



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 7 | Issue 4

Article 10

May-2006

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Recommended Citation

Ganser, Alexandra (2006). On the Asphalt Frontier: American Women's Road Narratives, Spatiality, and Transgression. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 7(4), 153-167.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol7/iss4/10>

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On the Asphalt Frontier: American Women's Road Narratives, Spatiality, and Transgression

By Alexandra Ganser¹

Abstract

In this article, I am going to analyze the concept of “gendered space” as it appears in select post-1970s US-American road narratives produced by women writers of various ethnic and social backgrounds. Drawing on recent re-mappings in cultural geography, I will cross disciplinary boundaries and argue that for female literary protagonists, the “open road” appears as a dangerous frontier—in which women’s physical and emotional well-being is always at perilous stake—rather than as an adventurous playground. In women’s road stories, the American highway does not maintain its mythical, iconic status, signifying freedom and the heroic quest for identity, which has been ascribed to it at least since the legendary accounts of the flight from domesticity by Jack Kerouac and his fellow (anti-)heroes of the Beat generation.

Female protagonists, too, it will be shown, feel the luring of the road, or see cross-country travel as a way out of the ideology of separate spheres—and, from a socio-historical perspective, they indeed have much more reason for doing so than their male counterparts. However, more often than not, women come to realize that they are “prisoners of the white lines of the freeway” (as Joni Mitchell puts it in her famous road-song “Coyote”), and as such are not liberated by mere motion, but confronted with spatial limitations not much different from those encountered at the hearth. Nevertheless, by embracing these multiple confrontations for the challenges they present, and by deliberately transgressing gendered boundaries of public vs. private and cultural vs. natural space, the itinerant protagonists of the texts under discussion eventually re-appropriate their share of the road.

Keywords US-American road narrative, public/private space, frontier

Ever since I was a kid, I'd tried to live vicariously through the hocker-in-the-wind adventures of Kerouac, Hunter Thompson, and Henry Miller. But I could never finish any of the books. Maybe because I just couldn't identify with the fact that they were guys who had women around to make the coffee and wash the skid marks out of their shorts while they complained, called themselves angry young men, and screwed each other with their existential penises.

--Erika Lopez, *Flaming Iguanas*

Introduction

In literary and cultural criticism, the analysis of gender relations and constructions is, by now, a more or less established approach to works of literature, film, music, and other cultural texts.² The concept of gendered space, as developed in cultural geography,³ on the other hand, is addressed rather rarely in these analyses, perhaps because space is not a traditional lens through which cultural articulations are looked at in critical

discourse.⁴ Like race/ethnicity, class, and gender, however, space has the potential to function as such a lens, though it probably does not focus as much on the subject (and thus on issues of identity) as on a certain socio-political and cultural system of subjectivity (patriarchal societies, for example, order space around certain principles that sustain these societies' status quo along with the lines of hegemonic constructions of subjectivity). Thus, I would like to argue for the general integration of a spatial analysis into literary and cultural studies in this article.

In this context, the notion of the gendered-ness of various spaces provides a rewarding theoretical device for the study of women's literature in general and of women's road-narratives in particular. Any such analysis rests upon the intersections and cross-cuttings of all kinds of spaces: textual and contextual space (i.e., fictional/imaginary and social space), the physical space of embodiment, as well as the mental space of textual characters and readers. In cultural texts, these spatial webs intersect; they create and potentially restrict each other; exterior(ized) and interior(ized) spaces appear in various configurations, sometimes dissolving into each other, sometimes affirming separation.

However, such a spatial perspective can be of use for feminist practice only if it is grounded in a view of cultural texts as productive—as generating discourse and dialogue rather than as static, bookshelf objects of study that (supposedly) merely reflect or represent reality. Narrative constructions always exceed a strictly literary economy; *besides* serving a literary purpose within the fictional space of the literary text, literary figures always also reflect and challenge cultural realities, being produced and perceived not coincidentally, but in very specific cultural and historical circumstances. In that manner at the very least—through the opening of new discursive fields as well as through communication with their readership—women's literary re-mappings of social space are potentially transformative of gender relations at large. Following one stronghold of Cultural Studies theory, it is nevertheless crucial that cultural products be contextualized, both regarding their emergence and their reception. The French poststructuralists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in the foreword to *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), even propose we consider books as unattributable assemblages of plateaus (as “rhizomatic” multiplicities), existing only through what is exterior to them; exterior and interior no longer operate in a binary relation:

There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel nor the world as its object nor one or several authors as its subject. (23)

