

Internationalizing Women's Rights: Travel Narratives and Identity Formation

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf once wrote that a woman must have a room of her own as well as money of her own if she was to become a writer. With the advent of “money of her own” for more women in the twentieth and twenty-first century, more women are traveling and finding rooms of their own on an international landscape. Travel narratives by women are increasing in both volume and readership. The narratives typically explore an individual woman's expanding consciousness as she moves into previously unknown areas of the world. Her experiences, recorded often for her own later reflection, often reveal a growing sense of sense of place in both what is called “home” and in the world at large. A new land or community intensifies these writers' connection to the mores of their own cultures, and these mores are often either reconsidered or rejected as the writer experiences other ways of being. In particular, the writers scrutinize mores associated with gender, and vow to make changes in the return home.

In many ways, these travel narratives follow the traditional quest of the hero, such as Odysseus; however, these women tend to write from their middle or later years and the travel adventures tend to raise memories that call for activism or change in the present. This paper will examine current travel narratives by women and comment on the call to action for women's equality within the text.

Introduction

In the last ten years, the number of women writing travel narratives has increased dramatically. Contemporary women's popular travel writing produces a modern, hybrid narrative that melds travel writing with the genre of the bildungsroman (or coming of age story) to create a striking narrative of what I am calling the “middle-age narrative.” For the purposes of this discussion, I want to look at three best-selling travel memoirs by U.S. women: Alice Steinbach's *Without Reservations: The Travels of an Independent Woman*, published in 2000; *Tales of a Female Nomad: Living at Large in the World* by Rita Golden Gelman, published in 2001; and *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia*, published in 2006. Thus, in middle age, these women are traveling to new physical landscapes but also psychological ones, as they cope with defining their middle years. They seek adventure in order to learn about a new self, not unlike the traditional bildungsroman, yet they write not as

adolescents, but as mature women. Judith Butler posits the interesting notion that gender is not only a social construct, but that individuals perform gender, thereby acting out prescriptive gender narratives. I suggest that in middle age, women question and rebel against these conventional gender performances. Why are so many middle-age women writing travel narratives, and what compels the popularity? These traveling authors create narratives that teem with irony, wisdom and humor, offering to their readers a new vista of life at middle age ; the travelers return home renewed and triumphant, and the readers participate in the optimism of the new, modern, middle-aged woman.

Alice Steinbach's *Without Reservations: The Travels of an Independent Woman* is Steinbach's middle-aged passage narrative. A Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist, the middle-aged Steinbach looks at her life in sum. Divorced, her two sons grown, she wonders "[w]hat had happened . . . to the woman who loved art and jazz and the feeling that an adventure always lurked just ahead, around some corner? I hadn't seen her in quite a while."¹ This middle stage at middle age is complex; Steinbach explains:

By 1993, however, I was entering a new phase of my life, one that caused me to rethink its direction. My sons had graduated from college and were entering new adult lives of their own; . . . the house felt quiet and empty. . . . At times I felt my identity was narrowing down to one thing—being a reporter. What you need to do, a voice inside me said, is to step out and experience the world After fifteen years of writing stories about other people, you need to get back into the narrative of your own life.²

¹ Alice Steinbach, *Without Reservations: The Travels of an Independent Woman* (New York: Random House, 2000), xv.

² *Ibid.*, xv, xvi.

Now that Steinbach is no longer performing motherhood in the active sense, nor a wife or significant other in any sense, she wonders what possibilities this new life might hold for her. Steinbach's situation both resembles and does not resemble the classic bildungsroman, where a boy "goes out into the world seeking adventure and learns wisdom the hard way."³ Unlike an adolescent, Steinbach knows the ways of the world, but like the teen, this is the first time since she herself was quite young that she has been unencumbered by traditional gendered narratives. Indeed, in "The Female Bildungsroman: Calling It into Question," Carol Lazzaro-Weis points to the complication of unraveling female identity as a singular "I" when "women play multiple roles as part of the strategy to subvert the self imposed upon them from the outside and to move toward the development of an autonomous female identity."⁴ I would argue that men participate in multiple societal roles as well, such as father, husband, and so on, but western society, in particular the twentieth and twenty-first century, the roles of husband and father come second to the role of occupation; while for women one's work constitutes only one of the main three narratives. Often, for women, the roles of wife and mother assume equal, if not greater, priority in social order. Thus, even so called "career" women often lament the lack of time and energy they have for their other roles. Steinbach confesses, "In my most honest moments, I recognized that earlier in my career, when the push to success was all uphill, my own children had sometimes taken a back seat to my work."⁵ However, this time around, guilt does not tug at her like so many small, sticky hands, and so she can, for the first time in decades, take time to reflect. She writes:

Over the years I had fallen into the habit, a quite natural one, I believe, of

³ Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989), 139.

