A Woman in the Wild: Gendered Public Spaces and Narratives of Femininity

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Abstract

In 2012, Cheryl Strayed published her memoir *Wild: Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. In it, she details her 1995 hike at the age of 26 on the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), a west coast route extending from the Mexican to Canadian borders. The phrase “The Wild Effect” has been used to describe the increase in people, notably women, on the PCT following *Wild’s* publication, as well as the conversation the book has sparked about women hiking alone in the wilderness, a historically masculine space. Lingering influences of historical understandings of women’s participation in outdoor recreation still inform much of the discussion of women in this space today. *Wild* addresses the female challenges of life in both the private and public realms, and provides inspiration for women to defy traditional, one-dimensional narratives of femininity. Apparent in Strayed’s transformative narrative, the independence and self-empowerment experienced in the wild does not threaten to overturn gender roles, but rather gives women the ability to make ‘smart’, ‘mature’ decisions about domestic responsibilities, such as getting married and starting a family. A woman in the wild is therefore not depicted as a threat to the social order despite exerting independence in a masculine space, as historical narratives would suggest; rather, Strayed’s narrative suggests she can perform her domestic roles more effectively after her transformative experience in the wild. While Strayed’s memoir popularizes a version of femininity that challenges traditional one-dimensional gender roles, it ultimately appeals to the general public because it shows that participation in historically masculine spaces and fulfilling domestic roles can function in harmony.

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Strayed’s popular memoir, as well as other female wilderness narratives, reveal the highly gendered aspects of this space.

I use *Wild* as a focal point to enter into a larger consideration of women in the wilderness. My focus in this paper is on *Wild* as a public text, its reception, how it relates to other similar narratives, and how it contributes to the larger conversation of femininity in public discourse. I begin by detailing a collection of research to situate women’s relationship to and in the wilderness. Based on this background, I argue that *Wild* challenges traditional one-dimensional narratives of femininity that confine women to the domestic private sphere. Secondly, my analysis shows that women struggle to fully shed societal expectations in the wilderness, still feeling the need to perform their gender and worrying that participation in this space somehow compromises their femininity. Furthermore, while I argue that Strayed’s book contains elements of resistance, I also argue that her memoir simultaneously reinforces a traditional domestic narrative. In this regard, my final argument is that Strayed’s memoir is so widely popular among the general public, specifically women readers, because it challenges traditional gender narratives while at the same time reaffirms the values of motherhood and marriage, ultimately offering a multi-faceted narrative of femininity where seemingly conflicting narratives function in harmony.

The current understanding of the American wilderness was solidified with the Wilderness Act of 1964, which endeavored “to establish a National Wilderness Preservation System for the good of the whole people” (“Wilderness Act”). All citizens could claim entitlement to this space, which is defined in the following terms:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. (“Wilderness Act” sec. 2c)

Despite the intention for the wild to be “for the good of the whole people”, The Act has received criticism based on the masculine language used to describe this public space, where “man”, “his”, and “himself” clearly denote male authority. Linda Vance comments that “it is tempting to imagine that wilderness exists as an exception to the rule of patriarchal domination” (60) but acknowledges that wilderness is “a cultural construction” and “dependent on a particular matrix of historical, cultural, social, and economic factors” (69). This assertion is validated by Susan R. Schrepfer in her book *Nature’s Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American*
Environmentalism, which examines the conservation efforts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America. Her in-depth discussion reveals that both genders participated in outdoor recreation in this space, but did so in ways that were acceptable according to Victorian gender constructs. Most relevant to this discussion, Schrepfer explains that men and women participated in wilderness recreation for very different purposes: men to reaffirm their masculinity, and women to escape the constrictions of their femininity.

