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# Outdoor Women: Thinking about Gender, Self, and Environment through Outdoor Enskillment Programs

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**Abstract:** Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) is a North American program that focuses on developing hunting, fishing and wilderness skills among women. BOW participant engagement offers a window onto gendered responses to environmental uncertainty, an awareness of the constraints of illegitimate peripheral participation, and multifaceted self-expression. Through their own bodily engagement and dialogues, participants disassembled the dualisms inherent in single-gender-dominated activities such as hunting. The contrasting desires, incentives and apprehensions of BOW participants were shared through an active process of self-reflection and reveal the ways in which this group of women navigated the tensions that are part of their daily lives.

**Keywords:** enskillment, hunting, gender, environment, participation, BOW

**Résumé :** Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) est un programme nord-américain visant à développer les compétences en matière de chasse, de pêche et de survie en milieu naturel chez les femmes. L'engagement des participantes au programme BOW permet de mieux comprendre la genrésation des réponses à l'incertitude environnementale, la prise de conscience des contraintes de la participation périphérique illégitime et les multiples facettes de l'expression identitaire. À travers leur engagement corporel et leurs dialogues, les participantes déconstruisent les dualismes propres aux activités mono-genrées comme la chasse. Les différents désirs, motivations et inquiétudes des participantes s'expriment à travers un processus actif d'autoréflexion et révèlent la manière dont ce groupe de femmes composent avec les tensions inhérentes à leur vie quotidienne.

**Mots-clés :** Acquisition de compétences par la pratique, chasse, genre, environnement, participation, BOW

In their work on environmental sustainability and experiential education programs, ethnoecologists and anthropologists Beckwith, Halber and Turner suggest that a central question for human–environment studies is “How can we humans, in our increasingly urbanized society, reconnect ourselves with the natural world and rekindle our relationships with place and with other species . . . ?” (Beckwith, Halber and Turner 2017, 412). While such an inquiry is necessary, it is likewise important to ask how this type of reconnection between ourselves and the natural world is already occurring. Such reconnections, particularly when deliberately sought out, as in experiential education, offer opportunities to explore the uncertainties that motivate public involvement and better understand the dynamic relationship between people and their environment.

To explore how some people are choosing to reconnect with the nonhuman environment, in 2016, I conducted fieldwork in a series of women’s outdoor programs in western Canada called Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW), which focus on building skills such as gun use, fishing, butchering and skinning animals, trapping basics, chainsaw and axe use, and wilderness survival. Given women’s historic under-representation in the academic literature on hunting and fishing in North America, as well as women’s minority participation in them, BOW is an important example of one way some people are choosing to shape the human–environment relationship through skill acquisition. This article presents case studies of three BOW programs, where I discuss the ways in which BOW participants exemplify how some women are deliberately trying to reshape the opportunities available to them, as well as the wider popularity of BOW as a program. In an effort to disrupt the binaries often entrenched in hunting discourse, I approach BOW participants as organisms-in-environment (Ingold 2002) that is, as actors embedded in ongoing relations with the human and nonhuman actors around them. As Donna Haraway (1992) reminds us, binaries (male/female, nature/culture) eschew difference

and experience in favour of the reproduction of the sacred image of the same. Regarding BOW, the narrative of man's dominance over nature and its much needed critiques has the unanticipated outcome of obscuring the complex motivations and experiences of participants.

While sociologists have explored survivalism (Mitchell 2002) and back-to-the-land movements (Wilbur 2013) as manifestations of changing ecological subjectivities (or selves in relation to the nonhuman world), less dramatic examples of reshaping the human-environment relationship should likewise be considered. As a popular North America-wide program, anthropologists should pay attention to initiatives like BOW and what they can tell us about the social relations that make such programs possible and the environmental relationships shaped within them. In this case, the interwoven nature of BOW participant priorities and concerns offers a window on contemporary social and environmental anxieties in a way that challenges class-based analysis and prioritises the voices and experiences of participating women. Women in BOW were actively engaged in self-reflection and self-making as facilitated by the skills they were learning and the human-environment relationship they were considering. In particular, contemplation of inadequate childhood learning, unease regarding environmental change, and the precariousness of public infrastructure were central to the participant experience. Participant narratives resisted typical contradictions, were rich in intersecting motivations, included deliberate and articulate self-evaluation, and as Zeiss Stange (2000, 147) found in similar circumstances, showed how "Babies and bullets could be discussed in the same sentence without contradiction".

Programs such as BOW are part of people's ongoing engagement with their surroundings and thus are indicators of a subset of contemporary cultural priorities and ecological subjectivities. Of particular relevance is that BOW takes place within a context of environmental uncertainty, by which I refer to an underlying anxiety about the state of the nonhuman environment. Though not a new phenomenon, others such as Coleman (1996) and Grove (1995) have offered a rich historic analysis of the discontents of modernity and the link between environmental anxiety and the foundations of colonial expansion, its contemporary manifestation is more pressing in the context of climate change. Congruent with the environmental anxieties of many BOW participants is Haraway's articulation of the process of denature (Haraway 1992, 66), as well as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's (2016) assertion that we are in the midst of an ecological breakdown in which people's concerns are easily dismissed as backward and simplistic. Focusing on the embodied experiences and views of participants and the link between touch and building knowledge

of organisms-in-environment helps bring to light how such anxiety is lived while (hopefully) addressing the muting effects of obvious binaries. Puig De la Bellacasa (2009, 298) reminds us that "To think with touch has a potential to inspire a sense of connectedness that can further problematize abstractions and disengagements of (epistemological) distances – between subjects and objects, knowledge and the world, affects and facts, politics and science". In this case it also highlights the simple truth that people's embodied experiences matter.

