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Chapter Four

The Daughters of Thelma and Louise
New? Aesthetics of the Road

Jessica Enevold

Introduction

In their critical analysis of twentieth-century travel narratives, *Tourists with Typewriters* (1999), Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan ask if it is "possible in a genre [travel writing] much given to repetition, to come up with something new?" (x). I agree with Holland and Huggan that in travel writing there exists a repetition of clichés, which cannot be overlooked. Nevertheless, I want to stress the importance of looking upon both travel writing and its clichés again from a slightly different, strategically important, perspective—that of gender.

Gender and genre are in this study thrust into a tight embrace. I see *genre* as constituted by a number of linguistic elements, constructed bodies of style, settings, ideologies, characters, and plots, and so forth. Its sibling word *gender* can be accounted for in much the same way. Their etymological kinship demonstrates an axiomatic association between the two: They are separated only by the "d," as Jacques Derrida writes in "The Law of Genre," where he also goes on to question the opposition between the two. Lidia Curti, taking the cue, states that "genre is traversed by the discourse of sexual difference as if the vicinity of the two English words—genre and gender, divided by 'd' (for difference?)—recalled coincidence and dislocation, obedience and transgression at one and the same time" (53). Considering their intimate and long-standing relationship, can these familiar associates breed into something unfamiliar, that is, new?

Attempting to answer this question, in what follows I focus on a certain subgenre of contemporary travel writing, which I refer to as the *road genre*. What I mean by the road genre is roughly what Ronald Primeau (*Romance of the Road* 1996) calls "The Literature of the American Highway," and Kris Lackey (*RoadFrames* 1997) "The American Highway Narrative."

The critics referred to above discuss travel writing under the auspices of genre, while—and here lies an important difference between their studies and my own project—the aegis of my investigation is gender. Gender is thus the basis for my analysis rather than another element hybridizing with another royal genre; gender becomes the cardinal critical category and diagnostic criterion rather than another chapter in another survey of travel literature.[1]

To pay primary attention to gender entails considering the questions of gendered authorship. The last thirty years of critical activity have been favorable to a literary climate in which the significance of the author has been undermined and the text privileged. A simultaneous movement to resurrect the rejected writer has, however, existed. It has been sustained by feminist and postcolonial critics protesting against, for example, the "neutralization" of the author, that is, the implicit whitening, masculinizing, or even erasure of the author. As far as travel writing is concerned, the author should be raised from the dead for good. An author's role becomes particularly urgent to consider as he or she, as writer and sometimes narrative subject, can be understood both metaphorically and literally as the navigator of the ship. Helmsmanship has been the key to journey narratives from the *Odyssey* to *On the Road*. Holland and Huggan implicitly draw the issue of helmsmanship (that is, subjectivity) into their analysis by singling out as a trademark of contemporary travel writing a feature that they label "specialization." One of their examples is "women's travel." In their example, "woman" becomes the determining agent for the definition of the travel narrative. They have thus focused on the agent of travel—the one who travels and who presents/writes the subsequent travel narrative. Their focus on the agent is nevertheless vague. Another example of specialization is

"ecological tourism," in the account of which the traveler loses its specific gender, that is, "reverts" to a supposedly neutral status, and in which the analytical focus is redirected to observe instead the narrative determinants of, for example, "new" ideological (in this case ecological) elements of travel. I would like to advocate an even closer pursuit of the traveler-navigator subjectivity, stalking in this process the implications of genre analysis as gender governs its perspective.

Where Do We Find Ourselves?

In 1947, Simone de Beauvoir traveled across the United States from New York on the East Coast to Los Angeles on the West Coast, and back. She kept a detailed diary, which was published in French in 1948 as *L'Amerique au jour le jour,* and in English in 1952 as *America Day by Day.* In 1996, a new translation with a foreword by Douglas Brinkley was published. Brinkley concluded his praise of the book with the words: "For women, and men, who want to experience vicariously Jack Kerouac's open road with less macho romanticism and more existential savvy, *America Day by Day,* hidden from us for nearly fifty years, comes to the reader like a dusty bottle of vintage French cognac, asking only to be uncorked" (Brinkley xvi). Brinkley also noted that in 1952 the book…

> generated few sales and little notice. But with the passage of time, *America Day by Day* emerges as a supremely erudite American road book—that distinctive subgenre based on flight of fancy rather than flights from economic hardship, as in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. In broader sociological terms, her critique outpaces William Least Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*. (xi–xii)

Brinkley's statement resonates with my triad of concepts: genre, gender, and "the new." First of all, Brinkley places de Beauvoir, the traveler/writer, in the "road book" genre.[2] He compares her account with Kerouac's *On the Road* and William Least Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways*. Both *On the Road* and *Blue Highways* have become road classics; both were published after *America Day by Day* by ten and forty years, respectively. Interestingly enough, Brinkley canonizes, in 1997,

a work written in 1948, into a road genre which can be said to have been defined as such first in 1958.[3] In other words: Brinkley has articulated "something new" by inserting something "old" into something else which is also "old." He has revised a very "male buddy genre"[4] by bringing a woman straight into the core of its canon. Gender and genre are here brought into a productive crisis, as it were, although in his review Brinkley does not reflect on this, and definitely not in these terms. In his short introduction to the book, the genre reveals no sign of being gendered, but is presented as an all-inclusive, all-neutral vehicle of story and history telling.[5] He thus follows the traditional story (and theory)[6] that reserves no place for non-WASP travelers who are not male. One could conclude, then, that de Beauvoir must be a man, because the prototypical American storyteller was always a man, and the prototypical traveler was always a man, and has remained so until the present. Something must have happened. The essence of Brinkley's review, as I read it, is that it divulges that now even a *French woman's diary entries* may pass for customized Xeroxes of American (male) culture in the making, and remaking.[7] This, indeed, is one way of making the travel genre "new." I find it, however, an extremely problematic and unproblematized one.