These significant differences can be seen in how men and women wrote about their experiences in the wild. Schrepfer explains that “men’s language was built on western culture’s traditional portrayals of the human body, particularly the female body, as analogous to the natural world” (41) and that “Victorian men approached wilderness fearfully but with the desire to dominate, and the protectiveness, curiosity, and emotional intensity that their cultures urged them to feel toward their wives” (41). In this sense, the wilderness was not a place to escape social conventions, but rather a space where men could further refine the masculine qualities favoured by society. By contrast, Schrepfer states that women “wrote of deliberately seeking mountains because they were places where they might escape artificial encumbrances, walk as equals of men, and dress comfortably” (78). She furthers that “women sought and found in mountains ‘joyous freedom’ from social conventions” (79). While men enjoyed the wild as a space to hone their masculinity and reaffirm patriarchal power, women instead used the opportunity to escape the values that restricted their participation in the public sphere.

In the article “Femininity in the Wilderness: Reading Gender in Women’s Guides to Backpacking”, Cheryll Glotfelty examines backpacking guides of the 1970s and 1980s. In response to unisex handbooks, which harboured implicit masculine tones, backpacking guides for women written by women began to circulate. Her study reveals a difference between the unisex guides and women’s guides regarding the assumptions about who goes backpacking and why. “The standard trip” (446) that the unisex guides discuss is of a man backpacking alone, with a group of male friends, or with their families. By comparison, her examination of women’s guides shows that they most often “devote substantial attention to the solo trip, strongly advocating its rewards in terms of promoting independence and self-discovery” (446). The unisex guides assume a male authority as leader of the backpacking trip and an excursion based on solely recreational purposes. It does not seem necessary to market backpacking to men as “promoting independence” since this is viewed as an innately masculine trait. Women’s guides, alternatively, emphasize the solo female trip in response to women’s exclusion from “the standard trip” and to challenge the cultural values that limit their participation in wilderness recreation. Backpacking is marketed to women as a chance to escape the domestic titles of mother and wife.

While this escape from daily life is enticing to female readers, Glotfelty explains that women are caught between wanting reprieve from their domestic roles, at the same time they fear losing their feminine identity. This paradox of remaining feminine while at the same time distancing oneself from certain gender expectations is a negotiation women experience when entering the wilderness; cultural conceptions about the wild posit rugged individualism against feminine beauty, motherhood, and wifehood to suggest the two cannot be reconciled. Glotfelty explains that the guidebooks’

attempts to redefine femininity endeavor to catalyze a lasting revolution. Any effort to
redefine femininity must refashion our image of beauty. While, on the one hand, women’s
backpacking guides reinforce traditional standards of feminine appearance by offering
backcountry beauty tips, on the other, they gesture toward new criteria for judging what
is beautiful. (452)

Apparent in this statement is the preoccupation with beauty as a measure of femininity.
To be a woman, according to this line of reasoning, requires one to maintain a specific body
image that can only be maintained in civilized society. “Traditional standards of femininity”
require grooming and self-care that are achieved with products and services that cannot be found
in the wild. “A lasting revolution” would target these standards and revise the criteria for “judging
what is beautiful,” which would free women from the binds of strict domesticity that conceives
them as unfit for wilderness recreation. Glotfelty’s advocacy for refashioning “our image of
beauty” attempts to merge the opposing ideals of rugged individualism and feminine beauty to
produce a new model where these qualities are compatible.

Glotfelty admits that women in the 1990s, at the time she is writing, may look back on
these ads as “silly” or “irrelevant.” She acknowledges that women may “feel perfectly free to
backpack without giving a moment’s thought to femininity” and that this “attests to the success
of the women’s movement and to the pioneering outdoorswomen who blazed the trails that so
many of us now follow” (454). Despite this success in breaking down the barriers between the
public and private domains, a more recent article by Jamie N. McNeil et al. from 2012 looks at
contemporary advertisements from the magazines Outside and Backpacker. Their discussion
reveals that gendered narratives of wilderness experience still assume the wilderness is a
masculine space, and women entering it alone an anomaly.

