

Roads of Her Own: Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women's Road Narratives, 1970-2000.

By Alexandra Ganser.

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Alexandra Ganser's *Roads of Her Own* is a study of American women's road narratives from the 1970s to the present, which primarily focuses on novels by eleven American authors and one Canadian, but also includes one author's journal and short stories and a graphic novel. Ganser has selected works since the 1970s written after second-wave feminism in order to examine how women writers have used the road narrative to challenge dominant literary and culturally determined spatial formations from the perspectives of gender, class, ethnicity, sexual identity, and other subcultures. Her theoretical perspective integrates spatial analysis drawn from the field of cultural geography into a cultural studies approach to literature to look at the ways women's road literature both reveals and questions socio-spatial structures which are culturally constructed and patriarchal. Ganser also employs as a heuristic the concept of transdifference to analyze simultaneous multiple and conflicting categories of identity in works which challenge the traditionally masculine genre of road stories. She introduces a taxonomy of women's road narratives that she classifies according to three paradigms or tropes: the quest, para-nomadism, and the picaresque.

Reflecting the fact that book is based on a dissertation, Ganser situates her literary analysis into an elaborate theoretical and critical framework which some might find rather dense. The first three chapters are theoretical: first, introducing the basic concepts of gender, cultural studies, identity, and transdifference; then proceeding to a chapter on the road genre as a masculine formation and women's response to it; then followed by a chapter on spatial analysis from the perspective of cultural studies and cultural geography theorists. Beat studies scholars will find the discussion of Kerouac in Chapter 2 of interest. Ganser agrees with other scholars that Kerouac's *On the Road* is the novel that established the post World War Two road story as "celebratory of rebellion and a prominent site of social criticism" while also creating a male-dominated narrative that relegated women to minor stereotypical roles. Thus, as others have pointed out, Kerouac's novel provided the model for resistance to cultural norms while instantiating hegemonic male/female, public/private dualisms. Women's road novels written after second-wave feminism are partly a creative engagement with Kerouac "which, on the one hand, affirm movement as a liberatory practice, but on the other hand emphasize that women's spatial limitations extend beyond those of hearth and home." Ganser notes that memoirs by Beat women contemporary with the novels under discussion deal with the issues of "women's place" and participate in questioning the masculine road narrative. Ganser also notes that *On the Road* "paved the way for cultural minorities to adapt the genre to their own concerns," thus diversifying the genre and making it attractive to female minority writers whose work is discussed within the para-nomadic and picaresque paradigms. Curiously, there is no comment

on Kerouac himself writing from a minority ethnic position. Although Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* is briefly mentioned later in the book, the important point is made that Kerouac's work also models the geographical journey as an inward, spiritual quest, which is relevant to many of the women writers.

Each of the three narrative paradigms is introduced with a lengthy, detailed critical background section before the discussion of the relevant fiction. The background to the quest paradigm (departure/journey/arrival) begins with references to *Gilgamesh*, the *Odyssey*, and *Pilgrim's Progress* and proceeds to the American frontier context and the traditional male "westering" journey for a new identity and a new home. In this category, Ganser discusses Doris Betts' *Heading West*, Sharlene Baker's *Finding Signs*, Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven*, Hilma Wolitzer's *Hearts*, and Chelsea Cain's *Dharma Girl*. These works reveal that women on road trips do not escape socio-spatial structures that assign women to domestic, private spaces and make public spaces dangerous for women. As shown in the novels by Betts and Baker, the theme of heterosexual romance threatens to foreclose the road story's potential for liberation. This conflict is avoided in the mother-daughter stories in the other quest novels discussed, a uniquely female rewriting of going on the road that also challenges the traditional family structure. This chapter concludes with a discussion of Anne Roiphe's *Long Division* as a novel that combines both questing and para-nomadic structures.