⁴ Carol Lazzaro—Weis, "The Female Bildungsroman: Calling It into Question."

NWSA Journal 2.1 (1990): 18. Academic Search Premier. 24 February 2007. <http://search.ebscohost.com>.

⁵ Steinbach, 54.

defining myself in terms of who I was to other people, and what they had expected of me as a mother, as a daughter, as wife, as ex-wife, as reporter, as friend. For a while, at least, I wanted to stand back from these roles and see who emerged.”⁶

Thus, Steinbach flies, or perhaps flees, to Paris to begin her adventures and leave behind a woman who had become a collage of empty, or perhaps finished, gendered performances.

During the course of the narrative, Steinbach enjoys wine in Paris, takes a course at Oxford, and almost becomes a victim of a crime in Rome. Though she had long called herself an “independent woman,” during her travels she finally feels free of burdens, and she writes euphorically, “I felt like a sixteen-year-old who’s just been given permission to drive the family car”⁷. Finally, in her fifties, Steinbach metaphorically and literally occupies the driver’s seat. Steinbach begins to see her self as an entity, part of, but not defined by, her gender. She muses humorously about her returning “adolescent” optimism. Adolescence, though gendered, is experienced differently by boys than girls; nevertheless, for many women, it generally represents the last time they were without the demands of marriage and motherhood. Steinbach describes her joy as “adolescent” in part because she casts off the lingering gender roles. Steinbach begins to demonstrate a life outside of gendered boundaries and to understand the construct of what Judith Butler calls the production of gender.⁸ Butler offers, “[i]f the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the true effects of discourse of primary and stable identity.”⁹ That is, if gender is a performance, and the repeated

⁶ Ibid, xvii.

⁷ Ibid, 150.

⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 174.

⁹ Ibid, 175.

performance begins to define identity, then identity can be changed, or redefined by new performances that may or may not still have the same gendered meaning. For example, Steinbach notes, “there was no one to please or not please on this trip.”¹⁰ Typically, even noting the absence of the need to please or not to please casts Steinbach in a traditional subservient role. However, in noting the impact of her observation, she moves past the focus on others and into a more individual space; she tells her reader, “. . . I was learning every day that, depending on the occasion and my mood, I had in my arsenal of feelings ALL of these responses.”¹¹

No longer defined by the dominant narratives of gender through performing marriage and motherhood, Steinbach rolls through new landscapes and experiences as well as revealing emerging aspects of a developing middle-aged self. No wonder then, that the sequel to this first travel narrative is appropriately titled, *Educating Alice*.¹² Although middle-aged, she is beginning a new path of a fully individuated self.

Steinbach concludes her travel narrative by noting that her memories, like her newfound sense of self, are hers—she rightfully owns them. She imagines a future where she is in charge of her life; “I began to imagine other rains that would be mine forever. I saw the rain streaming down the Spanish Steps. Blowing beneath the awning of a café in Paris. Sweeping through the piazza in Siena.”¹³ Steinbach began this narrative about traveling through the middle-aged passage by puzzling about her identity, her worth, her future. She boards her plane to go home as a person in charge of nurturing her new, emerging self, a construction that she alone authorizes.

¹⁰ Steinbach, 151.

¹¹ Ibid, 152, emphasis mine.

¹² Alice Steinbach, *Educating Alice: Adventures of a Curious Woman* (New York: Random House, 2005).

¹³ Steinbach, 258.

