

Introduction: Women in Motion Femmes en mouvement

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Article abstract

More than 80 presenters from the international scholarly community gathered at Mount Allison University on May 23-25, 2003 for an interdisciplinary bilingual conference on the theme of "Women in Motion." In offering this sample of the best papers to emerge from the conference concerning Canadian writing and culture, we hope to illuminate various ways in which the apparently gendered nature of movement can be interrogated, and highlight challenges to age-old models of feminine stasis. Such challenges are posed not only by women's travel and migrancy narratives, but also by problematizing the very notion of mobility, so that even ostensibly static domestic experiences can signify an interior mobility that extends the concept beyond its traditional physical paradigm.

Introduction: Women in Motion Femmes en mouvement

KARIN SCHWERDTNER AND KAREN BAMFORD

ON MAY 23-25, 2003, Mount Allison University hosted a SSHRC-funded¹ interdisciplinary bilingual conference on the theme of “Women in Motion.” As conference organizers, we invited participants to examine the gendered nature of movement and the ways in which mobile women have figured in cultures and societies, past and present. The focus was placed on exceptions to feminine models of stasis as they counter conventions of masculine mobility through the centuries and in certain traditions — exceptions such as women travellers, explorers, pilgrims, exiles, migrants, pioneers, vagabonds, missionaries, and wanderers. We were particularly interested in the following issues and questions: how representations of mobile women differ from those of more sedentary women, or compare to those of mobile men, through time and across cultures; the connections between particular literary or cultural representations of mobile or immobile women and real barriers to women’s mobility; and new literary and cultural traditions of representing mobile women in an age of increasing transnational migration.

Response from the international scholarly community (both faculty and students) was overwhelming: more than 80 presenters gathered from Canada, the United States, Europe, and Australia to discuss the theme of female mobility in a wide range of contexts: from seventeenth-century French Canada to contemporary Marrakesh; from nineteenth-century literature for children to postmodern fiction; and from fine art to film. The conference also included an art exposition, poetry readings, musical recitals, film showings, and a literary performance piece, all revolving around the conference theme.

Such presentations reflect an ever-intensifying interest in feminine motion and movement. However, the theme of mobility, as related to women, is not entirely new to academic literature and thought. Over the

last few decades, a great deal of consideration has been given to women's lives, and representations of them, in literature, history, and society. Many scholarly essays published in the 1970s focused on the day-to-day comings and goings of women in different cultures and eras. Redressing long-standing biases that, to a great extent, relegated discussions of such matters to footnotes, researchers and critics asked questions and addressed issues that had previously gone un- or under-represented in scholarly debate. And in more recent years, literary critics, historians, anthropologists, and geographers (among others) have drawn inspiration from this foundational work in turning their attention to various representations, understandings, and implications of the movements and mobility of women.

To give only a few examples, critics investigating diverse literary traditions and periods have examined fictional and historical representations of women as travellers and “*flâneuses*.” Responding to previously published essays that reflected or dwelled upon literary and cultural traditions of *masculine* mobility, Deborah L. Parsons's *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (2000) and Rachel Bowlby's “Walking, Women and Writing: Virginia Woolf as ‘*flâneuse*’” (1991) are part of a growing body of work illustrating a female urban consciousness alternative to that of the male “*flâneur*.” Contributing further to the wide range of texts dealing with mobility, Bénédicte Monicat's *Itinéraires de l'écriture au féminin: voyageuses du 19e siècle* (1996) discusses traditional biases regarding women and movement, in offering a geographical and bibliographical panorama of francophone and French women's travel writings from the nineteenth century. Lori Saint-Martin's *La voyageuse et la prisonnière: Gabrielle Roy et la question des femmes* (2002) makes use of feminist theory to consider the tension between women's socially prescribed roles and their desire for mobility and travel in the work of the eminent twentieth-century French-Canadian novelist Gabrielle Roy.

Aside from the contributions of literary critics, historians have undertaken studies of travelling women of different kinds and eras. Ruth Compton Brouwer's *Modern Women Modernizing Men: The Changing Missions of Three Professional Women in Asia and Africa, 1902–69* (2002), for instance, focuses upon women such as Margaret Wrong, whose experiences in the male-dominated worlds of travel and mission careers put her well beyond the late-Victorian stereotypes of the Lady Missionary and the Lady Traveller. Biographer Charlotte Gray's works — notably *Flint and Feather: The Life and Times of E. Pauline Johnson, Tekabionwake*

(2002) and *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill* (1999) — highlight the adventures and travels of Canadian pioneer women in various periods of a history whose emphasis was at one time placed on men, on the conquering of a continent, and on constitution-building. Anthropologists, too, have increasingly taken note of mobile women, focusing not only on the diverse ways in which they are represented in different sociocultural contexts — as in Holly Wardlow’s “Headless Ghosts and Roving Women: Specters of Modernity in Papua New Guinea” (2002) and in Filip de Boeck’s “‘Dogs Breaking Their Leash’: Diamond Traffic Between Angola and DR Congo” (1999) — but also on the novel circumstances that migrant women face in a changing global economy — as in Rhacel Salazar Parreñas’s *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work* (2001).