Put differently, aesthetic and social spaces act as a continuum; in bell hooks' conception of marginality as a site of resistance in “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” (1990),

[s]paces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice [...]. [This is a] message from that space in the margin that is a

site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves.
(152)

Within these theoretical contexts, the analysis of the spatial configurations of women's road writings can thus be conceived as a cultural practice of *thinking gendered spatiality anew* through the narratives these texts are assembling; the text itself, as an instance of cultural articulation, partakes in what Lawrence Grossberg calls "transformative practice" (quoted in McDowell 1999, 221). Looking at these writings, then, means to reconsider hegemonic spatial configurations of gender in ways that open up sedimentary ideas about the freedom of the mythical open road that prevail in US-American society and culture. As a transformative literary practice, US-American women's road stories prove this promise of freedom to be largely illusory (just as illusory, for that matter, as the idea that home, the place where woman "truly belongs," is always protective as a safe haven unfettered by cultural, social, and political issues; cf. Massey 1994, 157-73.)⁵

In the following discussion of road stories generated by US-American women since the 1970s, my intention is to show how hegemonic constructions of gendered space can be both reflected and challenged in these texts. Also, investigations into these spatial systems (as key constituents of the social sphere at large) create an awareness for the spatial limitations, regulations, and restrictions at work whenever these women, constituted as a group by a shared "being-perceived-as-female" in public, leave their assigned realm. When domesticity is transgressed by entering the semi-private spatialities of various vehicles, the "open road" becomes a liminal terrain resembling, within the specific US-American cultural context, the frontier of the 19th century.

At this point, it is crucial to note that the road narrative is largely a Western genre (though we are witnessing a large number of critical road movies by women of the former "Second World")⁶ and thus relates to the specific economy of a Western gendered spatiality which has been informed by the 19th century ideology of separate spheres. In terms of class and ethnicity, we have to be aware of the fact that this ideology, with its far-reaching consequences, originally pertained mostly to white, middle-class women, although it has certainly also concerned, in one way or another, other groups of women as well (as the Fall 1998 special issue of *American Literature* "No More Separate Spheres!" demonstrates). In any case, the gendered economy of space is not limited to the West, for gender has functioned as a dividing line for social divisions of space in many cultures (and these cultural contexts have to be specifically addressed in any analysis of this economy).⁷ Far from presenting a model study, I would like to argue that strategies of transgression and of "stepping out," potentially effecting a distortion of the public / private divide, can be of interest also for women in other cultural contexts than the US-American, albeit with different consequences and implications. In the United States context, the number of road stories women of various descent have created during the last decades show how travel, mobility, and the experience of being "on the road"—as a vital part of the public sphere as well as a national mythology—are central concerns for these women, regarding both strategies to counter normative models of (white, middle-class) femininity and their conflicted relationship to national myths.

Road Review

Apart from two recently published monographs,⁸ American women's road texts have experienced an incredibly poor history of scholarly reception, which reflects how the genre has been constructed as a predominantly masculine terrain. Most of the books, songs, and films produced *by* women *about* women who are not "riding in cars with boys"⁹ but directing their cross-country wanderings themselves were written by successful, productive, and at times award-winning authors; yet only an insignificant number of studies thereof have been published. In many analyses of the road genre at large, women's road texts are treated as a mere matter of tokenism: Ronald Primeau's *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway* (1996), for instance, groups women's configurations and re-mappings of the road experience into one (out of eight!) sections together with "other minorities" (107) like African American and (male) Native American writers. Also, Primeau's study over-privileges women's reflections of and connections to men's road narratives; with regard to the way women's road stories are contextualized in *Romance of the Road*, the book exemplifies a general tendency to entirely overlook both the figure of the *pícaro* and women's travel accounts as possible (re-)sources and intertexts for and cultural kin to these stories.

Judging from this negligible number of studies on the road-genre, the initial conclusion would be that women writers are probably not interested in the road genre, possibly because of its masculinist evocations. Contrary to these expectations, however, this is not at all the case. Elinor Nauen's *Ladies, Start Your Engines* (1990), one of the few anthologies of women's road writings, hints at an abundance of material starting in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and makes clear that from the 1970s onwards, road adventures have become a major theme in cultural articulations by US-American women of various social and ethnic backgrounds.¹⁰ (My bookshelf now counts over forty contemporary female authors who have written some sort of road-literatures—novels, short stories, poems, and various works of nonfiction).