McNeil et al. explain that women’s involvement in wilderness recreation has increased,
yet they are underrepresented in this area. Outdoor recreation is still largely “the domain of white,
college-educated middle class males” (McNeil et al. 40). In the advertisements they study, women
are depicted as rarely “actively engaged” or “alone” and instead as “voyeurs or followers” (46-
47) of outdoor recreational activities. In two advertisements by the company Mountain Hardware,
where women were depicted as hiking alone, the accompanying text to the image reads that
people might “question your sanity” (47) for being alone in the wilderness. In addition,

not only is wilderness seen as the traditional arena in which men can enact rugged
individualism and affirm their masculinity, but it is concurrently laden with heterosexual
gender expectations. From a young age boys are taught to use their bodies in skilled,
forceful ways, which allows them to successfully perform masculinity and they are
rewarded for these efforts, whereas girls may be taught that being feminine means limiting
their strengths, constraining their bodies, and foregoing outdoor, public spaces in favor of
private, domestic realms. (McNeil et al. 42)

This article confirms the same image of women in wild spaces that Glotfelty’s earlier
article depicted, indicating that despite improvements, the wild, in many ways, is still a masculine
domain and women typically occupy domestic spaces. I have included a lengthy discussion of
these genres – backpacking guides and advertisements – to show how the wilderness is portrayed
in public texts, and to illuminate the embedded narratives they contain about gender in these
spaces. These texts, however, do not offer first person narrative accounts of gendered experiences within this setting. Strayed’s memoir enters into this discussion with a first-person narration that reveals the differences between genders in the wild and shows the nuances involved in women’s attempt to negotiate entrance into this sphere.

Early in the memoir Strayed recounts writing her name and comments in the PCT trail registry at various stops, pausing to read “the names and notes from the hikers who’d passed through in the weeks ahead of me, most of them men traveling in pairs, not one of them a woman alone” (50). Upon embarking on her hike, she explains that she chose to tell herself “a different story from the one women are told” (51). Strayed creates a narrative for herself, and by extension her women readers in general, stating that she “made a deal” to use the words “safe”, “strong”, and “brave” when referring to herself (51). Strayed claims language typically associated with masculinity in an effort to confront the fears that she harbours as a woman alone and uses these terms to devise a new narrative of female capability.

Strayed’s position as both a woman in the wild and a woman in conventional society is acutely felt in an encounter with two men, Frank and Walter, that she meets while hitching a ride to a connecting section of trail. Strayed is asked to explain her reasons for hiking and relates that neither of the men “could fathom what business a woman had hiking [the PCT] by herself” (74). She recalls Frank inquiring about her husband. Upon replying, untruthfully, that she was married, he tells her that her husband is “‘crazier than you… It’s one thing to be a woman crazy enough to do what you’re doing. Another thing to be a man letting his own wife go off and do this’” (74). Strayed is termed a “crazy” woman for deciding to hike alone, but even “crazier” is a man who concedes to his wife embarking on such a trip. Explicit in Frank’s response is a worldview where women are controlled by domestic relationships and male authority. His comment also reinforces the assumption that women are irrational beings and need their husbands to moderate their decisions. He does not entertain the possibility that the hike could be a beneficial and safe undertaking for her because his outlook is invested in traditional heteronormative relationships of power. Importantly, Frank’s assertion does not seem to be made out of a malicious intent to be sexist; instead, he makes this statement based on the supposed naturalness of a patriarchal order to society.

During the chapter “The Only Girl in the Woods” (102), Strayed recalls how she felt about being the only solo female hiker she encountered on the PCT and how she felt the need to downplay her sexuality in order to fit in with the men:

“I’d never been that way in my life, interacting with men in the even-kneed indifference that being one of the guys entails… I’d been a girl forever, after all, familiar with and reliant upon the powers my very girliness granted me. Suppressing those powers gave me a gloomy twinge in the gut. Being one of the guys meant I could not go on being the woman I’d become expert at being around men. It was a version of myself I’d first tasted way back when I was a child of eleven and I’d felt that prickly rush of power when grown men would turn their heads to look at me or whistle or say Hey pretty baby just loudly enough that I could hear. The one I’d banked on all through high school, starving myself thin, playing cute and dumb so I’d be popular and loved. The one I’d fostered all through my young adult years while trying on different costumes – earth girl, punk girl, cowgirl,
riot girl, ballsy girl.” (111)