I wonder whether Brinkley is conscious of his "revision" of the road genre, or if his recommendation to infuse the road genre with Beauvoir's "savvy existentialism" is actually gender blind or ignorant of the gender-dependence[8] of the genre history.[9] Even so, this gender-dependence is evident since the very literary "inception" of the road genre. In a Judeo-Christian tradition, this inception can be placed as far back as in the biblical "Exodus."[10] Gender is ubiquitous in the genres of travel writing and must not be neglected, or cursorily treated by the cultural critic.

New Stories of Women on the Road

In 1998, the editors of the collection *Wild Ways: New Stories about Women on the Road*, Margo Daly and Jill Dawson, announced a change

in what I want to call the traditionally gendered pattern of mobility. "Women these days are big on adventures," they wrote, "Thelma and Louise captured the Zeitgeist.…Finally gals got a look in on the road trip" (x). As Daly and Dawson imply, the entrance of the traveling woman had been long in the making. Compensating for her extended absence, she crossed the threshold quite powerfully in the shape of *Thelma & Louise* in 1991. The movie's role as an efficient promoter of feminist values has been discussed.[11] Its impact on the road genre is nevertheless unquestionable. *Thelma & Louise* broke into a road narrative, which ever since the 1950s had been *the* masculine "buddy-genre," gendered as such by Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road,* and later reinscribed as such by Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper's road movie, *Easy Rider*.

By what could be called a simple reversal, *Thelma & Louise* laid bare the stereotypical gender-dependence of the road genre and exposed a vulnerability of women on the road, particularly when they are without guns or money. The mere substitution of two females for the customary male buddy protagonists, the appropriation of the road for two women, radically altered the genre's premises. These premises include male escape from societal constraints represented by women and what they stand for: domesticity, commitment, wed*lock,* in other words, immobilizing obligations. *Thelma & Louise* exposes the traditional stereotyping of male-female relationships where men "are" spermatic mobile men, and women waiting egg-bearing to-be-mothers in fixed locations, whose deviation from the stove seems automatically to translate them into "women on the loose" whose mere presence in public space announces that sex is up for grabs.[12]

In *Thelma & Louise,* the escape was transformed into an escape from patriarchal values and boundaries. Some critics emphasize the escape from heterosexuality; that is, they stress the friendship between Thelma and Louise as an evolving lesbian relationship.[13] According to Barbara Johnson, though, the film "failed to deliver…a lesbian plot" ("Lesbian Spectacles" 161). Thus, *Thelma & Louise* performs, within a long-established heterosexual institution, an attack on conventional patterns of chauvinist male behavior toward females. Women strike

back on sexual harassers and patriarchal guardians of law and marriage. The rapist is shot, Thelma's husband is cheated on and abandoned, the highway patrol officer is bereft of his gun and locked into the trunk of his car, and the truck driver is confronted, his cap confiscated, and his truck blown up. To put it tersely, there are several assaults on men and their machines.

Perhaps it is due to its violence that many reviews of *Thelma & Louise* have reported puzzled reception; the film has been surrounded by "furor" (Rapping 33) and said to be "phony feminism [that] fails on the silver screen" (Sharrett 57). It has been presented as an "acting out [of] a male fantasy of life on the road" that "can hardly be called a woman's movie or one with a feminist sensibility" (Carlson 57). The critic John Leo remarks on its "repeated paean to transformative violence" not to be found in any male-buddy movies, and with which, he claims, we leave "Dworkin [only to enter] a Mussolini speech. Here we have an explicit fascist theme, wedded to the bleakest form of feminism" (20). Leo criticizes the movie reviewers for their generally, in his mind, excessively positive reception, and goes on to refute the affirmative "pleasingly subversive" (Leo quoting reviewer Kennet Turan 20) and "big-hearted movie" (Leo quoting reviewer Jack Knoll 20). In point of fact, Leo claims, this is a "morally and intellectually screwed up…small-hearted, toxic film." With what can be interpreted as disgust, he notes that several of the female spectators appeared "to leave the theater in something of a daze" (20).

Violent feminism, some say; no feminism, say others. "Women cheer the movie," yet others say (Carlson 57). The connections made by the critics between the film and women, and between the film and feminism are noteworthy. The list of films starring violent or forceful males is endless, but whenever does male audience reception get reported in a similar manner? Not very often—one reason is that those movies pass by the critical eye of the general observer because a man in a role is, as always, not considered as a male, but as a protagonist.