But why should these works be considered separately, one might ask at this point? Is the postmodernist contention that there are no immanent or essential differences between men and women, and hence between men's and women's writings, not convincing? And if it is, what is the use of critical separatism? Of course, there are many possible answers to these questions. Clearly, there can be no doubt about the social construction of essential, "natural" differences between the genders: "man" and "woman" are not polar opposites in a gendered spectrum, and hence do not describe a binary relation; gender identities, as Judith Butler has shown throughout her writings, are largely a matter of performance and performativity. However, *social* gender differences persist, especially when looking at the material (economic, political, bodily) consequences of "man" and "woman" as political categories of subjectivity: it is a fact that everywhere in the world, women still earn less than men, that poverty is predominantly female, and that women experience physical abuse much more often than men. Although these material differences are by no means "essential" or "stable," but rather fluctuating and dynamic, social and physical realities are clearly not gender-blind. As a consequence, postmodernist discourses have had to acknowledge that the disposal of essentialisms does not preclude the persistence of power structures which regulate the spatial realm in such a way that normative models of femininity in the West are continually constructed as tied to home and hearth. If this ideal is disregarded, women get punished for their

transgressions, materially and symbolically.¹¹ By leaving home and hearth, many traveling women exemplify such a transgression and consequently are met by obstacles generated by the gendered construction of space on patriarchal terms. This is a major source from which road narratives by women proceed with their spatial negotiations.

Physical realities and ascriptions, with which women are confronted as soon as they step out into the street in that their bodies are scrutinized, disciplined, and punished, are imprinted on cultural representations of this spatial experience. Within their very specific cultural and historical contexts, literary constructions of female road trippers are not only informed by the politics of gendered space, but could also be seen as discursive interventions in this politics. As fictional and often semi-fictional narratives, they relate on, reflect, and challenge their social environs, thereby not only representing, but also creating women on the road within the cultural framework of the text.

On a metafictional level, critical voices also show a very specific relation to the gendered-ness of the road. In the introduction to Primeau's *Romance of the Road* (1996), for instance, the author makes a universal statement when characterizing the road narrative as such:

From the rich traditions of religious and secular stories, the road narrative adapts its own *departure rituals for detachment from normal events and everyday delegations*, a time of *reveling in a free-floating state beyond ordinary spatiotemporal bounds* [...]. (6; my emphasis)

Primeau implies that all road stories, regardless of their protagonists' genders, begin with a departure ritual from the duties of everyday life ("everyday delegations") and thus liberate their characters, who, once on the road, are floating in space freely and cheerfully ("reveling in a free-floating state") and without spatiotemporal restraint ("beyond ordinary spatiotemporal bounds"). My own reading of women's road stories contradict Primeau's generalizing statement, since most of the female characters in fact continue wrestling with their everyday lives, their bodily realities, and conventional domestic duties when on the road, thus experiencing both spatial and temporal limits. Anne Roiphe's *Long Division* (1972), Hilma Wolitzer's *Hearts* (1980), Mona Simpson's *Anywhere but Here* (1989), and Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* (1988), for instance, all depict the main characters traveling with their natural or surrogate daughters and therefore emphasize their social duties as caretakers and mothers—even on the road. Japanese-American Cynthia Kadohata's road novel *The Floating World* (1989), Cherokee-American writer Diane Glancy's road chronicle *Claiming Breath* (1992), and Erika Lopez' queer motorcycle adventure novel *Flaming Iguanas* (1998) also make mother-daughter relations one of their central concerns; in Joan Didion's postmodern tale *Play It As It Lays* (1970), the angst-ridden protagonist Maria Wyeth is haunted by the loss of her daughter and the abortion lying ahead in many of the book's road scenarios (e.g. 64, 78-80). In Doris Betts' *Heading West* (1981), Nancy Finch, the kidnapped female hero,¹² struggles with both the inconvenience of menstruation while traveling (88) and the confines of a stereotypical gender role, spinsterhood in her case (e.g. 29). Besides, Dwight, the kidnapper, whom Nancy views partly favorably (as the man who finally makes her escape the suffocating confines of her home), reminds her of her domestic duties as he

ordered Nancy to carry everybody's dirty clothes to the Laundromat. His voice set off echoes. Time for my medicine, Nancy. Bring me a glass of tea. Is breakfast ready yet? [...] Help me upstairs. Familiarity made her cry out, "Stop ordering me around!" (94)

The novel's conservative ending—Nancy eventually marries a man who behaves, in my reading, incredibly patronizing and disrespectful in the text—was disappointedly noticed by many reviewers at the time the book was published (e.g. Leonard 1981, Ferguson 1983). On the one hand, it definitely hints at the influence of the overall ideological conservatism of the American 1980s, yet on the other, it demonstrates the difficulties of envisioning, even in works of literature, an alternative, unoppressive version of home once the female protagonist returns to domesticity (here again, literary and social space are inseparable).