## **Becoming an Outdoors-Woman Background**

BOW evolved out of a University of Wisconsin conference that identified barriers to women's participation in hunting and angling (Thomas and Peterson 1990). Since its inception in 1991, BOW has spread to at least 40 US states and seven Canadian provinces and territories, and spawned offshoot programs such as *Yukon Outdoor Women* and Ontario's and Saskatchewan's *Women's Outdoor Weekend*. BOW emphasises teaching women in an inclusive, non-intimidating environment.

Camps are tied to the founding organisation through branding and structure but are otherwise locally managed. The program description therefore varies for different locations: in Nova Scotia, the aim is "assisting people to overcome barriers, whether social or financial, to learning outdoor skills" (Nova Scotia Federation of Anglers and Hunters 2013); in Newfoundland, BOW is described as "Workshops for women who wish to learn new outdoor recreation skills or enhance their knowledge of fishing, hunting and other outdoor activities" (Fisheries and Land Resources, Newfoundland and Labrador 2017); and in Manitoba, it is "an opportunity for women of all ages to learn outdoor skills that will benefit them in all manners of outdoor pursuits" (Manitoba Wildlife Federation 2017). Courses are encouraged to follow the ideal of one-third hunting-oriented, one-third fishing-oriented, and one-third wilderness-oriented (although the interpretation of what this means varies between sites). In Canada, programs are usually volunteer-run and sponsored by local Fish and Game Associations (FGA) or comparable organisations. Program costs in Canada range from \$200 to \$300 for two to five days' lodging, food and programming. Instructors are volunteer local experts and are women when possible.

## **Researching How to Become an Outdoors-Woman**

In 2016, I attended three BOW programs in western and northern Canada, conducting participant interviews as well as speaking to organisers and instructors, local Fish

and Game Association representatives, past participants and, occasionally, local female hunters. I also participated in the program by taking courses in wilderness survival, gun safety, trap shooting, handgun and rifle target practice, archery, canoeing and kayaking, game care, trapping, axe handling, GPS and mapping, preparing for a sheep hunt, plant identification and edible bugs, fire starting and shelter building and fishing, as well as shorter sessions including woodworking and outdoor cooking. Touch is an engagement that undoes the distance of detachment (Puig de La Bellacasa 2009) and is central to situating new information in the context of direct perceptual engagement with one's environment (Ingold 2002). Thus, my aim was to privilege both participant voice and embodied experience by focusing on the physical acts of learning and the conversation around it, with interviews providing a space for self-reflection afterward.

Each program had between 19 and 80 participants, with approximately four to ten women in each training session, and two to four sessions per day. While I did not conduct a survey on participant status and identities that would allow statistical analysis, conversations and queries revealed that participants were from a mixture of rural and urban areas, ranged in age from the 20s to the late 70s, had education levels from high school to graduate school, were predominantly white (a demographic also reflected in US programs; Lueck 1995; Welch 2004), and were often though not exclusively married. The majority of participants were employed and had previous outdoor experience, sometimes having grown up in hunting and fishing families. Although the minority, participants new to outdoor pursuits were not rare, including three new Canadians with limited outdoor experience. Equal to the whiteness of the groups was diversity in terms of rural and urban backgrounds, education level, and profession, including university professors (other than myself), teachers, administrative assistants, stay-at-home parents, park wardens, enforcement officers, bus drivers, farmers, store clerks and students.

In total, 37 semi-structured interviews and over 40 unrecorded shorter informal interviews were conducted, with roughly even representation across the three camps. Participants were informed of my research during group introductions and invited to seek me out if they wanted to talk about their BOW experience. My position as a woman and mother from a ranching background facilitated inclusion, and the research was generally met with curiosity. A lack of outdoor prowess despite my rural upbringing both further connected me to participants once programs began and blurred researcher/subject boundaries. Indeed, I came to relate to participants and their reflections and struggles on a personal level

throughout the programs. During interviews I asked participants to share their background, previous outdoor experiences, views of the gender-specific nature of the program, level of skill, motivations, and perceived views of friends and family regarding their involvement and participant perceptions of BOW more generally. In addition, I asked the women to tell detailed stories about some element of their BOW experience and encouraged them to discuss subjects outside of interview questions.

Participant discussions throughout the program often revealed the richest examples of the sometimes indefinite or tangled drives that led women to sign up for BOW. The nature of embodied learning demanded that participants mimic specific movements and, in doing so, come to know their surroundings and themselves through new acts of engagement. Consequently, participant discussions while shooting, canoeing, skinning animals or starting fires were part of a process of articulation and self-awareness. Instead of a concern with presentation or aesthetic, this focus on the body is about capacity and the impact of that capacity on self-perception. Although such a conception of the body still evokes a Western formulation of individual selves as embodied (Becker 1995), it nevertheless shifts attention toward the internalisation of practice through engagement, mimicry and mimesis (Dilley 1999).

