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Women with Passports, Words without Value: Contemporary Female Travel as a 'Promiscuous' Excursion

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Abstract

This paper maps trouble spots and sites of turbulence in contemporary works of female travel. Since travel is a metaphor for the slippage or displacement of cultural knowledge, there is need for closer and more complex readings of the female practice. This paper locates the contemporary female traveller on ground and on page, and flags some of the cultural myths and misconceptions that affect how she moves through space. When women travel, they inscribe themselves across landscapes that have been previously overlooked, openly discarded, and even unexamined. In doing so, they travel an intricate course due to historical connections between wandering and promiscuity, and continuing confusions between issues of mobility and morality. Taking gender, then, as its interpretative parameter, and following a post-modern line of enquiry, this paper considers the troubled terrains of female travel, from early fairytale to modern outback adventure. In considering how gendered journeys through these landscapes may intersect the hybridities of private and public space, this paper explores the disruptive nature of female travel and how it may shape the narratives of wandering women.

In the 19th century, when female travel narratives were read as excursions rather than expeditions, it was common for women authors to preface their travels with an apology. This admittance, which usually assumed the confessional form, excused the author for partaking in a variety of infringements: ‘for writing in the first person, for engaging in such inappropriate activity, for bothering the reader with their trivial endeavours, and so forth’ (Siegel 2004, 3).

‘What this book wants,’ begins Mary Kingsley’s *Travels in West Africa*, ‘is not a simple preface but an apology, and a very brilliant and convincing one at that. Recognising this fully, and feeling quite incompetent to write such a masterpiece, I have asked several literary friends to write one for me, but they have kindly but firmly declined, stating that it is impossible satisfactorily to apologise for my liberties...’ (2008, 4). Historically, the tendency of the female travel writer to preface her journey with an acknowledgement of its presumptuousness crafted her apology as an admission of guilt. ‘Where I have offered any opinions,’ opens Isabella Bird in *The Englishwoman in America*, ‘I have done so with extreme diffidence, giving *impressions* rather than *conclusions*...’ (Bird 1856, 2).

While Elizabeth Howells has since argued that the apologetic preface is in fact an opposing strategy that allows women writers to assert their authority by averting it, it is certainly telling of the time that a female traveller could only defend her work by first excusing it. It is especially indicative of the genre’s masculinist tradition that a woman could only write her travels after first denying herself as an author. ‘I am only a woman,’ Kingsley writes in private correspondence, ‘and we ladies – though great on details and concrete conceptions—are never capable of feeling devotion to things I know well enough are really greater, namely abstract things’ (Kingsley in Blunt 1994, 1).

Although I am not concerned with the Victorian lady travellers *per se*, I have started with Kingsley because her travel writings emphasise the inextricability of gender and genre. While there has been a traceable shift from apology to affirmation since the first women travellers abandoned their embroidery, it seems some sense of lingering culpability in both writing and in travelling still remains.

In other words, the contemporary female traveller, like the early lady traveller, is still a displaced woman. She still sets out cautiously, guide book in hand, and she still moves, intentionally or incidentally, in the margins. Often, she writes, like the female confessant, in an attempt to recover what Woolf calls ‘the lives of the obscure’: those found locked in old diaries, stuffed away in old drawers, or simply unrecorded (1979, 44). Often, she speaks insistently and indeterminately of the ‘abstract things’ about which Kingsley also writes so easily and extensively. She is, however, even when writing from within her own home and about her own travels, still writing from abroad. While the female travel writer may no longer preface her work with an explicit apology, there are still signs she is carrying historical baggage.

