

Femininity in the Wilderness: Reading Gender in Women's Guides to Backpacking

CHERYLL GLOTFELTY

University of Nevada, Reno

The gods created the woman for the indoor functions, the man for all others. The gods put woman inside because she has less endurance for cold, heat and war. For woman, it is honest to remain indoors and dishonest to gad about.

Xenophon, 500 B.C.¹

THE WILDERNESS ACT, PASSED IN 1964, established a national wilderness preservation system, designed to "secure for the American people . . . the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness." The Act defined wilderness as a place "where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." This landmark legislation recognized that since World War II recreational use of American wilderness had increased steadily, a trend that the Wilderness Act itself further accelerated. One study estimates that in 1947 there were under 3 million days of wilderness use spent by backpackers, while by 1975 the figure had risen to 42 million backpacker days (Hart 14). Wilderness hiking grew five times faster than the population and three times faster than car camping.

Publishers and manufacturers of outdoor equipment soon capitalized on this "backpack to nature" trend. In 1968, Colin Fletcher's *The Complete Walker: The Joys and Techniques of Hiking and Backpacking* brought its author "a splurge of unexpected affluence" and sold well enough to warrant a second edition in 1974, *The New Complete Walker* (Fletcher 1974, xiii). In 1969, R. C. Rethmel's *Backpacking* was already in its sixth edition. *Back-*

packer magazine began publication in 1974, and by 1977 so many people were charging up the trails, trammeling nature, that the Sierra Club published John Hart's *Walking Softly in the Wilderness* on minimum impact camping. By 1978, the wilderness shopper could choose from more than a dozen different how-to-backpack books, all published since 1967.²

Coincident with the wilderness movement, the modern women's movement surged into prominence in the mid-sixties with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), a bestseller that spawned a second edition ten years later and was followed by a host of other feminist books and by the debut of *Ms.* magazine in 1972. The National Organization for Women (NOW), founded in 1966, fought to gain equal opportunity for women in education, the workplace, and politics. Tennis star Billy Jean King's famous defeat of Bobby Riggs in 1973, along with her founding of *Womens-Sports* magazine in 1974, paved the way for women to enter the world of sports and fitness. The women's movement heightened public awareness of gender-inflected language, so that in time the Wilderness Act itself, with its "untrammelled by man" and its "man himself is but a visitor," would seem decidedly patriarchal.

The women's movement and the wilderness movement intersected in a second wave of handbooks, namely, backpacking manuals written by and for women. At least half a dozen guides appeared between 1976 and 1983, with titles such as *Woman in the Woods*, *Wild, Wild Woman*, and *The Backpacking Woman*.³ This wave of women's backpacking guides is noteworthy, for although the earlier wave of guides are almost all written by men, the books themselves never say "For Men" on the cover. Indeed, their titles are uniformly gender-neutral, with typical titles including *America's Backpacking Book*, *Introduction to Backpacking*, and *Backpacking One Step at a Time*. The authors appear to intend their guides to be unisex, presenting basic information about outdoor equipment and skills that applies equally well to either sex.

With so many unisex guides to backpacking already available, how do the authors of the women's guides justify the need for yet more books? Are the earlier books deficient? If so, what information do the women's guides promise to provide that the earlier guides do not? There were no "For Men" guides to backpacking; why, then, did there need to be "For Women" guides?

One reason that women's backpacking guides found a market is that the unisex guides exhibit a strong male bias. The masculine pronoun is routinely used, as in this generic sentence: "In his chosen environment, the backpacker is a free spirit, . . . going where and when he will" (Bridge 4).

Colin Fletcher's popular *The Complete Walker* is studded with sexist jokes and includes the cavalier footnote, "Everything I have to say in this book about men applies equally to women. Well, almost everything. And almost equally" (Fletcher 17). One guide, *The Joy of Backpacking: People's Guide to the Wilderness* by Dennis Look (1976), scolds its predecessors for being chauvinistic, and scrupulously employs inclusive pronouns throughout. The implication is that this progressive book achieves genuine sexual equality. In Look's chapter on clothing, he writes,

There is no need to discuss what one writer calls "distaff wardrobe." Everything I've said about clothing, . . . applies to both sexes. . . . Besides, I don't think women need men telling them what special items (halter tops, and the like) they need to go backpacking. (61)

The truth is that many women did want to be told what "special items" they should bring. Look's insistence on absolute equality is willfully blind to sexual difference and therefore neglects to provide information that women might need to know.

