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**‘You can interview me, but I don’t have a story’:
Local Accounts of Wandering Women,
Rewondering Queensland Landscapes.**

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Abstract

This paper investigates how contemporary works of women’s travel writing are reworking canonical formations of environmental literature by presenting imaginative accounts of travel writing that are both literal and metaphorical. In this context, the paper considers how women who travel/write may intersect the spatial hybridities of travel writing and nature writing, and in doing so, create a new genre of environmental literature that is not only ecologically sensitive but gendered. As the role of female travel writers in generating this knowledge is immense but largely unexamined, this paper will investigate how a feminist geography can be applied, both critically and creatively, to local accounts of travel. It will draw on my own travels around Queensland in an attempt to explore how many female storytellers situate themselves, in and against, various discourses of mobility and morality.

In 1654, the French writer Madeline de Scudéry, published a map of her own design to preface her novel, *Clélie*; the *histoire romaine* of two lovers separated by an earthquake in classical Rome. Scudéry's map, *Carte du Pays Tendre*, (A Map of the Land of Tenderness), pictures a rugged terrain of land, sea, river, mountain and lake, intertwined sporadically with villages, bridges and towns. Each route, which represents a spatialised pathway to a fictionalised land, includes, like the archetypal journey, a set of temptations and fatal attractions that must be overcome. One may start, for example, in the town of *Nouvelle L'Amitié* and move north past the village of *Sincérité*, carefully bypassing the villages of *Négligence* and *Inégalité*. Another may take a more rapid but risky route and navigate their way across the Lake of Indifference, carefully circumventing the River of Inclination whose tributaries all lead into the Dangerous Sea.

The borderless map then, which is penned by the novel's female protagonist, evokes playfulness in travel and emerges, perhaps unsurprisingly, without a set of formal instructions on how it is to be used. As Guiliana Bruno, in *Atlas of Emotion*, explains,

There are no rigid directives for this map tour, based on an interplay between natural and architectural setting...villages and even cities are designed on the map to *house* sentiments. They function as resting places along the map tour, places of lodging for the emotional movement...such movements are possible and encouraged in a touring that produces a cumulative emotional effect (2000, 4).

Whatever itinerary the reader chooses, the journey assumed or avoided signifies a narrative expedition through an interior landscape that is able to be represented by the external world, and vice versa (ibid). Scudéry executes this translation in a complex but sophisticated way. Not only does she depict a physical world that is able to be marked and mapped, but she also imagines a narrative voyage that her readers may embark on. If the rationale for the map is to provide an alternative symbolic setting for the reader as traveller, and the writer as travel guide, then it makes sense to choose an open and boundless landscape that calls into question the very concept of border itself. Indeed, Scudéry's imaginative terrain gives the impression it is a place with neither beginning nor end, only a middle space that can be wandered to and through. As Bruno explains, 'One senses that the traveller on this chart can wander around the map as well as off it' (2002, 225). To wander this land, marked with its safe zones and trouble spots and various sites to stop and see, is 'to visit the ebb and flow of a personal yet social psychogeography' (2000, 4).

What Scudéry's map also implies, particularly in the context of contemporary female travel, is the continued need for the application of feminist geographies. That is, for a cultural politics that does not require us to measure every aspect of our engagement with geographical space (to flag lands, penetrate spaces and plot boundaries), but to revision instead a world that is more flexible and less tangible. This employment of travel as a register for the experience of embodiment warrants immediate attention for several complex, multifaceted and interrelated reasons, especially since travel itself is currently 'a fashionable metaphor for the slippage or displacement of cultural knowledge' (Holland and Huggan 2003, 111). As women's travel writing, in particular, is increasingly concerned with tales that blur the boundaries between real and imagined, female travel may set in motion a process that subverts some of the genre's masculinist expectations. What is considered 'quality' travel writing, for example, is no longer necessitated as travel that is scientific, heroic or adventurous. Rather, there is an insistence on the

subjective and situated nature of experience and a prevalent idea that political critique comes first and foremost, from the movement of the body.

