Interwoven Wilderness: We are the Wild

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The road trip was going to be a good one. Nine days on the open road, from Georgia to Washington state, camping all the way. It was peaceful, driving on highways with no other sign of humanity around, watching rolling hills pass by under a bright, cloud-filled sky. Every night we were met with the embrace of the wild as we set up camp. From the rustling of leaves in the hush of a forest to the howl of coyotes in the distance on the hills, each night filled our senses with the call of the wild. It was freeing, the time spent in nature. Having a chance to break away from the drone of routine, to enter the thralls of the natural world, was truly liberating. It also provided a space for reflection, to consider my life and future with the detachment of someone escaping it. So, when I consider the word wilderness and its manifestation within nature, this journey into its depths is the first image that comes to my mind.

But can I really say I was in the wild? Sure, I was in nature, but does that mean I was in true wilderness? My trip can be defined by my connection to nature, but it could also be described through my separation from it. I drove in a car, a major source of carbon emission pollution, on highways that cut across the natural world for human transportation, to stay in pieces of land that were cleared and shaped for the purpose of human camping. I had access to heat, water, and shelter made for humans the entire time. Although I traveled into nature, I did so with the assistance of human technology. Can a trip so dependent on the tools of humanity truly be called an experience with the wild?

And yet, maybe this is asking the wrong question. Often wilderness is only described in these two paradigms: as a place for escape or reflection and as a victim of human progress. In both of these cases, wilderness is seen as something separate from us. Sometimes this difference comes from an idealization of it, as viewing nature as separate makes our journeys into it feel more significant. Other times it is demonized, directly or indirectly, as something we need to control with the power of innovative technology. Yet nature is not something we can disconnect from. These views create a division between human and nature, but ultimately they are inextricably linked. We cannot escape from the wild, just as the wild cannot escape from us.

While nature may be seen as its own entity, which can be necessary for creating a sentiment of respect that the wild world deserves, it is important to remember that this boundary is a human fabrication. We are wilderness. Remembering our connection to the wilderness, our connection to nature, is ultimately essential for our care of it. Wilderness is a description of the world, of its unpredictability and wildness, and that description is something that both nature and humanity are an integral part of.

Often in discussions of wilderness, the natural world is celebrated for its beauty. It's a common perspective in the field of naturalism, as writing that comes from an appreciation of nature is sure to highlight its awe-inspiring quality. An example of this style of naturalist writing can be seen in the work of Nicholas Kristoff, a New York Times columnist known for his love of and advocacy for the natural world. In his article, "Fleeing to the Mountains," he writes, "this [trip into the wild] is also a spiritual experience: It's a chance to share a reverence for the ethereal scenery of America's wild places. The wilderness is nature's cathedral, and it's a thrill to worship here" (Kristoff). This appreciation and reverence for nature is clearly shown throughout

Kristoff's work and can be found in a multitude of pieces within the naturalist field. In this way, nature is viewed as a sanctuary for reflection, a place to consider ourselves in the context of the ethereal natural world. As a conduit for this reflection, the wild is seen as somewhere that can offer peace.

However, nature is not always so inviting. With the beauty of the natural world often comes the dangers associated with the unpredictability of the wild. I learned this the hard way during my trip across the country. While we were lucky to have mostly clear skies and light clouds throughout the journey, the weather was not always so accommodating. Twice we were caught in rain storms, which soaked us through to the bone and made for some dreary nights of camping. On a different night we were caught in a lightning storm. It was incredibly windy, with dust hurtling back at our faces and blowing away our perfectly prepared camp. More terrifying was the lightning, which struck across the dry sky and threatened to send the forest around us ablaze. Eventually the wind and the storm became too much. It was the one night we abandoned our camp, driving in the middle of the night to a local lodge. In this way, the calm, placid beauty of the natural world became an unpredictable storm right before our eyes. We learned the hard way that nature is not always welcoming, and sometimes it is better to return to the folds of humanity and the comfort of human convenience. Another who experienced this realization was the author and nature photographer Sander Jain, although his story borders more on the fantastical. In his article "Sasquatch: If hearing is believing," Jain describes his perceived experience of witnessing Sasquatch while alone in the backcountry of Clayoquot Sound in British Columbia. When Jain first describes Clayoquot Sound, he describes in a typical naturalist fashion as a place with "overpowering scenic dimensions" that "[shrink] our human scale into insignificance." For Jain, nature was initially a place of peace and solitude that he could escape to, a possibility for a " simple and rustic but…gentle way of wilderness living" and an opportunity for tranquil reflection. However, by the end of his fifth day out in the wild his hopes for tranquility were dashed, as the sounds of a thunderous creature outside of the cabin where he was staying led to a feeling of such "mortal fear" that he felt compelled to escape from the terrors of the wild. Jain's experience, as well as my own, reveal the other common view of the wild. Rather than seeing the wild as something to be appreciated, many see it as