Finally, much recent cultural and economic geography has explored how historical and contemporary urban designs and infrastructures have developed in conjunction with, and in support of, particular understandings of women’s unique movements, needs and “places.” Works such as Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt’s *Gender, Work and Space* (1995) and Mona Domosh and Joni Seager’s *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World* (2001) underscore the important role of gender in shaping travel activity patterns, and analyze the interconnectedness of gendered identities and various spaces; whereas some of Sara Mills’s work, particularly *Discourses of Difference: Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism* (1991), concentrates on gender and travel in relation specifically to *colonial* space. A grant from SSHRC’s Aid to Occasional Research Conferences enabled the organizers to bring three of these notable authors as keynote speakers: Sara Mills, Lori Saint-Martin and Charlotte Gray.

As evidenced by the strong response received by our call for papers, the issues addressed in this conference continue to be of great relevance to discipline-specific researchers as well as to scholars interested in contributing to the development of new, interdisciplinary perspectives on questions related to gendered mobility. In this special section, “Women in Motion/Les femmes en mouvement,” we offer a sampling of some of the best papers to emerge from the conference concerning Canadian writing and culture. Answering to scholarly journals that have, in the past, attended primarily to models of masculine mobility, “Women in Motion” interrogates the apparently gendered nature of movement, while drawing attention to women’s lives in Canadian literature, history, and society. This section also highlights a variety of understandings of feminine “mo-

bility,” comprising essays that focus on different ways in which mobile women test age-old conventions of feminine stasis.

The section begins with Wendy Roy’s truly interdisciplinary essay on the previously underestimated adventure traveler, Mina Hubbard, and continues with Robin Sutherland’s paper on the wife of Canada’s first prime minister, Lady Agnes Macdonald. Like the “rooted” Tara Lata discussed in a subsequent essay by Katherine Miller, this last model Canadian is not easily described in relation to a great *physical* mobility. In Lady Macdonald’s case, Sutherland argues, a woman’s apparent immobility or historically understated authority as observer — attending family and prime minister at home and in Parliament — merely prompted her to seek innovative outlets for her *intellectual* mobility, for her alignment with, or interaction with, masculine political authority. Thus, according to Sutherland, while it is true that nineteenth-century Canadian women were not free to access all parliamentary chambers, it is false to say that some did not actively participate in the world of politics.

Wendy Roy’s discussion of *A Woman’s Way through Unknown Labrador* demonstrates that it is also incorrect to declare that early twentieth-century women did not contribute to Canadian exploration and mapping, and, in so doing, revise the traditional perception of geographical knowledge as a masculine prerogative. Indeed, not content to restrict their authority to the domestic space, and to influence national politics and geographical discovery indirectly (through their husbands and male contemporaries), Mina Hubbard and Lady Macdonald made use of their personal and published writings to take part, respectively, in the building of a nation and in the visualization of the Labrador landscape. Hubbard’s story, as Roy observes, is that of “an early twentieth-century Penelope whose Odysseus did not return from his voyage, and whose death set the stage for her decision to voyage in his stead, to tell her own tale, and to map and thus make a claim to the physical space of the Ungava Peninsula.” Still, Roy emphasizes the lengths to which Hubbard had to go to be seen as a legitimate explorer at a time when considerable limits were placed on women’s ability to travel and map independently.

The first of a selection of essays on more contemporary texts is Kathleen Kellett-Betsos’s analysis of *Le premier jardin* by Anne Hébert. In her paper, Kellett-Betsos illustrates the geographic mobility afforded to the Quebec-born main character, Flora Fontanges, by a stage career in France. Flora’s mobility is, moreover, complemented and highlighted by a certain transcendence from the social and spatial constraints imposed upon women of her time and economic class, and, after a return visit to

her native-city, by a proper “mourning” of the past. Katherine Miller’s paper explores the link between mobility/immobility and identity construction in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Desirable Daughters*. Focusing upon the cases of the modern rootless Tara and the rooted Tara Lata, Miller asks, “Does mobility truly offer female characters a way of redefining themselves and their relationship to home, as Mukherjee suggests in *Jasmine*? Or do homes, both personal and communal, inescapably influence the nexus of identity construction?” Like Miller, Irene Oore addresses the juxtaposition between the rootless and the rooted, or in Oore’s words, between “le mobile et l’immobile, le dynamique et le statique.” However, in her paper on *Les lettres chinoises* by Ying Chen, Oore is less interested in the problem of identity construction than in the psychological motivations for, and ethical implications of, voluntary (im)mobility.

Not surprisingly, all of these essays on “women in motion” challenge various literary tropes or social preconceptions. Roy’s study of Hubbard’s explorations in Labrador, like Sutherland’s analysis of Lady Macdonald’s negotiations between the domestic and political, reminds us not to underestimate the agency of our foremothers, even those apparently restricted to limited mobility within the domestic sphere. Miller’s reading of Mukherjee’s *Desirable Daughters* proposes that absolute rootlessness is not possible: that family and husband continue to act as ideological determinants in the construction of a gendered identity. Kellett-Betsos finds in Hébert’s *Le premier jardin* a more hopeful model of modern female mobility: Flora negotiates a role for herself that contrasts with both the stasis of Samuel Beckett’s Winnie and the perpetual wandering of her runaway daughter Maud. Finally, Oore’s paper concludes with a challenge to a simple reading of Chen’s *Les lettres chinoises* that problematizes the very notion of mobility: “Ne pourrait-on pas plutôt voir l’ouvrage comme l’histoire du pèlerinage intérieur de Sassa, au-delà de son immobilité, un récit d’une vie de risque et d’aventures, alors que les voyages de Yuan et de Da Li ne seraient dans cette optique que des mouvements très superficiels, de simples illusions?”

NOTE

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