

**The Wilderness as a Queer Refuge: A Multimedia Exploration from the 19th Century
to Present Day**

Nadia Learner Fortea

Treball Final de Grau, Estudis Anglesos,

Supervisor: Dr. Rodrigo Andrés

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Coordinació d'Estudis
Facultat de Filologia i Comunicació

Gran Via
de les Corts Catalanes, 585
08007 Barcelona

Tel. +34 934 035 594
fil-coord@ub.edu
www.ub.edu

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Title: The Wilderness as a Queer Refuge: A Multimedia Exploration from the 19th Century to Present Day

Abstract (English)

This text explores the affinity lesbians, and queer people in general, have towards the wilderness and undeveloped spaces through a variety of media including literature, visual art, and audiovisuals. The objective of this paper is to better understand the reasons for this interest and how homosexuality and the wilderness have become part of our contemporary zeitgeist in fiction. Using mostly North American examples from primarily the 19th to the 21st century, I approach the ways capitalism has harmed *and* helped this trend and to what extent its fictitious representation reflects reality. This research project serves more as an anthropological study than a criticism or analysis through which a certain theoretical framework is employed. The methodological focus is on making connections through the patterns found both in the past and present relating to LGBT living environments and the housing desires of lesbians with a sociological perspective. The emphasis is, therefore, on the political and social context of the time during which these trends were popular.

Key Words: Lesbians, contemporary art and literature, the wilderness, urban spaces

Títol: La terra salvatge com un refugi queer: una exploració multimèdia del segle XIX fins el present

Resum (Català)

Aquest text explora l'afinitat que tenen les lesbianes i les persones "queer" en general amb la terra salvatge i els espais no desenvolupats a través de diversos mitjans com la literatura i obres audiovisuals. L'objectiu d'aquest estudi és entendre els motius pels quals existeix aquesta vinculació entre l'homosexualitat i la terra salvatge, i la representació de com les lesbianes desitgen viure, tant en el món fictici, com a la realitat contemporània. Utilitzant exemples majoritàriament Nord Americans del segle XIX fins el segle XXI, exemplifico

com el capitalisme ha malmès i/o ajudat aquesta tendència i fins a quin punt la seva representació fictícia reflexiona sobre la realitat. Aquest projecte de recerca pretén ser més un estudi antropològic que una crítica o anàlisi amb un marc teòric concret. El plantejament metodològic té una perspectiva sociològica i estableix connexions entre patrons passats i presents dels entorns on volen viure les persones LGBT i els habitatges desitjats de les lesbianes. Com aquest desig ha format part del nostre Zeitgeist (“esperit del temps”) contemporani en la ficció, el trobem, aleshores, en el context polític i social del moment en què aquestes tendències van ser populars.

Paraules Clau: Lesbianes, art i literatura contemporània, terra salvatge, l’espai urbà

“The queer drive towards escapism is a longstanding cultural marker.”
(White, 2020)

Introduction:

I chose to pursue this area of study because it was one that I had been interested in since 2018. I wanted to learn more about how LGBT people found and constructed their own spaces and communities and how one could maintain a sense of community, even when living or daydreaming of living away from civilization. This research looks at sources across different decades and helped me understand how economic systems shape culture and how tragedy can simultaneously bring us together (as in the case of the HIV/AIDS epidemic) or separate us (as seen with the Covid-19 pandemic). I was first drawn to this concept by the boom I saw in cottagecore-related content on social media. I was fascinated in seeing whether it was something new within the queer community or whether there was a history behind the wilderness serving as a safe place for queer people. I believe that interest in this trend is sparked by literature and fictional depictions of idealized rural living but that events in recent years (primarily the Coronavirus Pandemic) have amplified this interest.

The theoretical framework, as mentioned before, is not strictly ecofeminist or Marxist. This is partly due to my desire to focus on the individual relationships between queer people and nature and partly because concentrating exclusively on the former theoretical frameworks would limit my perspective on possible outcomes to my question regarding the position lesbians and queer people occupy in the domestic sphere. How urban and rural spaces contribute to their politics is also of interest to me.

The main challenge of this paper was the number of sources I could find (both academic and non-academic). I tried to strike a balance between using published papers from academic sources and intellectuals established in the field of queer ecology such as Catriona Sandilands and living spaces along with observations from queer people themselves. It would be an injustice to ignore the voices of many LGBT Millennials and Generation Z who are not published but whose opinions and speculations on newer trends (primarily cottagecore) hold merit. Giving value to the thoughts and experiences of young queer people is important to me as it helps move them from (an already predisposed)

object-position to one of agency within their own academic subject-position. That said, I had to be selective when deciding which comments left on YouTube videos to include as my goal is not to push a curated narrative but rather to show the wide range of ties queer people have to this fantasy. Capturing that in its entirety is impossible, which leads me to my next challenge.

I was restricted by the length and time I had to work on this paper. These constraints meant that as much as I would have loved to include how other cultures and queer folk experience nature by looking at the intersectionality between race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, it was beyond the scope of this paper. I must mention however, that due to the location where most of the fiction is set, a closer inspection of its colonialist and patriarchal origins would be vital to getting a clearer image of who this escapist fantasy is for and who has access to it. Its relevance within this paper, especially with the discussions of cottagecore due to the Eurocentric vision of land ownership and the varying degrees of ethical practices people engage in play a big role in who gets to participate in turning their dreams into reality.

This troubling idea of *who* the wilderness belongs to and how we can reinstate and do justice to marginalized communities is certainly a topic I am interested in, but for now, this paper aims to ask and answer questions relating to the recurring trope of the wilderness as a queer refuge in both literature and pop culture, primarily from the 19th century onwards.

This exploration is divided into subsections starting with the depiction of directionality in queer or queer-coded characters in primarily North American and British literature and European multimedia. An author's motives for *why* a character may leave civilization affect how they express themselves in the wilderness. Without delving too deeply into cognitive linguistics, briefly consider the implications of language as a reflection of culture, and how leaving an urban space to find peace in a natural environment can be viewed from opposing image schema (mental depictions of our embodied interactions with the world). Essentially, we are to consider whether queer people are running away *from* or running away *to*. While ultimately, they result in similar conclusions, I am most interested in one's intentions and ideas of self-determination. Oscar Wilde's famous quote; "Life imitates Art far more than

Art imitates Life" from *The Decay of Lying*, (1889) is therefore very relevant to this evaluation.

