

## SELF-FASHIONING AND OTHERING: WOMEN'S DOUBLE STRATEGIES OF TRAVEL WRITING

### CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL YO Y DE LA OTRA: NARRATIVAS DE VIAJE ESCRITAS POR MUJERES

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#### Abstract

This essay examines early 20<sup>th</sup> century travel texts written by two European women: the Catalan journalist Aurora Bertrana (1899-1974) who lived in French Polynesia from 1926 until 1929, and her contemporary, the Dutch journalist Mary Pos (1904-1987), who travelled to the Dutch East Indies in the fall of 1938 and returned early in 1939. Our research is double-focused: on the one hand it examines issues of empire, colonisation, and orientalism, and on the other hand it explores issues of modernity and feminism. The travel texts under study offer personal registrations of self-fashioning strategies that both authors employ, which significantly question gender expectations regarding women's social and sexual practices, their professional, familial and marital roles, and their opportunities for education. Presenting them as emancipated modern women, however, the accounts are also embedded in an orientalist and colonial discourse and seem to impose their own views of modernity and feminism on other women—despite ardent appeals to intercultural understanding.

**Keywords:** Gender; Travel writing; Modernity; Colonialism; Orientalism.

## Resumen

Este ensayo examina dos relatos de viaje de principios del siglo XX escritos por dos mujeres europeas: la periodista catalana Aurora Bertrana (1899-1974), que vivió en la Polinesia Francesa desde 1926 hasta 1929, y su contemporánea, la periodista holandesa Mary Pos (1904-1987), que viajó a las Indias Orientales Holandesas en el otoño de 1938 y regresó a principios de 1939. Nuestra investigación tiene un doble enfoque: por un lado, examina cuestiones de imperio, colonización y orientalismo, y por otro lado, explora cuestiones de modernidad y feminismo. Dichos relatos de viaje revelan las estrategias de autoconstrucción de una identidad singular que cuestiona significativamente las expectativas de género de la época con respecto a las prácticas sociales y sexuales de las mujeres, sus roles profesionales, familiares y maritales, así como su educación. Sin embargo, presentándolas como mujeres modernas emancipadas, los relatos dejan ver su posición dentro de los discursos orientalistas y coloniales, imponiendo su propia visión la modernidad y el feminismo a otras mujeres, a pesar de los ardientes llamamientos que hacen al entendimiento intercultural.

**Palabras clave:** género; literatura de viajes; modernidad; colonialismo; orientalismo.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s there has been a proliferation of studies on women's travel writing which have established a firm canon of works in the genre. Most texts studied were written by English, French and American travellers: names such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Mary Kingsley, and Gertrude Bell come to mind. Prompted by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), the 1990s saw a revived interest in the genre further legitimised by Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992). James Duncan and Dereck Gregory explain that travel writing «raises questions about the politics of representation and spaces of transculturation, about the continuities between colonial past and supposedly post-colonial present, and about the ecological, economic and cultural implications of globalizing projects of modernity» (Duncan and Gregory 1). The travel texts that we analyse here are written by European women in the 1930s, a period when the topics identified by Duncan and Gregory, namely colonial projects and post-colonial struggles, intersected with discourses of modernisation, early 20<sup>th</sup> century feminism, and globalisation (tourism and travel). The travel writings by Catalan journalist Aurora

Bertrana (1899-1974) and the Dutch journalist Mary Pos (1904-1987) that we explore here chronicle these socio-political transformations.

Critics of women travel accounts from the 1990s point out that, during their travels, women seem to have identified most often with those whose oppression seemed similar to their own (Blunt 1994; Mills 1996). Our study nuances this argument by showing how the subject positions established in Bertrana's and Pos's texts are conditioned by colonial ideologies and western gender discourses that prevent full identification (if ever possible) and instead emphasise the difference between them and other women (Siegel 2004; Thompson 2007, 2011; Cerarols and García-Ramón 2008).

Spanish women's accounts of travels to Morocco in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (such as those written by Carmen de Burgos, Rosa Regás and Aurora Bertrana) illustrate the particularly ambivalent position of women travellers because they often wrote from the margins of Spanish society but maintained the colonialist/orientalist attitude towards «oriental» peoples (García-Ramón et al. 1998; Epps 2016; Goyadol 2008; Torres-Pou 2006). Their texts were embedded within Spanish *Africanism*, a term used to designate the political interventionism of Spain in Morocco at the beginning of the twentieth century (Morales 1988). In her text about Morocco, titled *El Marroc Sensual i Fanàtic* [*Sensual and Fanatic Morocco*] (1936), Bertrana considers Moroccan women a property of men and their veiled bodies a symbol of that oppression. Our analysis of *Paraisos oceànics* [*Oceanic Paradises*] (1930) in this article shows a contrasting vision on Polynesian women whose naked bodies (usually topless) represent a symbol of freedom repressed among both Moroccan and (allegedly emancipated) Western women.

The ambivalent position expressed in travel accounts written by Spanish women writers is echoed in accounts published by Dutch journalist Mary Pos. Pos travelled to the Dutch East Indies in the fall of 1938 and returned early in 1939. In the 1940s, when the Second World War made it nearly impossible for her to travel, she gave numerous lectures about «women's life in the tropics» on national public radio and all over the Netherlands. She also published articles about her Indies trip in Dutch dailies such as *De Telegraaf* and in journals such as *Wij Jonge Vrouwen* [*We Young Women*]. After the Second World War she published her travel books *Werkelijkheid op Bali* [*Reality on Bali*] and «*Eens op Java en Sumatra*»: *Het laatste reisboek over ons Indië in zijn*

*glorietijd* [«Once on Java and Sumatra»: *The last travel book on our Indies in its glory time*] (1948). These texts seem to confirm her straightforward claim that as a Dutch journalist and lecturer she had a moral responsibility to contribute to a better intercultural understanding between Dutch and Indonesian women. But they also express an ambivalence: whereas they emphasise the large potential of the Indonesian women's movement, they simultaneously Orientalise Indonesian women.