As in *Without Reservations, Tales of a Female Nomad: Living at Large in the World* begins with Rita Golden Gelman's concern that her identity has been misplaced. She opens the travel narrative:

I am living someone else's life. It's a good life, filled with elegant restaurants, interesting people, and events like Academy Awards and the Grammys. My husband of twenty-four years and I dine with celebrities, we see the latest movies before the rest of the world, and we're invited to all the book parties in Los Angeles I first realized something was missing about five years ago when . . . tears began streaming down my cheeks. . . . I was crying for my lost spirit.¹⁴

At forty-seven, Gelman would not define herself as an independent woman. In fact, when she first begins her travels she worries about dining alone. She imagines that other diners will view her as inadequate and pity her as a middle-aged woman who can no longer attract a companion. She retreats, weeping, to her room where she chooses not to eat dinner. A known, published children's author, Gelman manifests the signs of a woman constrained by not only by images of public scrutiny, but more so by her internal sense of gender behavior. Rita Felski describes a contemporary model:

in which female self-discovery is depicted as a process of confrontation and dialogue with a social environment. Although the text often emphasizes internal growth and self-understanding rather than public self-realization, only by moving out into the world can the protagonist become critically aware of the limitation of her previously secluded existence and her unquestioning acceptance of the

¹⁴ Rita Goldman Gelman, *Tales of a Female Nomad: Living at Large in the World*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 3.

circumscribed nature of women's social roles.¹⁵

Here, I want to pause a moment and discuss the implications of Felski's words on an international basis. If, as Felski asserts, that only by moving out into the world from the private sphere of "home" can a protagonist encounter a series of "tests" that will allow her to see both gender and self in relief, then the importance of travel, of what in the classic bildungsroman is called "separation" from the community of origin, becomes important for all women. All three of the travel narratives in this discussion adhere to this model whereby the author confronts and passes a series of "tests," but unlike the adolescent male, she encounters them in middle-age, because she has not had the freedom of mobility before this time.

Unlike Steinbach, Gelman begins the narrative separated from her husband, but not divorced. She lingers in a limbo world for a time—the wife, but not the ex-wife, and even has hopes that her travels might bring energy into "a marriage that could benefit from rejuvenation."

¹⁶ However, she soon finds that as a direct result of her increasing need to roam, her husband files for divorce. The divorce reminds Gelman about the myths of "happily ever after" and other aspects of her self that did not fit into traditional gender roles; she even admits to hating decorating a home. ¹⁷ Divorce becomes one of Gelman's rites of passage, lamentable, but necessary. Saddened about the divorce, she still knows that she "ha[s] become a woman who has felt joy, shared laughter, explored other worlds, and rediscovered a hidden me. I will not, cannot, bury her again."¹⁸ Her children grown, her marriage severed, Gelman tells her reader, "Once I leave the U.S., I am not bound by the rules of my culture. And when I am a foreigner in another country, I am exempt from local rules. This extraordinary situation means that there are no rules

¹⁵ Felski, 135.

¹⁶ Gelman, 32.

¹⁷ Ibid, 37.

¹⁸ Ibid, 37.

in my life. I am free to live by the standards and ideals and rules I create for myself.”¹⁹ Gelman clearly believes that she will forge a new identity, combining the fragments of self that she wishes to retain with new aspects of self that she will uncover through the tests of travel.

Thus, the middle-aged passage narrative emerges as what Felski might term a feminist bildungsroman, and Butler might name as a questioning of the acts of performing gender. Felski notes that the classic narrative of marriage “is now explicitly revealed not as the endpoint of female Bildung, but as its very antitheses, so that female “youth”-- the period of interior and exterior discovery and development—is located at quite different points within a female social biography.”²⁰ During her travels, Steinbach refers to herself exuberantly as feeling like she was “sixteen” and Gelman gushes, “[t]he new me is feeling rebellious, looking for excitement, bursting with energy to explore.”²¹ These feelings of anticipation and feeling “young” are not indicators of regret or a longing to be actually young again. These authors articulate clearly that they can feel hope again precisely because they have experienced other gendered myths and have found them now outdated, or unfulfilling. They now possess the strength and confidence to move in a new direction.

Gelman, in the middle of her narrative, readies herself to travel to the Galapagos Islands. She writes, “[m]y life is endlessly fascinating, filled with learning, adventure, interesting people, new and enlightening experiences. I laugh, sing, and dance more than I ever have. I am becoming the person inside me.”²² Butler might argue that Gelman is defining self, that is, her performances, in a new way—that she is choosing an identity as she acts, dances, laughs, and sings. Indeed, if as Butler posits, “the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts

¹⁹ Ibid, 40

²⁰ Felski, 138.

