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# **WOMXN: An Evolution of Identity**

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## **Abstract**

*Environmental Education is situated firmly in the hegemony of White, settler-colonial, capitalistic, able-bodied and -minded, heteronormative, patriarchal society. Individuals whose identity does not conform to this dominant metanarrative are excluded from and marginalized by "othering". Trauma and violence are commonplace in society against Indigenous peoples, Black and Latinx folx and People of Color, womxn, people with disabilities, people in the LGBTQIA+ community, and all minoritized identities. That history of trauma, coupled with social and physical isolation can lead to mental and emotional struggles that negatively impact personal wellbeing. A lack of wellbeing, in turn can lead to or further depression. To counter this, there is need for careful and intentional inclusion of all people in the outdoor community. A deep, self-reflexive examination of self and identity, allows positionality to be understood. That positionality informs how personal identity intersects with others. This knowledge allows for oppressive "-isms" to begin to be dismantled because people truly see one another.*

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**Keyword: identity, positionality, reflexivity, inclusion, environmental education, queer, womxn, minority, outdoor recreation**

I want to formally recognize that this was written and researched on ceded and unceded sovereign Indigenous lands. This territory has been the traditional home of the Upper Skagit, Sauk-Suiattle, Swinomish, Nooksack, Lummi, Nlakápamux, Confederated Tribes of the Colville and Yakima Nations, and many other tribes since time immemorial. We must acknowledge the reality of our role in the continued subjugation of Indigenous peoples and work towards dismantling this toxic and oppressive paradigm.

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## **Positionality**

Every individual exists within their own scope of knowledge, informed and shaped by their worldviews and experiences. Many of us have experienced trauma. For those of you who have not suffered trauma or abuse, or faced prejudice and hatred, know that these experiences dominate the lives of many people in society today. And although they may not fit into your

understanding of the world, they are part of the oppressive dominant narrative. Your positionality in this world is shaped by your identity – what you know, and how you know it is a summation of your experiences. If your identity conforms to the White, settler-colonial, capitalistic, able-bodied and –minded, heteronormative, patriarchal narrative that is seated in the societal position of power, the oppressions of which I speak and that are a truth to so many, may sit entirely outside of your worldview and scope of knowledge. One of the most difficult undertakings in life is to see past the bounds of your own perspective – to realize your understanding of the world is an assumption crafted by your experiences, your identity and your privilege, rather than as a universal truth (Takacs, 2003).

Violence against marginalized and minoritized peoples is the metanarrative in this White, settler-colonial, capitalistic, able-bodied and –minded, heteronormative, patriarchal society. This long and complicated sounding list of terms are the oppressive structures that control power in the Western world, and are the basis of White supremacy. These dominant power structures have perpetrated violence against Indigenous peoples, Black and Latinx folx and other Peoples of Color, womxn, people with disabilities, people in the LGBTQIA+ community, and every other minoritized identity. That violence isn't always purely physical. Social violence, political violence, ideological violence, emotional violence, theological violence, and intellectual violence are realities of an identity that does not fit within the hegemonic narrative – these structures of violence are ever present and intersectional.

Much of Western thought perpetuates the notion that the outdoors is an empowering space for all people – without the explicit recognition that the homogenous identity of people who recreate outdoors create a space that is not always safe for anyone who is not a straight, White male (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004). The outdoors does have the potential to be an incredibly empowering space, but a shift is needed in the framing of this space – from the “othering” of marginalized peoples and education *about them* and *their* struggles, to a sustained examination of how each of us constructs our own identity, and how that in turn shapes our positionality and relationships in the world (Russell, Sarick, & Kennelly, 2002).

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## **Identity**

In pursuing this degree and research, I hoped to refine my skills as an educator and facilitator and gain the knowledge and experience to create inclusive spaces for people who identify as a womxn. This term stems from the orthographic “woman”, which is rooted in the patriarchal power structure that still systematically excludes womxn. “Womxn” is an intersectional concept that seeks to include transgender womxn, womxn of color, womxn of Third World countries, and every personal identity of womxn. It is an antithesis to the daily micro-aggressions that subtly, but systematically work to undermine the value of womxn and enforce their secondary social status. It is vital to abolish these toxic paradigms and empower young womxn to be bold and brave. I want to dismantle the power dynamics that I find so problematic in outdoor recreation, and

the world at large. This desire to create empowering spaces and places in the outdoors for womxn stemmed from trauma.