A last example that runs counter to Primeau's undue generalization is Brenda Bradshaw, the picaresque figure in Sharlene Baker's *Finding Signs* (1990). Hitchhiking in the 1970s, Brenda gets to hear a question that implies her physical weakness and inferiority as a girl repeatedly: "Aren't you afraid?" (78) From the reactions of her environs to her transient life on the road, Brenda draws her own disillusioning conclusions; she learns for her as a woman, there is no such thing as the freedom of the so-called "open road."

Public/Private Spatialities

American highways and backcountry roads, once conceived of as gendered spaces, are never pre-existing, *easy riding*, adventurous, liberating, or socially detached playgrounds that the legendary male quest-narratives of Kerouac's *urtext* *On the Road* (1957) and the subsequent currents of male-centered road narratives seem to suggest. To the contrary: in women's cultural representations of the road, the complex web of gendered space is reflected as well as challenged. Significantly, a creative interest in the genre intensified in the 1970s, when the second women's movement in the US began to question the domestic ideals of the 1950s on a broad political scale. Similar to the first women's movement, challenging spatial boundaries became part of the feminist demand of access to the public; in this sense, "taking back the streets" became feminist theory put into spatial practice. In most women's narratives of the road, however, female heroes realize that this is not a simple mission. They find themselves as "prisoner[s] of the white lines of the freeway," as Joni Mitchell put it in her legendary road-song "Coyote" of her 1976 album *Hejira*, and as such are not liberated by motion, but confronted with spatial limitations not much different from those encountered at the hearth. Clearly, a contextualized reading of these cultural artifacts helps us understand the spatial economy operating within them; as works of art, these road stories rely on their contexts in order to create both literary credibility and a platform from which the text's criticism, in its reflective and inventive modes, can proceed.

Brenda Bradshaw, the hitchhiker in Sharlene Baker's *Finding Signs*, for instance, alludes to the paradoxical situation of both public and private spatial confinement (the reflective type of criticism) while also envisioning agency (the inventive, creative mode of criticism). On the one hand, cross-country travel initially, and true to the American

myth, promises freedom and mobility, while on the other the novel's main character is confronted with her embodied-ness as a woman and the concomitant implications:

There you are, just a private person thinking private thoughts, walking down the street, then you turn and stick out your thumb and you're suddenly public property. That moment when you cross the line from pedestrian to hitchhiker [...]. It's weird. (76)

The novel's awareness of Brenda's body as "public property" is clearly gendered, informed by a "geography of fear" that links the female body in public space to sexual vulnerability and the threat of sexual assault. Consequently, the protagonist's body becomes public property by way of hitchhiking, reconfigured here as a form of giving up control over her own corpo-reality and thereby opposing the masculine myth of the hitchhiker's freedom. Throughout the novel, Brenda is haunted by the paradox of physically confined mobility, which demonstrates how she cannot simply leave behind her en-genderedness as a woman. Earlier in the narrative, her representation of life on the road, which she characterizes as a territory of dependence rather than independence, reads like the antithesis to the Beat generation's claim of freedom through mobility. This description of dependencies ridicules the celebration of the open road that the road genre traditionally evokes in the reader:

On the road you belong to the world. You depend on strangers to take you places, and often to feed you and take you in; you depend on the weather not to be too cruel to your highly vulnerable self; you depend on your own body not to betray you with sickness or depression. I'm always a little hungry and a little cold. (4)

Similar to the other main characters of the texts under discussion here, Baker's picaresque protagonist simultaneously feels in and out of place on the road. Brenda poignantly concludes some lines later that she knows "a woman can't make it for long, out here," (5) yet despite of herself continues her road-trip right until the last page of the book. Her stubborn defiance of expected spatial behaviors eventually turns into an experience of self-empowerment and gaining control, as the last sentence of the book demonstrates: "Then I step outside, and start pulling toward me what I need" (241). Thus, the novel demonstrates how a transgressive literary character appropriates the public space of the road, actively constructing a spatial web that counters a masculinist national mythology of the open road. Like Brenda Bradshaw and Nancy Finch (in Betts' *Heading West*), many contemporary representations of female travelers feel the luring of the road and envision cross-country travel as a possible way out of the manifold trappings of the domestic sphere—thus "buying into" the national myth to a certain extent, but necessarily revising it in due course.¹³