The action of/in *Thelma & Louise*—as is implied by some reviewers—needs to be defended, or "protected" against certain viewers (or "viewings"). "I enjoyed this movie," Rapping writes, "so did my male

companions" (31). She adds: "[A]nyone daring to go on the Oprah Winfrey show to defend the creep who attacked Thelma and was shot down by Louise had better be prepared to be yelled down by audience, crew members, and the loudmouthed hostess herself" (31). My personal experience confirms this Thelma and Louise–effect. Wherever (on the screen, as a home video, in the classroom) and whenever (in 1992, 1996, or now), I have seen the movie or taught it, the women's violent performances have been received by the audience with elated sanction. There is something about the movie that rouses its audiences. As Sarandon put it in an interview, "'[W]e all underestimated *Thelma & Louise*. I thought it was a Western, with two women, and you know, trucks. But the fact is, there was such a…she pauses in a rare, rare loss of words, '…just a fanatic, deeply difficult something in that movie'" (DiClementi 31).

With *Thelma & Louise,* we seem to reach a disjunction between political correctness and feminist/emotional investment. A similar disjunction appears toward the end of the 1990s when Girl Power is, by some, experienced as a major backlash on 1970's feminism and as solidifying traditional gender stereotypes into a feminist impasse, rather than as empowering female tactics.[14] However, when at these kinds of critical disjunction, it is crucial not to envision women as merely "fronting for Hugh Hefner," as one critic of *Thelma & Louise* wrote (Carlson 57). Each and every time feminism, or rather, representations of women (that invoke discourses of feminism), are perceived as facing a major crisis, feminism is forced into dialogue with its past, and our sociocultural framework of understanding is challenged. We must try to understand the responses that *Thelma & Louise* elicits, but how can we do that? Which discourses does the film violate or infringe upon to cause such reactions? To clarify the confusion and "mess" *Thelma & Louise* creates, the film is subsequently discussed as an example of a regendering of a genre through rescripting. Implementing this regendering through rescripting, *Thelma & Louise* represents what I have termed an appropriative turn in the evolution of the road narrative.

Rescripting the Road Narrative: The Appropriative Turn

The regendering of a genre can be understood in other ways than as a mere substitution of women for men in the lead roles.[15] This substitution in *Thelma & Louise* could at first glance be called a simple reversal; it is in fact much more complex. *Thelma & Louise* unmistakably excites and upsets the professional critics as well as the general audience because, in this movie, gender and genre are intersecting at a major cusp, intruding on each other's paths—rescripting one another, and in the process crossing culturally scripted, binary boundaries. What then is *scripting,* and what binary boundaries are crossed?

I use the term *scripting* loosely after Derek Gregory. Gregory understands scripting as "a developing series of steps and signals, part structured and part improvised, that produces a narrativized sequence of interactions through which roles are made and remade by soliciting responses and responding to cues" (116). Gregory admits that describing the "cultural practices involved in travel and tourism" in the terms of scripting is not original. James Buzard, for example, has written on "'the scripted continent,' but he [has done so] in ways that constantly folds travel back into the text"; that is, Buzard (as does Gregory) relates to a tradition of "guiding texts," which have influenced nineteenth-century travel writing. However, Gregory claims, whereas Buzard maintains a predominantly "textual" perspective on the territories and "boundaries mapped out by those prior texts," Gregory wishes to accentuate the "production (and consumption) of spaces that reach beyond the narrowly textual" and to "bring into view practices that take place on the ground" (116).[16] Then how is scripting important to travel writing? This is what Gregory says:

> In the first place, it directs our attention to the ways in which travel writing is intimately involved in the 'staging' of particular places: in the simultaneous production of 'sites' that are linked in a time-space itinerary and 'sights' that are organized into a hierarchy of cultural significance. Travel scripting produces a serialized space of constructed visibility that allows and sometimes even requires specific objects to be seen in specific ways by a specific audience. (116)

Not only Egypt that Gregory investigates, but also "the road" in general has been written down, mapped, and charted for its subsequent travelers. That is why road narratives (films and books) that have become "road classics" predispose authors and readers to stage and identify their stories in certain prefigured ways. In *Thelma & Louise* we find residues of the traditional road script concurrent with a violation of its "sites" and "sights" in terms of gender. *Thelma & Louise* wreaks havoc on the road genre's long-standing gender polarization, or in the familiar feminist terminology—on the hierarchy of binaries.

In her essay "What Is a Woman?" Toril Moi does a "critical analysis of some of the presuppositions of poststructuralist thinking about sex, gender, and the body" (118). She exemplifies her analysis with a number of cases, one of which is treated in Mary Anne Case's essay "Disaggregating Gender from Sex and Sexual Orientation: The Effeminate Man in the Law and Feminist Jurisprudence." To illustrate her argument, Moi reproduces the list Case uses of attributes regularly categorized as either "masculine" or "feminine."[17] The qualities of the different genders (or, more correctly, sex-based stereotypes, as Moi points out) are grouped as follows:

MASCULINE	**FEMININE**
aggressive	affectionate
ambitious	cheerful
analytical	childlike
assertive	compassionate
athletic	flatterable
competitive	gentle
dominant	gullible
forceful	loyal
independent	sensitive
individualistic	shy
self-reliant	soft-spoken
self-sufficient	sympathetic
strong	tender
	understanding
	warm
	yielding

Moi critiques "the theoreticism of poststructuralist feminist theory," with the intention of freeing us "from a theoretical picture that tells us how things must be, and so blinds us to alternative ways of thinking" (118). She wants to show "that in the case of a question that truly matters to [her], namely 'What is a woman?' there are good reasons to consider alternatives to the sex/gender distinction." Still, she finds that the distinction may be useful, for example, "when it comes to opposing biological determinism à la Geddes and Thomson" (119).