The core themes of fun, independence, food security and health, and environmental and social anxiety noted during informal conversation between participants were reflected within interviews. Inductive coding and analysis of field notes and interview transcripts supported the commonalities that I had noticed while participating. It is important to emphasise the concurrent motivation of fun with other themes such as social and environmental anxiety; neither negates the other, and to separate them risks production of a homogenous "same" in the face of diverse individual experiences. Reflecting participant prioritisation of narrative and embodiment, I will provide interview extracts that represent the common themes from the interviews and informal conversations. Through their inclusion, I aim to connect and value participant voice *and* the experience from which these words emerged. First, however, I provide a wider context for how women, guns and hunting are typically represented within academic literature, arguing that the experiences of women themselves are too often absent and that their motivations and values are too often treated as set and unchanging subjects.

## Women, Guns and Hunting

Much academic literature about hunting and BOW takes a standpoint regarding the self as subject in relation to wider social influence. For example, some of the

literature discussed below privileges external factors over individual agency: for instance, husbands' influence on the choice of women to hunt, the place of advertising in influencing personal choice, the role of mothers in teaching their children, and the place of women as subordinates to a wider system. These same topics were likewise present within participant narratives. However, among participants, the roles of agency and social influence, or processual and structural influences (Demo 1992), were actively being negotiated along with the binaries inherent within them (male/female, culture/nature).

The expansion of BOW throughout the 1990s and early 2000s did not occur in isolation from the wider outdoors community, and, as a consequence, BOW participants (and their motivations) have found themselves as part of an ongoing debate about North American hunting culture. BOW popularity occurred in tandem with growing women's participation in hunting and fishing in both the United States and Canada throughout the 1990s (Bissell, Duda and Young 1998; Henderson et al. 1996). Women hunters make up an average of 8% of all hunters in North America (Heberlein, Serup and Ericsson 2008), with some studies arguing an upward trend (St. James 2014). In British Columbia, female hunters have increased from 6735 in 2009 to 10,570 in 2015 (however, their overall percentage has decreased from just over 13% to roughly 10% during that same time; British Columbia Fish and Wildlife 2016). Additionally, there has been increasingly gender-targeted advertising on the part of FGA and outdoor equipment suppliers. Within this wider context, BOW is occasionally referred to as a program of indoctrination into hunting culture (Fitzgerald 2005, Prescott 1995). Regardless of whether or not hunting education is a primary aim of BOW, it was a common topic of discussion and end goal of many participants.

Existing literature specific to BOW often originates within recreational studies and research emerging from Christine L. Thomas, founder of the program, and her students. These works examine barriers particular to women's outdoor engagement (Thomas and Peterson 1990), the outdoor engagement of minority women (Schnell 2000), and the role of women in hunting more generally. This literature is particularly useful in tracking anticipated program outcomes. For example, Lueck (1995) determines program impact by examining instances of hunting and angling post-program. Welch (2004) surveyed 1240 American participants to measure program goals such as postprogram awareness of hunting and angling agencies, regulation awareness, and policy compliance. Likewise, Hargrove (2010) examined leisure satisfaction in the outdoors among 1283 previous BOW participants. Such research focuses on expected

outcomes of BOW programs in relation to program intent but seldom offers deeper analysis of BOW as a phenomenon itself or of the participating women's motivations beyond program goals and experiences of the program itself.

Outside of this small cluster of BOW-specific literature, women and hunting is itself a wider research topic. The apparent contrast of women with guns is a focus within (mostly American) literature querying women's use of guns for self-defence, women's historic participation in war, and the problematic nature of women with guns more generally (Kelly 2004, Homsher 2001). The idea of women and hunting as anomalous is repeated either overtly (McFarlane, Watson and Boxall 2003) or subtly (for example, through the topic of women hunting as a feature of curiosity), which indexes the norm of hunting as a domain of masculinity (for example, Heberlein, Serup and Ericsson 2008).

In contemporary media, the trend of women and guns is extended to broader outdoor pursuits where BOW programs are depicted as a trend-setting and pressure-free opportunity for women to enter the male-dominated outdoors. For example, the following headlines are common in media coverage about BOW: "Move over guys, women are taking to the woods and waters, right across Canada" (Ball 1998); "Sisters Are Killing It for Themselves: Women Hunters" (2006); "More Women Give Hunting a Shot" (Schmitt 2013); and "Okanagan Women Help Shatter Image of Typical Hunter" (Bregolisse 2016). Despite the program being successful for over two decades, the tone of these media pieces falsely creates the new and surprising trend of women suddenly asserting their role in the outdoors. Additionally, these types of news articles tend to diminish the female body through suggestions that such women are "one of the guys," thus minimising the apparent contradiction of "woman hunter," which is a reclassification technique observed in other male-dominated domains (Rodgers 1992).

In contrast, some scholars have argued that lack of recognition of women in hunting is being conflated with lack of participation. Zeiss Stange (2003) has argued that the narrative of male-only as opposed to male-majority hunting is a relatively new feature resulting from post-WWII America, prior to which women hunters were not irregular. Zeiss Stange's (2003) edited collection of detailed personal hunting accounts written by women hunters between 1900 and 2002 provides proof of the long history of this ongoing engagement. In addition, autobiography-style accounts of women learning to hunt and coming to self-identify as hunters are offered by Zeiss Stange (1997), Thomas (1997) and McCaulou

(2012). Focusing intensely on embodied experience, each memoir follows a similar narrative arc of a woman encountering the unknown world of hunting, incorporating and/or challenging hunting norms with her own identity as a woman, and eventually internalising an ethic and identity of being a hunter.