The book covers, dust jackets, and prefaces of women's backpacking guides proclaim that these new gender-conscious books fill a niche. Grits Gresham observes in a somewhat patronizing preface to Sheila Link's *Women's Guide to Outdoor Sports* that "[w]omen . . . needed a guidebook written for them. This is it, written—appropriately enough—by one of them, a woman" (v). In another guide, author Maggie Nichols intends *Wild, Wild Woman* "to keep women from feeling as I did when I began—alone and somehow wrong for preferring wilderness to dress shops and beauty salons" (xvi). The back cover of Kathleen Farmer's *Women in the Woods* reads,

Just for Women! . . . Today's women are beginning to seek enjoyment in the outdoors for themselves rather than just as a companion. This is the first attempt—by one of the "new" outdoorswomen—to take the "dirt" out of enjoying this leisure freedom and to deal straightforwardly with those special things women want to know.

And just what are those "special things?" Farmer promises that her book tells "[h]ow to stay clean and comfortable. How to feel feminine away from civilized conveniences. How to gain confidence. How to venture into the woods alone, yet secure" (11). Jackie Maughan and Ann Puddicombe, on the back cover of *Hiking the Backcountry: A Do-It-Yourself Guide for the Adventurous Woman*, advertise,

- Know who will make the best companions on the trail
- Build up strength without looking "masculine"
- Clothing alterations that make life easier

—Deal with hygiene and medical problems in the wilderness: menses, pregnancy, contraception and “the pill”

In both the unisex and women's handbooks the reader will find chapters on equipment, clothing, food, outdoor skills, safety, types of trips, wilderness impact, and additional resources. In presenting this basic information, the women's guides differ in emphasis and tone from the unisex guides. In most chapters, the women's guides downplay or simplify the technical and technological aspects of backpacking while giving relatively more attention to psychology. The tone of most unisex guides is straightforward and dry as befits logical exposition of technical information.⁴ Women's guides, however, adopt a more intimate voice, a big-sister-to-little-sister tone, with frequent pep talks and personal disclosures. In addition to their informational component, all books include a motivational element. In their attempt to answer the obvious question, “why backpack?,” the authors describe the rewards of wilderness hiking and speculate on what prevents more people from trying this activity. Perhaps the most significant difference between the two sets of books is that all the women's guides contain a lengthy discussion of femininity. While unisex guides focus on “*how to*” skills, women's guides teach readers “*who to*” be.

Analyzing the differences between unisex and women's guides helps to elucidate the gender norms prior to and during the women's movement of the 1960s and 70s. Although the women's guides argue that women ought to have equal access to wilderness, none of them advocates dispensing with the notion of sexual difference. Some sections of the books appeal to biology as the basis of sexual difference, while others find social conditioning to be paramount. Even as they seek to redefine femininity so as to include physical strength and initiative as feminine properties, they also reinforce traditional gender stereotypes by providing trailwise beauty tips and by arguing that women backpack differently than men do. In short, the guides are a good place to witness femininity in flux and to observe the ambivalence about gender that was precipitated by the convergence of the women's and wilderness movements.

EQUIPMENT

One of the ironies of backpacking is that it is postwar *technology* that made getting back to nature so easy. Technology's products include durable nylon for packsacks, aluminum alloys for packframes, lightweight stoves, mummy bags, polypropylene, synchilla, and goretex fabrics, vibram boot soles, and freeze-dried foods. To the uninitiated, the wide assortment of

outdoor paraphernalia can be bewildering. Thus, unisex backpacking guides devote the majority of their pages to equipment, describing the different kinds of tents, stoves, packs, and sleeping bags, and evaluating the pros and cons of each. The reader will find helpful charts of tabulated data, giving dimensions, weights, insulation values, cost, calories, and efficiency of the various categories of supplies. Most guides also include a checklist of essential and extra items. Neither tampons nor sanitary napkins appear on the unisex checklists.

Women's guides present much the same information about equipment, but they generally are not as comprehensive or as quantified as the unisex guides. Perhaps the authors of women's guides are not as materialistic as their male counterparts, or perhaps they judge other kinds of information to be more important. As any backpacker knows, comparison of gear can become a competitive sport on the trail; maybe women do not wish to promote backcountry one-upmanship. Some of the women's guides complain that "the equipment world has been dominated by men" (Thomas 18) and that consequently women may have a difficult time finding backpacks that fit. Maughan and Puddicombe advise that women have less upper body strength than men, so women should choose a pack with a comfortable waist strap that will allow their hips to help carry the weight. They warn,

Do not let your boyfriend, husband, trail boss, or supervisor stick you with an "army" style pack (a pack without a frame and straps without padding) because they don't want to buy you a good pack until they are sure you will like backpacking. Many men complain that women don't like backpacking. If they had to hike with makeshift equipment, they wouldn't be sold on backpacking either. (36)

Women's guides are designed to help women take the initiative in their own provisioning so that they won't be dependent upon men.