Thelma & Louise provides no neat distinctions between the two columns of binaries; it does not stay safely on the female/femininity side of the binary division of qualities. Nor are the characters a simple reversal of the masculine/feminine polarization. Things are much more "untidy" than that. *Thelma & Louise* guides its audiences into a fog[19] of binaries, a haze of notions of sex-based stereotypes. It argues that there is not *one* thing a woman is—which is one of the points Moi wants to make with her Beauvoirean approach to working out "a theory of the sexually different body," a theory, which, in her view, gains nothing from a "rethinking of the concepts of sex and gender," as it will not yield a "good theory of the body or subjectivity" (4).[20] *Thelma & Louise* is not only a conquest of a male buddy genre, but also an appropriation of a set of qualities traditionally viewed as traits of masculinity characterizing male human beings (here: inhabiting the road) while, at the same time, retaining traditional qualities of femininity. Thelma and Louise are yielding and assertive, affectionate and aggressive; they are loyal and independent; they are tender and forceful; they are gentle and strong, and so on.

Descripting the Road Narrative: The Metafictional Turn

Thelma and Louise constituted a renewal of the road genre. However, as has been noted, they do die in the end—a rather bleak result that makes it tempting to say that the movie failed, rather than succeeded, when it comes to the question of liberating women.[21] Although the film did liberate the road genre script, Thelma and Louise were never able to sit down comfortably in the director's chair; this is, however, what the "daughters" of Thelma and Louise do.

Although Thelma and Louise died, it is obvious from the narratives discussed below that a new generation of women has survived and grown up with Thelma and Louise's revolutionary adventure vividly in their minds. These women (or female characters) seem to thrive on what Thelma and Louise did, and they refuse to drive off the cliff; they want to resolve the road differently. Presented here are a few examples from *Wild Ways: New Stories of Women on the Road,* and *Flaming Iguanas: An All-Girl Road Novel Thing*.

The *Wild Ways* collection shows that *Thelma & Louise* has had an undeniable and impregnating impact on many of its (writing) descendants. The movie did indeed accomplish an appropriation of territory. Not only did it appropriate the road as a generic space, but judging by the "acts" of its daughters, it also opened up a space for road mothers, who thus appropriated the important role of road models.

Such female role models are invoked repeatedly in *Wild Ways.* Sometimes the role models are juxtaposed to the road fathers who previously reigned supreme, sometimes they quietly supersede them, sometimes they explicitly reject them. Although in *Flaming Iguanas* role models assume different shapes, the rejection of road fathers is nonetheless up-front. The following examples from three different stories from *Wild Ways* indicate which female forerunners the women of these "new" (to quote the collection title) road stories relate. The first example, from Bidisha's story "Leaving," shows an interesting combination of influences: "And here I am, an ordinary writer writing ordinary things…thinking about a story I have to write. Travelling, journeys, feminism—I arrange my hat and think of lipstick, Thelma and Louise—Cindy and Barbie" (Bidisha, "Leaving" 109). Does this combination of names imply an analogy (between the two pairs Thelma and Louise and Cindy and Barbie), or is it the contrasting effect Bidisha is after when she lists images coming to her protagonist's mind when she thinks of "travelling, journeys, feminism"? Rather, the reference is a reflection on the images of women brought to the narrator since adolescence (or childhood). These act as scripts which develop, to repeat Gregory's words again, a "series of steps and signals,

part structured and part improvised, that produces a narrativized sequence of interactions through which roles are made and remade by soliciting responses and responding to cues" (116). However, the point here is that the response solicited is "Thelma and Louise—Cindy and Barbie," not "Kerouac and Cassady—Ken and Action Man."

"Tofino" by Jill Dawson is a story about two women, Nickie and Ann, and Nickie's teenage daughter (who is the narrator of the story), traveling down the British Columbia Coast into Washington state and then back to Canada. The party set out four weeks earlier, initiating their journey by renting a car:

> They were disappointed initially when the guy at Budget Rentals produced a Chevy that was so unlike their dreams. Brand spanking new for a start…This Chevrolet, this white Chevy Cavalier, with its *Beautiful British Columbia* is a bit too much like a Nissan Micra for Mum's taste. But hell, what does she know about cars anyway? They decide that Thelma and Louise would still have driven it if it was all the rental company had on offer, and that, after a short giggle at their own silliness with this Thelma and Louise thing, seems to do the trick. (Dawson 55)

They have had "a fantastic trip. Fantastic scenery, fantastic motels, fantastic food. The only thing missing has been fantastic sex, and you can't have everything….Perhaps we should pick up a hitch-hiker, like Thelma and Louise, what about it Nickie?" (57). The repeated reference to Thelma and Louise as road models, however facetious, is thought-provoking. The reference recurs in Emily Perkins's "Can't Beat It." Here the characters Cecilia and Marcie (as the narrating character has chosen to call herself during the stay in America), two Australian women on a road trip in the United States, financed by a grant from the Australian Arts Council, stage themselves as Thelma and Louise. As we can see, Thelma and Louise again surface in the narrative, enabling a rescripting of the road. In another scene, the narrative playfully issues a territorial claim on the road by moving beyond its male road predecessors and their scripts. "Can't Beat It" literally stages and rescripts the road:

> In a way, we're paying homage to Kerouac and to Cassady—they

> refused to accept a strict, narrow time structure…they also colluded with phallocentrism—look at the benefits they reaped, the fame, the 'freedom', the access to naïve—I don't say stupid—women. So we must look further than these men. We look to the road itself and pay homage to that, to the passive, 'female' land that must bear the scar of the road that man has carved through it, the burdened road, burdened land that carries its traffic in much the same way the female carries the male … (Perkins 6–7).