Women’s solitary or ‘unescorted’ travel, in particular, is still considered less common in the Western world, with recurrent travel warnings constantly targeted at female travellers. Women on unaccompanied journeys are always made aware of the limits of their body and its vulnerabilities: ‘the fear of rape, for example, whether crossing the Sahara...or just crossing a city street at night, most dramatically affects the ways women move through the world’ (Morris 1993, xvii). While a certain degree of danger always exists in travel, for both men and women alike, and while it is inevitable that some of those risks are distinctively gender-specific, travel is still viewed as far more hazardous for women than men. Guide books, travel magazines, and online advice columns aimed especially at female readers are cramped with words of concern and caution for female travellers. Often, the implicit message – that women are too weak and

vulnerable to travel – is packaged neatly into ‘a cache of valuable advice’ with shocking anecdotes and officious chapters, such as ‘Dealing with Officials’, ‘Choosing Companions’, or ‘If You Become a Victim’ (Swan and Laufer 2004, vii).

As these warnings are usually levelled at white, middle-to-upper class women who have the freedom and financing to travel, the question arises as to what is *really* at risk when women take to the road. Subtextually, the usual dialogues between issues of mobility and issues of safety can be read more complexly as confusions between questions of mobility and morality. As Kristi Siegel explains, ‘among the various subtexts embedded in these travel warnings is the long-held fear of women “on the loose”’ (2004, 4).

According to Karen Lawrence, the author of *Penelope Voyages*, travel has always entailed a ‘risky and rewardingly excessive’ terrain for women because of the historical link between wandering and promiscuity (1994, 240). Paul Hyland has even suggested that the nature of travel itself is gloriously promiscuous: ‘the shifting destination, arrival again and again, the unknown possessed, the quest for an illusory home’ (1988, 211). The idea of female travel as ‘a needing to make touch’ entails straying behaviours that are often cast in sexual terms (ibid). The identification of these traits in early criminological research, such as 19th century studies of cacogenic families, is often linked to travel in the broadest sense. According to Nicolas Hahn’s study, *Too Dumb to Know Better*, contributors to the image of the ‘bad’ woman frequently cite three traits as characteristic, each of which has a discernable tie to travel:

First, they have pictured her as irresolute and all too easily lead.

Second, they have usually shown her to be promiscuous and a good deal more lascivious than her virtuous sister.

Third, they have often emphasised the bad woman’s responsibility for not only her own sins but those of her mate and descendents as well (1980, 3).

Like Eve, who wanders around the edge of the garden and eventually succumbs to temptation, the promiscuous woman has long been said to have a wandering disposition. Historically, women who ventured out of the home and dared to write about it afterwards were cast as wild and unruly. Their travels out of the private sphere and into the public flaunted the gendered norms of female decorum with their ‘unnatural’ and ‘inappropriate’ behaviour. The continued harnessing of this cultural taboo by both popular myth and media has not been without consequence for modern travel.

In Robyn Davidson’s *Tracks*, for example, the account of her solitary journey by camel across the Australian desert, Davidson shares with her readers the single and unvarying warning she received while preparing for her expedition. That was, if she ventured into the desert alone, without a guide or male accompaniment, she would be attacked and raped by an Aboriginal man. In the opening pages of her novel, Davidson tells of an unsettling conversation in the local pub, when one of the ‘kinder regulars’ warns her, ‘You ought to be more careful, girl, you know you’ve been nominated by some of these blokes as the next town rape case’ (1980, 19). Davidson writes, ‘I felt really frightened for the first time’ (ibid, 20). Later, Davidson notes with irony how the Indigenous men were represented ‘unequivocally’ as the enemy:

Dirty, lazy, dangerous. Stories of young white lasses who innocently strayed down the Todd at night, there to meet their fate worse than death, were told with suspect fervour. It was the only subject anyone had gotten fired up about (ibid, 6).

While Siegel questions whether Davidson's journey would have received the same cautions, and the same national and international attention, had she been an Indigenous woman, Davidson's comments illustrate that it is still only a 'privileged' group of women – those who have the freedom of mobility and expression – who are considered 'endangered' by travel

Perhaps no tale better depicts this troubling than the fairytale of *Little Red Riding Hood*. In the earliest versions of the story, Little Red outwits the Wolf with her own cunning and escapes without hurt or harm. By the time the first printed version emerges, however, the story has dramatically changed. Little Red now falls for the guise of the Wolf, and tricked by her captor, is eaten without rescue or escape. Charles Perrault, who is credited with this original publication, explains the moral at the end of the tale, leaving no doubt to its intended meaning:

From this story one learns that children, especially young lasses, pretty, courteous, and well-bred, do very wrong to listen to strangers, and it is not an unheard thing if the Wolf is thereby provided with his dinner (1961, 77).