In their discussions of clothing, all books emphasize that outdoor wear should be practical. Unisex guides consider such things as warmth, rain and wind protection, comfort, weight, durability, versatility, mobility, and fit. Women's guides acknowledge these concerns as well, but are more aware of appearance. Maggie Nichols exhibits perhaps the most acute fashion consciousness of any of the guides. She insists that "there's hardly a man or woman alive who looks attractive in Bermuda shorts, Jamaicas, or pedal pushers. Anyone who truly wants to be a knockout in the woods won't wear these garments" (175). Other writers note, on the one hand, how difficult it is for a woman to feel attractive in baggy men's clothes, and, on the other, how disturbing it is that manufacturers of women's outdoor clothing promote fashion over function; Lynn Thomas, for example, reports that flowered longjohns have less wool content than longjohns made

for men (45). In one instance, manufacturers of women's clothing *have* given special consideration to function. QP-Pants for women feature a Velcro crotch so that women can answer nature's call without pulling down their pants. Maggie Nichols heralds QP-pants as "the great breakthrough," claiming that these pants represent "something of a revolution for women in the wilds" (20).

Every backpacking guide for women makes a big to-do about the creative uses to which bandanas and scarves can be put. Maggie Nichols points out that "TV's Rhoda has demonstrated to the world that dozens of cute things can be done with simple squares of cloth . . . The hair may be a sweaty, dusty, icky mess, but if it's hidden beneath a chic exterior, who cares?" (174). And Lynn Thomas assures her readers that

It is possible to remain stylish and attractive while backpacking. Pookie Godvin, for example, who heads the fashion parade at National Outdoor Leadership School, does so with color, jewelry and scarves. To a lavender turtleneck she adds a contrasting patterned peasant scarf in red. The dazzling accent of turquoise earrings makes one forget her trail-weary pants and three-pound clodhoppers. (58)

Shoes are arguably the most important item of clothing for a backpacker to consider. Here, women's guides recommend tough, water-resistant boots that support the ankles and have good tread. Susan Brownmiller, in her well-known critique of femininity, entitled *Femininity*, asserts that in Western culture, "sensible shoes aren't sexy" (187). Sensible shoes, she writes, "announce an unfeminine sensibility, a value system that places physical comfort above the critical mission of creating a sex difference where one does not exist in nature" (186). Women's guides are aware that men find women in *impractical* shoes alluring, but in this arena, they do not yield to taste, except to recommend scarves and jewelry above to deflect attention away from the clodhoppers below and to say that once in camp a woman can slip on a pair of sandals to "bring out the woman in you" (Farmer 83).

SKILLS, DANGERS, AND SPECIAL TRIPS

Discussions of food and of minimum impact camping do not differ substantially between unisex and women's guides. There are, however, three remaining areas that bear mentioning: outdoor skills, safety, and types of trips. Chapters on outdoor skills teach the reader techniques of map reading, route finding, stream crossing, pacing, fire building, tent pitching, camp cooking, personal hygiene, and other useful skills such as fishing and equipment repair. Women's guides cover the same skills as unisex

guides do, but the tone is often more encouraging—holding the reader's hand, as it were—patiently coaching her that she *can* do it. Often, the assumption seems to be that women have a mental block against outdoor skills. Maughan and Puddicombe remark that “[n]avigating, specifically reading maps, is not something which comes easily to most women. Many do not want to be bothered with the mass of lines and routes. However, its mastery is the only way to be independent in the wilderness” (103). Kathleen Farmer persuades women that pitching a tent is “much like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. First, read the directions. Then, by following each step, abracadabra, a tent stands taught and cozy before you. . . . You—pitching a tent. Can you imagine?” (108, 111).

In chapters on safety, backpacking guides cover dangers to health, such as hypothermia, heat exhaustion, and altitude sickness; weather and terrain dangers, such as lightning storms, snow storms, flooding rivers, and avalanches; and biological dangers, such as Giardia, poison oak, rattlesnakes, and bears. The general tone of the unisex guides in these matters is sober, warning that hikers should learn to recognize symptoms and should always be prepared for the worst. The underlying message seems to be, “Don’t be stupid! If you’re not careful, you could die out there.” This stern delivery seems to be directed at an overconfident reader whose cocksure attitude could get him into trouble. Women’s guides review the same list of dangers, but the emphasis is on helping women overcome their fears. Rather than soberly warning that these dangers are serious, the women’s guides reassure the reader that danger can be minimized with prior knowledge, planning, and appropriate action. In their discussion of bears, for example, Maughan and Puddicombe argue that “[s]tatistically, the chance of being mauled is about .00007 percent, or one attack per 1.5 million visitors” (179). Women’s guides convey a message that seems to promise, “Don’t worry. You’re actually safer in the wilderness than in the city.”