Marcie, obviously bored, leaves the camera running and goes for a little walk.

In "Men and Women" I claimed that in the various travel genres women were traditionally "walk-ons," not heroes. In "Can't Beat It," the female characters are not only protagonists, they also take on the role of film director. To use another cinematic metaphor, women can be said to have promoted themselves from the relatively hidden position of assisting script-girl to that of woman-director. Cecilia and Marcie (by way of Perkins's narrative scheme) are toying with the founding text, the textual directors, the "original script" of the road, the traditional gendering of landscape as female or feminine, and with their own "artistic" situation. By way of metafictional commentary these "new" women on the road shed light on the genre's burdened past and its conservative constructions of female subjectivity. They are addressing belatedness with a self-conscious and ironic vengeance—without a trace of anxiety.

"Can't Beat It" refers extensively not only to the road genre but also to America in a way that makes their road trip a model example of what Eco would call travel in hyperreality[21]: Perkins's Cecilia and Marcie exemplify the mind-boggling experience of the traveler who, for the first time, encounters the material/spatially tangible phenomenon of the "real" United States, heretofore the make-believe (and, it should be added, the stereotypical and genre-typical) America mediated through films and commercial icons. They exclaim: "Here we are in the United States of America. We are *so* excited! It is like a dream. It's like the movies. It's *just* like the movies" (3, original emphasis). The hyperreality of silverscreen-America is projected onto "reality," making it real and true. There are several references to American cultural/movie and media icons. Cecilia "smokes Kent, be-

cause Audrey Hepburn used to smoke them" (4). It is a big event coming across "Our first drugstore! Cecilia bought 'a pack a Trojans.' They were the most American things we could think of. I recorded the event on our Super 8 camera. The guy asked what kind, and Cecilia said Ribbed, buddy—for her pleasure" (5). In the car "we play Bruce Springsteen exclusively. I thought some of the lyrics would go against Cecilia's feminist stance, but she sings along regardless" (9). This pattern of metafictional and postmodernist self-conscious rhetoric justifies, I would argue, another modification of the scripting term; "Can't Beat It" comes closer to a de-scripting, that is, a deconstructive re-scripting of the road narrative.

Whereas the patriarchal yoke in *Thelma & Louise* seemed to require an engagement of violence to be lifted off women's shoulders, in "Can't Beat It" the yoke of forefathers, patriarchs, and contemporary males seems easily cast off. For example, the references to other "big" male names, more loosely associated to the road in terms of its wider meaning of Western, are given with humorous zest: Cecilia "sprays herself with Evian three times a day 'toning and moisturising in one'" and comments, "I am surprised to find that I like not washing. Did Martin Sheen wash in *Badlands*? Did Billy the Kid wash? Did Jim? No way" (8).

Apart from deflating potential patriarchal pressure, the sentence harbors self-conscious play; the stereotypical qualities associated with women—the pampering of the skin, the paying attention to beauty and maintenance of outer signs of femininity are juxtaposed with the delight in not washing. Marcie may, of course, also have referred to *Thelma & Louise,* in which there is a gradual shift in appearance of the two women as their journey progresses, from a very neatly clad and well-groomed exterior, from skirt and lace frills to dirty faces without make-up, suntans and hair let loose, jeans, T-shirts, and bandanas. The "appropriation" of "both/and"-binaries in *Thelma & Louise* is also taking place in "Can't Beat It," but it is enacted in a self-conscious manner, the women constantly observing their own activities, their own de-scripting.

The reviewers of *Thelma & Louise* were the ones articulating feminist interpretations of the film and filmic interpretations of feminism. The authors and characters of the three quoted stories from *Wild Ways* explicitly deal with the stakes of feminism; feminism is, in fact, ubiquitous in the three quoted narratives. Even so, its status is always hemmed in, made ambivalent. In Erika Lopez's novel *Flaming Iguanas,* this ambivalence becomes acute and is to a high degree connected to the "issue" of road models, and to the long-standing questions in the debates on feminism, that is, "what feminism," and "whose feminism"? The main character of *Flaming Iguanas,* Jolene alias Tomato, whose intention it is to cross the United States on a motorcycle, never mentions Thelma and Louise, although one of its reviewer's does: "Lopez gives Tomato an outlaw integrity that Thelma and Louise only hinted at" (Patricia Holt, *San Francisco Chronicle*—reprinted on the book's back cover). The publisher's blurb on the back cover of *Flaming Iguanas* also wants to connect Lopez's narrative to that of male road ancestors: "Tomato Rodriguez hops on her motorcycle and embarks on the ultimate sea-to-shining-sea all-girl adventure—a story that combines all the best parts of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Easy Rider*." However, it should be noted that Lopez/Tomato never mentions *Easy Rider*. The divergence between the two narratives becomes particularly conspicuous if one considers the fact that *Easy Rider* does not contain one grain of comedy and takes itself very seriously, whereas *Flaming Iguanas* is extraordinarily funny and self-ironic. The similarities between Tomato, a Latina lesbian-biker-bitch-to-be, and Captain America, a snow-white heterosexual dead-to-be drug smuggler, begin and end with their preferred choice of transportation. If there are any undertones of the *Easy Rider*–narrative, they could possibly be found in Lopez's "Before"-statement. However, she advertises the pre–road trip state of affairs in a tone of voice very far from a venerable homage to Billy and Captain America. She can be said to venerate the road, but it is a road that changes with the eye of its beholder, and in Lopez's view nothing is too sacred to be made fun of—including herself and her highway project. *She* is the director of this adventure. Her "statement of purpose" is well worth quoting:

> Magdalena and I are gonna cross America on two motorcycles. We're gonna be so fucking cool, mirrors and windows will break when we pass by. We'll have our own hardcore theme music that makes our heads bend back and bite the sky, and women wearing pink foam curlers in passing RVs will desire us and we'll slowly turn to them at seventy-five miles an hour and mouth "hello" back.…We'll be riding the cheapest motorcycles we can find/stopping every forty-five minutes for gas. And we'll be spitting our mango pits like fucking bullets if anyone says anything about our huge Latin American Breasts. (1–2, slash in original)

The quote adamantly states that we are women, and we like other women, thus bringing out explicitly the theme of homosexuality. It also asserts that women on motorcycles are women without the need to pretend to be men and that women have an equal right to the road. It also says that if anyone objects to the fact that we are women on the road we will launch a counterattack, and it will be violent. Of course, the tone is self-consciously jocose, but given the gendered legacy of the genre, the underlying assumption of what *must* be de-scripted is extremely serious.

Although there is no direct reference to *Easy Rider* or *Thelma & Louise,* there is, nevertheless, a straightforward rejection of other (genre-important) road fathers:

> 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 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. (Lopez 27)

In conjunction with this "counterattack" on men's and women's traditional roles, I want to recall Brinkley's review of de Beauvoir's *America Day by Day,* and agree with him that de Beauvoir does indeed imbue the road genre with "savvy existentialism," although in a completely different sense than he had in mind. In addition to the "existential penises," the following certainly supports the claim:

> Erica Jong was there for me in my mother's bookshelf between *Va-*

> *ginal Politics* and *The Second Sex*, unapologetically running around the world in heat with her panties stretched taut around her ankles. But I never identified with her being tied to relationships like a dog to a tree/like a tongue to its mouth. (Lopez 27)

It is very interesting to note what can either be a reference to Ellen Frankfort's 1972 book, *Vaginal Politics*, or a mischievous allusion to Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*. Such a comment would, in combination with the unquestioned influence of de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, signal a certain ambivalence to feminism, as does the dismissal of Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*. The indirect mention of *Fear of Flying* demonstrates an ambiguous relationship to a potential female predecessor. *Fear of Flying* is often mentioned among the works of "liberating" feminist fiction, and also given as an example of modern picaresque.[22] However, there is no such generic association anywhere in Tomato's account.[23] Lopez has called her book a "road novel thing." She has chosen a genre (which she uses whichever way she pleases) and acknowledges the fact that there is a generic past while simultaneously throwing it out. Road fathers are ousted with suggestive determination. This is an "*All-Girl* kind of road novel thing."

Tomato's choice of role model, then, falls only partly on a French feminist philosopher. Xena, Warrior Princess, is mentioned as another ("Xena must live forever" 163), and others are "wanted"; when Tomato reaches her final destination, San Francisco, she finds herself in the arms of a lover who "was like a queen lesbian going 120 miles an hour down hill without an iota of hesitation about turning on a somewhat straight girl" (248). Tomato's reflection on the experience brings the burning question of role models and feminism to a high-point:

> To my relief, the next morning I didn't feel like a member of a lesbian gang. I didn't feel the urge to subscribe to lesbian magazines, wear flannel shirts, wave DOWN WITH PATRIARCHY signs in the air, or watch bad lesbian movies to see myself represented. No. I wanted a Bisexual Female Ejaculating Quaker role model. And where was she dammit? From now on I would demand to be represented. (251)

As shown by the previous quote, Tomato de-scripts all potential male

residues latent in the genre. As one reviewer expressed it: "Lopez isn't your father's road warrior. She's way too passionate to be beatnik cool" (Stovall 17). However, in addition to expelling male road models, she calls for a new one: She demands "to be represented." Her search for a representative after which to model herself sexually and racially is expressed throughout the narrative. Tomato keeps commenting on her own constitution as ethnic and sexual being. Thus, *Flaming Iguanas* will not content itself with merely a regendering of the road persona, but wants a further expansion of the territory of subjectivity to include other races, other ethnicities, and other sexualities than white, North-American heterosexuality. Thus, regendering is only one aspect of this narrative, which demands more and more room for the female mobile subject.

Thelma & Louise takes one step away from the gender of the scripts of *On the Road* and *Easy Rider* by way of re-scripting. With *Wild Ways*, the regendering escalates from re-scripting to *de-scripting*. This de-scripting consists of metafictional commentary, as well as a postmodernist self-conscious rhetoric. In the first case, an appropriative turn takes place, in the second, a metafictional one. In both these "turns" the *regendering* of the road narrative is crucial. But, to return to the title of this essay—how new is this "new" aesthetic?

