wilderness is for American men, women must forcefully, or at least aggressively, claim their right to be outdoors away from homes and malls, civilized domesticity and commerce. Legler makes clear that she can do so, but crossing the line and assuming the power side of the dualism (this time between humans and other animals) does not make her happy, and the possibility that this is the only way to have access to these spaces scares her. Legler wants co-existence, not dominance and ends by saying, “there has to be a space for me; space for me as a woman out here” (1995: 14). Many of the essays that follow detail her struggle to discover what accessing such spaces on her own terms entails.

## 2. Going Out to Go In

Susan Gal (2004) rightly claims that public and private are not fixed distinctions but ideological ones. I use the terms here in order to argue that American men can access public outdoor spaces without gender-based fears, thus allowing them a greater sense of privacy or escape. In the same way scholars break down the interiors of the Victorian home to analyze which rooms are *more* public or private, such “multiple nestings” occur within the broader context of

outdoor spaces (Gal 2004: 265). Instead of “embedding ‘public’ activities in private spaces” (Gal 2004: 272), I want to examine what happens when a woman performs many private activities outdoors.<sup>8</sup>

This nesting of the inner/outer or public/private dichotomy is highlighted by American explorer and author John Muir’s well-known observation that going out is really going in. He encapsulates the way the Romantic pastoral impulse of retreat has been a means of inner reflection, not just observation of the outer landscape. But spatial oppression has limited women’s outdoor roaming, and therefore one must assume that their self-knowledge, as nature writer Joseph Wood Krutch would say (at least about men), has been limited as well. Domosh and Seager note that Victorian lady travellers who did escape the constraints of tight corsets, high heels and the “ideologies that encourage women to be physically frail” (2001: 117) were not as interested as their male counterparts in “naming and claiming new geographical discoveries”; rather their purpose lay in “self-discovery” (2001: 144–5). Legler’s experience suggests that though physically accessing outdoor spaces gains women the public aspect of such spaces, it does not provide reliable access to the private aspects. The American definition of “wilderness” found in the Wilderness Act (1964) states the tract of land must be big enough to have “outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation” (online at [wilderness.net](http://wilderness.net)), but for women this may be another instance where the importance of size is overstated. It is not possible to feel solitude if one always feels watched or on-guard.

Like women in the modern city, Legler struggles to feel she can move freely, unselfconsciously, and safely when alone in nature. Under culture’s terms she has limited ways to claim a place outdoors: as a sexual resource (a wife or girlfriend), as not-a-woman (renouncing her sex), as camp aid (domestic partner), or at least as dependent upon a male as guide or provider. But Legler shows us what her terms would be: as a sexual being not there for men, as someone who does not have to censor or watch herself, as a woman who has agency, as a body separate yet linked with the body of the earth. The fact that she feels she must deny parts of herself when hunting, fishing, or camping – hide her body or not act in stereotypically feminine ways of being emotional or polite – adds to Legler’s sense of herself as an “imposter” (1995: 106), as playing a role. There is an important distinction to be made between feeling conscious of having an audience, whether actual or internalized, and feeling so comfortable in what one does and where one is that the self-monitor recedes. In order to be able to

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<sup>8</sup> The necessity of going to the bathroom outside deters many women from venturing outdoors on longer excursions. One of the most private acts, it generally demands we be alone and, when urinating, more exposed than men.

slip from self-consciousness into an inner privacy, Legler must find a way to lose the sense that she is always performing outdoors.

In “Gabimichigami”, an early essay a scant two pages long, Legler re-creates a fleeting moment when she felt absorbed in a public privacy where her awareness was filled with only her body and the earth. It is not a seamless transition, as her shifting point of view conveys, but it represents a brief escape from self-consciousness. She and Craig are camping on a cliff in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness while on a paddling trip. This morning, three days into the excursion, Legler wakes in the tent with Craig already outside preparing breakfast. As she begins to dress a new desire takes hold, so new it does not seem like her own. “I start to button [the shirt], then stop”, Legler says before changing to third person (1995: 35):

She doesn't want clothes.

She undresses, lets the shirt fall. Her boots are set outside the tent door [. . .]  
She ignores them.

. . . .

She does not pretend that she is dressed [...] But she walks outside without any shyness, with the same confidence of movement she would have if she were covered. (Legler 1995: 35)

Craig sees Legler as “she walks into the woods, away from him” (1995: 35). “She has never done this before” and “wonders if he will follow her, and is glad when he does not” (Legler 1995: 35–6). Her response to the only male gaze around is significant because she is not embarrassed or preoccupied with what Craig may think. Her only concern is that he should not interfere, and, when he does not follow, Legler lets go of his gaze. What she never lets go of is her own gaze, which is not the internalized gaze of the patriarchy such as we saw in “Border Water”, but the self gaze that is aware of moving into a new relation to nature.