Our analysis will focus on issues of colonialism and orientalism, but also on issues of modernity and feminism. Bertrana and Pos produced travel texts that unmistakably presented them as modern women. This self-fashioning seems to have been possible only because of an intriguing double strategy. On the one hand, they praised, and identified with, some of the local women encountered during their travels to Tahiti and Bali; on the other hand, they set themselves apart from indigenous women. Through a close-reading of their travelogues this essay shows how exactly this ambivalent strategy worked to establish them as Orientalists who created exotic images of other women according to colonial rhetoric, but also as promoters of women's emancipation from fixed gender roles regarding sexuality, motherhood, education and social roles.

As modern cultural agents embedded in the European context of the first half of the twentieth century, they both had their own way of assessing the women they encountered on their travels. Mary Pos mostly shows an elevated and detached view from above which contrasts technological modernity with the hardships of rural life and working the land. Bertrana's representation of women in the Polynesian islands involves an idyllic picture in which nature and women maintained their purity outside of western modernity. Whereas Pos appears to bring together a variety of ideas of modernity, women's emancipation, and the uplifting of the state of the indigenous Indonesian woman, Bertrana entertains romantic ideas about the freedom of a pre-modern state and argues against civilisation's oppression of women. In their writings both Bertrana and Pos use specific strategies to appeal to their home audiences, recurring to modernist literary devices and Dutch religious and colonial discourses respectively. Jointly they demonstrate the extended continuum along which white European women measured and assessed the indigenous women they encountered.

## 2. BERTRANA: WRITING FROM THE MARGINS

The Bertranas were a bourgeois family from Girona. Mar Abad (2017) affirms that from a young age Aurora Bertrana refused to become the archetypal housewife which she saw in her mother<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, she succeeded first, by becoming a jazz musician, trained in Barcelona and in Switzerland where she founded the first all-female jazz band of Europe, and second, by dedicating her life to traveling and writing about her trips. She obtained a humanities degree in Literary History and Classic Spanish and worked as a journalist writing for Catalan newspapers. The trip to French Polynesia fully fed her curiosity and adventurous imagination, «era como un sueño deslumbrante, como apartar una cortina encima de un insospechado país de hadas» (Bertrana qtd. in Abad 16) and *Paraísos oceánicos* confirmed her as a modernist writer. The narrative style of the travelogue shows the sensual, escapist and melancholic features of Spanish *modernismo*, as well as the influence of French poetry (*Parnassianism*) that Bertrana, as a reader and writer in French, was familiar with.

In *Paraísos oceánicos* Bertrana describes, for example, the rich and seductive colours of the tropical sunsets while living in the jungle. She writes: «Era una tarde deliciosa, tejida de luz, de verdor, de cielo de turquesa, de perfume de flores. El Pacífico se mecía tranquilo, desde los arrecifes hasta el infinito. Pasaban sobre la laguna los recios pescadores dentro de sus piraguas, desnudos y magníficos» (152)<sup>2</sup>; she recounts her visit to a gambling house and opium den in the *Barrio Chino* in Papetee, and confesses her explicit

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1. In her memoir, Bertrana describes her mother as the embodiment of the enduring housewife, an exemplary and discrete woman, married with three children and home-bound: «Mi madre no tenía más amigos, ni compañeros que nosotros tres. Mi padre no la llevaba a ninguna parte: ni a pasear por el campo, ni al teatro, ni a reuniones, y ella nunca se quejaba ni suspiraba, ni tomaba puestos de mártir como habrían hecho otras mujeres en su lugar. Y es cierto que no era por indiferencia hacia los viajes, el campo, las reuniones, la música, el teatro... Todo eso le gustaba, nos lo decía a menudo» (Bertrana qtd. in Abad 14).

2. We will be quoting a Spanish translation of *Paraísos oceánicos* published in 2017 by the publishing house: Rata\_ based on the original translation into Spanish made by Bertrana in 1933. The first translation was, however, titled *Islas de ensueño* [Islands of Dreams]. The 2017 edition includes a critical article by Mar Abad and a fragment from Bertrana's memoirs (*Memòries fins al 1935*) written in 1973. The fragment of Bertrana's memoirs included in the 2017 edition, is a Spanish translation.

admiration of the openness of the natives towards nudity and sexuality. Bertrana recreates, for example, her experience viewing a traditional dance called *Oteá* where men and women dance frantically. The dance concludes with love making under the moonlight: «el sudor les resbala por la cara, baja por el pecho y las espaldas desnudas e impregna aquella carne morena de brillantes de ídolo milenario...El velo densísimo de la selva cubre con indulgencia soberana aquella hora orgiaca» (266-267). Goyadol affirms that the book became a bestseller in Spain (221). As we show in section four of this article, Bertrana writes with a Catalan and Spanish audience in mind for whom an account of extraordinary landscapes and thrilling adventures was more appealing than a critique of (French) colonialism<sup>3</sup>. In her *Memòries fins al 1935*, written in the 1970s, Bertrana recognises the book's lack of a critical eye confessing that «Quizá le falte malicia y espíritu crítico» (Bertrana in Abad 26).