New? Aesthetics of the Road

Holland and Huggan claim that "postmodern devices have not so consistently infiltrated the travel book as they have the contemporary novel" (158). It is nevertheless true that there are a number of postmodernist literary devices, which are present in the new aesthetics of the new women's road narratives analyzed here: extreme self-consciousness, self-theorizing, parody, irony, and playfulness. Holland and Huggan also point out that when "postmodernism impinges on travel writing, then, it usually does so obliquely, under the sign of 'meta': metatravel, metahistory, invariably metanarratives, reflecting on their own status as texts—as theoretical texts—on travel" (158). This can also be said, to a certain extent, about women's recent road narratives. However, which travel narratives do Holland and Huggan

analyze as postmodern? They analyze the "metanarratives" by Italo Calvino, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Jean Baudrillard, Bruce Chatwin, Robert Dessaix, and Paul Theroux (158). None of these narratives is written by a woman, or is about a woman traveler. Holland and Huggan touch very superficially upon gender in their analysis of these so-called postmodern itineraries. In their analysis they ask, for example: "Is there a space for the individual traveler within the overarching system?" (159). They answer with Calvino's words by pointing to the "indeterminate and evanescent movement of subjectivity" (159). Holland and Huggan thus speak of "the traveler" of metanarratives as a gender-neutral entity, and of "travel" in a very general sense. Having moved through the terminology of migrancy and nomadism (174), and Jonathan Raban's and Paul Theroux's "increasing tendencies toward metafictionality" (176), Holland and Huggan conclude that "while the various techniques of metafiction provide scope for injecting a sense of play into travel narrative, by definition they also detract from the travel book as a more or less 'authentic' autobiographical account" (178).

Holland and Huggan insist on rejecting the "new" in travel writing and stubbornly emphasize its repetitions, despite their identification of various "countertravelers" as including "women travelers, subverting the male traveler's traditional values and privileges; gay male travelers, either seeking liberatory spaces or flouting heterosexual travel codes; and ecological travelers, reacting against the environmental damage they most frequently associate with tourists" (198). Although they observe that these countertravelers "generally locate themselves in opposition to 'conventional' modes of travel," they interpret this oppositional stance as providing "a further alibi for travel writing while still depending on its traditions" (198). They insist on the repetitiveness of the genre, although at certain points they hint at the possibility of something new transpiring in the genre, for instance by mentioning that "counter travel, of one sort or another, has certainly energized travel writing…in the decades since the war" (198). Despite this, and despite their investigations under the rubrics "Women's travel writing and/as feminist critique," and "Transgression, performativity, and the gay male traveling subject," and their brilliant introduction of the narratives investigated in these sections as interrogations of male clichés, phallic myths, and male tropologies

"clearing a space in the process for the subjectivities of women travelers, and for the exploratory journeys and performances of gay men" (110), they disconnect genre from gender. They make gendered subjectivity secondary to a higher generic order governed by repetition. Thus, they observe that "oppositional narratives cannot escape but being haunted by an array of hoary tropes and clichés (originary, primitivist, exotic, and so forth) any more than they can hope to distill 'authentic' encounters from their commodified sources" (198).

In their final words, Holland and Huggan invite the travel book to "reexamine its biases" as the genre, despite its involvement in the processes of commodification, has the capacity to "engage large numbers and several different kinds of readers," and as such merits its existence. In other words, the final statement of the investigation turns into an attempt at "rescuing" the travel book from its death, rather than declaring what in it is new (217).

Holland and Huggan thus end up where they begin, despite all their excellent examples of "new" subjectivities on the road. Because they are caught up in the theories and vocabularies of postmodernism and postmodernity and because of their intensive focus on genre, they fail to see the new, which becomes visible only when gender governs the perspective of the analysis. Consequently, the narratives analyzed in my article are not "new" by virtue of being metafictional accounts, or postmodern picaresques, but rather, due to the simple—yet complicating—fact that the mobile subjects are women. Thus the genre is vitally and fundamentally regendered. As *Flaming Iguanas* shows, the genre calls for additional reorganization—"resubjectivization." What I have done is to describe two phases of the development of the road genre in terms of its employment of certain narrative devices, here conceptualized as re-scripting and de-scripting. The regendering of the genre is "something new" and something too significant to be set adrift among the strong undercurrents of postmodernism, eventually to be submerged by its greater literary paradigm.

Notes

1 Opacki has proposed a theory of genre evolution that emphasizes hybridization, that is, the cross-fertilization of a "royal" (or "dominant" in Russian Formalist terms) genre over time by other genres. "A literary genre entering, in the course of evolution, the field of a particular literary trend, will enter into a very close

'blood relationship' with the form of the royal genre that is particular to that current" (121). A royal genre attracts basically all other genres at a certain time but without fusing them all into one single genre. While the literary trend lasts, a new form of the genre emerges. It could be argued, for example, that "metafiction" is now a literary current become royal genre that draws into it several other genres that nevertheless keep their distinguishing features. Metafiction may earlier have been a "feature" of another genre. As it is "promoted" to a royal genre, its features become "characteristic of the entire literary trend thereby ceasing to be something distinctive for that genre, becoming non-distinguishing features. They become features that make it similar to other genres" (123).