something to be feared and controlled. Nature becomes not something to venture into, but something to fight against.

The wild can be beautiful and tranquil, but it can also be chaotic, unwieldy, and dangerous. For this reason, humanity often tries to beat nature into submission, using technology and innovation to control the uncontrollable, often with disastrous results. This is the central argument of environmental scholar and researcher Paul Wapner, who discusses our less than friendly relationship with the wild and its consequences for our world in his work *Is Wildness Over?* In the first chapter of this text, Wapner discusses the development of technology and the expansion of human influence as humanity has attempted to "minimize wildness" in an attempt to "enhance ease and predictability, and otherwise control the world" (6). However, rather than creating more order in the world, this "deep impulse to expunge risk, unpredictability, and inconvenience…has unleashed huge, unstoppable global challenges" (13). Through the lens of Wapner, our history with nature becomes one strife with conflict, rather than one of peaceful reflection or worship. We wrestle with the wild, using technological advancements to force it to our whims. But the wild will always evade our control, or transform into something worse on a global scale (5). This understanding of technological limits can also be seen in the work of Ashely Shew, although her work is focused on how our understanding of technology impacts our understanding of disability in her book *Against Technoableism: Rethinking Who Needs Improvement*. Throughout the text, Shew critiques the view of using technology to 'fix' disabilities, the perspective that considers disability as a problem to be eliminated rather than an aspect of disabled people's identity (50-51). In viewing disability as "a malady, something *outside the norm* that needs to be addressed, cured, eliminated, or remediated through medical or therapeutic intervention," disabled people are dehumanized and removed from the conversation of their own identity, which ultimately creates harm for the sake of maintaining social conformity (20). In both of these works, the authors highlight the harm created through the view of technology as a means of eliminating what is uncomfortable or inconsistent with societal expectations. In this way, technology becomes a weapon for humanity's fight against the other, whether that's the concept of disability or the consideration of the wild. In this view of the wild, we are in conflict with it, with technology as our arsenal.

Yet, this consideration of humanity and the wild creates a false dichotomy. The view of the wild as something to be eliminated, or a concept fought against by human invention, assumes that humanity and the wild are inherently separate. It paints humans and the wild as two forces acting against each other, when really they are intrinsically linked together. This is the greater point that Wapner makes in his discussion of the wild. While the pursuit of human comfort, security, and convenience ultimately leads to destruction of wild spaces, the wild will always return. The idea of global wildness is the consideration of how the wild is linked to our human experience. Whether we like it or not, the wild is a part of us, and it will find its way into our

lives despite our best attempts to eliminate it, as the globalization of the wild means that "the feral now haunts everyone" (13). It is for this reason that Wapner argues for a rewilding of ourselves, "inviting *more* unpredictability, inconvenience, and even more danger into our lives," as well as "opening up to difference and vulnerability" (15). It also involves a consideration of how the wild is a part of us, and how we are a part of the wild.