As more than three decades of *Herstory* as well as sociological and psychological studies on domestic violence have shown, Western women have much more reason to resent domestic confinement than their male counterparts. In a recent publication, Mona Domosh and Joni Saeger not only trace back the separation of spheres into a naturalized public vs. private dichotomy, but also connect the dichotomous socio-historical construction of public/male vs. private/female to limitations in women's mobility

(*Putting Women in Place*, 2001). They state that “[i]t is hard to maintain patriarchal control over women if they have unfettered freedom of movement through space” (115-116) and name both openly political and more subtle social forces that work to keep women in their place, such as driving and fashion conventions. In their book, Domosh and Saeger take a closer look at the home as the “feminine sphere” where women are “in” place and discover that the separation of spheres reveals itself as both a constructed dichotomy and a lose-lose situation. If the home was where “woman” categorically belonged, where she was “safe and protected” by the patriarchal system, one would have to wonder why most violence against women does not happen in public but right at home. According to Domosh and Saeger, domestic violence is an effective method used to keep women confined to a house and marriage (117). Once women step out, however, they are likely to be confronted with the discursively produced “geography of fear,” experiencing insecurity, angst, agoraphobia, and vulnerability, as studies in both geography (e.g. Valentine 1989) and psychology (e.g. McHugh 1996) have shown. A safe space for women apparently does not exist in the patriarchal social order of the West. To some extent, “woman” always finds herself on the spatial frontlines of wider-reaching gender struggles, and this is exactly where women’s road literature can function as “imaginary political intervention,” occupying these frontlines with female agents.

The Road as Frontier?

In much of women’s road literature, female travelers inhabit textual constructions of the mythical “open road,” constructions that frequently present them with danger-zones dominated by an androcentric logic in which women’s physical and emotional well-being is apparently always at perilous stake. Life on the road, even as a fictional creation, is presented as quite dangerous, the highway a frontline made of asphalt. Patently, these stories reflect a gendered economy of space that creates the road as all but the “right(ful)” place for a woman.

Projecting this construction of “the road as dangerous” onto the larger cultural context of the U.S., the notion that women do not belong in a presumably perilous territory finds a powerful predecessor in the historical concept of the frontier.¹⁴ While there is an understandably vehement critique of the over-use the frontier-metaphor in criticism, the parallels between the conception of the 19th century-frontier and the hegemonic construction of the American Road as a masculine territory in the second half of the 20th century are neither negligible nor coincidental, I would suggest. In “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century” (1994), Patricia Nelson-Limerick writes that

[a]s [Frederick Jackson] Turner had said in 1893, the term [frontier] is ‘an elastic one, and for our purposes does not need sharp definition.’ One hundred years later, despite earnest scholarly efforts to define the frontier, “elasticity” and confused meaning formed its one constant characteristic. [...] [T]he popular understanding of the word [...] and the scholarly effort to reckon with the complex history of cultural encounters in colonization share almost no common ground. (78-9)

Although I consider Limerick's analysis appropriate from a Western historian's perspective, I would also argue that any attempt at de-elasticizing the frontier-concept would be both impossible and useless, exactly because the frontier is invested with multiple meanings and a dynamic symbolic economy. From a feminist cultural critic's point of view, the still-powerful, mythical force of the concept is indeed an effect of this "confused meaning," and it is also such "confused meanings" than neat, dichotomous structures and orderings that allow women, both as social beings and literary creations, to subvert patriarchal symbolic systems, as a plethora of feminist theory has shown.

The confused, complex gender-economy of both the historical, 19th-century western and the late 20th-century asphalt frontiers is of particular interest here. In this context, my initial assumption would be that both concepts posit "gender on the edge," as Rachel Borup (1997) put it in her dissertation on women writing the American frontier in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Following the vein of New Western History, Borup asserts that the historical frontier functioned as a central paradigm through which gendered identities were constituted, and that it was ideologically produced as an exclusively masculine territory (1-2). This view follows Annette Kolodny's denaturalization of the masculine frontier-territory, which implicitly critiques the universalization of a white male experience of the West, in both *The Lay of the Land* (1975) and *The Land Before Her* (1984; see also Borup 1997, 6).