The fact that she was more popular among readers than among critics becomes clear in her *Memòries* where Bertrana refers to an unfruitful meeting she had with the well-established Spanish intellectual Gregorio Marañón, who was, at the time, the president of the Spanish Society of Geography. Marañón refused to read her book and to offer any comments to the author. This, among other events she retells in her memoirs, led Bertrana to bitterly lament the lack of consideration she received as a writer and shows that what the public readership understood as merely exotic descriptions was understood differently by critics. Bertrana deems the critique she received a symptom of gender discrimination and a rejection towards the anti-colonial aspirations of her book:

¡Una mujer, que sin pedirles consejo, osaba escribir y publicar un libro entusiasta que cantaba a la naturaleza exótica y a los hombres primitivos! Con elegantes escalofrios de hombres «ultracivilizados» me acusaban de discípula de Jean-Jacques Rousseau, con una irónica piedad sobre aquellas

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3. The French seized the Polynesian islands in 1984 and the Collectivity of French Polynesia is nowadays an overseas territory of France. Bertrana enthusiastically joined her husband at the time (Denys Choffat, a Swiss electrical engineer she had married while studying music in Switzerland) who had been assigned a job in Papeete to set up an electric plant.

teorías de retorno a la naturaleza del autor de *Émile* y del *Contrato Social*.  
(qtd. in Abad 31)

This fragment suggests that the contingency of Bertrana's travelogue does not only lay on a critique of the futility of colonial projects (which alter the relationship between primitivism and progress) but also on a condemnation of Spanish intellectuals, who, unlike Rousseau, suffer from a double myopia towards colonial subjects and towards women. Bertrana expresses her anti-colonial aspirations in *Paraísos oceánicos* emphasising the equal relationships between Polynesian men and women and in doing so she critiques colonial discourses and the gendered structures of Spanish/Western societies.

García-Ramón *et al.* (1998) and Torres-Pou (2006) argue that Bertrana's critique of Spanish colonialism in Morocco is ambivalent because of three reasons: first, because Bertrana condemns Spanish colonialism by virtue of the incompetence of Spanish politicians vis à vis other Europeans –namely the British, the French and the Dutch– but not because she condemns it all together (Torres-Pou 50); second, because her disdain for Spanish colonialism responds to a republican agenda, which, according to García-Ramón *et al.*, served to affirm Catalan nationalism on the premises of its voiced anti-militarism and the Catalan struggle for autonomy (234); and third, because in the mid-thirties «colonialism was no longer perceived as a natural law of civilized countries» (Torres-Pou 43) but was substituted by the imperative of western progress. In the next section we show how the ambivalence of Bertrana's discourse on colonialism takes shape in *Paraísos oceánicos*.

### 3. AGAINST CIVILISATION

Unlike in *El Marroc*, where Bertrana represents locals as fanatics and oppressive of their wives<sup>4</sup>, in *Paraísos oceánicos* she exploits the image of the locals

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4. In the following quote of Bertrana's text in English translation, she explains how she needs to ask men for permission to have access to their women and uses the metaphor of a caged bird to refer to Moroccan women: «Some hardly paid me any notice: others responded that they had their woman locked up at home and had forgotten the key. The youngest and most modernised allowed me to 'see' their family ... in the same manner that a philatelist would have done with his collection of stamps, or an avid zoologist with his group of monkeys or caged birds» (28; qtd. in García-Ramón *et al.* 237).

as uncorrupted noble savages where men and women live in harmony. In doing so, the book is infused with an anti-colonial sentiment expressed through the questioning of gender roles in western civilisation. We can see Bertrana doing this in two ways: on the one hand she implies that civilisation, materialised in the modern city, disrupts the bond between man and nature and, on the other, she suggests that civilisation is sustained by a set of gendered rules that represses the free and natural relationships among the Polynesian people.

*Paraísos oceánicos* contains multiple references to Eden with which Bertrana identifies Tahiti and other islands. For example, in the episode called «Vida Selvática» [Life in the jungle] Bertrana compares her stay in a bamboo hut between the sea and the jungle in the bay of Hanauati with the myth of Adam and Eve: «Nuestra vida era apacible y dulce como debió de serlo la estancia de Adán y Eva en el paraíso» (195). With «our life» Bertrana here refers to a travelling companion («yo tenía un compañero con el cual compartía aquella vida primitiva y fácil» 193) who is presumably a lover with whom she shares her accommodation. Bertrana divorced her husband shortly after returning from their trip to the French Polynesia. By hinting at the fact that she had multiple partners, Bertrana affirms her polygamy.

In the second chapter of the book, titled «El correo de California» [Mail from California], Bertrana describes the arrival of mail, on the giant vessels of the Union Steamship, as an event that transforms the quiet harbour of Papetee into a buzzing place. The ship not only brings letters, parcels, consumable goods and clothing, but also «estrafalarios turistas (que) suelen ir con calzón y faldita corta, la *kodak* en la bandolera y gafas ahumadas» (59). The presence of tourists on the island is depicted with ambivalence. On the one hand, it affirms the openness of the locals to welcome foreigners to their land and, on the other hand, shows Bertrana's condescending attitude towards the dependency of foreign tourists on modern gadgets such as the kodak camera, which additionally intrudes into the Eden-like picture Bertrana wants to paint. Projecting her own thoughts onto the locals Bertrana writes: «los indígenas, discretamente apartados, los miran pasar con una especie de maliciosa condescendencia» (59). In her text, Bertrana remarks that the sexual encounters that occur between male tourists and local women is a sign of the sexual freedom of Polynesian women who, according to her, «no

beben mucho, pero ríen, cantan, y aman desinteresadamente» (63). Bertrana highlights the generous sexual encounters among people in the island suggesting that free love (among the locals and with foreigners) is another sign of pre-modern sexual freedom.

At the beginning of the same chapter Bertrana reflects on how, through the arrival of the mail boat, residents of Tahiti, including herself, are connected to the outside world but problematises this link as a toxic symptom of civilisation:

El correo es nuestro único lazo con la civilización. Lo esperamos con los ojos y el alma fijos en el Occidente, despreciando la sabiduría eterna y soberana de la madre naturaleza. Él mantendrá nuestras grandes flaquezas de civilizados, nuestra eterna inquietud. Somos impotentes contra el tóxico de las ciudades europeas o americanas, lo llevamos en la sangre como un microbio hereditario, y no pensamos, que allí, a nuestra espalda, la selva solitaria es todo un mundo cercano, rebosante de frutos y de agua pura, de belleza y de serenidad. (55-56)

The irreconcilable binary nature/civilisation appears here as the opposition jungle/city, and again Bertrana idealises nature as the provider of food, beauty and peace in contrast to the restless and toxic life in the city.