Legler's descriptions of the woods merge her body with the earth: “In this light, the trees radiate greenness. In this light, blue veins glow through her skin” (1995: 36). She rubs against a spruce, chews on pine needles, and leans against a birch, comparing the textures of these to her shoulders, hips, and thighs. Water falls on her back but she is not cold, her feet land on rocks and twigs but are not hurt. This losing of herself in nature might be alarming to feminists, given how women have been conflated with nature against their will, especially how even Legler's language objectifies herself. However, I read this as an indication of Legler's struggle to shed binary logic that decrees one can be a subject *or* an object, but never both. She is experiencing what phenomenologists would call “intersubjective phenomena”, where there is “a multiplicity of sensing subjects” (Abram 1996: 38). Legler does not explain the phenomenon but gives us

an example of feeling a sense of merging without denying agency to herself or nature.

“Gabimichigami” is a nested pastoral. Legler begins already in a remote place with only one other person, a man with whom she is intimate. Yet there is a further retreat to a privacy that is both of the body and of the earth, enacting the longing for an Arcadian ideal within the body that Gifford has identified in other ecofeminist writers (1999: 166). Her unexpected disinterest in clothes could be read as a symbolic casting off of cultural oppression, but that seems more an analysis aimed at a piece of fiction than nonfiction. Foremost here is her experience of being in direct sensory contact with natural surroundings. Later essays make clear Legler’s ideological position that nature and culture can not be separate; clothed or not we still carry gender expectations. Yet she gives us early in the book (too early to function as a climax or epiphany) an example of achieving the public privacy which she spends subsequent essays trying to reclaim on her own after ending her marriage, and with new female lovers. In “Gabimichigami” Legler reaches a level of public privacy deeper than that she shares with Craig outdoors, yet it is likely that it is only possible because he is there. Having a trusted male in the vicinity, Legler can relax her guard, and he does not break her reverie until, at last, he calls to her (and Legler once again shifts to first person).

This reverie helps illuminate a comment in the essay immediately preceding “Gabimichigami” in which Legler says: “I am always afraid alone in the woods, but I push on” (1995: 34). Now we see that she pushes on for moments that take her briefly beyond her preoccupation with self and identity and the constraints culture places upon her. Despite all her fears, she knows the benefits. Acclaimed nature writer Alison Hawthorne Deming (1994) is one of the few who has directly addressed this issue in her essays. Deming states: “Women in our culture understand and respond to fear differently than men do. For one thing, we face it more often, since we inherit a historical legacy of men’s social and physical power over us” (1994: 172). Fear is a “radar” that women carry everywhere, and Deming suggests women go to the forest to “escape” it; but “no matter how sweet and pastoral her longing for the wild, once there, she finds her old companion fear has come along” (1994: 172).

Both Legler and Deming implicitly raise the question: What could women achieve if they had access to the self-knowledge acquired through wandering that is associated with great male thinkers and artists? In this collection Legler does not give an answer, and focuses overmuch on her own situation without using that insight as a lens to view outward. But perhaps this is where each wanderer begins. By escaping, even briefly, into a solitary public privacy, Legler does discover a less judgmental body image, a sense that “her body is fine, out

here" (1995: 36). It should not seem odd that her body image and her comfort level outdoors are so tightly joined because "in all societies there is an intertwined reciprocity between space, bodies, and the social construction of both" (Domosh and Seager 2001: 112). Legler's work suggests that a woman's increased comfort level outdoors is accompanied by letting go of some cultural inhibitions and gender conditioning.

It is important to recognize that Legler does not present herself as freed from all her previous fears and anxieties outdoors. In "Lake One, Lake Two, Lake Three, Lake Four", Legler recounts her "first-ever solo canoe trip", which takes place after she has left Craig (1995: 155). Legler is going out to go in, to "prepare for [her] future" which involves burying her sister's ashes (1995: 155). What follows is the description of an imperfect trip where, nevertheless, significant gains – inner and outer, physical and mental – have been made.

She is not totally confident or competent; she gets lost at first, has trouble hanging her food bag to keep the bears out, and often struggles carrying her canoe when portaging. However, the descriptions of packing provisions, of paddling straight, of setting the tent up "quickly, with wet, cold hands", of starting a fire, of keeping "the cream cold by weighing it down in the water with rocks" attest to the skills, knowledge, and comfort she does have outdoors (Legler 1995: 158, 162). Legler is also still afraid and finds she must really work to concentrate on the tasks of setting up camp in an attempt to "evaporate [her] fear, the fear that behind [her] was something terrible, something watching" (1995: 159). Yet there are also peaceful moments on the lake and at camp.