The para-nomadic paradigm is defined in the context of contemporary theories of nomadism from Deleuze and Guattari to contemporary feminist and postmodernist usages. Ganser proposes the coinage "para-nomadism" to refer to metaphorical nomadism. Para-nomadic travelers are forced on the road by external (usually economic) coercion and attempt to make a home on the road or make the road a home. In contrast to the quest narrative, mobility is not an expression of freedom, and the journey has no destination, but the attempt to make a home on the road implies that coerced travel can become empowering. This type of road novel addresses the migrations and identity conflicts of ethnic minorities in Glancy's *Claiming Breath* and *The Voice that Was in Travel* and Cynthia Kadohata's *The Floating World*, but it also defines the existential trap of and upper-middle class white woman in Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays*. A final section on Aritha van Herk's *No Fixed Address* introduces a novel that combines the nomadic and the picaresque.

The critical background of the picaresque paradigm is, of course, the picaresque novel which Ganser reviews from its beginning in 16th-century Spain to the postmodern novel, with attention to the picara's emergence in 18th century. The picara is an adventurer and trickster who transgresses social/sexual norms within an episodic narrative structure that parodies genres and stereotypes, including the male picaresque travels of the countercultural sixties. Michelle Carter's *Other Days While Going Home* and Katherine Dunn's *Truck* both critique romantic masculine notions of the road trip as a liberatory act. Erika Lopez' *Flaming Iguanas: An Illustrated All-Girl Road Novel Thing* is the beginning of a graphic novel trilogy in which a bi-cultural, bi-sexual biker chick's humorous adventures parody the quest narrative and a wide range of gender/class/ethnic/popular culture stereotypes, replacing essentialist identity conceptions with transgressive performativity.

Like Katie Mills' *The Road Story and the Rebel* (reviewed earlier on the BSA website), Ganser's book shows that the road narrative is an infinitely malleable genre: in this case, telling the stories of runaways, outlaws, migrants, kidnappees, biker chicks, traveling saleswomen, servicers of vending machines, and picaras; making use of questing, nomadic, and episodic plot structures; crossing class and ethnic boundaries. From a feminist point of view, women's road stories foreground the cultural construction of female vs. male spaces and the masculinity of the genre. By embarking on a road trip, a female protagonist by definition transgresses cultural norms and parodies masculine structures. In the novels Ganser discusses, the escape from the traditional domestic place of women often results in the creation of nontraditional homes and families or unconventional relationships with family members. Only the most experimental fictions and the picaresque protagonists reject the idea of home. Ganser's analysis reveals that late twentieth-century, post-feminist female road novels must still struggle with the "separate spheres" concept of masculinity and femininity, but that women's appropriation of the genre allows the reader to imagine alternatives.

In *Roads of Her Own*, Ganser provides a valuable introduction to feminist cultural geography and the ways that it can illuminate both literature and material culture. She also introduces the reader to a number of female road novels which are not widely known and makes a major contribution to the recognition and theorizing of this late twentieth-century genre. One problem confronting the reader, however, is "dissertationese." As a doctoral student must, Ganser reviews the relevant theory, literary history, and criticism at great length and in great detail to show her command of the field, but these extended background discussions often tend to dissipate her central preoccupation with gender and spatiality and overwhelm the focus on the literary works under analysis. She also goes to extreme lengths to examine past debates and definitions in order to defend her own positions. For example, a reader of a scholarly book offering a feminist analysis of women's fiction would not need the author to review the theoretical debates concerning the social category "woman," but would be content with the author briefly stating her own position before moving forward. Another example is her questionable invention of the term "para-nomadism" to refer to metaphorical nomadism after a sixteen-page analysis of the nomad in contemporary theory. As Ganser herself says, "the para-nomad's value may exceed her conceptual merit." Similarly, the critical background introduction to each of the three paradigms seems excessive in length and scope: is it really necessary to review the picaresque from the 16th century to the present or to begin a discussion of the quest with *Gilgamesh*? Again, basic definitions and a focus on the more immediate background (American, twentieth-century, road novels) would be more to the point. In spite of the book's many strengths and original contributions, it reads too much like a dissertation that would have benefited from further editing before publication.