Another element of Bertrana's contest against the «ultracivilised» and, also, the basis of her feminist claims, is a critique of women's oppression, presumably in Spain and France (the colonial metropolises). Tahiti provides a space from where she is able to articulate a feminist voice and a repertoire of themes to question issues of gender, more concretely, the control of bodies through sexuality and motherhood. In an episode called «Turey, 'la cortesana'» [Turey, the Courtesan] Bertrana recounts her brief encounter with Turey, a well-known and respected prostitute from the island, «todo Tahiti admira a su cortesana» (99). Turey is in a clothing store looking at some fabrics and toys in the company of her eldest son, Teré (born to a European father, «[un] hombre de letras europeo, conocido y admirado» 99). Bertrana compliments her on the beauty of the child and after observing Turey in the shop is prompted to conclude her book chapter as follows:

Y yo, ¿cómo decirlo? –escandalizaos si queréis– habría deseado ser amiga de Turey 'La cortesana'. Su amistad me sería más cara que la amistad de las

más opulentas vecinas del barrio elegante, sensuales y emperzadas. ¡La honorabilidad viciosa de estas damas me repugna más que el deshonor de la muchacha tahitiana, tan sencilla, tan graciosa, tan dignificada por su maternidad! (100-101)

Bertrana here brings up the question of honour in European and Tahitian societies, with a reference to sexual practices and motherhood. The city's courtesan, Turey, does not feel ashamed for being a single mother and a prostitute. On the contrary, Bertrana admires her dignity. Sex and reproduction are not, among the Polynesian, attached to conventions of marriage and chastity, which are the core values of honour to the other women that Bertrana refers to in the quote –presumably French women who live in the colonial quarters of the island («el barrio elegante»). Bertrana reaches these conclusions without interacting with either Turey or the other women. Their voices are not introduced in the text. Bertrana's assessment of Turey's dignity vis-à-vis the other women's questionable honour («honorabilidad viciosa») is fully imagined. Moreover, considering the textual evidence suggesting that Bertrana had companions other than her husband during her stay in Tahiti, her comment on honour may be a reaction towards judgments made to her.

#### 4. STRATEGIES OF EXOTISATION

Bertrana's writing creates picturesque descriptions of French Polynesia through her depiction of young men and women in traditional clothing (such as sarongs of white flowers against a red background and decorative ornaments in their hair, hibiscus flowers and crowns made of *tiaré*) as well as landscapes of white sandy beaches and a lush (but kind) jungle vegetation. With these images Bertrana wants to represent an authentic, homogeneous indigenous culture, which is clean and beautiful, dismissing the existence of other realities that may corrupt a picture that evokes the naivety of some of Gauguin's paintings.

In her book chapter «The Imaginary Orient» (1989) Linda Nochlin discusses the strategies of «realist» representations that French painters (among others Jean-Léon Gerôme) used in order to show 'real' images of the Orient. Nochlin demystifies such reality through a reading of absences. She identifies four types of absences: absence of western people (like the painters

themselves), of history (of change and development), of art (artifice, creation) and, of scenes of work and industry. By eluding to these elements, Nochlin argues that realist representations of the Orient aim at producing picturesque images of it:

Orientalism, then, can be viewed under the aegis of the more general category of the picturesque, a category that can encompass a wide variety of visual objects and ideological strategies, extending from regional genre painting down to the photographs of smiling or dancing natives in the *National Geographic*. (51)

Furthermore, Nochlin notes that an «important function, then, of the picturesque ... is to certify that the people encapsulated by it, defined by its presence, are irredeemably different from, more backward than, and culturally inferior to those who construct and consume the picturesque product. They are irrevocably 'Other'» (51). The main function of Bertrana's pictorial representation of the Polynesian people is, however, different from what Nochlin points out in her quote. Bertrana's attempt to mark the difference between *us* and *them* does not capture the Polynesian as inferior but uses them to question the assumed superiority of those who consume the picturesque product. Nevertheless, her attempt to strive for what she thinks is real, genuine, and authentic is not fully successful because she does not exoticise all Polynesian peoples. Her book also contains, in contrast to the descriptions of heavenly sunsets and beautiful men and women, reflections on the ugly, dirty, and abject that reveal a rhetoric of racism. Such is her consideration of the *annamite* women which contrasts with her description of other women she observes while strolling down Papetee's harbour:

Los *gambiers* son altos, esbeltos, de dorada piel oscura. Todos visten el pareo tradicional encarnado con flores blancas. Algunas mujeres, tranquilas y enigmáticas también suelen acompañarles. También ellas vienen de los mares del sur, con sus largas trenzas y su amplias túnicas transparentes. (47)

In contrast to the beauty and allure of the *gambiers*, *annamite* women do not fit Bertrana's patterns of beauty. She describes them as follows:

Por las márgenes del paseo, una o dos hembras anamitas –no puedo decidirme a llamarlas mujeres– buscan agachadas no sé qué de triste y mezquino entre la hierba ... Si pasáis cerca de ellas os sonreirán, pero su sonrisa es aún más mísera, más triste y más repugnante que su aspecto, pues todas llevan los

dientes cubiertos de laca negra. ¿Es por lujo? ¿Por tradición? ¿Por higiene?  
No lo sé. (47)<sup>5</sup>

Here, the local custom of chewing leaves that colour one's teeth is considered disgusting («repugnante») and inhuman (Bertrana hesitates to call them women). Additionally, Bertrana condemns pregnancy among the annamite women as a lack of self-care with a remark on their pregnant bellies as «vientres eternamente fecundos y deformes» (47). Whilst Turey's pregnancy dignifies her because she is a respected prostitute, the poor, dirty (because of their coloured teeth) and pregnant annamite women held no attraction for Bertrana. Essentially, the image of these other women does not comply with the stereotype of beauty that underlays Bertrana's imagination of the paradise islands of Oceania that she strives for in her book.