Relevant literature has also argued that women are an integral component of hunting, not as hunters, but as wives and community members of men who hunt. McFarlane, Watson and Boxall (2003) have proposed that many women acquire hunting licences to apply for lottery draws in order to increase their husbands' chances of being selected for limited hunts. She argues that 20–30% of female hunters in Alberta do this, suggesting that an increase in the number of registered female hunters is less about “girl-power” and more about “guys-in-disguise.” One of McFarlane’s key points is that regardless of motivation, women who are involved in hunting offer a potential recruitment point and increase the social acceptability of hunting. This point of view is mirrored by Fitzgerald (2005), who argues that there was an aggressive marketing strategy by the US Department of Natural Resources during the 1990s aimed specifically at recruiting women hunters. Earlier models of such efforts are also detailed by Zeiss Stange, who points to late nineteenth-century British hunting magazines featuring women riding with hounds as something that “not only encouraged more women to take up the sport ... it also had the hoped-for effect of raising public levels of approval for fox hunting” (Zeiss Stange 2003, 13). That women’s bodies are occasionally co-opted in support of the hunting industry is generally agreed upon; however, the impact of this process on women’s individual choices remains contested.

Scholars taking an ecofeminist approach have perhaps been the most consistent critics of hunting, of women hunting and of targeted programming and advertising. Often these works emphasise structural influence in women’s decisions. For example, Kheel (1995, 88) understands hunting as a symbol of dominance over both women and nature. From this perspective, women hunters not only are displaying a lack of empathy for nonhuman life but are also willing participants within a patriarchal system that is active in their own oppression. Likewise, Fitzgerald, a feminist political ecologist and BOW critic, argues that the reasons behind an increase in women hunters can be primarily reduced to a male-generated and financially motivated recruitment campaign targeted at women Fitzgerald (2005). Citing King (1991), who is likewise a severe critic of hunting and of women engaging in hunting, she argues that “hunting is immune to the challenge that some women hunt

too, primarily because most members of an oppressed group will agree with many of the interpretations of the world offered by the dominant group” (King 1991, 84). Fitzgerald specifically references BOW as little more than a hunting recruitment initiative, arguing that she saw little evidence of Thomas’s goals of growing women’s equality and empowerment. In addition, she argues that BOW’s “aim is to recruit not only women, but to recruit youths through women, because ‘Women are often the vectors for family participation in outdoor recreation—a key ingredient in the successful recruitment of youth into outdoor activities’ (Fitzgerald 2005, 97, citing Mertig and Matthews 199, 494).

Subsequently, within this ecofeminist framing, not only are women victims of this system, but their bodies are used as instruments to further the reach of the male-dominated hunting and fishing industry. Much of this literature (as cited above) extends a pattern of undermining women’s agency in favour of male and systemic influence, and with the exception of hunting biographies, manages to exclude the actual experiences of its subjects. For instance, it perpetuates the ideas that BOW programs are foremost a recruitment ground for male-dominated outdoor industries, of women hunting primarily to support their spouses, and of women’s participation in the outdoors as new and/or rare. Such attitudes serve to further entrench discussions of gender and hunting within inadequate historical storylines and overlook an opportunity to discern underlying drives in contemporary environmental action.

While being entwined within the hunting debates as outlined here, I argue that the participant engagement and motivations observed in my study offer a look into a gendered response to environmental uncertainty, an awareness of the constraints of illegitimate peripheral participation, a complex self-expression, and an entanglement of past and future imaginings. The BOW participants I interviewed simultaneously challenged and reproduced the key arguments that exist within this literature: of women hunters as anomaly, hunting as gendered, the questionable influence of media, the role of mothers in normalising such outdoor activities, and the ethical concerns of hunting and fishing. Rather than being distinct conversations, these ponderings were entwined and underwent constant (re)formation together with participants’ own ongoing self-reflection.

## Choosing to Participate

Reasons for participating in BOW were entwined throughout general informal discussion during BOW workshops and study interviews. The women’s reasons

can be grouped as follows: fun and skill-specific learning, freedom and independence in context of limitation, concerns over food security and health, and environmental and social anxiety. As participant voices show (detailed below), their contemplations were an act of sense-making and self-reflection that discursively dismantled the very structures they identified as limiting or worry-making.

### *Fun and Skill-Specific Learning*

Most participants sought a relaxing and fun event with like-minded individuals in a welcoming environment. Many came with friends, family members (mother/daughter pairs or sisters), and in one case a bridal party. The event had appeal as healthy, fun and different. As one participant described it:

When you get your list of courses . . . It's like well I want to go, I want to go to the weekend. Cause it's a good fun weekend and you get out of town for the weekend and no kids, no husband, no spouse, no wives or whatever. "And what (courses) am I going to take? Oh that might be cool." Maybe I'll learn that and I mean it just opens the door to so many possibilities. You take an introduction to trapping course and it can change your life, like these courses are life changers for a lot of women and it's huge. (BOW participant A14)

In addition to its novelty, as the above quotation illustrates, there is also the appeal of learning itself and of the women-only environment as a focus.