²¹ Gelman, 39.

²² Ibid, 97.

through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the spatial metaphor of a 'ground' will be displaced and the 'ground' or the foundation of identity building becomes amorphous."²³ Gelman no longer thinks of her self as a one stylized gender because her life no longer fits the gendered categories that she knew. Though she remains anatomically female, she no longer performs, without thought, the routine constructs of gender.

Gelman closes her travel narrative with the title of her last chapter: "A Journey Still in Progress." As with the classic bildungsroman, she has returned "home" to the United States as a changed woman. She reflects on her travels, "I laughed again at my ragged tortillas and wailed with the woman who was holding her dead baby. I sang in the mountains, fell in the mud and blew bubbles with a little boy and his mother in the middle of New Guinea."²⁴ Gelman charts her life now by a new narrative that is about her newfound connection to others, in what Felski calls "a story of development toward coherent selfhood through a process of moving into a wider community."²⁵ Gelman narrates a middle-age journey that ends in peace, fulfillment, and joy.

Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India, and Indonesia follows Elizabeth Gilbert on the path of the middle-aged narrative, but with more trauma than Steinbach's and Gelman's. In part, Gilbert's willingness to talk about serious depression, anti-depressants and suicidal thoughts places her as a women growing up amidst the self-help generation, while both Steinbach and Gelman came of age in the 1950's and early 60's. Gilbert turns thirty-five during her stay in Bali; she came of age in the 1980's. Perhaps this accounts for Gilbert's angst occurring earlier. As with Gelman's narrative, Gilbert's begins with divorce. A successful writer, she and her husband purchase a large, suburban home and decide that it is time to have a baby. Only Gilbert secretly doubts that she wants to be a mother, and she begins to

²³ Butler, 179.

²⁴ Gelman, 303.

²⁵ Felski, 140.

question her marriage as well. She tells the reader, “I don’t want to be married anymore. I don’t want to live in this big house. I don’t want to have a baby.”²⁶

Although a younger woman, Gilbert automatically questions the roles that fragment her life. Unlike both Steinbach and Gelman, who managed careers and motherhood, Gilbert dreads the time and work she knows will be involved in parenting. She already is tired of being a wife. She asks herself, “Why did I feel so overwhelmed with duty, tired of being the primary breadwinner and the housekeeper and the social coordinator and the dog-walker and the wife and the soon-to-be-mother, and –somewhere in my stolen moments – a writer”²⁷ Gilbert leaves her husband to find herself; she travels in search of spiritual fulfillment.

While both Steinbach and Gelman write of the fulfillment they feel during their travels, including transcendent moments, neither author delves deeply into specifically spiritual searching. Yet, Gilbert wants more than just her freedom. Like some of Chaucer’s pilgrims, she wants psychologically healing and she wants to find personal answers to philosophical questions. Though I would argue that Gilbert’s writing is the least polished, her desire and relentless search for a spiritual framework in which to place herself separates her slightly from the narrative form in which I have placed her. Unlike Steinbach who later regrets a relentless ambition that she believes intervened in her mothering, Gilbert has no such qualms. She acknowledges her success, realizes that she does not want, nor need children, and her next logical step is toward understanding her place in the universe, and though it is a reach that exceeds her grasp, she hungers for philosophical truths.

Though she longs to find a spiritual center, Gilbert also acknowledges her need to overcome some gender stereotypes. Gilbert shares, perhaps she overshares, with her reader,

²⁶ Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything Across Italy, India, and Indonesia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 10.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 11.

“Moreover, I have boundary issues with men. Or maybe that’s not fair to say. To have issues with boundaries, one must *have* boundaries in the first place, right? But I disappear into the person I love.”²⁸ Spoken from a successful thirty-something woman who has the courage to leave the marriage and motherhood narrative, these lines sound odd. Gilbert manages like a “diligent soldier for years—working, producing, never missing a deadline, taking care of my loved ones, my gums and credit record, voting, etc. Is this lifetime supposed to be only about duty?”²⁹ Here, Gilbert unconsciously echoes the voices of Steinbach and Gelman; in her longing to escape the routine of her constructed life places her squarely in the middle-age narrative.