For a long time, outside was the only place I felt safe. In nature, I was entirely in control of myself, and my interactions with other people. The things that I had no control over were the natural elements. The rain, the snow, the wind, the sun, floods, landslides, falling rocks, downed trees, and washed out trails – these challenges tested my ingenuity, my decision-making skills, my ability to plan, my tenacity and endurance, and my capacity to function under pressure. Though there was danger, it was a different kind of danger, a more obvious and predictable danger I found manageable. These perils reminded me that I could survive, and that I could thrive through my own resolve. I found personal empowerment through my experiences in nature. I found healing. I found self-love. I found bravery. Most importantly I found forgiveness.

The sanctuary of the outdoors, of pushing myself physically, mentally and emotionally is something I truly believe that every womxn should have the opportunity to experience. As I healed from my past, I embraced a new kind of freedom, and an empowered version of myself. I am a queer womxn. I gave voice to my identity and my sexuality, and I found a power in voicing this truth that had so long been buried under societal expectations of what it means to be a womxn in the outdoor world. When I entered my graduate program, I did so as a strong, vocal, out queer womxn. I dove into feminist pedagogy with a full and enthusiastic heart. I examined my teaching from this lens, and sought to empower my students with open, student-centered discussion and validation of their lived experiences. I focused on student self-discovery, and strove to avoid gender, racial, and classist assumptions. Even now, I work to address and redress my own epicenter of bias. Through critical self-reflexivity, a dynamic process that revolves around continuing self-awareness and placing our identities in social and cultural contexts, I hope to instill a responsibility in the learning community that leads to positive and equitable social action and inclusion.

My educational exploration continued to grow and develop. I deepened my understanding of feminist pedagogy, and dove into queer theory and identity work. I asked tough questions of myself and my peers – how do societal norms and pressures affect individuals who cannot box themselves into preconceived notions about what it means to live in a world of constructed binary principles? These binary principles sit within social and cultural hierarchies that construct the dominant or hegemonic identity. And I began pushing back against the hegemony in traditional environmental education, against the narrative that I saw so clearly situated in this program.

Oppressive “-isms” are multidimensional and adaptive, fostered on a system that ensures unequal distribution of resources. For example, when examining sexism in this country, White men dominate societal institutions, and historically this interest of subjugation of other groups is foundational in U.S. society (DiAngelo, 2001). And while an individual White male may not subscribe to this prejudice, they still reap the benefits afforded to them because of the system. Even when a womxn is present in circles of power, most decision-making voices are White men. That is not to say that White men don't face challenges and barriers of their own, but systematic sexism or racism isn't one

of them. The foundation of oppression is not ignorance or hate, but rather self-interest that creates an unequal system. This structural oppression is paralleled in all forms of systematic oppression, and understanding the distinction between individualized discrimination and the systematically institutionalized inequity of power is paramount. We cannot understand oppression if we do not understand and acknowledge uneven power dynamics. We also cannot talk about privilege without the explicit recognition that this privilege stems directly from the oppression of others.

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## Essentialism

I spent 20 months challenging my construction of self. The deep introspection was a difficult process, and facing the truths of my past took its toll. I was living in one of the most beautiful places, surrounded by this thing that had always cradled me in safety and security, but it didn't feel safe anymore. I was "out" in a space that has long been rooted in a "boys club" mentality, and a space that womxn are still working to find equity. Environmental Education Teacher-Educator Dr. Allison Lugg notes it is important to recognize the toxic patriarchal paradigm in the outdoors that "serves to generate a power hierarchy of men over women, [and] assigns superior status to these 'masculine' characteristics and inferior status to those deemed to be feminine." (Lugg, 2003, p. 35). Often the mastery of "hard skills" are valued above "soft skills", or a person's ability to tie the right knots and kayak for miles is recognized as more important than the perceived "feminine" interpersonal connections. This is done through subversive and subtle verbal and non-verbal interactions that undermine the validity of womxn's contributions and abilities in the outdoors, and reinforce stereotypical and oppressive values and behaviors. Ultimately it contributes to the demoralization of womxn's competence (Lugg, 2003).