A common sentiment was that the women-only environment allowed deeper enjoyment. One participant, who works in a male majority workplace in an urban centre, commented

I'm the type of person who doesn't like to look foolish. I don't like to do something and then have, be snickered at or whatever, I mean for the most part I can handle a comment or whatever . . . it's just, I'm more relaxed and more fun. I find that I have more fun being on the same level as ladies than having that male kind of dominance. (BOW participant C19)

Another participant stated that her primary motivation was just to have fun and enjoy herself and she found a sense of liberty and accomplishment in being outdoors with women:

A reoccurring theme in my life is that guys are initially you know, throughout dating and even with my husband, it's like their first reaction is like "oh sweet! A girl that likes to do this stuff" but then they only really want you to do it with them every once in a while and then they want you to stop doing it and like

be a girl again. And I'm kind of like well, this sucks, I like doing those things. (BOW participant C21)

The sometimes summer camp atmosphere was light-hearted, with a few camps offering campfire games and one camp allowing chances to swim in the lake between courses. Meals were provided by the organisers and participants were not required to help in cleaning – it was a common comment that this alleviation of domestic duties was reason enough to come.

On occasion, women sought to learn a specific skill rather than with a more general education. One participant had a wood-heated home but was uncomfortable chopping wood, and another accompanied her partner on hunting trips but felt uncomfortable around guns. Often the women expressed the desire to be confident outdoors and transfer knowledge to children as a goal. For example,

Fishing is my main goal. I really want to learn to fish cause, I really want to ultimately start doing a lot of camping with my family and being able to teach them [children] those kinds of things. I don't want them to . . . they wouldn't be lacking in growing up with less skills than I did. (BOW participant C15)

Skill-specific motivation often resulted in women choosing a variety of courses within the same domain, such as multiple gun and game-care courses. Sometimes these decisions were deliberate, but other times their course choice revealed an interest otherwise unknown to the participant:

Well looking back, I realised I went for all the weapons (laughter). I don't know what that says about me but I did archery . . . I really liked shooting and really like the archery and I found actually, what I found out about myself was, you know, while everyone had a lot of fun shooting the handguns and the semi-automatic rifles and stuff, I really liked the traditional feel of the single-shot bolt action. Like 70-year-old rifles . . . I was more proud of my shooting prowess with that than I was with the one that had the scopes and did everything for you. The same with archery, we'd use compound bows and the traditional recurve bow and just something about the feel of the recurve just really spoke to me. So apparently I'm more traditional in my weapon choice [laughter]. (BOW participant A12)

Other times participants tried a course for the novelty but found that the experience illuminated their own capacities. In discussing the gun courses, the following experience was shared by many of the women who were new to using guns:

At first I was very, like I almost didn't want to do it at first and I didn't, I didn't even know why. I just didn't feel like I wanted to do it and then the lady [instructor] kept on encouraging me to try it and after the first or second round I started to feel like gee-whiz, perhaps I could do this thing. [Laughter] . . . I liked it actually and today I felt like I really wanted to do it again and that is because I had some success. I couldn't believe I, like when I looked at the range of where we're supposed to shoot that little ball [the target], I thought hell fricken' no, I wasn't going to shoot nothing . . . I surprised myself that I did it. (BOW participant C15)

Particularly with the gun courses, the enjoyment of trying something new, challenging themselves or honing already developed skills was the subject of ongoing discussion. These conversations combined the physicality of the task (for example, sore shoulders, sore arms, the feel of the gun, the texture of wood and metal, the smell of a shot just fired) with internal revelations spoken out loud – “I just did that!” – in a mixture of proud declaration and disbelief. On occasion, throughout this process, male/female and private/public dualisms were decoupled by the very acts and conversations occurring. For example, on the second day of my first BOW program, I ate lunch with six women who had returned from the shooting range. Throughout lunch their discussion of events moved from favourite guns to children at home, from identifying bullets and dealing with the sore shoulder muscles of a shotgun kick to breastfeeding and recipes, from food safety to hunting ethics. The conversation flow remained uninterrupted by the mixing of what would normally be disparate semantic fields.

### *Freedom and Independence in the Context of Limitation*

American activist and writer Terry Tempest Williams wrote a hunting story in 1984 in which she recounted the tale of her brother's excitement over deer tracks and her own confusion as a child as to their significance. Years later, as a young woman, her father took her on her first deer hunt where she realised she had “a small fraction of what my father knew, of what my brothers knew about deer. My brothers had been nurtured on such tales, and for the first time I saw the context they had been told in. My education was limited because I had missed years, layers of stories” (Tempest Williams 1984, 28). A similar story of “missed years, layers of stories” emerged as participants spoke, recalling how, as children, they were only included as participants external to the primary acts of rural livelihood. Although they were somewhat welcome in their ignorance to ask questions, play, touch,

and be passively taught, they were humoured in response to any genuine interest they had. To borrow from Roy Dilley (1999), these women were legitimate peripheral participants, where socially sanctioned situated learning took place on the margin of the activities, often with the eventual goal of full participation.