I consider how capitalism has facilitated and been detrimental to queerness in the city and wilderness and how nature is framed around men (both straight and gay) in literature. I look at how this may vary with lesbians, and finally, I see what lasting impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had and whether this pattern has any staying power.

1. Origins

“sense of belonging is possible in part because wilderness provides opportunities to escape (to escape structure, judgment, and technology) and to experience bodily awakenings and connections (kinesthetic awareness, sensory engagement with natural processes).”

Meyer, A., & Borrie, B. (2013), p.303

What do women have in common with nature? Historically and culturally, a lot. From the way flowers and fruit are constantly regarded as yonic symbols to the stages of the moon that replicate and sync with menstrual cycles, it would be easy to adopt an essentialist ecofeminist attitude about women and their ‘intrinsic’ relationship with nature. That said, some women seem to have a greater affinity for nature and specifically living in nature than others. Broadly speaking, queer women and sapphic people in particular seem to be drawn to an idealized vision of rural living_ “wilderness does not so much offer space for women and gbtq to resist hetero-patriarchy as it offers space for creative expression and to experience engagement with other, non-judgmental things.” (Borrie, et al., 2012, p.72) It appears then, that the attraction of women towards the woods is bilateral. Women are drawn to nature as an antidote for the very reasons they are repelled by urban living. This topic is especially fascinating when we consider women’s historical and present-day reality, their financial and social restrictions. Due to 1st and 2nd wave feminism and workers movements supporting women in the work sphere as well as the destigmatizing of

unmarried women and lesbians, the concept of the nuclear family has long since been disrupted. Because of this, there is little need (or willingness) to remain in urban and semi-urban patriarchal environments like the suburbs.

This subject gains a level of nuance found when we consider lesbians. The primary focus while examining relationships and nature will be a queer one, with an emphasis on sapphic relationships and lesbians' personal relationship with nature. Whether these relationships are explicitly romantic or whether these characters are explicitly gay is not the priority. It is also imperative to consider gay men, their role and position in how this trope has been constructed, and more importantly, how, and why exactly this concept varies traditionally and culturally between the two groups.

With the 2020 Coronavirus, came the popularization of a recently coined term: Cottagecore. First having emerged from the social media site Tumblr in 2018, the 'core' or 'aesthetic', used as internet lexicon to mean something that is (predominantly) visually or aurally pleasing quickly rose to popularity in mainstream culture. This was likely due to the pandemic, where for many stuck inside small city apartments, a cottage surrounded by land or forest would be a haven. The term found a home with the online queer community (predominantly Millennials and Gen Z), especially amongst lesbians with whom the term Cottagecore Lesbians was coined.

Visit TikTok, Twitter, Tumblr, or practically any online space where there's a conglomeration of queer women and you'll find a plethora of young women talking about going to the wilderness with their same-sex lover. One example of this is TikTok user @landofbella who participated in a now-deleted 'Lesbian 10 Finger Challenge' the goal being to see how many stereotypical lesbian traits you fall into. 'Put a finger down if you have ever thought about moving to a cottage in the woods with your wife' (n.d) the audio says. Bella nods and smiles widely in response, effectively putting down a finger.

But the connection between lesbians and anti-urban living is not new and in fact, Kazyak (2012, p.825) comments that there's "a gendered dimension to the geography of sexual

minorities, as gay couples are more likely to live in cities than are lesbian couples''. Since the late 60s there has been international interest in 'Womyns Lands' and similar lesbian separatist movements built to create communes, communities, and villages away from men. This reality bleeds into the imaginary as well and Sandilands gives proof of the effect these politics had in literature with Sally Miller Gearhart's 1979 speculative fiction novel, *The Wanderground*, a world where women are "freed from oppressive male influence, were able to live together in polygynous sexual relationships in a rural world that was actively and intentionally separate from destructive, male-dominated cities. (...)" (Sandilands, 2005). This fading practice differs from cottagecore desires of the 21st century because of its exclusionary politics and its emphasis on community, social cohesion, and teamwork.

Unlike cottagecore, which highlights and celebrates femininity in a rural space, empirically and historically there does not seem to be much space for queer femininity in rural spaces where attributes such as being hardworking and self-sufficient are tied to an accepted masculinity, "wild lands were once seen as territories of men, virility, aggressiveness and masculinity" (Meyer & Borrie, 2013 p.6). In contrast, femininity (in women) is tied to domesticity, heteronormativity, and, in men, disapproval or harassment. "The construction of gay as effeminate also contains geographical meanings, namely, as being incompatible with rurality. In contrast, lesbian as butch coincides with rurality." (Kazyak, 2012, p.836)

Cottagecore has grown in popularity because young lesbians are less inclined to label themselves following a butch-femme dichotomy and femininity as part of the lesbian identity has undergone several significant developments. Cottagecore ultimately exists only as an escapist fantasy for many women, who neither have the economic resources to be able to move to a forest or farm somewhere nor the knowledge to realistically provide for themselves with, for example, a vegetable garden or beekeeping business.

Running Away From or Running Away To?

Fine artist Roxana Halls' painting, *Laughing While Leaving* (2017) is part of her series begun in 2017 'Laughing While'. In this painting, we can see two joyful women in the foreground holding hands with a bag and cat carrier while in the background a house is on fire. Here the intentionality is clear, 'leaving' the toxic domestic sphere to presumably go somewhere better and less stifling. It is not the only painting in this series that shows a house on fire. In *Laughing While Perching (a vulturous boredom)* (2021) a woman sits barefoot, up high on the branch of a tree laughing with her eyes closed while nearby flames escape from the windows of a house in a suburban neighborhood. Halls herself is a lesbian and was inspired to do a series of women laughing while doing 'mundane' activities, stating that "Acts of political resistance come in many forms and when I paint images of women laughing, eating, reclining, reading or simply looking, I am always cognizant of the fact that the most seemingly innocuous actions can be subversive." (Hall, 2020) *Laughing While Running (desert road)* (2022) also depicts two women joined by the hand, barefoot and with no possessions save for their heels, a jacket, and small purse. There are no manmade structures in the background, they are surrounded by mountains and green and brown vegetation. The only human structure is the paved road they are running on and a car in the distance with its headlights on. The car acts as a physical manifestation of this conundrum, is it moving and following them? Or has it been parked and abandoned by the two women? These women have nothing but the clothes on their backs and we cannot see what they are running to or running from, but they are gleefully in their escape.