Outdoor spaces highlight gender differences because the emphasis on the physicality of activities is not value free, the experience is a culturally constructed "... embodiment [that] is subjective and social at the same time. It is therefore a site for the lived sense of self and gender, and cultural expectations of self and gender. (Bell, 1997, p. 147) This binary is evident in a study conducted in Victoria, Australia, in which forty-nine womxn were interviewed about their experience in a degree course for outdoor education. A sampling of their responses follows:

*As cited in Lugg, 2003,*

*One of the unspoken rules is for women to act like one of the boys. (pg. 41)*

*Yes, I've come across some situations where, because I am female, I am treated differently, [...] to someone else it might be subtle but to me it's frustrating. I never see a guy giving advice to another guy on how to climb unless the advice was asked for and yet I've had guys telling me or other girls how to climb which is quite frustrating. (pg. 41)*

*Lots of people think that in outdoor education women are supposed to be strong, courageous and strong minded and be able to do what the guys are able to do ... Yet our society is structured [...in such a way that...] many girls would find it difficult to carry out those kinds of characteristics. (pg. 42)*

The outdoors is far from being the level playing field that so many claim it is – that myopic view fails to grasp the depth of the ingrained and essentialist notions about gender roles in the outdoors. Those notions stem from a macho and heteronormative understanding of what defines a competent leader – which is the stereotypical idea of a “mountain man” (Russell, Sarick, & Kennelly, 2002). Heteronormativity is the normalizing of sexuality such that queerness, or anything other than “straight” is viewed as deviant (Dignan, 2002). In the field of critical theory, marginalization related to sexuality and queer identities are just beginning to be centered in discussions of oppressive systems that map the intersections of race, culture, class and gender (Russell, Sarick, & Kennelly, 2002). The Western classification of people based on their sexual orientation or gender identity is a relatively new phenomenon. It is significant to note that gender is a purely social construct. It is based on assumed differences between womxn and men (Lugg, 2003).

These assumptions play a prominent role in the outdoor world, and within the culture that I experienced throughout my graduate residency. My optimism in my ability to dismantle the problematic binaries and exclusionary dichotomies was slowly eroded. Through a specific type of social isolation due to my out, queer identity, as well as being a womxn, I felt “othered” and often alone. I am a White, cisgender, female body, queer womxn, and the two identities that do not conform to the hegemonic narrative set me apart from feeling a true inclusivity in this community. I spoke about my discouraging experiences in a heteronormative space, and pushed the need for queering the curriculum and the culture. Responses from individuals within that organization both essentialized my identity as a womxn and fetishized my sexuality. My life experiences were invalidated. There is a clear link between social isolation and feelings of depression (Wang, et al., 2017). There were moments of extreme self-doubt, moments of apprehension about the future, and moments of complete and absolute hopelessness. This despair and isolation began a dizzying spiral into pain and darkness for me.

How do we recover from the spiraling darkness that threatens to swallow us? How do we climb back up to the light? How then do we find resilience? For me, it took descending to the darkest moment of my life. I lost part of myself. There was a death of self-love, of confidence, happiness, and hope. This deep low found a home in my mental and emotional wellbeing, and my struggles with acceptance and identity left me feeling utterly alone. But I wasn’t alone, and I am not alone. I am still navigating the process of self-love, and will always have to negotiate that practice because identity is not a stagnate or finished product. That is the nature of identity work though; there are moments of good, and moments of bad. Everyone experiences those good moments and those bad moments, and in recognizing that, we remove the shame and stigma associated with not being okay.

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## Wellbeing

The realization that something needed to change in my life lead me to seek out moments of empowerment and self-love. I turned to running, writing and climbing and I tuned into the needs of my mind and body. Writing forced me to deeply reexamine self and identity, running provided a purely physical challenge and embodied the pain I carried, and climbing was the intersection of the two, a place that I had to overcome mental fear and trust in my body's ability. Climbing has always provided a sanctuary for me and brought salvation, but I had forgotten its power in my life. Not long after this recognition I made a trip to Index, WA, where majestic, sweeping fins of granite jut into the horizon, and I reconnected with rock and with myself and with my power. It was the first time I could see past the despair in which I had been drowning. It was the moment I knew I could endure, and that I would continue to fight for myself. In written reflection after this trip I sought to capture the complexity and breadth of this internal upheaval:

*On the wall, eyes closed, grasping the rough stone in my hands, a small life line at my waist, I breathe in the rock, and the rock breathes in me.*