Legler still internalizes the judgmental male gaze when she drags her canoe due to exhaustion, and especially when she decides to alter her plans, not going as far or as fast as she and Craig had previously done. "There was that voice, rattling on . . . 'If you were half the outdoorswoman you claim to be you'd do it. Do it. Do it'" (Legler 1995: 163). However, success lies in Legler's response: "Wisely, for once, I chose not to push myself" (1995: 163). While she recognizes this as being wise rather than copping out, she still seems a long way from comfortable with choosing to shorten her route.

Most of all, Legler's solo excursion was a going in as well as a going out, a time to reflect both on what grieving is, and what she does and does not go outdoors for. Though she did not get a sign or message about what to do when burying her sister's ashes, Legler did realize something about herself: "I enjoy solitude, but I do not enjoy being alone [...] I yearn for contact" (1995: 167). Perhaps with the awareness that she is competent enough to go solo, Legler no longer has to prove anything and can choose to enjoy her solitude outdoors with others. Fear remains, but it does not rule her.

### 3. The Brokeback Pastoral

While fear (whether of men or bears or getting lost) is a major barrier to many women's sense of comfort outdoors, Legler demonstrates how solitude may just not be seen as fun. Carol Gilligan (1982) has noted that women tend to be more relational than solitary, and this dislike of strict isolation may be another reason pastoral modes are not as readily available to women. In Legler's case one might wish she did enjoy it more, or give it another chance. Likewise, the public privacy women can find in small groups, going "manless" as Underhill termed it, is underexplored though she does write of all-woman camping and ski trips. Instead, several essays focus on outdoor excursions with women who are, or she hopes will soon be, her lovers. While annoying in how unworldly her tone becomes compared to previous essays that contain critiques of how our cultural approach to the natural world parallels our approach to women and sexuality, these later essays present pastoral escape as retreat from city manners and norms *that are laden with heterosexual bias* and precede the publication of Annie Proulx's (1999) short story "Brokeback Mountain" by several years.

"Brokeback Mountain" – the basis for Ang Lee's controversial and award-winning movie by the same name in 2005 – is fiction and would not be considered by some ecocritics to be nature writing. Yet historically the pastoral is a form which came to include fiction (Gifford 1999: 1), and comparing some of Legler's essays with Proulx's story reveals an interesting trend of post-pastoral retreat to a safe place for unsanctioned companionship rather than for isolation. In the story, two cowboys come to love each other one summer while herding sheep. Since the cowboys are, in fact, shepherds for a time, this story is actually a pastoral of the "historical form" (Gifford 1999: 1). It is a blissful time for young men who had not expected such companionship. "There were only the two of them on the mountain flying in the euphoric, bitter air, looking down on [...] the crawling lights of vehicles on the plain below, suspended above ordinary affairs" (Proulx 1999: 260). They can never recapture this time, the feeling of invisibility (though in truth they were seen), and, though they escape to the wilds for brief trysts as years go by, they never escape as completely as they did that summer. The tension in the story centers around one of the men wanting to leave his wife and child to ranch together and the other's commitment to his children and knowledge that they would never get away with it in homophobic twentieth-century America; in other words, one's desire to make Arcadia permanent and the other's awareness that Arcadia is more a notion than reality.

Similarly, some of Legler's essays such as "Cold" and "All the Powerful Invisible Things" set up a pattern in which the natural world is "a secret safe place away from everything that could ever hurt [Legler or her lover]"; a place where "it feels like everything is possible" (1995: 189). Yet there is often still fear

when she and her female lover are out alone. They sense a presence watching from the woods and lock their cabin door. This fear is more pervasive than for the gay cowboys who, because they are men, feel they belong in the wild and experience no fear that first summer, but only once they descend the mountain. Interestingly, the one thing that makes Legler feel safest, at least in these essays, is severe cold. Camping in remote cabins heated by wood they must chop, Legler and her lover find themselves in weather at least forty below zero, “too cold to make love” (1995: 103). Cold enough to kill, yet they extend their stay longer than planned. If nothing else can reassure one that there are not killers who target women or lesbians<sup>9</sup> lurking nearby, it appears extreme weather can. A strange idyll, but convincing: “I ask you if you like this – to be isolated in this way, to be warm and to be the happiest you might ever be, in a lonely, faraway place like this in the bitter cold. ‘I could live like this,’ you say” (Legler 1995: 103). This gives the impression that living is equated with not having to keep one’s fear radar always on, that the constant vigilance women, as well as gays, must exercise daily is merely existing.<sup>10</sup>

“Brokeback Mountain” takes the Romantic image of the loner cowboy and suggests that, gay or not, some men might have relational inclinations. It challenges pastoral assumptions from the inside by showing men using the public privacy of the wilds for love and companionship – activities perceived as feminine. Legler’s brokeback pastorals, to label the mode, challenge pastoral assumptions from the outside, even more so than if she had limited her focus to her struggles as a woman and left out the added difficulties of being a lesbian. They add another layer of fear she has to deal with and another challenge for a writer trying to make space for her voice within a genre defined by masculine qualities and freedoms.