The image of women burning down the house and all that is represented by 'the house' and by a larger extension, the suburbs can be found in literature too. *Housekeeping* (1980) by Marilynne Robinson is an example of this. Sylvie and Ruthie (aunt and niece) 'unhouse' themselves from dogmatic and restrictive structures by setting their house on fire and leaving structured civilization.

We can therefore consider Robinson and Hall's portrayals of women destroying the home and leaving the heteronormative domestic as a subversion of gender roles and societal

expectations, qualities that speak deeply to the queer feminist experience. Besides the suburbs being an incompatible location for lesbians, the city also possesses hurdles for young lesbians that may influence a young woman's decision to escape into the woods.

2. Queer City vs Queer Wilderness

“The pervasive assumption that queer communities are essentially urban has had the effect of erasing the ongoing presence of rural gay men and lesbians whose lives might not look much like Christopher Street.”

Sandilands, (2005)

The connections gay men have to urban environments, I would argue, are stronger than those lesbians have, and I believe this is largely due to the intersectionality of a lesbian's identity. A woman or someone who may be perceived as a woman (regardless of gender presentation) may face double the threat of being attacked or harassed, and this vulnerability increases with additional factors such as being of a marginalized race or transgender. Browne and Brown (2016) also mention this stating that “Whilst the city affords women freedom in their financial independence and anonymity, it is equally portrayed as a space of fear and danger for women both in the past and present (Pain and Smith, 2008).” Therefore despite the historical formation of LGBTQ communities in urban areas “so much so that Julie Abraham has argued that homosexuals have become ‘models of the city itself’ (2009, p. xix). (...)” This perception is not all inclusive. “women's explicit erasure from the city, in narratives of this group's fear of city spaces, and weaker economic and political power contradict the neighbourhood/bar typology of LGBTQ spaces as being equally safe, useful and/or liberating for all genders, as well as races and classes.” (Giesecking, 2016, p.12)

The loss of lesbian bars and spaces in the city in recent years, only an estimated 27 bars left in the USA compared to 200 in 1980 according to The Lesbian Bar Project (<https://www.lesbianbarproject.com>) as of 2023 may also be part of the reason why lesbians are interested in leaving. Many young women and non-binary lesbians look for

solace and a space they can care for outside of the city. I think physical lesbian spaces are incredibly important but with the increase of online spaces, it seems that this need is less relevant compared to 50 years ago when having urban places (feminist book shops, community centers, bars, etc) were imperative for the gay liberation movement, to mobilize protests, advocate for change and as a basic way to find one another. There are limited opportunities to find fellow queer people in real life so technology has since made way for a new kind of community, one that can be accessed regardless of area code. Generation Z (the generation most attracted to the idea of living in the woods), has grown up without having many options to explore their local lesbian community or culture. The reality is that for many young adults (especially those still living with their parents), online engagement with an abstract lesbian community is a safer and more accessible option than driving to a major city to find a single lesbian bar.

Whether technology does more to connect us or isolate us depends on its users because while it's great that young queer people can find one another and explore their sexuality on social media platforms, technology also eliminates the need to seek these communities outside of their homes. Gay culture has also become a lot more mainstream in recent years as more media and celebrities come out in favor of same-sex relationships and storytelling. The 'strength in numbers' mentality that was necessary during Stonewall in the 60s and during the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 80s seems to be a thing of the past as young queers seem to favor individually curated online spaces to collective group activism.

Besides technology making us simultaneously more connected and more isolated, the increasingly individualistic nature of Western (North American in concrete) society caused by late-stage capitalism or neoliberalism plays a large part in this interest in the wild. These buzzwords are more than just a passing trend to understand what queer people are prioritizing financially and how these financial structures provide a bigger picture for understanding what decisions are being made and why. Things are rarely black or white, so we have to consider, whether capitalism is beneficial or harmful for queer individuals.

Capitalism: Harmful or Helpful?

Alexander Ávila comments that it was not until the 19th and 20th centuries, that we see a turning point in the domestic and work sphere, thus creating the “conditions for a homosexual identity” In fact, “John D’Emilio a historian for sexuality argues that queer communities and identities didn’t emerge until the capitalist economy really began to take off. (...)” It is due to the implementation of our current capitalist economy that “individuals no longer depended on family units to have ones living needs fulfilled. Instead, they could sell their labor to a local capitalist and become self-sufficient.” while there are some places that try to enact a queer political structure and society parallel to that of the mainstream, heteronormative society, “in a market economy like in the one we live in today in the United States, queerness as a private act of consumption seems to be the future most of us have accepted.” (Ávila, 2022)

This begs the question, is the (often sapphic) desire to escape from society a reaction to or a product of capitalism? Lesbian couples would not be able to live alone without the 19th-century separation of labor and family into the domestic and work sphere much less own land. Less than 20% of the world's land is owned by women (Villa, 2017) and in the US this is further problematized when we consider its colonialist origins from which many indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans suffered.

To start with, the interest in owning arches of land, and being part of a farmer’s community or culture is very rare as many lesbians instead fantasize of smaller scale objectives (such as a personal vegetable garden or chicken coop), once again reinstating the individualism behind this trend. This escape into the wilderness is not one related to profit nor is it a test of bravery. It’s for personal consumption and survival, personal happiness, and mental health. It is undeniable that queerness has been more accepted and normalized than ever, but lesbian identity is still invisible and over 520 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been proposed since 2023. (Peele, 2023) Attacks on the rights of transgender children and adults restricting access to healthcare, safety, and acceptance in work and school show a disturbing trend. We do not have the excuse that there is nothing left to fight for. Nor can

we allow ourselves the luxury of believing that online activism is as successful as group, community activism. Shares on social media to raise awareness simply do not replace mass protests, rallies, or strikes. The weight of our collective burden and trauma may feel out-of-touch for many Gen Z who grew up with same-sex marriage laws in a society post-HIV/AIDS crisis, but if this escapism fantasy is a reaction against capitalism, is it fair to prioritize our individual happiness over the shared cause of fighting for our rights and the rights of our community?

Ávila says that capitalism gave queer people the economic freedom to avoid heterosexual marriages. Since queerness has moved from temporary actions that one participated in, to a solid identity, it, like any identity, has become politicized. In this regard, one could consider the act of living alone in the woods as two women radical. The idea that queer individuals have found freedom living on the peripheries of society is nothing new. Gay cowboys were prevalent in the mid to late 1800s (Miller, 2021) and despite the period lasting only 30 years or so, the lasting impact it has on our modern perception of the US and freedom has endured. It has encouraged and perpetuated the mythos of the Old Wild West, making it a popular trope within the gay community today.