Consequently, what we find repeatedly in the work of contemporary Western travel writers is an obsession with both the self and the other, which has found ideological justification in contemporary discourses of feminism. Often, however, in the traveller's attempt to assume authorial credibility and validate the journey, one of two things happen: the land the travel writer ventures to is romanticised as other or it is 'reduced to an exotic or hostile backdrop to the drama of the personal life of the author' (Mulligan 2000, 77). Similarly, Robyn Davidson's popular travel memoir, *Desert Places*, recounts Davidson's travelling experiences with a nomadic tribe known as the Rabari. According to Mulligan,

The project follows the pattern of much women's travel writing in the post-colonial period: the writer signs a contract to provide articles for a magazine in return for financial support; she is allocated a professional photographer; she knows little about where is going because she has deliberately chosen a tribe and an area which is almost undocumented, and by its very nature as nomadic, cannot be pinned down (2000, 62).

Despite this void, Davidson, like many wanderers, feels compelled to travel because of the 'avowedly romantic image evoked in her by the idea of nomadic life' (ibid). According to Maureen Mulligan, part of the trouble with the travel writing Davidson attempts, is her tendency to romanticise the nomadic other, 'when the reality she experiences is anything other than romantic' (ibid, 63). For Davidson, the Rabari are 'the keepers of the original way' (1997, 57) and she constructs herself 'as a person without cultural identity,' as someone who has 'more in common with simple native peoples existing in unadulterated natural conditions, than she has with her Western peers' (Mulligan 2000, 64)

In her stories of everyday life, Davidson constantly returns to one subject—herself. Arguably, this is justified since women's self-narratives have historically been excluded from the genre, but it is concerning that Davidson, like so many Western travel writers, relinquishes the importance of her own Australian background. In *Fragrant Rice*, Janet De Neefe, also trades in the particularity of her own Australian identity for that of the Western tourist. She writes,

Small joyful children greeted us with 'hello, hello' and then followed us as we happily wandered up the hill. Bright-eyed and bubbly, they laughed and sang as we made our way to the next village. Years later I was to learn that 'hello' is the name children give to tourists (1997, 21).

De Neefe constantly washes over the importance of her own Australian background and at times, even diminishes it. 'Life in Melbourne is dull and empty' she writes. At other times, she also seems to harbour what can only be described as embarrassment of Balinese culture. While reflecting on a trip to the markets with her sister-in-law, a Balinese woman named Kasi, she explains,

I would cringe as she haggled passionately over the prices. It would be the same argument every time as she bellowed, 'Is that your best price? Last week it was

cheaper!’ Sometimes she seemed to be furious with the stallholder and her shrill voice would rise several octaves as she quarrelled over a few rupiah (2003, 28).

Earlier, as De Neeffe reflects on a Balinese holiday with her family, she also cringes, literally, over the actions of her father.

Women effortlessly transported rocks the size of wheelbarrows on their heads, carrying them from the river bed to the road. My dad took countless photographs of this amazing feat. I cringed every time he asked one of them to hold a pose and smile under a thirty-kilo weight of stone (ibid, 22).

At present then, there is a lack of contemporary criticism surrounding the coded structures, connotations and allegorical meanings of women’s travel and in particular, the implications of its intersections with environmental literature. While there have been few significant studies of Australian travel writing, there have been even less about women’s travel, especially those pertaining to subversive movements; the kind ‘where new possibilities emerge, where cultures collide and where play is sanctioned’ (Pesman, Walker and White 1996, xvii).

Conceiving the subject [of travel] itself is difficult for Australians. When we think of English travel writing, we think readily enough of what the English have written about the world. When we think of Australian travel writing, we are more likely to think of what the world has written about Australia (ibid, x).

In a typical Australian autobiography, for example, overseas travel not only takes up significant narrative time but often represents a crucial turning point in the author’s life.

The critical rite of passage, the supreme test of one’s courage or identity, the moment of epiphany or the occasion that the veil falls from one’s eyes so very often happens overseas (ibid, xiii).

Consequently, there is need for local travel stories that, like Scudéry’s map, do not hesitate to stray from the well ordered path of scholarship, towards a much more colourful vista of misadventure, unorthodoxy and general misrule. Accordingly, in November last year, a colleague and I developed a collaborative project with government and industry that intersected the terrains of women’s contemporary travel, lived experience and feminist fascination with the everyday. The travelling project, *Our Women, Our State*, involved a 6000km road trip around Queensland (as far west as Charleville and as far north as Karumba) in which we interviewed 150 Queensland women who we encountered on our travels.