2 He prefers to distinguish the "American road book" from Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath,* but to me, this too is a road narrative.

3 Of course he is not the first one to make this kind of anachronistic move. Placing *Tristram Shandy* among the postmodern works of fiction is one of the better known examples of retrospective genre categorization.

4 See Jessica Enevold Madesdotter, "Men and Women on the Move: Three Dramas of the Road."

5 At the same time he seems to make an ad hoc differentiation between the road book and the road story of *The Grapes of Wrath,* which to me becomes very paradoxical. I am somewhat surprised that Brinkley chooses to skip *The Grapes of Wrath* to go straight to *On the Road*. His move to make *America Day by Day* into "an erudite American Road book" would have been slightly less anachronistic had he chosen to define *The Grapes of Wrath,* from the 1930s, as an embryo of the road narrative of the 1950s.

6 Nina Baym, "Dramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women," *American Quarterly* 33 (1981): 123–39.

7 By "pass for," I am of course sarcastically referring to what I deem to be a belated, avaricious transfer of what could be called symbolic cultural capital accumulated by de Beauvoir for more than half a century, by way of a gesture of charitable inclusion into the American genre of literature.

8 See Enevold Madesdotter "Men and Women on the Move" for a detailed discussion of the issue of gender-dependences.

9 It is essential to note that Brinkley is an accomplished historian who has written his own book on the road (*The Majic Bus: An American Odyssey*) as well as edited/written forewords to editions of the road books of others, for example, Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,* and *The Proud Highway,* Theodore Dreiser's *A Hoosier Holiday,* and Carl Thomas Rowan's *South of Freedom*. I expect that he is well aware of the genre history. Nevertheless, acknowledging simultaneously the affirmative character of the genre of forewords and back-cover blurbs, I would advocate caution when speaking of the road book in order not to neglect its "genderedness."

10 See, for example, Enevold "The Motherhood of the Road."

11 See Rapping 1991, Sharrett 1991, Morf and Andrew 1991, Carlson 1991, Leo 1991, Pochada 1992, and Cooper 2000.

12 See Enevold Madesdotter, "Men and Women," and Enevold, "Motherhood."

13 For example Cathy Griggers who writes about the "lesbian body [that] appeared masquerading as the latest American outlaw hero in *Thelma & Louise*"

("Lesbian Bodies in the Age of (Post)Mechanical Reproduction" 1992), and Lynda Hart, who in *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (1994) treat the "Female Buddy Film" (qt. in Roach 1996). It is very interesting to note that *Lesbian News* downplays the lesbian theme in *Thelma & Louise*.

14 For a discussion of Girl Power, see Enevold "Girl Powers and Power Girls."

15 Another possibility is the substitution of men for women or any other sex /gender-related alteration/replacement of the traditional main character/s.

16 Gregory's essay "Scripting Egypt" is published in an anthology that builds upon "Edward Said's oft-cited claim that Orientalists past and present have spun imaginative geographies where they sought ground truth [which] has launched a plethora of studies of fictive geographies" (Duncan and Gregory i). Gregory forwards an argument "triangulated by three ideas: the construction of the Orient as *theatre*; the representation of other places and landscapes as text; and the production of travel and tourism as a scripting" (115). Please consult the anthology for a more exhaustive and just account of Gregory's presentation of travel as "an intrinsically hermeneutical project" (115).

17 Case draws on "the so-called Bem Sex-Role inventory (BSRI). [She] lists a number of adjectives that psychologists and other researchers regularly consider coded masculine and feminine in contemporary American culture" (Moi 103).

18 In her afterword, in which she explains "The Point of Theory," Moi refers the reader to Wittgenstein's standpoint that "the role of philosophy is to be therapeutic, to produce a diagnosis of the theoretical pictures that hold us captive, not in order to refute them, but in order to make us aware of other options: 'A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside of it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it inexorably' (PI §5)" (qt. in Moi 119). Moi reminds us of Wittgenstein's thought that a philosophical problem is a "question that arises when we are lost in a kind of linguistic fog" (119). Moi understands Wittgenstein's view of the "clearing of the fog as an intellectual liberation" as a never-ending task which, she hopes, will be a "philosophical therapy [that] would help feminist critics and theorists not to get lost in meaningless questions and pointless arguments, and enable us instead to raise genuine questions about things that really matter" (120). And by things that really matter she means "the sphere of the ordinary…in which our political and personal struggles actually take place" (120).

19 See Moi, *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays.*

20 From here on, *Thelma & Louise,* the road movie, more or less "fuses" with Thelma and Louise, the characters, and vice versa. One reason for this is the fact that the narratives that I analyze in the following sections regularly allude to the road movie through its characters, who thus come to symbolize both female subjects and the road genre.

21 See Umberto Eco's travel narrative "Travels in Hyperreality" from *Faith in Fakes*. See also Baudrillard's travel narrative *America* for an interesting analysis of America in this vein, and see Holland and Huggan for a specific analysis of Eco's and Baudrillard's travel narratives.

22 See Robert J. Butler, "The Woman Writer as American Picaro: Journeying in Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*," and Maria Lauret, *Liberating Literature.*

23 Jong could possibly stand for the picaresque novel *Fanny* (1980), but that is less

likely, particularly since makes no specific connection with this older type of travel genre.

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