For this subsection of gay men in the wild, art imitated life. These relationships were common and accepted and now we see how queer artists in the modern day have adopted cowboy imagery into their work to pay homage to the origins of this phenomenon. By challenging the master narrative, that all cowboys were straight, white, solitary men, these artists approximate themselves closer to what relationships were really like on the Western frontier and create visibility. The following are some notable examples where this can be found: Lil Nas X and his popular song *Old Town Road* (2018), country musician Orville Peck, Mitski's 2018 album *Be the Cowboy*, Taylor Swift's song; *cowboy like me* from her 2020 album *evermore*.

Marginalized voices taking back the wilderness in a way that is not associated with the mainstream gives way to a queer interpretation. Albeit it's not concerning sexuality but as an opposition to the standard heterosexual family unit. When it comes to lesbians being

attracted to the idea of living in the forest, the path is less clear. It's difficult to see whether historically lesbians have been influenced by art or literature or if the prevalence of lesbians and queer women in fiction is inspired by real relocation trends.

We could attribute this resurgence in interest in isolated living in the 19th and 20th centuries to first and second-wave feminism fighting for women's rights regarding property ownership and career opportunities. The increase of women in the workforce (over 50% by the 70s), has contributed positively to the GDP of the United States, and with the increase of pink capitalism (companies appealing to the LGBT community due to it becoming 'mainstream'), the fantasy of affluence and choice of dwelling has largely been attributed to capitalism. The reality is a little less optimistic however as 28% of LBGT youths have experienced homelessness and housing instability, which is 120% higher compared to their heterosexual, cisgender peers. (The Trevor Project, 2022)

LGBT adults are also more likely to face homelessness. Community shelters and specific LGBT+ community-based organizations are what help a lot of people find safety and shelter during these times. To see how urban spaces have been part of the ethos of queer culture, look no further than *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman (1891-1892) in which various poems celebrate the accepting nature of the city, eg. Drum-Taps. "Proud and passionate city – mettlesome, mad, extravagant city ! / Behold me – incarnate me as I have incarnated you ! (...) / whom you adopted I have adopted," (p.231) and more recently, the depiction of New York's Ballroom scene of the late 20th century in the TV show *Pose* (2018). The city meant finding community and creating a financial microcosm for queer businesses and artists.

It shows how important community is, even as Margret Thatcher's neoliberalist attitudes bleed into North American conscious. In her 1987 interview where she famously claimed that there was no such thing as society, but rather "individual men and women (...) families and no government can do anything" are contradicted by late 20th century attitudes as there was a strong sense of solidarity between the gay and lesbian community. First in the 60s and 70s while fighting against persecution and then in the 80s and 90s due

largely to the shared trauma of the AIDS crisis. The early 21st century also created moments of unity while fighting for equal marriage laws, but the Trump administration and subsequent Covid-19 pandemic has significantly damaged the morale of Generation Z (people ages 15-25). 42% of American Gen Z reported “feelings of hopelessness” and depression, which is nearly double the amount for Americans over 25 (23%) .(Stern, 2022) Besides the fragmentation within the queer community itself, external factors such as the pandemic have made it harder for people to find community and gather in the same ways that they once may have. Neoliberalism’s role in the decline in community engagement has been significant however in recent years and the queer community is not exempt from this.

Neoliberalism and capitalism also act as a hindrance in pursuing this queer fantasy because how close your dreams are within reach depends on the economic status of your country and your class status. For George and Lennie, in *Of Mice and Men*, their dependence on the capitalist structure on the farm during the Great Depression in the US acted as a barrier to their escapist dream. On the other hand, women who did not have financial power depended largely on their male relatives to support them so unless a woman could form a lavender marriage, as Ávila comments, it is women’s rights and modern capitalism that have facilitated queer relationships. Women no longer need men to provide for them economically or keep them 'safe' (from other men). For lesbians, this is doubly important because women could create family units and pairs without a man and have more economic freedom to decide what kind of living arrangements they want.

We can see this connection of wilderness as an alternative to capitalism in songs too, lesbian musician Brandi Carlile’s song, ‘You and Me On The Rock’ (2021) is a criticism of suburban development in nature and corporate greed. Lyrics such as “There's nothin' in that town I need / After everything we've been through / Me out in my garden and you out on your walk / (...) / I don't need their money, baby / Just you and me on the rock,” express anti-capitalist sentiment and the priority of love for fulfillment. Sandilands writes that lesbian feminists have "consciously connected a radical feminist politics with a radical ecological politics." and that writers have "overtly tied the destruction of nature to patriarchal, heterosexist social institutions." since the 60s and 70s. (Sandilands, 2005)

Queer artist Aeris's song *Cottagecore* (2021) also conveys this with their lyrics in the first stanza: 'It's you and me and anarchy, my dear' in the second stanza the subject mentions their political drive with the lyrics 'We could watch the news and write letters / To a congressman we both hate / Slowly steeping in our disappointment / Realize that you can't escape from it' and finally in the last stanza they reconcile with this conflict of interest between wanting a peaceful escape from the world with their lover and at the same time being involved with the betterment of the world and politics. ' Will that fantasy survive? / Will it have to step aside / When there's so much more to fight for'. In Aeris's case the two cannot coexist.

In 'Wilderness Experiences as Sanctuary and Refuge from Society' (Borrie et al., 2012) the authors argue that the wilderness is not a space of isolation but rather "a place of refuge and sanctuary," where the wilderness permits "experiences of connection, engagement and belonging." (p.70) The ungovernable dominion is therefore framed as a place that provides comfort and safety for a disillusioned individual "wild places are often sought, or preferred, for escape from the personal and social expectations, pressures, and demands of everyday life." (p.71) Despite the traumas you can acquire from living in the city, the wilderness is not the antidote to capitalism, the authors quote Zahniser who "suggested in 1955, "the true wilderness experience is one, not of escaping, but of finding one's self"(p.60)" (Borrie et al., 2012, p.71). In passing through wilderness, as compared to conquering and claiming it, we can find ourselves clearly reflected back." The wilderness serves us then as a mirror, not as a tool for transformation. What we want to find is already within us, it cannot be manufactured. Just as the wilderness is organic and spontaneous in its creation, so are humans part of that instability and uncertainty when we leave the thresholds of a carefully curated front lawn.

3. The Wilderness Through a Heterosexual and Homosexual Lens

"constructions of male femininity align with gay sexuality but not rurality, which may mean that for some gay men, the ability to stay put in rural areas might be constrained."