In a physical sense, we are a part of the wild because the wild runs in our blood. As much as we try to separate ourselves from it, either as an unbreachable entity or a force to be eradicated, we must admit that our form is inherently animal, and therefore inherently wild. This consideration of humans as animals, not above but a part of the kingdom of the wild, is brought up by the author and philosopher David Egan in his article "We Can't Outsprint Cheetahs, but We Can Beat Them in a Marathon." In this work, Egan highlights the common trend of "people [who] consistently undersell the human body." He identifies the theme across history of viewing humans as weak creatures who rely on "our big brains and the technologies they've enabled us to fashion" (Egan). Yet, rather than focusing on what we believe separates us from mere animals, Egan instead focuses on what connects us to them, and how our nature as "exceptionally tough and versatile" creatures with a stamina that makes us "us fearsome persistence hunters" is an essential aspect of human identity. Ultimately Egan uses this consideration of the physical human, rather than just the intellectual, to critique the "sneakily self-aggrandizing myth" that leads to us seeing ourselves as other from the world, and therefore justifies our exploitation of it. The wild is not a foreign concept: it runs within us.

We also run into the wild. Human society is often viewed at odds with the natural world. We see them as distinct spheres, to the extent that many describe their trip into nature as a time where they "ran away from home to the mountains" to "[escape] the tether of email and cellphones" and to be "yanked back to a simple life" (Kristoff). Yet can we truly escape our own social context so easily? One author that argues against this understanding of wild experience is Evelyn White, an author who draws on her experience as a black woman in the chapter "Black Women and the Wilderness" from *The Norton Book of Nature Writing.* In her writing, White highlights how afraid she felt in nature for a considerable part of her life, as nature was not a place to escape from social conventions but a place where they flourished. As she emphatically states in her discussion of nature, "I was certain that if I ventured outside to admire a meadow or to feel the cool ripples in a stream, I'd be taunted, attacked, raped, maybe even murdered because of the color of my skin" (White 1063). In this way, nature doesn't serve as a way to disconnect from society, but as a shocking reminder of how it treats the disempowered. The social condition is not something to be escaped from but a reality to be confronted while in the natural world. As Corina Newsome, a contributor for the *Audubon Magazine*, underscores in her article "It's Time to Build a Truly Inclusive Outdoors," nature is a space to confront the "uncomfortable conversations about racism and privilege" and embrace

human diversity within the space of both the natural and social world (19). Under the eyes of White and Newsome, nature becomes a place to transform human culture, rather than escape from it. For just as we cannot escape from nature, nature cannot escape from us.

It is obvious that there are a myriad of perspectives on how we understand the wild. Whether as an idol to be worshiped, and uncertainty to be destroyed, or a reality we are connected to, the wild defies one certain understanding. And maybe that's just it, maybe the wild is not meant to be understood one way. It is finding the balance between these perspectives, understanding the wild as both beautiful and dangerous, and ultimately something we are connected to, that leads to the greatest understanding of what is truly meant by the word wild.

Interacting with the wild requires being mindful of it, as how we decide to interact with wildness determines our ability to coexist with it. One author that considers this idea of mindfulness is Robin Wall Kimmerer, a Native American botanist and author who discusses the concept of "The Honorable Harvest" in the text *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. As Kimmerer describes it, the honorable harvest is "the rules of sorts that govern our taking, shape our relationships with the natural, and rein in our tendency to consume–that the world might be as rich for the seventh generation as it is for our own" (180). While Kimmerer acknowledges our need to take from the Earth in order to sustain ourselves, she underlines the importance of doing so in a way that respects the Earth, that is mindful of the life you are taking, and considers your relationship with the natural world. This idea of mindfulness can also be seen in her discussion of *slow food*. As she says while describing her foraging of leeks, "while a sharp shovel would make digging more efficient, the truth is that it makes the work too fast. If I could get all the leeks I needed in five minutes, I'd lose that time on my knees watching the ginger poke up and listening to the oriole that has just returned home" (178).

Kimmerer takes this time to meditate on her connection to nature, while also taking what she needs to sustain herself as a human. Here we can see the true balance between ourselves and the natural world. Maintaining our relationship with the natural world requires being mindful of it, both in how we interact with it and how it interacts with us. Understanding this balance and our place within it is what is truly essential in our consideration of the wild.

With this in mind, I think back to my experience in nature while on the open road. While I depended on human technology for my experience, I experienced the beauty of the natural world all the same. My experience was not just a venture into the wild, but an opportunity to consider my place within both natural and social spaces. While I visited the wild, and explored the natural world, I also considered the wild within me.

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