Much like her fellow writers, Gilbert too finds solace abroad. Walking through the village of Syracuse, Sicily, Gilbert wonders at the beauty of the village. She writes:

In a world of disorder and disaster and fraud, sometimes only beauty can be trusted. . . . To devote yourself to the creation and enjoyment of beauty, then, can be a serious business—not always necessarily a means of escaping reality, but sometimes a means of holding onto the real when everything else is flaking away into . . . rhetoric and plot.³⁰

Gilbert realizes the structure of the narrative itself and places herself into it as a character, and then provides the reader with self analysis. In this, I believe that Gilbert opens the door most fully to Butler’s ideas of discontinuity, or finding a self in the borders of gendered performances. Part of this acknowledgement, of course, is to place oneself outside the margins of most socially constructed orders. In Bali, Gilbert explains, “[m]y habit of wandering through this world oblivious to my physical orientation, in addition to my decision to have stepped outside the containing network of marriage and family, makes me—for Balinese purposes—something like a

²⁸ Ibid, 65.

²⁹ Ibid, 23.

³⁰ Ibid, 115.

ghost.”³¹ Gilbert’s deliberate choices for herself as an individual, that unfolding of self that Gelman and Steinbach celebrate, somewhat saddens Gilbert. Having experienced marriage and motherhood for many years, both Gelman and Steinbach participated fully in the socially accepted order before leaving it. Gilbert, confident that she does not want marriage and motherhood, nevertheless wonders how she will fit into some sort of community.

Rita Felski calls the female bildungsroman one that “charts women’s movement into the urban and public spaces of a modernity from which they have been excluded. Integration does not, however necessarily signify reconciliation, and the move outward into society can assume more or less radical contours.”³² Yet, Gilbert has not been excluded from urban or public space. If anything, she excels in what was traditionally a male domain: writing. Gilbert’s angst originates from a sense of alienation that does stem from gender issues, but not the gender issues of the previous generation. Gilbert’s mother tells her, “[y]ou have to understand how little I was raised to expect that I deserved in life, honey. Remember—I come from a different time and place than you do.”³³ Gilbert asks and then attempts to answer the difficult questions of her life with the knowledge that, unlike Cinderella, she can choose not to go the ball.

Gilbert’s valiant attempts, like pilgrims from all generations, bears witness to her desire to change her life. She does find a measure of peace and of happiness at the end of her searching. Gilbert finally finds a definition for herself in the ancient Sanskrit word “antevasin” which she defines as “one who lives at the border.” She muses:

I’ve spent so much time these last years wondering what I’m supposed to be. A wife? A mother? A lover? A celibate? An Italian, a Glutton? A traveler? An artist? A Yogi? But I’m not any of these things, not completely. . . . I’m just a

³¹ Ibid, 227-8.

³² Felski, 141.

³³ Gilbert, 83.

slippery *antevasin*—betwixt and between—a student on the every-shifting border near the wonderful, scary forest of the new.”³⁴

Gilbert wraps up her narrative with a line that she wrote to herself as she was beginning her journey. She had written to herself during a suicidal haze, “I love you, I will never leave you, I will always take care of you.”³⁵ By the conclusion of this middle-age narrative, she kept her promise to herself. She asserts that she was not the one rescued by a price; she was instead the administrator of her own rescue. Thus, Gilbert is princess and prince, she is the rescued and the rescuer—she lives at the discontinuous border of an emerging genre of women writers who travel both in the exterior world and in the psychological one.

Conclusion

Traversing borders of countries, these three writers also cross gender norms in order to set up a new space for women at the borders. Through their writings, they are suggesting a redefinition of middle-age for all women—one that begins and ends as their narratives do—with strong, confident, joyful women. Though this contemporary genre might not constitute aesthetic literature, it nevertheless calls for a new definition for women at a time in their lives that has historically been one of decreasing power. Carol Lazzaro-Weis asks as she finishes her discussion of the female *bildungsroman*, “Is there such a thing as a female *Bildungsroman*? Probably not, which is why it has been necessary over the years for many women writers and critics to invent one.”³⁶ This popular, new narrative form, or perhaps a new twist to a much older tradition, grants women in middle age a freedom and joy that can perhaps be equaled by a group of pilgrims starting on a journey with April breeze blowing softly as they commence on a path both more and less traveled.

³⁴ Ibid, 204.

³⁵ Ibid, 328.

³⁶ Lazzaro-Wiess, 34.

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