There is one danger never mentioned in the unisex guides, but given attention in most women’s guides, and that danger is men. A macho companion may try to pressure a woman to take foolhardy risks, such as crossing a steep snow slope without an ice axe. Stubborn refusal is in order. If the macho man persists, a woman may even have to resort to sneaky ploys, such as hiding his bootlaces, in order to get him to back down. The male stranger is another trail danger. One woman hiker quoted in Thomas’s *The Backpacking Woman* warns that “‘It’s men . . . who steal from other campers. It’s men who rape. It’s men who are the aggressors. It’s men who drive dune buggies over the delicate desert. It’s that attitude in juxta-

position with wilderness that seems so frightful” (101–02). As if to make light of the male threat, Maughan and Puddicombe in a chapter entitled “Little Red Riding Hood” put a funny spin on their sensible advice:

Camp off the trail and not near developed sites, where it would be obvious that you are alone. Pretend not to be alone. Indicate that your husband or boyfriend is nearby with a group of defensive linemen from the Los Angeles Rams. Inquire loudly if the size thirteen hiking boots you gave him are holding up on the trail. Complain to overly inquisitive strangers that your husband is so violent that you must take frequent trips into the wilderness to calm him down. (188–89)

The authors conclude that, in all seriousness, “There are risks, but in terms of crime, they are much less than in the city. The less women view themselves and behave as if they are prey, the less uninformed men will continue to approach them as such” (190).

Backpacking guides usually include discussion of different types of trips, be they short trips, long trips, desert trips, winter trips, large group trips, or solo trips. The unisex guides usually seem to assume that the standard trip will be a solo trip or a two- or three-person trip of male buddies. Most unisex guides include a chapter on family backpacking, providing tips on hiking with children. Women’s guides do not seem to have a standard trip in mind; however, all of them devote substantial attention to the solo trip, strongly advocating its rewards in terms of promoting independence and self-discovery. Only a small percentage of women’s guides say anything whatsoever about the family trip. More often, their advice is on how to leave one’s family behind so as to strike off into the wilderness unencumbered.

Some women’s guides recommend trying an all-women’s trip. Besides cultivating independence and leadership, backpacking without men can allow women to apprehend wilderness in their own way. Lynn Thomas believes that

[i]n subtle and significant ways women approach wilderness differently than men. On our own we usually walk slower and see more. When we are open to mystical thought we find extended meaning in natural objects. Redwood trees and old oaks, for some women, have souls. Such spiritual musing is seldom expressed or explored in the presence of men. (160)

On all-women’s trips, according to women’s guidebooks, there is less competition, less pressure to prove oneself or to perform some monumental feat, more time to smell the flowers and nap in the sun, and more freedom to explore other states of awareness.

REWARDS

Considered unromantically, backpacking is a peculiar thing to do. Why would anyone want to spend their precious free time shopping for and packing a week-end's supplies, driving for hours to a trailhead in order to carry a heavy load up a hill, get foot-sore, sun-burned, dirt-encrusted, smelly, and mosquito-bitten, only to turn around and tote the load back out again, drive back home, and deal with a packful of dirty gear that must be aired out, cleaned, and put away? One challenging task of the guide writer is to convince the reader that backpacking is a desirable undertaking, for their guides would not sell if consumers did not intend to backpack. Unisex and women's guides both perform this exercise in motivational rhetoric, but the rewards they paint are different, signifying that in the second half of the twentieth century, backpacking in America is a symbolic activity whose meaning depends upon gender.

As noted earlier, most unisex guides are male-authored with an implied male audience. These guides recommend backpacking for the chance it affords to see beautiful scenery, to get in touch with nature, and to be free from the demands of city life. Dennis Look writes that many hikers "are middle-agers who are either taking a hiatus from the rat-race or have dropped out of their fluorescent-lit offices to rediscover themselves" (159). Raymond Bridge claims that "it's good for your ego to get the feeling that you can take care of yourself with minimal help from civilization, computers, *nursemaids*, politicians, or policemen" (6; emphasis mine). It is difficult to believe that either Bridge or his readers have nursemaids, and the implication of that word choice seems to be escape from the coddling women in men's lives. Indeed, the overarching theme of the unisex guides is escape.

Escape is likewise a recurring theme in the women's guides, but the stress of the rat-race is mentioned less than the boredom of suburban life. It is as if Betty Friedan is the subtext of these guides, especially her declaration in *The Feminine Mystique* that "[w]e can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my home'" (32). As Kathleen Farmer writes, "to a family-oriented woman, home, children, and husband are extensions of herself. Leave them behind and go out into the outdoors. Find your true self" (171). Maggie Nichols concurs, saying,

An army of overweight dyspeptics is rising out of its easy chairs, looking for something more actively involving than the remote-control switch for the TV. Women, especially, are

seeking new interests that they can enjoy . . . and increasingly, they are finding these pleasures outdoors. (xii)

As a rule, women's guides focus less on the "escape from" element of backpacking than on its "journey to" potential. Often, going to the wilderness is cast in terms of women's empowerment. Lynn Thomas describes the backpack as "a ticket to independence and freedom" (xvi), a means of learning "self-confidence and unity" (102) and of gaining "a self-reliance which accompanies her not only when traveling with backpack—but wherever she goes" (116). She interviews a leader of women's backpack trips who observes of her students,

Women who continually say "I can't" find in the wilderness that in fact they can. . . . It's a potent and wonderful feeling. It may have been years since they felt good about themselves. It's like the rudimentary beginning of consciousness raising. (237–38)

With the newfound confidence gained in the wilderness, Thomas observes that homemakers have mustered the courage to "apply for a job, or to reactivate a hobby" and that, in some cases, "there have been total life transformations" (237). Such passages make it clear that the writers of women's guides regard backpacking as a powerful tool in the quest for women's liberation.