Interestingly, in the Grimm Brothers' version, which emerges two centuries later, an explicit warning now appears in the tale, in the shape of the mother's instruction to 'walk nicely and quietly...and not run off the path' (1962, 144). This new inclusion sanitises the tale and highlights the slippages between issues of mobility and morality. Where Little Red once set out with no instruction not to wander, she is now told plainly to stay on the path, not for her own safety but for implied matters of virtue.

In other words, if Little Red strays while travelling alone she risks losing her virginity, which is synonymous with her 'worth'. This is what is really at stake when Little Red wanders: not that she will get lost in the woods and be unable to find her way, not that she will spoil the cakes for her sick Grandma, and not that she will necessarily need to be rescued by a woodcutter, but that she will, in purposefully disobeying her mother and straying from the path, no longer be 'a dear little girl' (ibid). In the Grimms' version, Red Riding Hood herself critically reflects on her trespassing from the safe space of the village to the dangerous world of the forest, and makes a concluding statement that demonstrates she has learnt her lesson, 'As long as I live, I will never by myself leave the path, to run into the wood, when my mother has forbidden me to do so' (1962, 149).

Of course, Red's message to her female readers is representative of the social world's message to its women travellers: 'We are easily distracted and disobedient, we are not safe alone in the woods (travelling off the beaten path); we are fairly stupid; we get ourselves into trouble; and we need to be rescued by a man' (Siegel 2004, 56). Even Angela Carter's Red Riding Hood, who bursts out laughing when the Wolf says, 'all the better to eat you with' for 'she knew she was nobody's meat' (1995, 219), still shocks readers when she uses her virginity to take power over the Wolf. Immediately, we learn that children in Carter's savage world 'do not stay young for long' and Little Red, who 'has her knife and is afraid of nothing', is certainly no exception (1995, 215).

Yet in the end, when Carter's Red seduces the Wolf and falls asleep between his paws, there is still a sense that this is a surprise ending. As Siegel explains:

Even given the background Carter provides in the story's beginning, the scene startles. We knew the girl was strong, independent, and armed. However, the pattern of woman-alone-travelling-alone-helpless-alone-victim is so embedded in our consciousness that we are caught off guard (2004, 57).

While the sexual overtones of Red Riding Hood have become more explicit in contemporary adaptations of the tale, such as David Slade's *Hard Candy* (2005), the question still arises as to what is at threat, or more specifically *who* is at threat, when women wander off the well-ordered path of duty towards a much more colourful unorthodox of trouble and general misrule. As this question continues to surface in discussions of the genre, other more nuanced readings are also distorting the purpose and practice of women's travel.

Freud's notion of travel as an escape from the family, particularly the father figure, is especially problematic for female travel. In his essay, *A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis* (1936), Freud explains how his own longing to travel was 'a wish to escape from that pressure, like the force which drives so many adolescent children to run away from home' (1936, 237).

I had long seen clearly that a great part of the pleasure of travel lies in the fulfilment of these early wishes – that it is rooted, that is, in dissatisfaction with home and family. When first one catches sight of the sea, crosses the ocean, and experiences as realities cities and lands which for so long had been distant, unattainable things of desire – one feels oneself like a hero who has performed deeds of improbable greatness (ibid).

Freud's argument fails to take into consideration the conflicting aspects of male and female practice, and neglects the unique history of women's travel. His experience of travel, for example, his description of feeling like a 'hero' who has achieved 'improbable greatness', is problematised by the female context, since women travel with different (e)motions and indeed motives to their male counterparts. Reading travel solely as escapism, and marking returns home as failures to evade, risks minimalising female travel as a fleeting endeavour. The suggestion women only travel to escape confinement insinuates that women only move to run away from the home space, to break free from a tedious domestic routine, or to flee the mundane patterns of an ordinary familial life. This kind of thinking reduces the identities of modern women to fleeting, fragile, and unfinished selves, whose investment in travel is always linked to recovering or resisting a male self.