Strayed’s comments here relate to gender as performance, an understanding which has been explored by philosopher Judith Butler, who describes gender as a “corporeal style, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative” (521-522). In her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, Butler explains that “to be a ‘woman,’ is to become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’” where the body becomes a “cultural sign” (522). In the preceding passage, Strayed discusses her gender as if she is performing ‘types’ of femininity. The “powers” of Strayed’s “girliness” are based on her ability to successfully act according to the societal ideals of what constitutes being female. Being “popular” and “loved” is achieved by performing roles that value women by how attractive they make themselves to men. Since this power is inherently based on approval from the male gaze, having to “sexually neutralize” herself leaves her feeling not only without any avenues to negotiate power, but also as less of a woman. Women in the wild are in a state of instability, self-managed by traditional values of femininity while at the same time trying to negotiate a ‘new woman’ that can be equal to man in this environment and beyond.

As Glotfelty reminds us, “women’s guidebooks concur that the greatest obstacle preventing a woman from backpacking is fear of the loss of her identity as a woman” (449). At the same time that Strayed acknowledges that suppressing her sexuality causes her to have a “gloomy twinge in the gut”, she gestures at the discomfort that conventional standards of femininity produce with the words “prickly”, “starving,” and “playing cute and dumb.” Despite the anxiety over losing her “girliness”, embracing the conventional qualities of femininity is equally painstaking. This moment in the text highlights the nuances and complexity involved in redefining narratives of femininity and shows that what is required is not one version or the other, but rather a new model of femininity that is not rooted in male desire and approval.

In the anthology Solo: On Her Own Adventure edited by Susan Fox Rogers, women explain the reasons they embarked on solo outdoor trips, and many note their inability to fully escape the feeling of being watched. E.A. Miller’s contribution to the collection resonates with Strayed’s discussion of embodied social expectations:

“So much for a solo hiking trip – I had brought along a vast audience, crowded with family, old lovers (even the thought of which can make me suck in my stomach) and literary critics. Talk about ill-fitting equipment: an invisible audience and borrowed stories.” (11)

Miller’s emphasis on “old lovers” and sucking in her stomach to look conventionally attractive, despite no one being around to see her, shows her internalization of feminine ideals. Both hers and Strayed’s accounts are keenly aware of the performativity that structures their reality, and Miller’s comment on “borrowed stories” recognizes the power of narrative in shaping our lives and conceptions of selfhood. Specifically, the urge to suck in her stomach shows the depths to which societal ideals have been etched into her subconscious and highlights the challenge of reversing such profoundly embodied responses.

In her comparative study of the biography Into the Wild, which chronicles Chris McCandless’s departure from society into the Alaskan wilderness and his subsequent death, and
Wild, Tanya A. Kam states that “Strayed’s memoir, which might be read as a self-help memoir, posits that solitude in nature is transformative and allowed Strayed to find her path back to emotional stability when she felt that all was lost” (11). Towards the end of the book, Strayed recounts the feeling of growth acquired on the trail. Her journey on the PCT transforms her from a “lost” woman into one that has “found” herself. Recalling her recent abortion, she calculates that she would be due to give birth to a baby while on the final stretch of the trail. She explains that this realization

“didn’t compel me to waver in my decision to end my pregnancy. It only made me beg the universe to give me another chance. To let me become who I needed to before I became a mother: a woman whose life was profoundly different than my mother’s had been.” (272)

In this quotation, Strayed indicates that she wants to fulfill the domestic responsibilities of motherhood, and evident in other parts of the text, wifehood as well. Strayed is not in opposition to the expectations of a domestic lifestyle. Her request is that she fulfill these roles on her own terms, after becoming who she “needed to be.” Her understanding of how to be happy in a domestic lifestyle is formed in response to a conversation she had with her mother:

“I’d never got to be in the driver’s seat of my own life,” [my mother had] wept to me once, in the days after she learned she was going to die. “I always did what someone else wanted me to do. I’ve always been someone’s daughter or mother or wife. I’ve never just been me.” (273)

Strayed’s mother, Bobbi, identifies herself by way of gendered relationships. She is a “daughter”, “mother” and a “wife” but unable to distinguish herself independent from these titles. She implies her decisions have always been leading her to and from these roles that structured her existence. Strayed’s desire to maintain autonomy independent from these roles is something that women have responded to in their discussion of the book.

Public reception of the book has centered on its emotional content and it has united women against the type of constrictions that Bobbi spoke about on her deathbed and that Strayed explained throughout the book. An article in Condé Nast Traveler introduces April Sylva, a 39 year-old from Oklahoma, who states that she “felt extreme parallels with Cheryl Strayed’s story” (Sylva quoted in Williams). Sylva used Strayed’s words as her “guide” and the article states that within a month after completing her own hike, she quit taking anxiety medication. In his article in The New York Times, Christopher Solomon discusses “The Wild Effect,” stating that

since Wild has appeared, the trail has beckoned to many women who, like Ms. Strayed, needed a change in their lives and believed they might find it on this challenging, sometimes lonely route, seeking the combination of ‘promise and mystery’ that Ms. Strayed described so enticingly. (Solomon)

He introduces Linda Blaney, a 53 year-old “self-described ‘very burned out’ blackjack dealer at the Wynn Las Vegas and Encore resort” (Solomon). Blaney stated she could identify with Strayed’s relationship issues because she herself felt that she could not stay married,
mentioning three divorces, and troubles with her own mother. Inspired by the book to do a three-week trip, Blaney’s reason for going was similar to Strayed’s: “I needed to find something in me” (quoted in Solomon), she said. Solomon interviews an addictions specialist, Leigh Swansborough, who stated that Wild has helped many women “see that it really wasn’t dangerous for them to be out there” (quoted in Solomon). Swansborough explains that “Cheryl’s book really made it possible and believable for women to see that doing something out of their comfort zone, or very big, was possible… Women aren’t really taught that in society” (quoted in Solomon). Solomon contacted Strayed for an interview, and from her home in Portland she said that she has received emails from approximately 1000 people who told her that Wild inspired them to do a hike. Myla Fay, in an article for Jezebel.com, stated that “more than anything, I understood her experience as a solo female hiker on a trail of mostly men” (Fay). Likewise, in a blog post, a self-described neuroscientist – who goes by her online name “Patches Thru” – explained why she left her position as a university faculty member to spend her days hiking:

Not only did Cheryl Strayed tell herself a different story, she shared that story with the rest of the world. The fact that Wild is giving people, especially women, the courage to tell themselves new stories and to live new dreams is inspiring. (Patches Thru)

Female reader responses to the book are twofold in their commentary on women’s experience: some women identify with Strayed’s personal struggles in her relationships and her grief over the death of her mother, while others focus more on the accomplishments she has made for public perception of women alone in the wild. Combined, Wild weaves the challenges of life in both the private and public realms and provides inspiration for women to defy traditional one-dimensional narratives of femininity.

Strayed’s memoir has been compared to Bill Bryson’s 1998 autobiographical account of walking the Appalachian Trail (AT), the eastern version of the PCT. Comparisons to this text are prompted by the timely release of movies of both Strayed’s and Bryson’s texts within a year of one another; 2014 and 2015, respectively. Marissa Fessenden, writing for Smithsonian.com relayed that Bryson’s book A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail had the same effect after its publication of increasing hikers on the AT, referred to as “The Bryson Bump” (Fessenden). On the second page of the text Bryson discusses his reasons for hiking the AT:

I formed a number of rationalizations. It would get me fit after years of waddlesome sloth. It would be an interesting and reflective way to reacquaint myself with the scale and beauty of my native land after nearly twenty years of living abroad. It would be useful (I wasn’t quite sure in what way, but I was sure nonetheless) to learn to fend for myself in the wilderness. When guys in camouflage pants and hunting hats sat around in the Four Aces Diner talking about fearsome things done out-of-doors, I would no longer have to feel like such a cupcake. (Bryson 2)

Notably, Bryson begins his description by indicating the he made his decision to hike by way of rationalization, a stark contrast to Strayed’s emotional reasons. His interest was in learning the history of his home country and centered on refining his masculine identity to avoid feeling like a “cupcake” amongst other men that have gone through this rite of masculinity. He recalls
waking up in his tent and his water bottle was frozen solid. To Bryon, “this seemed gratifyingly macho” (42). Bryson, who completed part of the hike with his old friend Stephen Katz, is most concerned with asserting his manliness. He does not see the need to do the trip on his own and instead seeks out friends who may be interested in being his hiking partner. It does not appear that “alone” is a necessary criterion for him to explore his masculinity, whereas for Strayed it is the crucial detail for both her self-healing and her sense of female empowerment.

In Bryson’s book, there are few appearances of women and the accounts of them in the text are antagonistic to female empowerment. Most obvious is Bryson and Katz’s encounter with a woman named Mary Ellen on the trail, who is hiking alone. Bryson develops her into a character the readers themselves become annoyed with: “She talked nonstop, except when she was clearing out her nose and blowing out with a series of violent and alarming snorts of a sort that would make a dog leave the sofa and get under a table in the next room” (53). Clearly, Mary Ellen, with her “violent and alarming snorts”, is a very ‘unfeminine’ woman in the wild. He goes on to state that “I have long known that it is part of God’s plan for me to spend a little time with each of the most stupid people on earth, and Mary Ellen was proof that even in the Appalachian woods I would not be spared” (53). Mary Ellen is a “constant, prattling, awesomely braindead presence” (61) for Bryson and Katz. This portrayal of the only female solo hiker can hardly be inspirational for any woman reader of Bryson’s text. Mary Ellen may be redeemable if she succeeded in her solo hike, but Bryson seems gratified in stating that “two days later we heard that Mary Ellen had dropped out with blisters after trying to do thirty-five miles in two days. Big mistake” (73). In the end, Mary Ellen is a stereotypical female in the wilderness. She has lost all her feminine beauty, she is unable to accurately plan her trip, and she succumbs to novice mistakes that force her out of the wilderness.

Most of the nature experts Bryson mentions in his historical discussions are men. In one instance he talks about a thru-hiker named Emma “Grandma” Gatewood, “who successfully hiked the trail twice in her late sixties despite being eccentric, poorly equipped, and a danger to herself. (She was forever getting lost.)” (119). A miracle that Gatewood thru-hiked twice, she is no expert in the wild but seems to have simply been lucky to survive. Bryson also describes how he finished remaining sections of the trail through a series of day hikes, bringing along “very nice packed lunches that my wife made for me each night before retiring and left on the top shelf in the fridge” (224). Bryson outlines for us a scene of traditional gender roles, with his wife attending to the domestic chores that enable him to embark on an exploration of his masculinity.

*A Walk in the Woods* also discusses a concern that has surfaced repeatedly in considerations of women in the wild: women’s safety in the backcountry is threatened by predatory men. He includes instances detailing two attacks on women by men, resulting in the death of Lollie Winans and Julianne Williams while he was hiking the trail, and the death of Rebecca Wight and the seriously injured Claudia Brenner in 1988. Krista Langlois’s recent 2016 article “Stop Telling Women Not to Go Into the Background Alone” in *Adventure Journal* takes offense to being told not to go into the wild solo. Recalling her first unaccompanied hiking trip in Maine, she states that

the woman who issued my permit looked at me like I was crazy. It’s a look women who venture into the wilderness alone often get. We get it from our parents, from society, from
the well-meaning people who issue backcountry permits. They say it without saying it: It’s not safe out there. Not for you… people admonish me not to go into the wilderness alone because I might get eaten by a bear or lost in a tangle of trees. But I know how to use bear spray. I can read a map. I can hike or paddle as far and as fast as any guy, and I can wait out a lightning storm in the safest possible place. These are things I can control. (Langlois)