Backpacking guides not only paint an enticing picture of rewards, but they also anticipate the major obstacles to backpacking, so that they can help readers overcome their misgivings. The unisex guides posit a fear of the unknown and an ignorance of technical knowledge as the principal hurdles. Accordingly, the guides proceed to demystify wilderness travel by making known what was unknown, and they provide the information on equipment and technique that a beginner would need to get started. The assumption seems to be that knowledge is what the reader lacks, and that hesitations can be cured by information.

The women's guides posit a long list of disabling phobias, including fear of dirt, fear of bugs, fear of discomfort, fear of being ridiculed for not knowing what to do, and fear of going to the bathroom outdoors. The authors address each of these fears. One guide draws a distinction between (bad) dirt and (good) soil, and argues that dirt is found in the city and in houses, but that in the wilderness one finds only good soil. Information is given on insect repellents, and fears of discomfort are met by descriptions of comfortable clothes and foam pads for sleeping, as well as by telling the reader that physical discomfort can awaken a woman to a wonderful new awareness of her body. Fears of ridicule are soothed by suggesting that the novice take some short, practice trips on her own. Many of the authors

recount their own clumsy first attempts, confessing all their mistakes and proving that with practice anyone can become a proficient outdoorswoman. Worries about going to the bathroom are generally defused with humor, admitting that there can be awkward situations—a Boy Scout Troop discovering one crouched behind a bush, for example—but making light of such problems and even hinting that being exposed in nature affords a special kind of thrill.⁵

Women's guidebooks concur that the greatest obstacle preventing a woman from backpacking is fear of the loss of her identity as a woman. Lynn Thomas explains, "Planted deep in most women's psyches is the insidious question, by going outdoors will I lose my femininity, will I become like a man?" (105). Maggie Nichols agrees: "Mention 'outdoor woman' and many people—women included—will conjure up visions of large unisex females with chapped lips and heavy shoes who talk in hearty voices" (ix). Jackie Maughan and Kathryn Collins observe that "there is . . . ambivalence among women as to how capable they can become and still be attractive to men" (53). One cannot dismiss such deep-seated fears as the loss of sexual identity with a snippet of advice or a pat on the back. The strategies adopted by guidebooks to grapple with the femininity question are multipronged and waver between being conservative and revolutionary. It might even be argued that these books are more about femininity than about backpacking.

FEMININITY

The fact that women's guides to backpacking devote so much attention to femininity suggests that in the 1970s and early 80s, backpacking represented a fundamental threat to prevailing notions of womanhood. These guides adopt three different strategies for handling the subject of femininity in the wilderness. These approaches range from the conservative to the revolutionary and might be labeled "The Three R's": Retain, Respite, Redefine. Taken together, these three strategies send mixed messages about femininity. Most of the guides offer tips or whole chapters on "Retaining Femininity," as one such chapter is entitled (see Farmer). Other sections of the guides, however, profess that part of the charm of backpacking derives from the rare respite from the normal demands of femininity. The most revolutionary rhetorical move is to redefine what femininity means. This approach rejects certain feminine codes, while simultaneously formulating a new conception of femininity by envisioning an ideal New Woman who is as much at home in the wilderness as she is in the suburbs.

In "The Dangers of Femininity" Lucy Gilbert and Paula Webster argue that for women, "[a]cting unfeminine, or feeling out of gender, produces anxiety. . . . This anxiety has to do with the fear of gender loss—the fear of being beyond the boundaries of femininity, without a solid identity" (49). Since the American wilderness has historically been construed as a man's world, a woman entering into that domain may feel that she is trespassing beyond the boundaries of her gender. Her sense of disorientation in this foreign land is exacerbated because she must wear men's clothes or unisex styles in order to function there. To soothe women's expected anxieties about gender loss, women's backpacking guides provide numerous tips on how to retain femininity in the wilderness. Most of these tips concern personal appearance, but a few of them also pertain to feminine behavior.