(Kazyak, 2012, p.2)

Before looking at the differences in sexuality, I want to comment on the gender differences that are found within this trope. To begin with, examples in which heterosexual men go into the wilderness in pairs are less common. More frequently, in Western literature, men end up in the wilderness by themselves and against their will, like the protagonist Robinson Crusoe in the 1719 novel by Daniel Defoe or Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie. When men do go into the wilderness as a group, they are also subjected to unpleasant experiences both mental and physical. The wilderness, becomes a liminal space, not a final destination, as such a place (one without superficial structures, patriarchal or otherwise), is impossible for these cisgender, straight men to find meaning in. Even if a superimposed hierarchy is established, like in the case of *Lord of the Flies* “We’ve got to have rules and obey them. After all, we’re not savages. We’re English, and the English are best at everything.” (William Golding, 1954) or *Heart of Darkness* (Joseph Conrad, 1899) the wilderness is depicted as the invisible enemy. It is something to be conquered or harnessed, the displacement of Western men in the wilderness as an allegory for colonialism and imperialism has long been established, seen even in science fiction narratives such as *Avatar* (2009). Other motifs that are tied to fictional men’s relationship with nature include a descent into madness, a collapse of society, and a disconnect of values and ethics. Because wilderness stories centered around boys and men tend to be about survival rather than pleasure, violence, and danger take center stage, making these repeating themes important even if the experience in the wilderness is ‘positive’ or ‘neutral’ (like 12-year-old protagonist Sam Gribble in *My Side of the Mountain*, 1959 by Jean George).

The experience is a transformative one, one that intends to prove a man’s self-sufficiency and masculinity, hence the popularity of the 19th-century philosophical movement Transcendentalism which subsequently inspired Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854). Characteristics that this movement championed such as; the importance of nature, spirituality, and living simply, along with the desire to get away from the ‘corruption’ of society seem to lend themselves to the modern escapist fantasy of lesbians

who want to move into the forest to “live deliberately” (Walden 1854, p.69). Modern day rural escapism seems more closely linked to Transcendentalism in contrast to Solarpunk (an artistic and social movement dissimilar to cottagecore as it focuses on intertwining nature with community and technology), or the characteristics found in the pastoral genre which presents depictions of nature with idealism and holds erotic and religious connotations. Escaping into the woods with your same-sex lover is not a desire to return to a past that never existed, but rather an interest in creating a routine less based around menial work, production, and the illusion of productivity in modern Western society.

Gay Men in the Wilderness

Because nature is uncontrollable by man, society's restrictive rules do not extend to forest spaces in literature. There are no natural binaries or man-made categories in the same way we see them in cities with certain neighborhoods being more affluent than others or possessing certain qualities (financial districts, art districts, gay villages, etc.) This limitless space opens up a place for dialogue and exploration of the self and one's relationship with others without the pressures of gender roles or marital expectations (consider Robin Hood and the Merry Men, outlaws who lived in Sherwood Forest, or Peter Pan and the Lost Boys, young boys who create a faux-family). These examples, among others, turn the amorality of the forest into an opportunity for authenticity and enjoyment instead of immorality.

It's not difficult to make the connection between queer culture and the forest if we accept Susan Song's (2012) explanation of queer theory, “The term “queer” implies resistance to the “normal,” where “normal” is what seems natural and intrinsic. Heteronormativity is a term describing a set of norms based on the assumption that everyone is heterosexual, gendered as male/female and monogamous, along with the assumed and implied permanency and stability of these identities.” In the same vein, Borrie et al. (2012) state: “Wildness is uncaged, self-willed, self-governing, and not subject to the impositions of another.” (p.71) The opposition between the wilderness and civilization therefore runs parallel to homosexuality and heterosexuality. Where in urban spaces gender and gender roles are constructed, in the wilderness they are deconstructed.

“ Queer theory also critiques homonormativity, in which non-heterosexual relationships are expected to resemble heteronormative ones, for instance in being gender-normative, monogamous, and rooted in possession of a partner.” (Song, 2012) Using this definition of queer, anything outside of this ‘normal’ including relationships between characters (despite them not being romantically or sexually queer), can be considered queer.

Therefore, plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare, 1595) can be read as queer as through the forest as a vehicle for change, characters can act on their instincts and without judgment or based on their respective positions in status. “The forest has been interpreted as a place of irrationality and as a place where passion and desire rule,” away from the eyes of authorities, the four lovers are able to explore these possibilities. Despite magic being the instigator, “The forest is a place where transgressions of Athens’ laws and morals are made possible. The heteronormative patriarchy can potentially be challenged in the wood, which creates space that allows for queer, transgressive passions. ” (Dalmaijer, 2019, p.8) This analysis becomes all the more apparent when seen with pairs of same-sex couples rather than groups or individuals.

While a narrative persists of the city representing freedom for the young gay man moving away from his small town in search of opportunity (as seen in *Dating Amber*, 2020), the inclusion of gay and bisexual men in the wilderness is also recurring. Male pairings and how isolation in nature can become a refuge for these ambiguous or explicitly romantic couples can be found in an array of media such as illustrated children's book series: *Frog and Toad* (Arnold Lobel, 1970-1979). The series about two anthropomorphic amphibians who are friends and whom, many believe to be, Lobel’s daughter included, lovers, commenting that they are “of the same sex, and they love each other,”. Lobel himself came out as gay in 1974, during the creation of this series and his daughter believes the series helped him come out. (Stokes, 2016)

George and Lennie from *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck (1937) and *The Professor's House* (1925) by Willa Cather, novels during which queer relationships are facilitated in

rural America are also explored. George and Lennie share daydreams of domestic rural bliss away from the capitalist exploitation of the farm owner's son, Curley. Their dependence on work, especially during the Great Depression, makes their dream all the more precarious. But having their farm is not the only thing that appeals to these two men, belonging to a place and creating a home is also a source of comfort to them. This can be seen when Lennie comments; "We could live offa the fatta the lan'!", George replies; "Sure (...) All kin's a vegetables in the garden, and if we want a little whisky we can sell a few eggs or something, or some milk. We'd jus' live there. We'd belong there.'" (Steinbeck, 1937, p.56) Although tragedy befalls them, their escapism provides them, and other members of the farm, with a form of healthy escapism. *Of Mice and Men* is not the only novel Steinbeck wrote "that explores the ways that ecological understanding warrants a conception of human relationships and how it may lead logically to homosocial and even homoerotic bonds between men—that is, to a queer ecology" (Person, 2004, p.8). Person also makes the case that living "nonhierarchically" in nature should transfer over to other relationships and indeed, George and Lennie's relationship has been viewed as a healthy queer one due to their equality in class and gender as well as their mutual respect and love for one another.