In the hindsight brought by years, or from the clarity of discussion with like-minded women, many participants reflected that their childhood experiences with male-dominated outdoor activities were generally hands-off – as in the case of being shown how to tie knots, how to tie lures, how to gut fish but being “helped” out of the actual experience of embodied enskillment by male hands and subsequently missing an opportunity to internalise skill and knowledge. For instance, the following participant grew up in a rural home in eastern Canada where hunting and fishing were common. As a girl she was excluded from fishing “cause girls weren't allowed” but found her own workaround:

My Dad just didn't want to take the girls . . . we would just do other things and then if I wanted to fish (my brother) was always fishing down by the river and I'd just go join him, take a fishing rod which I didn't know what I was doing so it was never parent taught. It was more sibling figured out. (BOW participant C16)

Another woman explained:

I grew up on a farm so there was animals and then they were in the freezer but there was no, and I knew those animals were the ones we were eating but a little girl you know like daddy's three little girls, “I don't want you to be involved in the shooting or the gutting” . . . we were removed from the bloody side of things and I don't, I don't think it was ever us wanting to be removed from it. I think it was you know parental shielding for you know, the gory side of life. Which is I think why my Dad's response (to BOW) was “what, you want to actually do that?” [laughter] Yes, I've been wanting to do this since I was a kid. (BOW participant A8)

Another participant, herself an avid hunter, recounted how as a child she was allowed to go on hunting trips with her family, but it was as an adult and with female mentors that she became a hunter herself. Asked if her family taught her to hunt, this was her response:

I just kind of went with them (on family hunting trips). Yeah I was young at the time and, and it was . . . my mom remarried and it was my stepdad's whole family that had the farm and, and what not and I went out a lot, I went hunting with them but I

never was really shown you know, here you go. (BOW participant A14)

These discussions initially came about while participants were skinning animals in a trapping course, hands bloody while butchering a still slightly warm goat, or climbing down from a tree stand with shaking legs. They were not exclusively the stories of older participants, and while this experience was not shared by all women, most could sympathise.

In each case where this particular story of exclusion was told, the social space of learning was eventually narrowed, usually with age and gender: accompanying the hunting (male) adult and asking questions became less socially acceptable. Their incomplete position as child apprentices limited serious future engagement and their status as legitimate peripheral participants eventually came to a close. The social space of their learning was consequently limited, and such activity became uncomfortable and a space of self-censure rather than self-expression. The women's curiosity (as children and as adults) was often still present but their opportunities were limited. The consequence was that these women enjoyed the outdoors but felt that they were unwelcome, had little to contribute or were third wheels when the opportunity did arise.

For the women who stated feeling this exclusion as adolescents, there was a desire to remedy the situation now as adults. Women's statements that they had "always wanted to learn this" or had "seen it done many times but never tried" are akin to "I should know this but I don't." These types of statements revealed a disconnect between how participants saw themselves and how they felt they should be. As one participant reflected,

For me I guess it was like, I said I grew up in (X) and you know people kind of just assume like if you grow up in (X) you know how to do all these like outdoorsy things and like I grew up, I went camping with my family and we went on river trips and stuff like that but my Dad kind of did everything for us so I didn't really learn a lot of those skills, like those outdoor skills and it's kind of intimidating like a lot of these skills just to kind of go out and do it on your own. (BOW participant B7)

One participant summed up her reflections on gender and hunting as follows:

Well I think it's the whole woman syndrome . . . the context of women taking care of the family and, not crossing, there's a line that crosses over. And maybe just because of cultural growing up and times that it just wasn't accepted . . . But now there's an opening

that, the boundary is lessened. It's down and now there's a possibility and, and I think men then realise wow, they missed out maybe on some of the women's childhood growing up. How they could have showed the girls that because all of a sudden they didn't even realise that the girls were interested. (BOW participant C16)

Such ponderings of gender, childhood, and what being skilled meant to participants were present throughout all three programs, though most richly present during the learning process itself.

As Joyce (2006) points out, the Western tradition has a long history of privileging the mind over the body as the site of identity, where the body is separate from (a usually male) subjectivity. Ingold's (2002) assertion that "showing" is central to perceptual engagement at first seems undermined by participants' disapproval at being shown but denied experience. Yet Ingold (2002, 21) also states that "To show something to somebody is to cause it to be seen or otherwise experienced – whether by touch, taste, smell or hearing – by that other person", thus positioning embodied engagement over (or at least alongside) the privilege afforded by sight alone. In urging academics to embrace touch within their methodologies, Puig de la Bellacasa (2009, 298), "Is knowledge-as-touch less susceptible to be masked behind a 'nowhere'? We can see without being seen, but can we touch without being touched?". In this case, we can understand "seeing without being seen" to also mean being physically present without being seen as a legitimate and full participant. In this work and in the subject of women and hunting more generally, I think it very important to privilege the role of engaged physical action in forming and contemplating identity, together with the recognition that it is the gendered nature of the physical body that reduced the possibilities for embodied learning in the first place.

In light of the cases shared above, the persistence of some participants in seeking to have hands-on experience, in interrupting instructors and insisting on specific detail over generalities, or in valuing the women-only environment takes on new significance. Likewise, the denial of their own innate interest in favour of the consequence of purely social influences is more clearly erroneous.