The way Bertrana depicts Tahitian and Polynesian women is problematic because it re-inscribes the unidirectional mode of Orientalism by which Bertrana projects herself onto others. *Paraísos oceánicos* enables this singular vision through a double strategy of seeing and telling through the omniscient first-person narrator/travel writer. Bertrana rarely quotes her interactions with women and maintains the position of a distant observer who appropriates what she sees and compels readers to assume her viewpoint. Remarkably, she addresses readers in the plural form (*vosotros*), thus sharing with them her experience of seeing:

Pero la hora culminante de la belleza en Papetee es el anochecer. Las puestas de sol tienen un tal encanto, que toda descripción resultaría pobre. *Pensad* en la sutilidad de una pintura japonesa, y podréis formaros una pequeña idea. ... *No sabéis* si es el agua o es el cielo que se vuelve rojo ... Todo cuanto os rodea se impregna de esa luz. *Diriais* que arde la ciudad. *Dirigís* vuestra mirada a las alturas, y sobre un cielo encendido, *veis* destacarse, recortadas y oscuras, las siluetas de las palmeras gigantes. ... *Mirad* ahora el mar y el cielo, ¡cuánta dulzura! (Bertrana 48-49; emphasis added)

The verbs in the present tense and plural *you* form create the effect of a simultaneous and shared experience of viewing by the narrator and the readers. The

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5. On many Pacific islands, the Philippines for example, people chew leaves which are similar to tobacco and color one's teeth. In rural areas of the Philippines, both men and women chew *buyo* (a local leaf) which produces a red coloring of the mouth and teeth.

latter are guided by the former into seeing. Bertrana commands the reader where to look to admire the sunset in Papetee («mirad el mar y el cielo») and even provides the metaphors for what is seen («diríais que arde la ciudad»). Bertrana's appropriation of what is being seen and her own position as the seer echo what Mary Louise Pratt calls «the-monarch-of-all-I-survey» (201), a strategy of exotisation and appropriation of what is seen that occurs in *Paraisos oceánicos* not only through the content but through the grammar of the text.

Bertrana's idealisation of a natural state, her production of the sexual freedom that she admires and her disgust for the abject and dirty show Bertrana's colonialist voice alongside her mode of Orientalism, which is selectively positive or negative but always a fantasy of the other.

## 5. MARY POS

Mary Pos (1904-1987) was a self-supporting travel journalist and lecturer. From the late 1920s until the late 1970s she travelled around the world, published numerous accounts of her journeys, gave radio chats, and presented thousands of lectures both abroad and in the Netherlands. Making use of her written as well as audio and visual accounts of her journeys she carefully constructed the persona of an accomplished and experienced professional. As self-willed, bold and courageous explorer, and witty and clever *solo traveller*, she was more than capable of confronting the logistical, financial, physical and psychological challenges of her journeys. Pos was a pioneer in the Dutch field of journalism for managing to obtain sponsoring money not only from ministries, but also from commercial companies such as Heineken. In addition, as a freelance journalist *avant la lettre* she sold articles to newspapers and magazines and was a paid lecturer.

Apart from creating a (financially) successful travelling self she claimed the role of cultural mediator and bridge builder. She presented herself as a socially skilled and publicly engaged global citizen who could play a part in the enhancement of intercultural understanding as well as the improvement of working and living conditions for women, the poor, and other underprivileged groups. As such she embodied the 'global subject' that has been theorized by scholars such as Hannes Schweiger and Sarah Panter. She seemed to

have all credentials needed for such a transnational subjectivity: her family's history of missionary work as well as her Dutch citizenship and thus embedment in an extensive colonial history and discourse; excellent lecturing, language and writing skills; an ambitious, adventurous and resourceful mind; and her unmarried status, flair and physical attractiveness. She also had an extensive and transnational network of friends, acquaintances, and notables who were willing to write letters of recommendation.

Finally, she carefully constructed the public image of a woman who was able to face all sorts of socio-cultural and religious forces when questioning established constructions of femininity. Stretching the boundaries of her own gendered mobility and manoeuvring space, she seemed to present herself as a polyglot and modern woman who could drive (and own) a car, occasionally smoked cigarettes in public, oftentimes flirted, and was financially and emotionally independent. Although she at times presented herself as a coquettish and modern young woman, she was more often an adventurous and robust traveller<sup>6</sup>. Some of the studio-portraits of Pos show a young and glamorous woman, but the photo images of her travels display a tough and down-to-earth figure. The journalist who interviewed Pos when she arrived in the Dutch East Indies, portrays her as anything but a modern girl: wearing a yellow shirt and blue spencer, shorts, knee stockings in loafers, and a gigantic sun helmet on her head, Pos routinely and briskly handles the customs issues («Mary Pos, journaliste»).

Pos's modernity was mostly contained in the choices she had made for herself. Her diaries and letters show how she established herself as an autonomous professional with an unconventional and enlightened attitude towards religion, women's and familial roles, and national citizenship. Still, her work, presented in a populist, journalistic, anecdotal, and oftentimes melodramatic style, blatantly exposes the limitations of her transnational and emancipated stance and the partiality of her perspective. Her published accounts, as well as her broadcasted lectures, display an unmistakable colonial and Orientalist stance, and many traditionalist ideas about race and gender relations (Boter 2018). Despite her personal ambitions of contributing to intercultural bonding she unashamedly offers many racist generalisations in her accounts of

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6. For a discussion of characteristics of the modern girl, see Weinbaum 5.

the Dutch East Indies, which she visited from early September 1938 to March 1939: «The needs of the native inhabitants are very limited, they are content with very little»; «Borrowing money in Indië is so easily done ... it is one of the larger flaws of its people»; «The women in Indië are very diligent» (Pos, *Eens op Java* 192-193)<sup>7</sup>. More implicit ways in which Pos conveyed a prejudiced message will be illustrated in the following sections that concern her journey to the Dutch East Indies.