Kathleen Farmer introduces her section on beauty tips by admitting that "at certain moments, every woodswoman has despaired of retaining femininity under mounds of men's clothing. Yet each has devised a secret formula that rejuvenates her spirit, refreshes femininity, makes it glow" (82). Secret formulas divulged in these guidebooks run the gamut from the aforementioned scarves and bandanas, to jewelry—" [a] mere touch of the hand to one earring can bolster sagging confidence," Farmer writes (82)—to lipstick, perfume, sexy shorts, and even a bikini. The trick is to bring along a little something extra, a "secret weapon," that "makes you look or feel appealing, seductive, or refreshed" (Farmer 83–84). Maggie Nichols agrees that "[t]he desire to keep up appearances . . . is not a frivolous or effete preoccupation. Self-image is basic to self-confidence" (166). And Lynn Thomas, in her chapter called "Beauty and the Backpack," affirms that [b]ackpacking is a sport which can diminish the difference between sexes if you let it. Most backpackers evolve their own subtle lightweight reminders that they are women" (170). One of her favorite examples is a woman who, "[u]nderneath the heavy boots and scratchy Levis and long-tailed men's shirts" wears "the laciest underclothes" (225).

Another tactic these books take to persuade women that backpacking needn't turn them into men is to profile experienced outdoorswomen—role models—who nevertheless exude femininity. Lynn Thomas recalls her visit to the house of a mountain climber:

The woman answering the door had the look of a delicately wrought figurine. She was dressed simply, in a long-sleeved peasant blouse, slacks and strap sandals. Chestnut hair, casually barretted back, fell to her waist. There wasn't a muscle in sight, yet she was strong. (11)

Kathleen Farmer tells the inspiring story of Jane, the only woman on a team of backcountry rangers who, after a grueling twenty-hour ordeal,

successfully rescued an injured mountaineer. Farmer describes Jane as “[q]uiet, with long brown hair, opal eyes that look through you, and a quivering smile, [a woman who] looks like she could be a librarian. She appears gentle, sensitive, and especially vulnerable to criticism” (79). On the day after the rescue, Farmer continues, Jane “brought freshly-made chocolate chip cookies to the injured mountaineer” (79).

Jane’s kind gesture of offering homemade cookies to an injured man raises the issue of feminine behavior. The guidebooks warn that women may undergo a personality change in the wilderness. The combination of unfamiliarity and fear causes some women to become aggressive and others to be withdrawn. This metamorphosis can be upsetting to women who are trained to be accommodating and amiable (Thomas 162). In *Femininity* Susan Brownmiller contends that “anger becomes the most unfeminine emotion a woman can show” because “competitive acts of personal assertion, not to mention acts of outright physical aggression, are known to flow from angry feelings” (210). Acknowledging that anger is fundamentally unfeminine but that certain backcountry situations can be unusually frustrating, Kethleen Farmer teaches her readers a simple way to vent anger. Bring along a 35-cent notebook, she counsels, and when negative feelings surface write them down: “Even while you are recording the incident on paper, the humor hits you,” she says, “[t]he comedy of errors. How you must have looked! If only your friends could have seen you!” (99). Interestingly, this device encourages a woman to imagine that she is being watched by her friends at home, and recollection of the social gaze restores her to her socially-acceptable self, or, to borrow from ecofeminist Susan Griffin, tames her wildness.

“Forget the mirror,” one guidebook insists (Farmer 134). “Makeup? Who needs it?,” demands another (Thomas 167). In seeming contradiction to the beauty tips offered in some sections of women’s guides, other sections of the very same books praise backpacking for the opportunity to forget about how one looks, and to redirect one’s attention from oneself to the sublime surroundings. Indeed, one of the justifications given for neglecting the normal grooming regimen is that “a human cannot equal the spectacular panorama of nature, no matter how much makeup is applied” (Farmer 140). The authors of women’s guides recognize that living up to society’s standards of female beauty is a never-ending battle, and they present backpacking as a welcome respite from the glamour parade. Lynn Thomas warns that wearing makeup on a backpack trip may even have a negative effect: “makeup has a bad reputation in the backcountry. Not a few women suffer puffy eyes (the combined effect of altitude, pollen and

makeup), and derisive comments from trailmates who prefer the natural look in this natural environment" (167).

Personal hygiene is another area where standards relax in the wilderness. Whereas some women may recoil at the thought of missing their daily shower, Kathleen Farmer counters that

[g]oing a week or two without a bath is common and part of the total experience. It is a complete departure from civilization, and bathlessness helps make the trip unusual and memorable. It is fun to rebel against the unwritten sanitary laws of society. (129)

The fun rebellion Farmer has in mind here is only temporary, like a child staying up past its bedtime when the babysitter comes. A similarly brief loosening of sex roles is another perk of the wilderness, where men may be seen whipping up a batch of pudding while women are heard pounding in the tent stakes. As outdoorswoman China Galland comments, "[l]ife in the wilderness . . . can be a refuge from socially assigned roles" (73).