*I breathe in, I breathe out.*

*Tenuously balanced, teetering on the brink, the precariousness a reflection of my life. Yet, my feet are steady. I have never felt more resolute. My mind emptied of the persistent doubt and self-loathing. Wholly immersed in this single moment.*

*I breathe in, I breathe out.*

*Perfectly tuned inward, I feel my muscles contracting, adapting, grounding me to the earth, each movement a testament to my power. I must trust in myself, to know that I am not only capable, but that I am indomitable. To believe in my own strength, my own power, my own possibility, and my own worth.*

*I breathe in, I breathe out.*

*I open my eyes and look down, and I feel the fear rushing back in to drown me. I feel my arms beginning to tire, my feet threatening to slip and plunge me back into the abyss.*

*I breathe in, I breathe out.*

*Steadied. I focus on the rough strength of the rock beneath my fingers. And I turn my gaze upward. A crack, a narrow and exposed and dangerous path.*

*I breathe in, I breathe out.*

*I must be bold. One hand up. It slips. My heart drops. I must be brave. Moving upward. Buoyed by each movement, I rise above the crashing waves of self-doubt.*

*I breathe in, I breathe out.*

*The end is in sight. A tree grows from the depths of the rock. Life in inhospitable terrain. As my hands grasp the bark, another set of hands reach for me. I see the face of a friend, smiling. And those hands pull me at last from the darkness. (personal journal entry, 2017)*

Moments like this were my beacon, and my way forward, but this is only a single vignette, my personal narrative, and it is vital to recognize that while this is one of my truths, it is not the only truth, nor was I or am I alone in this sort of isolation. There have been people who came before that struggled with this in their time here, there are others in my cohort that have struggled, and there will be more after me if something doesn't change. I do want to openly acknowledge that not every interaction was mired in the negative. I found joy, laughter, levity, love, life and hope. I knew there were certain people I could always turn to in times of need. I want to express my deepest gratitude and love to my dear housemates – Sarah, Jihan, and Angela – you who have supported me at my absolute lowest, and helped me find faith in myself once more. I cannot imagine this process without your love, your friendship and your passion. You inspire me every day. To Alexei, you amaze me with your capacity to care so deeply and fully, and to always know how to make me feel valued and heard and cherished. To Nick, with your quiet wisdom and profound passion, your sincere regard and concern is always a reassuring validation of self. And to Calvin, your bright smile and compassionate integrity, brought light to my darkest days.

There are so many other sentiments of gratitude that I cannot fully express, but I could not be where I am today without your help and encouragement. To those people who have been inquiry partners, mentors, and friends, and your insight and care has been invaluable. Your time, love, understanding and laughter have carried me through the pain and heartbreak identity work brings; through the isolation and suffering that comes of feeling alone while surrounded by others. You have helped me begin the healing journey my soul craves. It is when examining the good that a path forward is made clear. The times that I felt the most whole were when I was supported, loved and accepted. That pillar of support needs to be integral in programs of this nature.

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## **Resilience**

So, I ask again, how do we find resilience? How do we empower ourselves as individuals, and as a community? There is no simple answer, but there are steps that we can take as a community. There is the need for the de-stigmatization of mental illness in society, and more specifically, in the outdoor community. Within the field of environmental education, we take for granted the amazing things we get to do and that has translated into the ideology that it should preclude us from suffering from depression. Especially in a beautiful place, such as this, Seasonal Affective Disorder and depression are approached with a flippancy that can be deadly. Each person walks into



situations like this with their own experiences and struggles. The inability to have unprejudiced discussions around mental health only further isolates people who are already struggling. The community in which this residency program is situated, and many environmental education programs utilize, revolves around a cohort model. This type of community has the capability to support one another in deep and meaningful ways, but caution must be used to prevent privileging the wellbeing of the cohort above individual wellbeing. When a person is already “othered” by feelings of isolation and a disparate identity, the guilt of not being able to give as much to the community can further depression.