The frontier's complex gender economy mentioned above refers to a view of the frontier as a border-territory which is not only ethnically and socially contested, but also unsettles the woman/nature vs. the male/culture dichotomy. In masculinist representations of this liminal terrain, nature and wilderness are *feminized*—as a space that has to be subjugated, ordered, and "civilized" by (male) pioneers—as well as *masculinized*—a manly wilderness set in opposition to a domesticating, feminine cultural force.¹⁵

The concept of the frontier—which Frederick Jackson Turner considered the central paradigm of American expansionism—has retained much of its power even after its official closure in 1893. As a testimony to its mythical weight, road narratives by men and women of various ethnicities have taken up and refigured "the West" especially from the second half of the 20th century onwards. Many women-authored road texts actually lead their female heroes west, questioning (if not always subverting), by their mere movement, the masculine paradigm of the frontier as a manly terrain in which women are out of place. A quotation from Doris Betts' *Heading West* exemplifies this appropriative stance:

[Nancy] moved down the trail almost muttering aloud. I only want to be happy... What's wrong with that? People promised me that. Everybody. I'm going to write that in *my* declaration of independence, not the pursuit but the capture of happiness. Heading west to Nancy's Manifest Destiny. (140)

By claiming a right to the promise of the west as a Garden of Eden, a mythic Land of Cockaigne, Betts' novel follows a questing pattern in women's road narratives—a yearning for a better place that is frustrated by the realization that moving to a place "beyond" social realities is impossible, but that these realities can be challenged and changed if you "keep moving" where you are out of place (Massey 1994, 11).¹⁶

Of course, all of this is not to say that men's experiences on, and literary representations of the road are unlimited and untroubled; to the contrary. Socioeconomic and ethnic factors have always shaped access and perceptions of the adventure on the road as well as on the frontier and continue to do so, as most of the studies on American road narratives acknowledge. Nonetheless, women's textual accounts of such adventures plainly show that gendered constructions of space and mobility impede and complicate any movement that entails leaving their assigned spheres—even in the literary realm. The protagonists' "lines of flight" (to use a Deleuzian term) depicted in these stories are characterized by the experience of what I have called *confined mobility* above; however, it is exactly this limitation in the freedom of movement, in literature as elsewhere, that apparently acts as a major incentive for feminine re-figurations of the road genre.

Resistance through Transgression

Women taking to the road are frequently deemed to be erratic misfits, which is reflected in expressions like "streetwalker," "wayward girl," "tramp" and "loose" or "public" woman, all of which connect female bodies, public space, and mobility, and (via the concomitant negative connotations) identify her as deviant, improper, and out of place. In cultural geographer Tim Cresswell's (1996) conception, to construct any subject as either "in place" or "out of place" is a powerful instrument of hegemony that ultimately aims at keeping dominant social groups in their place, on top of the social ladder. Cresswell's observations on the intersections of place, hegemonic power, and resistance to normative forces (by what he terms "transgression") combine socio-political and spatial dimensions. Looking at instances that disrespect expectations imbued in certain places, he argues that "space and place are used to structure a normative landscape—the way in which ideas about what is right, just, and appropriate are transmitted through space and place," (8) and furthermore that the spatially transgressive defiance of these ideas "serves to foreground the mapping of ideology onto space and place" (9).

Following Cresswell, discursively produced expectations of masculine and feminine behaviors in certain places are clearly a form of the ideological structuring of space, and hence of domination, aiming at keeping subjects in their "rightful" and "natural" places. Reflecting Cresswell's theoretical and empirical findings, all of the female heroes in the road stories I have encountered confront the boundaries of what a patriarchal, in this case US-American, culture conceives of as "acceptable feminine behavior" in certain spaces. They experience humiliation, hostility, sexual danger, and surprised stares at the very best. The main character in Anne Roiphe's *Long Division* (1972), Emily Brimberg Johnson, presents a case in point: traveling cross-country with her little daughter Sarah in order to obtain her divorce papers in Mexico, she is repeatedly reminded of the absence of her husband, since people around her find it unusual and disturbing that a woman and her daughter should drive across the country on their own. Their stares make Emily feel uncomfortable: "a certain hostility was clear. [...] Like an unnatural mutation, I felt awkward in the normal universe. Like a pilloried adultress, or a stockaded petty thief, I felt exposed, my vulnerable pants pinned down" (17). The protagonist realizes that the normative geography of cross-country tourism is produced by the traveling nuclear family, "male and female and offspring" (17), and that her

deviance from this norm impairs her as well as her daughter's experience of the freedom to move.