While respite from prevailing standards of feminine appearance and conduct is presented as a fun rebellion, the guidebooks' more serious 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. They promote the idea of "the natural look," a standard of beauty that values health and vitality over artifice. Kathleen Farmer insists that femininity "is not lace, ruffles, and petticoats. It is brushing your hair, washing your face, standing straight, walking in graceful strides, sitting at ease" (80). One guide ridicules the *Playboy* bunny image of beauty and the notion that "strength is only attractive in women if carefully concealed in an aura of softness" (Maughan and Puddicombe 80). As a female body-builder of the 1980s puts it "[t]here's nothing feminine about looking soft and squishy" (Guttmann 216).

At the same time that women's backpacking guides echo the demands of the broader women's movement that women have a say in formulating images of female beauty, they also seek to change society's valuation of the body so as to rate function over physique. When women backpack, Lynn Thomas observes, something happens to the way they regard themselves:

suddenly the fact that our breasts are too small, or our waist too large, or wrinkles too plentiful becomes secondary. The negative orientation, implanted by a society stuck on appearance, gives way gradually to positive orientation. Our attention is diverted from physical beauty to the beauty in performance. (228)

Similarly, the guides encourage women to distinguish between skin-deep beauty sold in a bottle and soul-deep beauty nurtured by backpacking and other acts of assertion. As Maughan and Collins argue, “[w]omen who *do* things with their lives know that their value as human beings is not based solely on what they look like” (81). Women realize through the wilderness experience that, as an Outward Bound instructor expresses it, “femininity is deeper than makeup or not shaving their legs or having a dirty face for a few days. It’s a much deeper kind of energy and power” (quoted in Thomas 229).

Redefining femininity in the sphere of character traits entails rejecting attributes which have limited women, replacing them with more empowering characteristics, and reaffirming those traditional aspects of femininity that deserve respect and recognition. Among the adjectives that are rejected as these women’s backpacking guides reimagine femininity are “passive,” “dependent,” “timid,” “illogical,” and “weak.” The guides erase these constricting attributes from the tablet of femininity and, in their place, write “active,” “independent,” “brave,” “capable,” “self reliant,” “adventurous,” and “strong,” words that have traditionally been associated with masculinity.

The fact that women’s backpacking guides—and, indeed, the broader women’s movement—wish to ascribe traditionally “masculine” traits to the New Woman might suggest that they propose to dispense with sexual difference altogether. But, although one strand of the women’s movement does favor androgyny or at least advocates a gender-blind society, women’s backpacking guides do not. Maughan and Puddicombe, for example, provide an extensive and documented list of physiological and sensory differences between men and women. They report that women are more aware of subtle changes in their environment, that women have better peripheral vision, but that men have better depth perception and better spatial ability, that women see better in the dark, that women hear better, that women get cold faster because they are generally smaller with a greater surface-to-mass ratio, that women have a higher heart rate, making them less heat tolerant, that women have fewer red blood cells per unit blood, which means that they do not use oxygen as efficiently, that women do not require as much food, and that women have greater endurance, but that men have greater upper body strength (19–29). The authors present this catalog of biological differences not to claim backcountry superiority for either women or men, but to educate women about their own bodies so that they can plan accordingly for wilderness travel.

If women's backpacking guides do not deny the biological differences between men and women, neither do they minimize temperamental differences. Kathleen Farmer writes that "[f]emininity is the ability to rise above present problems and to project an inner calmness over those around you. . . . Feminine minds tend to see the subtle, read purpose into happenings, and search out beauty and meaning" (80). Jackie Maughan and Ann Puddicombe argue that

[b]eing feminine is not merely a state of being or physical attractiveness. . . . It is expressing the qualities of our sex which are positive and it should be encouraged. It includes nurturing, compassion, gentleness, and above all the desire to sustain life. It borders on altruism and can be fierce. (198)

All of the guides affirm the worth of certain traditionally feminine qualities, and they maintain that backpacking will actually enhance a woman's femininity. As one woman asserts, "[w]ilderness doesn't make you into a man. It makes you into more of the woman you already are" (quoted in Thomas, 229). And Kathleen Farmer assures her readers that after backpacking, "[y]ou will be more—much more—of a woman" (89).

NEW TRAILS

A woman of the 1990s, reading these women's backpacking guides from the 1970s and early 80s, might find their extended discussions of femininity irrelevant or even silly. That today's women feel perfectly free to backpack without giving a moment's thought to femininity 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. But even as we celebrate having made camp in the wilderness, we should look around to see if there might be new trails to explore.

In the spirit of adventure, the following questions are meant to suggest that our journey is not over. Why, when arguing that we must demolish the walls that have barred women from wilderness, do women's backpacking guides still desire to maintain the boundaries between the sexes? When advocating that strength, adventurousness, and independence be included in society's conception of femininity, why do the guides fail to consider that nurturing, compassion, and gentleness might also be incorporated into a changing image of masculinity? Why do the guides so consistently suppress any suggestion that some outdoorswomen are lesbian? Why do the guides assume that backpacking, which is in some ways an artificial pursuit and so tied to industrialism, will make a woman more "natural," and what is the meaning of "natural," anyway? Why do the guides

assume that getting away from people is the best way to find oneself? Do women who try backpacking and hate it therefore fail to measure up to the new standards of femininity? And what about women who love soap operas, shopping malls, and beauty salons? Does the new definition of femininity have room for them? Finally, do these guides—and the women's movement from which they spring—truly liberate women, or do they become a new source of authority, engendering yet another kind of dependency as women seek the answer of "who to be?" in the welter of feminist how-to guides rather than in their own hearts?