## 6. MONARCH-OF-ALL-I-SURVEY

Pos jubilantly relates her experiences of travelling by air to the Dutch East Indies: «flying is one of the greatest inventions of our time, it makes distances disappear, it fosters meetings between people. ... it is as if, on this flying carpet, only a bit more comfortably, one is allowed to visit other countries and become acquainted with other peoples» (Pos, «Door de lucht»). The fairytale-like reference to the flying carpet resonates with another quote: «the KLM-bird,» a «[glittering] machine» against «the clear blue sky», had dropped her at a small, deserted airport «carved out in the jungle» (Pos, *Eens op Java* 5). Thus, she creates the visually compelling image of an abandoned young woman, a modern traveller, all alone in the midst of the vast and still wilderness where she knows no one. The airport carved out in the jungle embodies another insistent image, one that intriguingly combined technological innovation and traditional rurality. Her fondness for airports even appears to derive from the way in which they join modernity and the rustic: «How I love airports. Despite their modernity and their runways of asphalt, they are so pastoral and filled with serenity when silence falls after the drone of the engines is gone. Centers and focal points in today's world, which may still offer a place to a quietly grazing flock of sheep and a calm shepherd» (Pos, *Eens op Java* 71). If, as Robinson Tomsett claims, «The deployment of discourses of modernity, navigation and danger allowed women journeyers to assert and express their identities as women of modernity» (182), Pos's

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7. Pos uses the term «inheems». For a brief discussion of the 1930s use of term «Native», see Blackburn 182. When we translate Pos's «inheems» or «inheensch» we follow her in her use of the capital or lower case letters.

comment in addition enables her to articulate a fascination for the interaction between technological modernity and peaceful nature.

In «Fieldwork in Common Places» Mary Louise Pratt has theorized the literary trope of the «arrival scene» in both ethnography and travel writing, which is often reconstructed retroactively. Rather than a trivial and anecdotal scene, it is charged with symbolism and ideology, and locates the traveler's body at a very specific, physically and ideologically superior, colonial point of vision from above (Pratt, «Fieldwork»; *Imperial Eyes*). This colonial point of vision, linked to modern aircraft technology, re-appears when Pos is allowed to fly in a bomber airplane, a Glenn Martin, from Andir airport in West-Java. Pos's account of the trip reveals another genre convention used in travel writing, namely that of the 'monarch-of-all-I-survey' that we anticipated in our discussion of Bertrana's work. In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* Pratt considers the classic scene in travel writing when a (usually male) traveller looks out over a terrain after having just conquered a mountain top. According to Pratt, this proud, exploratory, and panoramic view, combined with its description, resembles that of the coloniser who seems to appropriate, in his imagination, the land over which he is looking out. Pos's comments on air travel show numerous 'monarch-of-all-I-survey' moments where she positions herself as a superior and royal figure who oversees her subjects and kingdom<sup>8</sup>.

In the chapter «Guest for a Day of the Royal Dutch Indies Army at Bandoeng» Pos is allowed «despite my being a woman» to go up in the air in the «proud bombing aircraft» (Pos, *Eens op Java* 71). Wearing grey overalls and a helmet, a parachute buckled to her chest, she is asked to take her seat in a glass dome right in the nose of the aircraft. This is usually the spot where the observer-navigator sits, who is responsible for the ejection of the bombs. Remarkably, the travel narrative, written in 1939 but published nine years later, does not bring up the emerging threat of war at all. Despite the cultural pretensions of her transnational journalistic presence Pos apparently decided to ignore the global, geopolitical background against which she

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8. See also Babs Boter and Lonneke Geerlings, «Neerkijken en rondzien: Twee reizigers uit Nederland portretteren en presenteren Harlem». *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 129.3 (2016): 393-414.

travelled—possibly to appease her sponsors. Remarkable, as well, is her literal reference to the monarch metaphor as she describes her experience of flying.

It is a king's seat in the small dome. ... It will only be a pleasure trip over the peaceful sawahs and along blue vulcanoes. ... Dashing upwards in a droning bomber aircraft, on my own in a glass dome in which I can also stand upright. ... Never before did I see the world so boundless! ... We move on, the entire plain of Bandoeng now lies beneath us, at times we fly low over the silvery and glittering sawahs, then I see, standing in a bombing aircraft, *other women* who are occupied with the simplest and at the same time most important labour that people can carry out, the cultivation of the land. ... The [sawahs'] abundance of water and the wideness of the plain remind me time and again of Holland, but the striking vulcanoes deliver Indië right in my glass dome. ... All distance seems to have faded away. The entire world is with me and around me. (Pos, *Eens op Java* 72-74; emphasis added)

The fading away of distance and the experience of being enveloped by the entire world significantly echoes Pos's earlier jubilant statement, quoted above, that «flying ... makes distances disappear, it fosters meetings between people». In addition, the references to the power of the aircraft («dashing upwards», «droning»), and the monumental and royal quality of her location («glass dome», «boundless», «beneath us», «entire world») clearly link this scene to Pratt's trope of the 'monarch-of-all-I-survey'. Significant, as well, is the way in which Pos's narrator conjoins western technology («modern aeroplanes» (73); «very modern instrument» (75); «antenna masts of the radio station» (73)) and eastern labour (sawahs; cassava factory (73)), and how she sets herself off against the «other women» underneath her who cultivate the land.

This contrast is reiterated when Pos explores the Indies by riding in a car with a hired driver. sitting in an open taxi through Singaradja, the capital of Bali, her attention is drawn to

a group of ugly women with bare torsos who carry heavy loads on their heads and an emaciated dog who is being kicked from the court-yard and yelpingly flees. When I see these dirty drudges, and see how their slovenly hair has slipped down from underneath a dingy headscarf, I realise that they belong to those kampong women in Indië who never pull a comb through their hair. So, also on this island of beauty. (Pos, *Werkelijkheid* 5)

The individual 'I' who narrates and «see[s]» and «realise[s]» is significantly opposed to the anonymous women and dog who only exist as helpless, exposed and degenerate outcasts.