### *Food Insecurity and Health*

Women also often cited concerns about food safety, food origins, and the potential impact of a break in the food supply of their regions. These underlying anxieties about safe and reliable food availability were spoken of during interviews and social periods in all three programs,



formulated either in clearly articulated statements or in quick what-if scenarios. For example, the comments below are from a BOW past participant, current instructor, and avid hunter. When she was asked about her motivations to hunt and her perception of participant motivations, this was her response:

I think people are realising by the number of recalls and the number of countries that don't have rules and regulations surrounding food and safe handling practices and, not just vegetables, other commodities as well, it's not just meat. So you'll find that you can die from your spinach even though it's tripled wash, it can still get you killed, so it's not just any single thing, so I have a garden. I'm learning more and more about what you can eat in the woods and fresh pine needle tea and lots of different things you can get . . . It would be in my best interests to know all that available information if I'm thinking at any point in time there could be an issue with grocery stores or with a, a complete blackout or sunspot taking out all the power and electricity and all that kind of stuff so it's not necessarily war right, it could be any global event could really put a lot of people at survival risk. (BOW Participant A13)

These general sentiments were shared by many participants and were also often tied to concerns of environmental or political change.

In terms of food safety and health, other participants echoed the same anxieties that have supported green-oriented shifts in consumer habits: pesticide use, the perceived dangers of genetically modified foods, unknown ingredients, the prevalence of food recalls, and ethical sourcing. Alternatively, then, the women referred to wild meat and plants as healthy, organic, and environmentally friendly. One women stated,

I have some basic knowledge because of being allowed to watch, not participate necessarily but we watched my [laughter] grandfather. I think that's important but also like the idea of knowing that your, your food is coming from a non-factory, non-medicated source makes me a little bit happier so yeah . . . I used to think of hunting as blood sports whereas now I see it's a way of supplying your family with healthy meat choices. I do not agree at all with trophy hunting. I think that's horrible but if you're hunting for the table, I think that's, that's an amazing thing. (BOW Participant A12)

In a separate program, another woman stated,

I like eating like wild game, the natural-like organic meats. I mean for the most part you know that they're, well you do know that there's no antibiotics

getting injected into them. I mean if you watch and see where they eat you know they're not eating garbage and stuff. They're eating grains and leaves and that appeals to me. I've hunted with my Dad before. I've just, I've never shot an animal before and yeah, I'd like to learn how to do it. (BOW participant C16)

The "safe" nature of wild meat highlighted in the quotation above highlights an underlying anxiety about the safety of food bought in-store.

There also was a sense of the vulnerability of the food supply chain, particularly among rural residents who had faced road closures in the recent past that restricted supply deliveries. This sense of vulnerability was often articulated through gendered language in which participants explained how they were uncomfortable as mothers (as they felt the weight of responsibility to provide when the health of food was in question) and as women (being dependent upon systems outside of their own control). More than one participant expressed unease at having to rely on others, often male family members, to provide food for them in imagined times of scarcity. One woman said,

Here a lot of the hunting, well the hunting we do, is, we eat it. You, you want it because it's good meat and it feeds our family . . . We want good food for the kids so. Yeah, I mean you don't, we don't know, we don't know our food source. Here it could, you know we had the one day where the highway closed and the groceries were empty in two days. It's like well we really should know how to get some of our own food. (BOW participant B08)

In another example on a separate program,

You know I, I don't know about anybody else but I'm a very independent person and would hate to be reliant, like I rely on my husband in many ways, but I would hate to *have* to be reliant on anything and yeah the more I arm myself with knowledge, you know the more I learn myself, the less I have to be reliant on somebody else. (BOW participant A12)

While hunting as a source for food seems an obvious connection to make, this motivation can be veiled by contemporary sport hunting as both practice and narrative. Furthermore, food is not often addressed in the literature as a serious motivator for hunters who have other easily accessible options, and it is even less addressed with women hunters. However, the contemporary anxieties expressed through women's stories suggest that perceived or imagined food insecurity is a significant factor in their motivations to hunt.

## *Environmental and Social Anxiety*

Also present in women's concerns with food safety and availability was anxiety relating to potential social or environmental change. In my first camp, the woman across from my bunk was actively building her outdoor skillset. She referenced learning from her neighbour who raised geese, taking a master's gardener course, and having completed her hunter's education requirements. She also joked about taking BOW to prepare for the coming zombie apocalypse, adding, "If I need to, I want to know how [to survive]." That night I ate dinner in the common dining hall and sat with a woman in her late 50s who worked in the city but planned to retire in two years. She and her husband planned to move north and "live off the land." Later that night I met two women in their mid-30s, both mothers of small children, who also referenced a coming zombie apocalypse when I told them I was researching participant motivations.

In each program I encountered a small group of women who were either planning or had undertaken action in direct reference to imagined crisis-based scenarios. These scenarios were sometimes quick and tongue-in-cheek references (like those to the zombie apocalypse) and, at other times, thoughtful discussions of the precariousness of our current environment or social structures. In two of the three programs a small number of women expressed the direct intent or had already partially taken action to shift to off-the-grid or independent living. Others expressed a similar if more limited desire for just-in-case knowledge relating to the ability not only to harvest food but also to survive without the aid of modern conveniences and without being overly dependent on others. One urban participant stated her concerns as follows:

I think people are starting to turn from, okay we're in the city and I mean we, we watch all the apocalypse movies and whatnot and it's like well "what if" and then we have zero skills, we have no power. Okay, I think in a, a little part of that is thinking well "what if" right, like it's nice to have these skills. (BOW participant C19)

The past participant and instructor mentioned earlier had similar general concerns:

Just having an emergency preparedness kit is not enough in this day and age. I would think that in this day and age if something happens, it's going to be something big as opposed to the power is off and it would do, serve everybody better that more people could help each other out and in doing so have some tools, practical tools as in skills to, to make that happen. (BOW participant A13)

Regardless of individual interest, this underlying anxiety was a common topic throughout general discussions.