We created a photographic postcard of each woman and sent all 150 to the Premier of Queensland, culminating in a post-trip exhibition to be held in Mackay, during Queensland Week, 2011. We also gathered an online following by blogging our travels on social networking sites and regularly uploading video content (such as interviews and digital stories) to our website. At the time of the project’s inception, Queensland was commemorating its founding as a state and celebrating 150 years young, however, there was a lack of celebrations designed to promote the diversity of Queensland women and the various settings—both rural and urban—in which they lived and worked.

Many of the women interviewed shared their stories within discourses of travel, and narrated tales about themselves that were linked, inextricably to the physical setting from which their stories arose. On the road, we met women who introduced and defined themselves through their environment—an SES volunteer from Townsville who worked on Castle Hill, a 90-year-old grandma from Georgetown, a young ranger from Normanton busking her way around cities and sleeping in open fields, and a sailor from Airlie Beach who had been on expedition to Antarctica. The sailor described how she saw the great white as a vast empty space outside what she called ‘the normal world’. ‘It still exists most vividly in my mind,’ she explained. ‘I will always remember it as the emptiest place on earth.’ By describing the Antarctic as a blank or ‘empty’ space, the sailor who doubled as a storyteller, allowed herself to fill that space with her own creative imaginations and recollections. Essentially, by describing Antarctica as a blank space, she identified its landscape as essentially metaphorical.

As we continued then to interview women against a variety of backdrops—beach, desert, city, country—the stories emerged in hybrid spaces that emphasised inconsistency, intimacy and paradox. Many of the women were working, some were on holidays. Others were distracted; tempted by the lure of travel and flight. Others stayed close to the ground. Nearly all prefaced their interview with an agreement followed by a guilty admission, ‘You can interview me, but I don’t have a story’. Once we insisted our way past this ritual, the story emerged and unwound, and from its unwinding came a string of other things—questions, cautions, lessons learnt, and sometimes even confessions.

Many women, for example, drew explicit connections between their bodies and the land. The single recurring theme—that a woman could not help but be aware of her own physical vulnerability when travelling—raised questions about cultural constraints and rhetorics of peril, which were significantly different to those of men and inextricable from the natural environment, ‘the fear of rape, for example, when crossing the Sahara...or just crossing a city street at night’ (Morris 1993, xvii). While these ‘rhetorics of peril’ (Siegel 2004, 55) usually target white, middle to upper class women who have the freedom and finance to travel, the apparent interplay was one between discourses of mobility and safety; one that can be read more complexly as a confusion between issues of mobility and morality.

Yet, even women who drew these parallels, did not present the environment as overly-romantic or culturally alien. In fact, most women, found solace in the way they imagined their world, and often remarked how it aligned ‘strangely’ with their lives. In one interview, for example, a young mother from Innisfail described her struggle with postnatal depression and in describing the experience, constantly referred to the Innisfail floods of 2006, which devastated the local area and destroyed more than half the homes in the town. She did not, however, romanticise the destruction caused by Cyclone Larry, which was later declared a national disaster, nor did she reduce the incident as merely coincidental. She simply stated that she saw the natural disaster as inextricable from the course of her depression, and that in reflecting on the past from the stand point of the present, the floods constituted an important part of what was happening in her personal life. In another interview with a pub owner in the town of Blackall, one woman told how, as a teenager, she had run away from home. When I enquired as to why, she responded, ‘But isn’t it more important that I tell you where I went and if I decided to return?’

While the inner journey then is often cited as the most interesting part of any travel story, more important, and perhaps more relevant for mediations on the nexus between travel writing and the environmental literature, are complex accounts of both internal and external travel that steer clear of voyeurism and cheap tourism. These accounts, while abstracted and metaphorical, allow travel writers to place themselves on the continuum between travel writing as guidebook and travel writing as self-serving fiction. As a result of this blurring, the travel writings scribbled into existence have their own sensitive, imaginative, and emotional geographies, perhaps even, their own maps of tenderness.

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