Cather's *The Professor's House*, section 2: Tom Outland's Story, becomes an interlude in what is otherwise a story about a fairly heteronormative nuclear family. The relationship between St. Peter (a university professor) and Tom Outland (an old student of his who will go on to be engaged to his daughter) proves to be deeper than surface-level affection. Another example of a queer relationship in the novel is the lifestyle Tom Outland and Rodney Blake share (along with Henry Atkins, an old man who cooks and cleans for them). The three men live together on the Blue Mesa and venture through an unbounded and lawless environment.

Cather shows the cracks in her protagonist's heterosexual marriage and goes as far as to almost kill Godfrey St. Peter with a gas leak in his office, a death that St. Peter almost accepts until he is rescued by Augusta, not his wife, but a seamstress who rents the room. The relationship between heteronormative life and death then, as a queer character cannot

be more obvious. To further recover, he distances himself from his family by stating that he wants to spend the summer alone.

More explicitly we have Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist, cowboys from the 2005 American movie: *Brokeback Mountain* based on Annie Proulx's 1997 story. Here, the wilderness gives them the chance to break free from the insular towns and ideologies they come from, thus allowing them to turn away from convention. Their repeated escapes from their heterosexual town life into nature show how the wilderness became a refuge for them. A place where they can meet and express their passions and love for one another freely and without taboo. Unlike the stories of straight men in the wilderness, the threat of death comes not from nature but from the urban space.

Some honorable mentions in which homosexuality is viewed or permitted in the wilderness can be found in the Brazilian movie *Vento Seco* (2020) by Daniel Nolasco, in which most of the sex and intimacy between the two men occurs in the forest and *Riverdale* (2017-2023) character Kevin Keller who, while closeted, resorts to hooking up in his town's forest. There are likely many other stories that depict homosexual love thriving in the wilderness, away from society and we must consider not only the social and historical implications of this 'hidden' love but also, who is conducting these narratives.

Lobel was gay and there have been some strong cases and speculations around Steinbeck and Cather's queerness. While some sexual ambiguity was permitted around the creations and creators of these works, it hasn't been until recently that there's been a major push towards normalizing queer content. There were and are countless forms of sexuality-based oppression at artistic and state levels, so it's no surprise that the city would not be considered the most hospitable setting for same-sex couples hoping for privacy or respite. The Hays Code, officially titled: *A Code to Govern the Making of Motion and Talking Pictures* (published in 1934 by the Motion Picture Association of America) to establish 'high principles of public responsibility' (p.3) was formed to protect 'the correct standards of life' (p.6). It censored deviations from heterosexuality (among other things) in Hollywood films for over 30 years. The queer community took another hit later during the

Lavender Scare, the systemic oppression of LGBTQ+ people in government spaces prompted by McCarthyism (from the early 1940s to the mid-1950s). Then in Britain under Margaret Thatcher's conservative government, Section 28 (a piece of legislation that banned local authorities from 'promoting homosexuality' in schools and libraries) was in effect from 1988 to 2003. These are just three examples of how the social and political context of the time may have affected where these writers chose to set their characters' displays of liberation.

4. Lesbians in the Wilderness

“Wild places offer an escape from negotiating appearances and the constructs of femininity in America.”
(Borrie & Meyer, (2013), p.11)

In comparison, when women, and girls (not accompanied by other women) go into the woods willingly, it is usually to escape a danger or problem found or enforced by an authority (be it personal, such as a parental figure, or structural, like that of a government), eg. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). If a woman does encounter a threat within the woods, it is often masculine in nature (ie. The wolf from *Little Red Riding Hood*).

A positive escape highlighting an intimate relationship is that of Anne Shirley and Diana Barry in *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) by L. M Montgomery. Their friendship caused controversy, mostly due to Laura Robinson's paper; *Bosom Friends Lesbian Desire in L.M. Montgomery's Anne Books*. (2004) Robinson (along with others) has considered their love for one another to extend past platonic and most of their most emotionally charged scenes occur in forests or surrounded by nature. For example, when Anne first meets Diana in her garden, they perform a vow of friendship; 'I'll repeat the oath first. I solemnly swear to be faithful to my bosom friend, Diana Barry, as long as the sun and moon shall endure. Now you say it and put my name in.' (Montgomery, 1908) Likewise when they are forbidden from being friends over an accident, in a valley in the woods is where they profess their

undying love for one another, and Diana gives Anne a lock of her hair. Montgomery had read about lesbianism, understood same-sex desire, and even had a female fan who claimed to be in love with her. Although Montgomery negates being a lesbian in her journal, many believe this could be due to repression and internalized homophobia. Regardless of the author's sexuality, “lesbian desire in Montgomery's works is not an anachronistic issue, reflecting only our late twenty-first-century attitudes towards same-sex relationships; on the contrary, it arises directly from Montgomery's fiction and journals” (Robinson, (2004), p.13) The valleys and lanes in *Anne of Green Gables* become characters in the series synonymous with freedom and imagination, giving Anne the possibility to create worlds and stories with her companions. The young women do not live in the woods, but their proximity to the wilderness act as a haven and help Anne keep some of her independence.

Other classic examples include the queer family structure found in Disney's 1959 movie, *Sleeping Beauty* in which 3 women fairies raise the princess as their own in the forest to keep her safe from Maleficent. Often when a young woman is alone in the woods and lacks accompaniment by a male character, she is subject to scrutiny and theories about her alleged lesbianism by the audience, (fans and haters alike). Elsa (*Frozen*, 2013), Merida (*Brave*, 2012), and Raya (*Raya and the Last Dragon*, 2021) are all Disney heroines who have been queer-coded. All three women spend time in the wilderness and make significant revelations about themselves and their realities. Merida goes into the woods to break a curse she caused after going against gender roles and refusing marriage, and Elsa's escape from her kingdom to the mountains and her song 'Let it Go' have widely been regarded as a coming-out anthem.