## 7. TOO CLOSE TO COMFORT

Despite Pos's transgression of boundaries informed by gender, class, and education, she was not successful, like Bertrana, in building interracial and intercultural networks. Her texts show very few references to visits to the kampongs which, from the bombing aircraft, had looked «good-natured and weathered, hidden away amid the green» (Pos, *Eens op Java* 74). Pos generally watches local, lower-class women from a distance. In that sense she followed European urban women in the Dutch East Indies who, according to Elsbeth Locher Scholten, «met few women of other population groups, and then only in restricted numbers» (*Women and the Colonial State* 30). Locher Scholten even refers to «the social isolation or 'apartheid' of Dutch women» (*Women and the Colonial State* 30).

Pos's distance may partially have been a result of the way she travelled, being chauffeured, and may be related to her personal concerns with cleanliness, her health and the fact that she caught malaria during her stay in the Indies<sup>9</sup>. But it must also have been related to her investment in Dutch colonial discourse. She compensated for the physical distance by an extensive reading of the indigenous woman's magazine *Doenia Kita* [*Our World*], claiming that «reading the issues have brought the Indonesian women closer to me» (Pos, *Eens op Java* 187). In addition, she aligned herself with two groups of women: the (western-)educated indigenous women who, as «awakened» women, indefatigably worked towards the elevation of their more humble sisters (Pos, *Eens op Java* 194)<sup>10</sup>, and the European women missionaries who worked among local women and whom she greatly admired, not in the least because of their proximity to the kampong women.

The way in which Pos refers to the working methods of these European women is telling: she explains that in order to build a trustful relationship with kampong inhabitants, the missionary women had to go and sit on the

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9. See also Babs Boter, «The Traveling Self in Diaries: A Case Study».

10. Pos uses the Dutch term «ontwaakt» [awakened].

floor, next to the indigenous women. Implicitly they counter Pos's monarch position. She continues,

They'd better not refuse the coffee offered to her [the missionary women], as that could possibly offend her hostess, so they drink the coffee, made in a pot that is usually rinsed with water from the river in which many relieve themselves, they have to somehow swallow the syrups of the warongs, the movable shops, they need to risk everything [malaria, dysentery], in order to be able to show: I feel completely one with you. (Pos, *Eens op Java* 108-109)

Almost identifying with the missionary women, Pos here expresses her fear of dirt («rinsed with water from the river»; «risk everything») and possible discord («They'd better not refuse»). She feels for the missionary women who have to «somehow swallow» the dirt of the kampongs. They have to enter the abject threshold zones that Anne McClintock points out in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. Building on Mary Douglas's seminal work *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), McClintock argues that

Under imperialism ... certain groups are expelled and obliged to inhabit the impossible edges of modernity: the slum, the ghetto, the garret, the brothel, the convent, the colonial bantustan and so on. Abject peoples are those whom industrial imperialism rejects but cannot do without: slaves, prostitutes, the colonized, domestic workers, the insane, the unemployed, and so on. ... Inhabiting the cusp of domesticity and market, industry and empire, the abject returns to haunt modernity as its constitutive, inner repudiation: the rejected from which one does not part. (McClintock 72)

The abject inhabitants of the kampongs in Pos's texts, however, also leave the kampongs and meet her at the local markets, where she feels disgusted with their indigenous dirt. Travelling to the Batak people in North Sumatra, she relates:

At the market in the fairytale-like Prapat where the crystal-clear water of Lake Toba reaches the market place, one saw women being occupied with buying and selling. *They smelled against you*, the small children whom they carelessly carried ... had sore heads with scabs, they were all dirty and full of rashes, the women scratched themselves incessantly, even though they wore so few clothes, which they can launder so easily, and *they relieved themselves shamelessly*, and it seemed as if no woman had retained the most feminine quality to make themselves beautiful. (Pos, *Eens op Java* 221; emphasis added)

Loaded with spatial references, especially about proximity, this passage conveys that despite the nearness of the fresh water, which «reaches the market place», the women do not take care of their or their infants' personal hygiene and come too close to the Dutch visitor. They are allegedly nonchalant and improper and so Pos introduces adverbs which highlight this quality: «carelessly carried», «scratched themselves incessantly», «shamelessly». However, Pos's statement that «no woman had retained the most feminine quality» is also telling, and seems to be at odds with the image of the liberated woman that she clearly made an effort to convey. She understands that the conditions under which the indigenous women live and work leave no time or energy to care about appearances<sup>11</sup>. While the local women do heavy work such as mining rocks from a river, and each of them carries heavy loads on her head, their husband «prefers to play the big guy, he has a wife who feeds his children, who works for him and serves him in all aspects, what else could he long for?» (Pos, *Eens op Java* 221). In the midst of Pos's imperial fear of dirt and condescending comments on lack of femininity, which resonates with Bertrana's comments on the annamite women in Papetee, she expresses an awareness of the local women's gendered and subordinate position, unlike Bertrana, who simply dismisses them as the abject ethnic group among the Polynesians.