Nonetheless, I disagree with Cresswell's contention that such a normative geography is "always already existing" (10). In my reading of his study, his focus on transgressive acts in fact even relies on the very notion that place is never natural or pre-social, only "made natural" by spatial systems that are in need of constant reproduction and reassertion in order to keep their powerful force. Cresswell himself focuses on the reproduction of the spatial hegemony in the chapter "Putting Women in Their Place," a case study on a women's peace camp in Great Britain; it examines why and how the peace activists were represented—in newspapers and the media—as being unwomanly and totally out of place "at the front" (136). Just like affirming normative geographies, then, textual acts of spatial resistance are capable of disturbing and upsetting these patriarchal geographies of gendered space.

My own conceptualization of both the "out-of-placeness" of women on the road and of the road as a gendered frontier in post-1960s gender-struggles is informed by this construction of endangered female bodies, unprotected by masculine accompaniment on the one hand and patriarchal approval on the other. The textual examples from Roiphe's and Baker's novels, for instance, reflect how women on the road are often reproached for placing themselves in potentially dangerous situations, while those situations themselves are taken as "natural" facts that may remain unquestioned by what is presented as the patriarchal system of spatiality.

It is exactly by facing these "dangerous" spaces, using them as the setting of their narrative worlds, that women's road narratives are able to remap the road. In that they question, subvert, and/or appropriate the trope of confined mobility by creating not "a road," but many "roads of their own," they also construct transient, fluid, and deterritorialized female subjectivities that repeatedly escape spatial confinement. In this context, the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of deterritorialization highlights the processual and ephemeral rather than the structural or the systemic modes of transgression, referring also to Deleuze's and Guattari's idea of how the subject as a fluid assemblage can be conceptualized without having to rely on stable identities and identifications. In this view, the subject-as-assemblage is always about to constitute and define herself while simultaneously already dissolving these acts of self-definition again, as Guattari explains in his *Three Ecologies* (1985, 38).¹⁷ The protagonists in the road stories under discussion deterritorialize and alienate themselves constantly in order to transiently anchor themselves in self-definitions, while simultaneously subverting these definitions by transgressing their categorical boundaries, by moving on.

It is by way of their vagrant behavior, then, that these characters challenge and renegotiate stereotypical gender-roles effectuated by their stepping "out" into what is spatially structured as the public sphere.¹⁸ Their acts of taking the private (i.e. the female subject constructed as ideally domesticated) into the public not only transgresses the underlying binary opposition, but can also be read as evidence that once again, the personal, as well as the textual, is always also political.

Conclusion

In one way or another, I would argue conclusively, female road-heroes in the American cultural context subvert public / private and center / margin dichotomies, by

moving in a borderland of gender-roles as well as by defying centeredness via remaining always in a state of transition. Thus, they exemplify a textual practice of spatial resistance, appropriating masculine territory by way of a transgressive, feminist itinerancy.

This appropriation, as I have tried to show in my analysis, always entails a dismantling of the masculinist national mythology of the American open road; most road literature by women, therefore, is wary of celebrating the illusory freedom of travel, but emphasizes instead the importance of making women visible in public space, in this case entailing the road itself as well as the roadside, with its truck stops, diners, and motels making up what Cynthia Kadohata calls “the floating world.” These women-authored road stories literally take cultural constructions of Western femininity, historically tied to domestic confinement, onto the streets, thereby displacing them and opening them up for contestation and negotiation. The epic plot at the heart of so many representations of femininity, masculinity, and mobility, the story of Ulysses and Penelope, is broken; now it is Penelope moving (rather than waiting for her husband’s return from the road). Simultaneously, American women writers, by creating such mobile protagonists, effectively revise a genre that has traditionally been gender-blind. By embracing the American highway, female road heroes challenge the present, and by deliberately trespassing gendered boundaries of space, the picaresque protagonists of the texts I have discussed eventually re-appropriate their share of the road, thus creatively opening up a discursive space for new mappings of social spatialities.

Although this essay has centered on writings by American women, the implications of these narratives of gendered spatiality reach out, I hope, to women in different cultural contexts as well, even if perhaps only to a certain degree. In whatever way gendered spatialities are discursively and materially constructed, they are frequently used as a powerful means to confine women to “their place” in patriarchal societies all over the world—wherever that place may be. Perhaps my paper will thus serve as an inspiration to ask ourselves how we can think about the specifics of gendered embodiment in space, challenging the multiple strand of power embedded in our roots and routes. Ultimately, future analyses should help us to seek viable and forceful ways to reinscribe new historical narratives in the context of our social and cultural practices.

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Notes

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² I am employing a very broad understanding of the term "text," which includes not only written forms of cultural articulation, but also music, film, symbols, landscape, architecture, and so forth—in short, every expression of culture that needs an audience in order to be "read" or decoded.