An example of close friends who live in a cottage in the woods is Liana and Alexa (from *Barbie and the Diamond Castle*, 2008) To the untrained eye Barbie seems like the pinnacle of heterosexuality, but recently many fans have picked up on the frequent sapphic undertones that can be spotted across the movie franchise. In this particular movie it's especially apparent. These two best friends live together, sing songs about their love for one another, and turn down the romantic advances of men to continue living together selling flowers. *Overanalyzing the Barbie Movies with Queer Marxist Theory* by Alexander

Ávila, *Barbie: A Queer Analysis (Barbie and the Diamond Castle)* by Aidan Elizabeth and countless other videos prove how Generation Z has adopted Barbie and various of its movies as queer media that offer an alternative economic system to capitalism still compatible with the dreams of living a cottagecore lifestyle.

Summerland (2020), tells the story of Alice Lamb, a lesbian writer in the 1940s who lives alone in an isolated cottage by the sea. She is forced to take in a child who had been evacuated from London due to the war and reluctantly forms a bond with the boy. We find out about her queer past through a series of flashbacks and later discover (with the protagonist) that the boy's mother and her past lover Vera are one and the same. The boy's father dies in the war and after some turmoil, the movie ends years later with Vera and Alice reunited and living happily in the cottage together with Vera's son.

Alternatively in the French movie *Summertime (La Belle Saison)* (2015), it is when the lesbian couple (Delphine, who is the daughter of farmers, and Carole, a city woman) move back to the countryside to help out on the farm after Delphine's father suffers from a stroke, that they realize that country life is much less accepting. After being caught by Delphine's mother, Carole is banished. But the conflict here is not a product of the environment but of the people in it and their conservative and homophobic attitudes. Had they moved to a farm by themselves, of their own volition, maybe their relationship would have been more successful. It is for this reason that I want to emphasize the importance of *wanting* to go to the countryside, the wilderness, the forest, or whatever sparse, rural environment. The call to the wilderness must be desired by both parties for personal reasons only, not due to outside (family or work) influences.

In the Studio Ghibli movie *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), Ursula, an artist who lives alone in a cabin in a forest invites Kiki to stay with her while she regains her powers to fly. Not only has this character been largely considered a lesbian icon by many young fans today, but so are the two older women who live together who also appear in this movie. Lesbian Twitter user and artist @MegLegbird tweeted "The way I'm interpreting this story is that a young sapphic girl feels extremely out of place (and even hurt) around these (straight) city

people who consider her strange. (...) The only way she is able to overcome this is by spending time with a mature, successful, established sapphic woman (artist in the woods) (...) and then with a much older lesbian couple who again show her how much she can be loved and accepted for who she is.” (Meg, 2017) Kiki’s delivery service came out in the late 80s but already by 2005 you can find blog posts of viewers speculating on the queerness of this film, among others from Studio Ghibli, namely *When Marnie Was There*, 2014 which also features an (initially ambiguous and romantically coded) relationship between two girls whose bond grows in the marshes and countryside near an abandoned mansion.

Whether these characters are canonically queer or not is irrelevant. What matters is that there are elements in these narratives that lesbian readers and watchers identify with and recognize. There is something that speaks to their gay experience. Some more examples of this troupe in TV and movies can be found in episode 9, *The Jelly Lakes*, Season 1 of *Tuca and Bertie*, where the protagonists visit Coach Meredith Maple and her wife, Pat, a lesbian couple who live in a cottage in the woods and engage in cottagecore activities like arts and crafts. It is also of note mentioning that Coach Meredith Maple is played by Jane Lynch who is a lesbian actress. (2019). Another place where the wilderness has become a sanctuary for queer people is in Amazon’s 2020 TV show ‘*The Wilds*’ where closeted religious Shelby confronts her queerness in the privacy and amorality of the deserted island with Toni, an out and proud indigenous lesbian. The first time Héloïse and Marianne from *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) kiss, is in a cave by the sea as opposed to the dark and sparse mansion where they stay, a place that also represents Héloïse’s heterosexual fate of marrying an Italian man. In *The half of it* (2020), Aster and Ellie leave their town to go swimming in a secluded hot spring in the woods. Although nothing romantic occurs between them, the scene brings the women closer and sets the stage for romance later in the movie.

Summertime director Catherine Corsini and her girlfriend and producer Elizabeth Perez worked on the film together. *The Half of it* screenwriter and director is also a lesbian as is Céline Sciamma, the writer and director of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. To an extent, this

answers our question about whether art or life initiates this trend. From this small handful of examples, I see it as a circular, symbiotic relationship. Queer women are the creators, target demographic and subjects in these depictions of domestic and passionate love set in the wilderness. This could be because queer women are already ‘marginalized’ from mainstream culture, so they are more likely or willing to cut ties with traditional work structures. Since there is less pressure to follow heteronormative canons of productivity and life fulfillment (having a steady job, marriage, children, etc.), there is more flexibility or viability in daydreaming and pursuing alternative living situations and settings.

“In contrast to feelings of alienation, separateness and otherness that participants described in society, in wilderness they described feelings of wholeness.” (Borrie et al., 2012, p.72) These women also reported feeling positive about their vulnerability as humans and animals in an ecosystem as opposed to gendered vulnerability or as subjects in an established category (lesbian, woman, etc.) The desires to own land and possess a wife; 19th-century aspirations, and expectations for a heterosexual man become irrelevant in the wilderness.

Sandilands in her essay; *Unnatural Passions?: Notes toward a Queer Ecology* (2005) makes the point that “More recent lesbian authors have, in fact, consciously taken on the idea that women in lesbian relationships might experience nature differently, and possibly more positively, than is generally the case within the confines of compulsory heterosexuality.” This contradicts the narrative that homosexuality is ‘unnatural’ or something borne in an urban setting, and instead “argues that heterosexism is the urban ‘ill’ to which lesbians must respond.” Proving through literature that in a healthier, homosocial society “women could create a more profound connection to each other and to nature.” (Sandilands, 2005)

Wilderness Desire During and Post-Pandemic

‘Sometimes the only gay scene is in your own bedroom.’

(Diamantopoulos, K. Personal Communication, May 1, 2023)

Wilderness as something purifying and better as a foil to manmade civilization can be found in literary references from as early as the ancient Greeks to earlier literary moments such as pastoral poetry, which was popular during the Renaissance. Because of the surplus of information that can be easily accessed by the internet, it feels like this desire is stronger than ever.

In YouTuber Quality Culture’s video, *Frog and Toad: The Philosophy of Simple Living Video Essay* She discusses cottagecore and user TheSuperRatt states that “cottagecore is a nostalgic escapism. (...) This attitude is sorely needed in a culture where “productivity” has become everything.” (2022) Similarly, user Michael Welsh commented that cottagecore is not “feasible as anything more than an aesthetic. It’s mostly embraced by city dwellers who yearn for that quiet pastoral country life (...)” He also remarks that the Covid-19 pandemic likely influenced the surge in popularity “during the lockdowns when people could live their cosy country life fantasy of prairie dresses and flowerpressing and sourdough, but gradually faded as people realised that as a lifestyle, cottagecore is unsustainable for most.”