## 8. MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Thirty years prior to Pos's journey to the Dutch East Indies, the Dutch suffragette Aletta Jacobs (1854-1929) visited the Dutch colony. Harriet Feinberg distinguishes between two types of «discourses» that Jacobs employs when referring to indigenous women in her travel letters. The first one is «encouraging our peers» –a discourse which is fitting for women «who are helping others in a different region or nation to get [certain rights] too. This discourse assumes some basic equality across cultural, national, and religious boundaries». The second discourse, «lifting up [opheffen] our native sisters», is a phrase that Jacobs herself uses. In this discourse the proclamation of sisterhood across boundaries «is undercut by the simultaneous assumption of a

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11. For references to the indigenous women's dire circumstances see Pos, *Eens op Java* 194, 221; *Werkelijkheid op Bali* 12, 19, 40.

basic cultural, racial, or intellectual superiority on the part of the helpers» (Feinberg 66)<sup>12</sup>. Pos's travel accounts of the Dutch East Indies offer an intricate mix of both discourses. She may have been aware of the fact that by the 1930s Indonesian women had organised themselves and kept Dutch women in the colony at a distance (Blackburn 2004; Locher-Scholten, «Morals»). Pos writes that these «privileged» indigenous women should collaborate with white nurses, missionaries, social workers and teachers to achieve the physical and mental elevation of all indigenous women. In this she followed the idea that had developed since 1900 that the Indonesian people could be uplifted through the improvement of the position of indigenous women (Gouda 76).

Mary Pos's own role, we understand, was that of educator of her audience back in the Netherlands: «Millions and millions of women live in our Indies and what do we know of her [sic] life, her comings and goings, her desires and wishes, her happiness and sadness? Most of us feel ashamed that we do not know anything at all» (*Eens op Java* 184). The first of her didactic approaches is a biographical one where she narrates the stories of Indonesian women she has encountered or heard about whose lives have been characterized by self-improvement and social mobility<sup>13</sup>. They have transgressed gender boundaries and thus become possible role models for other young women. Through these biographies, Pos instructs her Dutch audience in the lives of indigenous women, and in addition contributes to the construction of her own public image of a self-made and liberated woman (Pos, *Werkelijkheid op Bali* 40, 88; *Eens op Java* 195). The second of her didactic approaches is a rhetorical one. Using phrases such as «It is understandable that» and «one can imagine» (Pos, *Eens op Java* 188, 190, 193) she cleverly encourages her readers to envision the life of indigenous women in case they are not familiar

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12. This is a variation of the idea that women travellers «frequently viewed the indigenous women not as equal but as unfortunate who needed to be 'saved' by their Western sisters» (García-Ramón 236; Burton). Indeed, as Locher-Scholten points out: «In line with the general conservatism of the two decades before the Second World War [Dutch] feminists [in the Indies] defined Indonesian women as 'not yet educated' or as 'steeped in adat and religion'...» (*Women and the Colonial State* 29).

13. Pos's travel accounts incorporate many biographical sketches. See, for instance, her portraits of Helen Keller and Eleanor Roosevelt in Mary Pos, *Ik Zag Amerika* 103-115; 236-242.

with it. Like Bertrana, Pos thus uses specific language to create empathy for the indigenous among her western readers.

The somewhat paternalising manner in which Pos thus manipulates her Dutch readers, evoking Aletta Jacobs's discourses of «encouraging our peers» and «lifting up our native sisters» is equalled in the contrived and naïve way in which she forces the conception of a link with all Indonesian women. Pronouncing that the Dutch and Indonesian women should gradually come to understand each other better, which will automatically lead to appreciation, she confidently points out that all women «have one tremendous thing in common, something that each good woman, married or unmarried, with children or childless, possesses, namely a mother's heart that will never be repudiated, and which will always try to mean something for others in serving love» (Pos, *Eens op Java* 196-197). In her research on British colonial women Antoinette Burton has likewise found that «There was an assumption on the part of many British feminists that their 'femaleness' gave them an understanding of Indian women that transcended national and racial boundaries. The common bond of motherhood was also considered a transcendent link» (148). Pos, who had no children and stayed unmarried until 1959, did not hesitate to summon this discourse of shared motherhood.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Both Bertrana and Pos admired, and at times identified with, some of the local women they encountered during their travels, whereas they also distinguished themselves from the local Polynesian and Balinese women. As we have shown, their identification with or rejection of people encountered when travelling was neither neutral nor innocent. This was a result of their own subject position as it was informed by their national and ethnic cultures, and their class, educational and professional background. The experiences of travel *and* writing afforded them a position as cultural commentators and professionals on which they capitalised. For Bertrana, the success of *Paraísos oceánicos* granted her enough recognition to be offered to go on a trip to Morocco as a journalist writing for the Catalan newspaper *La Publicitat* (García-Ramón *et al.* 232). For Pos, her popular travel accounts legitimized the self-created public persona of an adventurous and knowledgeable world traveller and

transnationally operating journalist, until her fame began to wane in the late 1960s.

In our analysis we have shown the ambivalence of their colonial and feminist positions either a reaction to civilisation and modernity which oppressed women through codes of moral behaviour and gender roles, or a wish to promote modern technology and education as the means to achieve a universal ideal of sisterhood whereby women can help women. Their white privilege complicates this idea as it does not escape colonial rhetoric. This becomes clear by looking at their positioning towards other women. Pos positions herself *above* (lower-class) Indonesian women and *next to* white Dutch women for whom she actually writes, and Bertrana locates herself *next to* some of the Polynesian women and *against* French colonial women and Spanish men who are the target of her critique.

Bertrana and Pos use similar strategies of exoticisation in their writing. On the one hand they depict a single perspective that appropriates and claims what it sees (what Pratt terms the monarch-of-all-I-survey), instead of establishing a dialogue or introducing a plurality of voices in their texts; on the other hand, they produce picturesque images that focus on a partial and constructed reality that leaves out the non-picturesque (the abject and ugly) in need of reform. Their comments on hygiene, motherhood and sexuality demonstrate a colonial and orientalist rhetoric. Our analysis of Bertrana's and Pos's travel writings that has taken into account postcolonial theory alongside notions of feminism and modernity demonstrates that the construction of these women's subject positions as modern feminists does not escape the European colonial and oriental discourses in which they are embedded, even though they react against them. In doing so, their travelogues and their roles as cultural mediators must be recognised as the work of public figures on a journey to assert their authority.

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