My bunkmate later stated during an interview that she and her husband were planning to move to a smaller and more self-sufficient farm. They are both actively working toward this goal by building specific skill sets:

And that's you know, jokingly as the zombie apocalypse, well you couldn't survive it, you know? But joking aside, we actually do want to have those skills and three-quarters of them we would need on a daily basis on a farm so especially if we're far enough removed that we're off grid so we're not connected to the services that people would rely on if they couldn't do something themselves or close enough to someone that you could take it to like take it to a butcher shop. Well we might be far enough out that we can't do that or it's not feasible or if we're doing such small volume, it's not going to be worth it, so what can we do all on our own to not have to have some additional source of income aside from the farm itself. (BOW participant A8)

When asked what people thought about her taking the program, this rural participant replied that BOW was part of a wider interest in survival skills:

Sometimes people tease me about it because [laughter], because they'd say well why do you need to have all those skills, like sure you like to camp, but isn't that a little bit extreme? Isn't that kind of edging towards survivalism and you know bunker mentality? And yet those same people that will tease me . . . I have a few friends that tease me about that, they're the same ones who will say holy cow you know our power went down, or what happened in the eastern seaboard, you know? Just disaster. People had no coping skills or no backup ideas and so the notion of being self-sufficient, having some ability to provide or to know where to get some food or how to make water out of the, you know, the morning dew kind of thing. I often hear people say well if the world goes to hell, I'm going to (the participant's) place and (laughter) she'll have firewood chopped up. (BOW participant B10)

It may be easy to dismiss such anxieties and the subsequent action of BOW training as more imaginary play than true action, but such a view misses an opportunity to consider seriously how environmental uncertainty affects everyday choices, as well as how this general sense of unease can be entwined in ponderings of gender, childhood and the self.

While it would be an overstatement to suggest that BOW is a gathering space for would-be survivalists, there are parallels between participants and Mitchell's

(2002, 9) view that “in most instances survivalism begins with the perception of relative choice, surplus, safety, and comfort”. Furthermore, there is often a desire to imaginatively reform the totality of social life by reinterpreting cultural assumptions and practices. Indeed, some of the case study women were actively working on, or considering the idea of, repositioning themselves and their abilities within a new form of daily living. They were tentatively engaging in a narrative that “tailors widespread rancor and disorder to fit schemes for maximizing personal competence, actualization, and relevance” (Mitchell 2009, 10). Deeper considerations of a supposed “new frontier” that may emerge from social or environmental collapse were not a focus for these women, however, as is the case with the survivalist movement. Instead their narratives favoured the notion of being competent, independent, and capable individuals.

## Conclusions

Mark Harris (2007) has argued that the process of practical knowledge needs unraveling and historicising. This assertion emphasises knowledge as an ongoing process rather than as a subject and asks that the context within which knowledge is gained and practiced be taken seriously. In the case of BOW, when contemplating the choices of participants, unraveling and historicising practical knowledge includes considering the gendered trajectory of skill acquisition, the contemporary anxieties of women, and the process of learning in which these things are articulated. Academic literature on women and hunting or BOW more generally often overlooks the role of bodily engagement in sense-making and fails to consider the viewpoints of women themselves seriously. In most of these texts, women’s choices and actions are represented through reductive storylines that restrain individual agency to singular narratives and reproduce stale tropes and binaries. These types of narratives suggest that women primarily hunt because of propaganda, to support husbands, or after succumbing to violent Western tendencies or that they participate in BOW because of predetermined program goals. What participants reveal through the process of learning and being engaged in their surroundings is that while they openly contemplated these factors, none entirely motivated their choices.

It is through the extension of their physical capacities that participants contemplated their own abilities, identities, backgrounds and anxieties. These reflections were shared with other participants in an ongoing dialogue throughout the program – in other words, through entangled relationships between humans, non-humans and natural, social and virtual environments (Ingold 2008). The resulting self-assessment showed

both structural and processual tendencies whereby the dynamic individual “responds to situational stimuli, incorporates new elements, rearranges, adjusts, and stabilizes temporarily before encountering new stimuli and undergoing further revisions.” (Demo 1992, 322). Somers and Gibson (1993) argue that such dialogues are part of making the self, that “it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities” (58–59). The uncommon rhythms and activities afforded by BOW facilitated participant self-reflection, and embodiment was a key feature of this process.

It is detrimental to assume that participants have clearly defined and delineated motivations and to ignore the ways in which their own actions and dialogues reimagine or disassemble the dualisms inherent in single-gender-dominated activities. The joint discussion of “babies and bullets” referred to earlier not only should be a clue as to the complexity of women’s place as both mothers and potential hunters, but also the ease of its expression within the context of BOW should remind us that there are few places where full expression of the self is possible when otherwise bound by social constraints. It is also important to note the wider context of BOW participants and programs when considering these constraints. In terms of cultural reproduction, an area that needs further exploration in BOW and similar outdoor experiential programs is lack of diversity. That BOW offers a space of expression and learning is laudable; who is excluded from these courses is worth further investigation. This is true both for participants themselves and for the type of human-environment relationship that is being shaped.

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