Women can use the tools and knowledge of outdoor survival just as effectively as men, as Langlois’s statement indicates. She emphasizes that it is not that women cannot take care of themselves in this space as successfully as men, but that problems in society outside of the physical wilderness make women vulnerable to men. Strayed’s memoir depicts these exact sentiments. In one instance, she helps two men she comes across by providing them with water, teaching them how to use a water purifier and iodine pills. After helping them, one man returns to suggestively taunt her before his other friend interrupts the encounter. Kam analyzes the scenario:

Strayed’s gendered narrative shows that, although she has become more competent out in the woods than these hunters, she is still prey to dangers that male adventurers such as Chris McCandless would not have to fear to the same extent. The scenario with the hunters reveals the possibility of violence, whether in the form of sexual assault, battery, or robbery when a woman travels alone, either in the wilderness or in conventional society (along a deserted street at night, etc.) (13)

Kam’s statement reiterates that it is not the specific space of wilderness or what this space requires from its occupants, but cultural violence against women that threatens their safety. Similar to her comment that Chris McCandless “would not have to fear to the same extent”, while Bryson mentions that he is aware of the danger of murder on the trail, it is not as imminent a threat to him in particular.

In this discussion I have explored how women lack a sense of entitlement to the wilderness based on a historical narrative that relegates women to the domestic sphere and how Strayed’s memoir inspires women to challenge the concept of the wild as a solely masculine domain. Strayed’s emotional journey also resonates with women readers who feel troubled by personal shortcomings relating to gender expectations. I would like to suggest that one of the reasons Wild is so widely popular is because it provides a framework wherein women are encouraged to be independent and explore new territory, while it simultaneously reinforces traditional values of womanhood in accordance with societal norms.

Janice Radway’s study of romance novels and their popularity with women readers reveals that some women readers like an ending that demonstrates that “female empowerment and marriage are compatible rather than mutually exclusive” (54). Likewise, a similar conclusion can be made regarding the appeal of Strayed’s memoir. Following her journey of independent self-exploration in a traditionally masculine space, Strayed ends her memoir by telling her readers that she married, became a mother of two children, and now lives a happy life of domesticity while balancing a career in writing. In fact, in an interview with People Magazine she indicates it is the domestic responsibilities she values most in terms of personal growth. Strayed explains
that motherhood has been the most life-altering experience for her: “Suddenly I went from living for myself to living for my children and the way that I love them is so profound that it altered everything” (quoted in Tauber).

In her discussion of memoirs and self-care guides, Megan Brown states that, in terms of genre, the “…personal narrative is a central way to circulate discourse about ‘private life’ and to perpetuate, and even police, norms of subjectivity” (372). She explains that Wild may be best “known for its depiction of getting by in the wilderness, but the book is also a memoir of drug abuse, detailing the narrator’s slide into shooting heroin as a response to her mother’s death, a crumbling marriage, and an overwhelming sense of existential crisis” (363). She furthers that

the experiences on the trail are portrayed as formative lessons – as the narrator learns more about hiking, she becomes more confident and independent, and in turn, this newfound sense of confidence/independence allows her to process her feelings about her family and her ex-husband. Readers observe this normalization process, this shift from depressed proto-junkie to thoughtful, well-adjusted woman who has properly grieved the loss of her mother. (Brown 364)

Likewise, an article on Vulture.com by Kathryn Schulz echoes Brown’s interpretation of Strayed’s memoir:

Before Strayed sets off on her journey, she embodies much of what America fears about young lower-class women: she does drugs, sleeps around, gets an abortion. Eleven hundred miles and 315 pages later, she has sobered up, sworn off the one-night stands, and become as wholesome and appealing as the girl next door. (Schulz)