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Linda and Tim Goreclanton for their help in locating material for this essay.

Notes

1. Quoted in Thomas, 104.
2. See, for example, Abel, Bridge, Colwell, Fletcher, Hart, Jack, Kemsley, Look, Manning, Mendenhall, Rethmel, Saijo, Styles, Winnett, and Wood.
3. See Farmer, Link, Maughan and Collins, Maughan and Puddicombe, Nichols, and Thomas. For two general studies of women and wilderness that appeared in 1980, see Galland and LaBastille. For a more recent and historical study of women and nature, see Norwood.
4. Colin Fletcher's books are an exception to this generalization in that their tone is conversational and playful; the idiosyncratic persona Fletcher creates is more riveting than the information he provides, and readers with no intention of ever backpacking may still enjoy reading his books as literature, which may account for their popularity.
5. For an entire book on backcountry defecation, see Kathleen Meyer's *How to Shit in the Woods*, especially chapter five, "For Women Only: Hot Not to Pee in Your Boots."

Works Cited

- Abel, Michael. *Backpacking Made Easy*. Healdsburg, Calif.: Naturgraph, 1972.
- Bridge, Raymond. *America's Backpacking Book*. New York: Scribner's, 1973.
- Brownmiller, Susan. *Femininity*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1984.
- Colwell, Robert. *Introduction to Backpacking*. Harrisburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 1970.
- Farmer, Kathleen. *Woman in the Woods*. Harrisburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 1976.
- Fletcher, Colin. *The Complete Walker: The Joys and Techniques of Hiking and Backpacking*. New York: Knopf, 1968.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. 20th anniversary edition. New York: Norton, 1983.
- Galland, China. *Women in the Wilderness*. New York: Harper and Row, 1980.
- Gilbert, Lucy, and Paula Webster. "The Dangers of Femininity." From *Bound By Love*, Beacon P, 1982. Reprinted in *The Gender Reader*. Eds. Evelyn Ashton-Jones and Gary A. Olson. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1991. 39-55.
- Griffin, Susan. *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.

- Guttmann, Allen. *Women's Sports: A History*. New York: Columbia UP, 1991.
- Hart, John. *Walking Softly in the Wilderness: The Sierra Club Guide to Backpacking*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977.
- Jack, Nancy. *The Complete Pack Provisioning Book*. Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1978.
- Kemsley, William Jr., and the editors of *Backpacker Magazine*. *Backpacking Equipment: A Consumer's Guide*. New York: Collier Books, 1975.
- LaBastille, Anne. *Women and Wilderness*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1980.
- Link, Sheila. *Women's Guide to Outdoor Sports*. Tulsa, Oklahoma: Winchester P, 1982.
- Look, Dennis. *Joy of Backpacking: People's Guide to the Wilderness*. Sacramento: Jalmar P, 1976.
- Manning, Harvey. *Backpacking One Step at a Time*. New York: Vintage, 1968.
- Maughan, Jackie Johnson, with Kathryn Collins, M.D. *The Outdoor Woman's Guide to Sports, Fitness and Nutrition*. Harrisburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 1983.
- Maughan, Jackie Johnson, and Ann Puddicombe. *Hiking the Backcountry: A Do-It-Yourself Guide for the Adventurous Woman*. Harrisburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 1981.
- Mendenhall, Ruth. *Backpacking Techniques*. Glendale, Calif.: La Siesta P, 1967.
- Meyer, Kathleen. *How to Shit in the Woods: An Environmentally Sound Approach to a Lost Art*. Berkeley, Calif.: Ten Speed P, 1989.
- Nichols, Maggie. *Wild, Wild Woman: A Complete Woman's Guide to Enjoying the Great Outdoors!*. New York: Berkley Windhover, 1978.
- Norwood, Vera. *Made from this Earth: American Women and Nature*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1993.
- Rethmel, R. C. *Backpacking*. 6th ed. Chicago: Follett, 1979.
- Saijo, Albert. *The Backpacker*. San Francisco: 101 Press, 1972.
- Styles, Showell. *Backpacking: A Comprehensive Guide*. New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1976.
- Thomas, Lynn. *The Backpacking Woman*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1980.
- Winnett, Thomas. *Backpacking for Fun*. Berkeley, Calif.: Wilderness P, 1972.
- Wood, Robert S. *Pleasure Packing*. Berkeley: Condor Books, 1972.

Copyright of Women's Studies is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.