There are several hegemonic binaries that lead to the “othering” of people. In society they are hierarchical: men versus womxn, White versus Black, straight versus gay, able versus disabled, cisgender versus trans, first-world versus third-world, rational versus emotional. The list goes on, but this need for categorization leads to social dislocation and personal disempowerment when your identity is not reflected or valued in your community. These binaries, and the dominant narrative in which they are situated, need to be dismantled. That is the true challenge of creating an inclusive and empowering culture. How is that accomplished then? Reflexivity is important, positionality is important, identity is important, finding your power is important. The process of critical self-awareness, the examination of where you fit into dominant narratives, knowing who you are, and feeling empowered with those knowledges is imperative at all levels of the community. This work can be exciting, challenging, daunting and intimidating, but it is only through this constant practice that we see how our identities and social positions intersect with others.

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### ***The Way Forward: Transforming Outdoor Education***

Often we only crudely recognize our personal identities – race, class, and gender – without being explicit in how those identities determine our positionality and shapes our daily interactions and worldviews. (McCorkel & Myers, 2003). By unequivocally situating and acknowledging our social positions, we begin to understand how our principles, values and behavior are crafted, and therefore we begin a journey to self-awareness and self-actualization. David Takacs (2003) succinctly puts it: “We come to know the world more fully by knowing how we know the world.” (p. 29). Through tough, unyielding, reflexive introspection I have grown. Finding your authentic self is a brutally honest and never-ending process, and accepting peacefully what you find there is the greatest challenge of such acknowledgement. I am still learning that it is okay to give voice to the multifaceted and evolving sides of my identity. I am W♀MXN and simultaneously becoming womxn. My understanding of what womxn means to me grows every day. It doesn’t have to conform to societal norms or expectations, and there is power in being authentic. I am queer and simultaneously accepting my queerness. My understanding of my own sexuality is in constant flux. I do not have to explain what it means to others, and I certainly do not have to allow how others interpret that identity to define me. I also understand that while my identity is my own, paradoxically self-

knowledge can only be gained through others. Positionality is relational and inescapably a fundamentally social form of knowledge.

I believe it is crucial to reflect on *self* – your positionality in terms of race, nationality, age, gender, sexuality, ability, and social and economic status influences the way in which you see and interact in the world, as well as how those experiences become coded as valued knowledge, or not. Valued social positionality is situated in a refined historical context of White, male supremacy. A supremacy that perversely distances the hegemonic identity from the minoritized identity, and creates a norm that lives in the realm of oppressive and universal truths (Haraway D. J., 1991). To resist this, we must “make visible our own critical positioning within the power structure.” (McDowell, 1992, p. 413).

This journey has taken me down many paths, but the greatest discovery that I have made is not one of factual knowledge or practical application, but rather the unraveling of my own self. A deeper understanding of who I am and where I come from has, of course, only led to more searching, but the more I examine myself - my motivations, my passions, my shortcomings - the more I understand and accept that my identity is something that will change and evolve. Humans are in a constant state of progress. There is no “end goal”, no final evolution that makes us perfect, rather it is through this process of personal understanding and self-reflexivity that we continue to grow.

I end with hope, and a request. We need to transform the future of outdoor and environmental education programs, but with the acknowledgement that it will not be a simple or easy process. This work is not a box to check. It is not enough to read articles and go to conferences. It is not a marketing strategy. There needs to be careful consideration given to why this is important and what it means to you as an individual, and as a community. I am asking you to try to see beyond the bounds of your own experience, to truly see yourself, and to see others, to allow yourself to be vulnerable, to allow yourself to grow. We all come into this work at different levels. Be gentle with yourself and give yourself time to process. It can be terrifying to confront ourselves, and embarrassing to admit faults or mistakes in our past. I am not perfect nor an expert, but I strive to have the critical humility to confront myself and work towards a constant awareness of how I construct and interact with knowledge. We must empower ourselves as knowledge makers. Individualized experience contributes to the collective understanding. From tolerating difference, we move to respecting difference, and from respect we move to celebration. Throughout this expedition of self-love, discovery, and empowerment, I have found that questions about the relation of myself to others and to society consistently float to the forefront of my mind. These questions provoke thought and reflection, and force me to examine myself. They are found in Appendix A. I ask that you allow yourself to begin a journey to self-actualization. Examine your identity and positionality. Use that awareness from self-reflexive practice to dismantle uneven power dynamics and create inclusive communities and a world of equity where all identities are celebrated.

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Human existence, because it came into being through asking questions, is at the root of change in the world. There is a radical element to existence, which is the radical act of asking questions... At root human existence involves surprise, questioning and risk. And because of all this, it involves actions and change - Paulo Freire (hooks, 2010, preface).

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