By going out into the wilderness, Strayed returns to society a more respectable citizen than she was before her hike. Readers follow along with Strayed as she works through her troubles, and are thereby instructed on how they too can overcome their own hardships. Glotfelty references Lynn Thomas’s The Backpacking Woman when she states that “homemakers have mustered the courage to ‘apply for a job, or to reactivate a hobby’” following wilderness backpacking and, in some cases, have experienced “total life transformations” (Glotfelty 448). Apparent in these transformative narratives, the independence and self-empowerment experienced in the wild does not threaten to overturn societal values, but rather gives women the ability to make ‘smart’, ‘mature’ decisions about domestic responsibilities, such as getting married and starting a family. This narrative transfers the independence experienced in the wild into courage to apply for a job within society, thereby helping the state through women’s self-sufficiency and contribution to the workforce. Therefore, a woman in the wild is not depicted as a threat to the social order, despite exerting independence in a masculine space; rather, Strayed’s narrative suggests women can perform their domestic roles more effectively after such a transformative experience.

It is worth questioning if Wild would have been as successful if it did not reinforce the traditional values of heteronormative relationships, motherhood, marriage, and sobriety. Readers want a happy ending to stories, but what constitutes a happy ending also reveals something about societal values. We might question, then, if Strayed’s memoir would have been so successful –
made best sellers lists, been adapted into a film with Reese Witherspoon, been featured on Oprah’s Super Soul Sundays – if these normalizing events were not part of her narrative. Examined in this light, reception of the memoir reveals that the general public is still largely invested in a narrative that ultimately reinforces traditional values, where a hike in the woods only makes Strayed more prepared to fulfill domestic responsibilities.

A narrative that breaks barriers while simultaneously reinforces gender norms could be read as a narrative of ‘safe’ resistance. This memoir popularizes a version of femininity that questions traditional one-dimensional gender roles by providing a female protagonist who successfully completes a 1,100 mile hike typically only undertaken by men. It is safe in that it allows the public to appreciate the resistance because it also reinforces the traditional norms of society. I believe this line of reasoning, while valid, detracts from Wild’s accomplishment and misses another complexity of gender identity. As shown in this discussion, women have to negotiate multiple narratives in relation to their femininity, which I should note is also dependent on class, race, sexual preference, disabilities, and other factors. Women have expressed concern that entry into the wild will compromise their femininity. However, Strayed’s narrative demonstrates that entry into this space does not need to detract from a woman’s femininity; instead of devaluing domesticity, it suggests that women need to be able to make decisions about their domestic responsibilities on their own terms. As Strayed explained when writing about her abortion, it was not that she did not want to become a mother, it was that she wanted to do it in her own time. In this light, the choice becomes an act of self-empowerment. Instead of asking women to choose between narratives, we might consider how these identities are not mutually exclusive and recognize that a woman’s decision to participate in traditional gender norms is not fairly described as simply reinforcing the status quo.

Reflecting on her memoir, Strayed says she feels she has “given people permission... you do not have to be an expert to walk into the woods,” (quoted in Solomon) a statement speaking against “elitism” that mocks rookie hikers like herself. Wild has been praised for its universal value in documenting human grief and recovery, beyond a solely female narrative. As Strayed herself states, much of the book deals with common themes of how it feels to lose loved ones and embark on life without them. Strayed’s book, then, can be valuable to multiple publics – males, females, those struggling with grief or relationships – in its consideration of collective feelings. I have chosen to focus on the gendered aspects of Wild and the larger conversation about the wilderness and femininity that it is situated in, and therefore the specifically female public that it addresses in this regard. Strayed’s statement that one does “not have to be an expert to walk into the woods” is likewise applicable to the model of femininity that Wild presents: women are given permission to embrace new territory without feeling that their ability to remain feminine or fulfill domestic responsibilities is being compromised by their participation in traditionally masculine spaces.

References

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