In most Hollywood films pre-dating *Thelma & Louise*, for example, and in some popular films currently emerging, women's travel is always tied up in a man. Often, the female traveller leaves home to escape an unhappy marriage, to recover from a broken heart, or to search for new love. Even Elizabeth Gilbert's best-selling travelogue, *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006), found its success on the premise of a once happily married woman who, reeling from a contentious divorce, takes off 'in search of everything' on a round-the-world adventure. 'The only thing wrong with this readable, funny memoir,' writes Grace Lichtenstein, 'is that it seems so much like a Jennifer Aniston movie' (2006, par 1).

Like Jen, Liz is a plucky blond American woman in her thirties with no children and no major money worries. As the book opens, she is going through a really bad divorce and subsequent stormy rebound love affair. Awash in tears in the middle of the night on the floor of the bathroom, she begins to pray for guidance, "you know – like, to *God*". God answers. He tells her to go back to bed (ibid, par 2).

Since its debut, the novel has been accused of being self-absorbed and sexist, and even branded by the *New York Post* as 'narcissistic New Age reading, curated by [Oprah] Winfrey herself' (Callahan 2007, par 13). Perhaps most interesting for discussions of travel, however, is *Bitch* magazine's recent article 'Eat, Pray, Spend', which suggests that the positioning of the memoir as 'an every woman's guide to whole, empowered living' typifies a new literature of privilege that excludes the unfortunate from participating (2010, par 6).

Eat, Pray, Love is not the first book of its kind, but it is a perfect example of the genre of priv-lit: literature or media whose expressed goal is one of spiritual, existential, or philosophical enlightenment contingent upon women's hard work, commitment, and patience, but whose actual barriers to entry are primarily financial (ibid, par 7).

Without seeking to limit the novel with separatist generalisations, the freedoms of Elizabeth Gilbert to leave home and to write about her travels are not the freedoms of all women.

As a result of this tension, many contemporary women mark out alternative patterns of movement when travelling, often moving deliberately in a variety of directions and at varying paces, in an attempt to resist their placelessness in both the genre and the world. As Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, speaking of *Housekeeping*'s Ruthie and Sylvie explains, 'they do not travel ever westward...in search of some frontier space, nor do they travel across great spaces. Rather, they circle, they drift, they wander' (2004, 199). Women, therefore, have to work twice as hard to be considered credible travellers, particularly since travel is traditionally a male discursive practice in which the male is constructed as a heroic explorer and the female is mapped as a place on the itinerary: she is a point of conquest, a land to be penetrated, and a site to be mapped and plotted. She is rarely, if ever, a travelling equal.

Finally, it often emerges that even when female travel focuses specifically on an individual or collective female experience, it is still read against, or in opposition to, the long tradition of travelling men. In their introduction to *Amazonian*, travel theorists Dea Birkett and Sara Wheeler maintain that the primary difference between male and female travel writers is that 'the male species' has not become extinct (1998, vii). The pair, who have theorised widely on New Travel Writing, identify some of the myths and misconceptions of the female genre, often citing their own encounters with androcentrism in the industry:

We have found that even when people are confronted by a real, live woman travel writer, they still get us wrong. In the time allowed for questions after a lecture, we are regularly asked, 'Was that before you sailed around the world or after?' even though neither of us has ever done any such thing. The inference here is that to qualify as travel writers, women must achieve astonishing and record-breaking feats. Either that, or we're trying to get our hands down some man's trousers. One of us was once asked by the president of a distinguished geographical institution, "What made you go to Chile? Was it a guy?" (ibid, xviii).

In light of Birkett and Wheeler's comments, there remain traceable differences and difficulties in both male and female travel. Perhaps the only commonality that intersects both practices is that travels are always gendered, even when purposefully designed to be genderless.

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