³ One of the earliest and most important theorists of gendered space is Doreen Massey (e.g. in *Space, Place and Gender*, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994).

⁴ It is hardly surprising that the concept of gendered space is rarely addressed in analyses of the road genre, at least not explicitly. Deborah Paes de Barros' recently published *Fast Cars and Bad Girls: Nomadic Subjects and Women's Road Stories* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), one of the few monographs on women's road stories, does not talk explicitly about the concept of gendered space, although she provides a valuable analysis of women's mobility in the book.

⁵ Although rarely addressed in the road stories I have analyzed thus far, the larger, global implications of this dismantling of the idea of "freedom on the road" would be the unveiling of "roads" as constructed on movements of global capital and resource dependencies. Notably, William Least Heat Moon's famous road novel *Blue Highways* (1983) expressly chooses those back-country roads passed by by these global flows.

⁶ The most famous example for recent road stories by women in which these geographical areas are at issue is Maja Weiss' much-praised Balkan road documentary *The Road of Fraternity and Brotherhood*, 1999.

⁷ See, for example, Anouk de Koning's 2005 essay on "Embodiment and Public Space in Up-Market Cairo" (which is unfortunately not yet published).

⁸ See Heidi Slettedahl-MacPherson, *Women's Movement. Escape as Transgression in North American Feminist Fiction*. Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000, and Paes de Barros (2004).

⁹ This is the title of a novel by Beverly D'Onofrio (New York: Penguin, 1992), turned into a movie in 2001 by Penny Marshall.

¹⁰ Road-texts by women of ethnic minority groups not only contest gendered space, but also negotiate ethnic displacement on the road; see Anne Roiphe's *Long Division* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), Diane Glancy's *Claiming Breath* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1992), or Erika Lopez' *Flaming Iguanas: An Illustrated All-Girl Road Novel Thing* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

¹¹ In popular discourse, the possibility of rape is often used as both a caveat and punishment for spatial transgression. Women are not to go out alone, not when it is dark, and should not "invite" rape by wearing short skirts etc.; this is also reflected in court, where victims of rape are asked about how they were dressed when they were raped.

¹² On the difference between a “heroine” and a “female hero,” see Betty King’s *Women of the Future: The Female Main Character in Science Fiction* (Metuchen: Scarecrow P, 1984).

¹³ Due to historical contexts, African-American women are an exception here. As bell hooks has shown in “Homeplace: a Site of Resistance” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End P, 1990), the domestic sphere is rather empowering than confining in this context.

¹⁴ In her essay “Manifest Domesticity,” published in the *No More Separate Spheres!* issue of *American Literature* (70 (3) 1998: 581-606), Amy Kaplan indeed argues that the logic of conquest and expansionism depended on the complementary construction of the feminine domestic.

¹⁵ Many classical Westerns of the 19th and 20th centuries testify to the tensions these opposite forces, which generate the frontier as a gendered space, present for the male protagonists. However, the confused gender relations are usually renegotiated in the Western in a way that ultimately restores the system of separate spheres.

¹⁶ Betts' novel tries, but ultimately fails, to subvert the West on her own terms without buying into the concept of the terrain as manly; her eventual marriage to a patriarch suggests that she will not “capture happiness.”

¹⁷ Rosi Braidotti uses Deleuze's and Guattari's writings for feminist theory; in the by now classic *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), she revises the Deleuzian figuration of the nomadic, realizing the potential inherent in strategies of nomadism for a feminist politics. According to Braidotti, a feminist-oriented nomadism is characterized by “an acute awareness of the nonfixity of boundaries” rather than by a “fluidity without borders” (36). Braidotti, like Cresswell (in *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*. Minneapolis, London: U of Minnesota P, 1996), uses nomadic transgressions of such borders as a strategy: consequently, a feminist nomadism entails “the intense desire to go on trespassing, transgressing” (36) that women can use to create new subjectivities. The problematical issues involved in appropriating nomadism in Western philosophy are part of my dissertation; see also Christopher Miller's essay “The Postidentitarian Predicament in the Footnotes of *A Thousand Plateaus: Nomadology, Anthropology, and Authority*.” *Deleuze and Guattari. Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers III*. Ed. Gary Genosko. New York, London: Routledge, 2001, 1113-1150.

¹⁸ The *desire* to transgress “proper femininity” might even be a major incentive for the vagrancies of the female characters in women's road-stories, especially also in queer contexts (see Lopez 1998).