Legler’s accounts resist the pastoral pattern of a solitary escape from “the entrapping society” to “the promising landscape”, both of which “are [traditionally] depicted in unmistakably feminine terms” (Baym 1981: 133), where the outer is prioritized over the inner, and nature is separate from culture. Ultimately, she prefers to retreat briefly with women for a companionship unrestricted by societal heterosexual norms. These retreats are imperfect but

9 The 1996 double murder of two lesbians on the Appalachian Trail put such fears in the spotlight. Even though the FBI has never found evidence to indicate it was a hate crime (they do not say whether there was sexual assault). Karla Mantilla makes a strong argument that, in the absence of other motives, all random attacks on women and lesbians are more political than targeted attacks and serve to gain control over more than the victim by causing many women to restrict their activities. See Mantilla 1996.

10 Obviously the same is true of marginalized heterosexual male populations. A good example of an African-American post-pastoral is Harris 1988.

still seem to be desired as a means of making everyday life back in the city more easily endured. As the main character in “Brokeback Mountain” reminds us, “if you can’t fix it you got a stand it” [sic] (Proulx 1999: 269).

Just as Janet Wolff has argued that “insofar as the experience of ‘the modern’ occurred mainly in the public sphere, it was primarily men’s experience” (1990: 35), Nina Baym has shown that in American literary criticism, the “American experience is inherently male”, in large part because “the essential quality of America comes to reside in its unsettled wilderness and the opportunities that such a wilderness offers to the individual” (1981: 130, 132). The fact that these opportunities were rarely available to women affected more than just women’s experience on the ground, but also their vicarious experience of outdoor spaces through literature. The “sense of agency offered to white boys through imperialist fiction” is an example of how “imaginative space”, as cultural geographers call it, can “position and enable” a “spatial self” (Crang and Thrift 2000: 10). By not being able to read much about themselves in such wild spaces, women’s cultural exile from wilderness has been reinforced.

Many women who pioneered various outdoor activities, such as climbing and bicycling, wrote about them, not because they were writers, but because they felt women would be encouraged to try such sports if they were given female examples. “The first openly feminist mountaineers of genuine renown were Americans”, claims David Mazel (1994: 8–9). “Bloomer girl”, Julia Archibald Holmes, published an account of her 1858 summitting of Pikes Peak in *The Sibyl*, a journal run by women devoted to feminist social reforms (Mazel 1994: 7). Later that century climbers Annie Peck Smith and Fanny Bullock Workman openly competed for the women’s altitude record, using their fame to “further the cause of women’s rights” and authoring numerous accounts (Mazel 1994: 9). About the same time there was Frances E. Willard ([1895] 1991), influential leader in women’s social reform movement, who wrote a small volume about learning to ride a bike at age fifty-three. Willard felt that “there was a special value to women in the conquest of the bicycle by a woman [...] who had so many comrades in the [...] army of temperance workers that the action would be widely influential” ([1895] 1991: 74). Though not necessarily pastorals, these demonstrate how written examples of a woman’s efforts to gain skill and comfort in outdoor spaces can act as aids to other women by sharing frustrations, accomplishments, tips, and realizations. Thus, accounts such as when Legler details her struggles and pleasures hunting, camping, paddling, and fishing enable women to more easily access male terrain in the United States both on the ground and on the page.

There is an interesting caveat in John Ruskin’s description of the female character. Stereotypically, the man is “active [. . .] the creator, the discoverer

[whose] energy [is] for adventure” while the woman’s energy is for arranging, ordering, and praising (qtd. in Wolff 1990: 16). “She is protected from all danger” that “man, in his rough work in the open world, must encounter”, Ruskin declares, “*unless she herself has sought it*” [emphasis added] (Wolff 1990: 16). Even though many women now work as raft guides, wilderness rangers, wildlife biologists, and do other “rough work in the open world”, it is still often assumed that women do not seek such opportunities; that, except for a few Amazon types, women have no interest in wild outdoor spaces; that women do not enjoy getting dirty. Unfortunately, many women are inhibited from seeking such opportunities because of gender-specific fears and lack of examples. Legler’s book is one of many demonstrating that women do choose to experience physical activity, risk, and open spaces, though not always the same way as men – or as each other.

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