These are all excellent points that have been taken into consideration since the global pandemic sparked many social changes and highlighted many areas of discontent and desire people were previously numb to, but the notion of women escaping to the wilderness goes beyond cottagecore and its whimsical fantasies. Since I am examining this paper from a lens that prioritizes fictional examples, engaging in wilderness escapism as a queer person counts as part of this pattern, even if during the pandemic it was most prevalent in the form of cottagecore. Brand theorizes that “In some ways, the escapist fantasy of cottagecore’s

rise in tandem with the pandemic can be viewed as a response to a loss of control over one's social interaction, whereby seeking isolation on one's own terms could make the forced seclusion seem more manageable.' (Brand, 2021) For some queer women who have faced rejection from their friends, family, or society, this voluntary isolation has its appeal.

Cottagecore has created a space for young lesbians fatigued by urban life to participate in activities and take back traditionally feminine and masculine hobbies and labor without heteronormative obligation. Waller states this succinctly by saying; 'The most powerful part of the gender expression reclamation found in Cottagecore is that no activity is coded in gendered ideas. There is a dismissal of the traditional ideas of outdoor vs indoor, hard vs soft labor.' (2022, p.32) Not all lesbians fit into the gender binary, not all lesbians are feminine and not all queer women who are into the idea of leaving the city to go to the wilderness are lesbians. This inclusion of other identities is what makes cottagecore unique as the perception of masculinity as a necessity in rural spaces as seen in Kazyak's paper, has not been embraced by Generation Z. Instead, a discourse has been created where femininity can be explored in a traditionally male-dominated environment. Although the trope of a witch living alone in the woods and all its queer connotations have been pervasive throughout history in fiction and real life, nurturing flowers and plants are not restricted to femininity or one gender. "Unlike other reactionary movements such as 'Trad Wives' — a right-wing mommy bloggers subculture who advocates a return to regressive gender roles — Cottagecore offers a vision of domestic bliss without servitude in the traditional binary framework," explains Slone (2020)

Two users who commented under lesbian YouTuber Strange ÆONS' video: *Tradwives & The Tumblr #Girl Ecosystem* state the following; "Cottage Core for a lot of communities just innately hits the idea of self sufficiency in a world where you are forced to rely on outside factors so much that it feels like you have no control over your life," and "queer people use the style as a form of escapism instead of oppression. They romanticise the idea of abandoning the cis, white, straight, and male dominated society and instead living the separated cottage core lifestyle." (K)EinKanal and Erin Christie respectively. Lastly, in an episode on *The Chosen Family Podcast*, Mak Ingemi, a TikTok lesbian talks about her

desire to move to the woods with her girlfriend asking, “You don’t want to get a little house in the woods and maybe some cats and it could be just you and me against the world?” (Gavin & Ingemi & Joy, 2023) The isolation that comes with moving away from society is acknowledged and wanted.

This rural escapism fantasy isn’t only bounded to lesbians and it’s significant to mention that making this dream a reality is most accessible to those who are white, able-bodied, and of middle and upper-class economic status “This cultural binarisation of country and city is a powerful diversion from the harms of capitalism as the underpinning, material system that shapes and pervades social and spatial inequality. Under covid, British media has become preoccupied by the ‘race for space’ and new valorizations of the rural, and media discourses of ‘exodus’ from the city to the country have intensified. (...)”. The intentions to move away “from urban aesthetics and frenetic work temporalities,” and ultimately, “a broader turning away from capitalist values” (Kay & Wood, 2021, p.2) are therefore at odds with the primary demographic for this desire. Nature and wilderness are commodified, as is everything under a capitalist economic structure, and those who can benefit from it will do so regardless of where their political values lie.

For many, cottagecore and rural spaces are not actively political but rather a place for healing and self-care. James O’Connor commented under Rowan Ellis’ video: *why is cottagecore so gay?* “As a gay man who grew up in rural Ireland, I really feel the need to de-bigot my cottagecore childhood. Since leaving home I got some houseplants, covered my walls in flower paintings and filled my life with poetry. Even though I’m now locked down in an urban setting, it feels like I’m reclaiming (at least a little bit) the idyllic childhood that I could’ve had if I hadn’t felt so ostracised.” Cavar expresses a similar sentiment, in their personal blog post *et tu, cottagecore?* (2018) claiming that for lesbians, the rural fantasy is “especially tempting because it offers an alternative to a society that is usually either hateful toward you or pretends you don’t exist. Perhaps also to help something or someone grow in ways we have been denied; to nurture other living things in the ways we wish we were nurtured. This is especially true, it seems, for lesbians who don’t want children” Slone also affirms this, “While cottagecore could easily be mistaken for an

escapist fantasy, its proponents insist it is a form of self-care.” (2020) Borrie et al., conducted 20 interviews with LGBTQ women to see how women experienced the wilderness and found that “A sense of ecological belonging represented the overarching wilderness experience for most study participants.” Most women expressed their “profound sense of connection” to themselves and the ecosystem. We are fundamentally part of nature and in its purest forms they found it provided a refuge “to escape the structures, judgments and technologies of society and re-connect to the body and to the natural world.” (2012, p.72)

Conclusions:

“I am sure we should not shut our hearts against the healing influences that nature offers us.”

(Montgomery, 1908)

As we can see, the interest and acknowledgment of the wilderness as a queer refuge are hardly new and perceiving it as a side effect of the Covid-19 pandemic would be a gross misrepresentation. In this case, like most things, I do not think the interest of sapphic people in going to the wilderness is one that stemmed from purely fictional means, nor has fiction that depicts this lifestyle strictly correlated to real-life instances. Instead, they are interwoven and made relevant time and time again with the various social and literary movements of each decade. We will always need community and whether that takes the form of found families in an urban space or connected through the internet, sharing tips and visions of a prosperous future cemented in queer ecology, it’s nice to know our imaginations will fill the gaps when reality proves too burdensome to bear. Literature and art while already a form of escapism, continues to provide a place where queer women and others can be themselves and live authentically. Hopefully one day we will find a way to make reality more tolerable for LGBT+ people so that they won’t have to choose between fighting for their rights in urban spaces and their rural daydreams.

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