

TOWARDS A FEMINIST POLITICS OF MOBILITY: U.S. TRAVEL AND IMMIGRATION MEMOIRS

HACIA UNA POLÍTICA FEMINISTA DE MOVILIDAD: MEMORIAS DE VIAJE E INMIGRACIÓN ESTADOUNIDENSES

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Abstract

This paper challenges longstanding cultural associations that link men to mobility and women to stability by outlining what I term a feminist politics of mobility. Bringing together four contemporary memoirs that foreground journeys, I explore how U.S. women embody and represent their mobility, as well as how movement shapes their relationships to global power structures and to norms of gender and sexuality. I draw on feminist geography, feminist and queer theory, memoir studies and mobility scholarship to read Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat Pray Love* (2006), Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us* (2012), Daisy Hernández's *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* (2014), and Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* (2012). Highlighting the differences between these authors' journeys as well as the patterns across them, I ultimately find that these memoirists model a feminist politics of mobility, wherein moving through space redistributes power to women and renegotiates social relations that have historically supported women's subordination.

Keywords: Mobility; Memoir; Feminism; Travel; Immigration.

Resumen

Este artículo desafía las asociaciones culturales que vinculan los hombres a la movilidad y las mujeres a la estabilidad para perfilar lo que he llamado una política feminista de movilidad. Reúno cuatro autobiografías contemporáneas de viajes para explorar cómo mujeres estadounidenses encarnan y representan su movilidad, y cómo sus viajes influyen en sus relaciones con estructuras de poder, género y sexualidad. Me baso en la geografía feminista, las teorías *queer* y los estudios de autobiografía para leer *Eat Pray Love* de Elizabeth Gilbert (2006), *The Distance Between Us* de Reyna Grande (2012), *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* de Daisy Hernández (2014), y *Wild* de Cheryl Strayed (2012). Este estudio destaca tanto las diferencias como las similitudes entre los viajes, y encuentra que estas mujeres modelan una política feminista de movilidad según la cual la posibilidad de moverse redistribuye el poder a las mujeres y renegocia las relaciones sociales que históricamente han apoyado la subordinación de las mujeres.

Palabras clave: movilidad; autobiografía; feminismo; viajes; inmigración

«The time of leaving is the time of reckoning»
(Hernández 23)

When New York City is flung into darkness during the 2003 blackout, author Daisy Hernández does not remain indoors, frightened, awaiting the return of her electricity. She walks, finding comfort in the act of moving. «I am not afraid or confused», she writes, continuing, «or maybe it's that when those feelings rise up, I am focused on my feet, on where the sidewalk ends and where the next one begins» (172). For Hernández, the act of walking, of travelling through space on her own, delivers a sense of wellbeing and self-assurance. As she notes, however, feelings of fear and confusion also arise during her walk, reflecting the unshakable knowledge that women travelling in public face risks and threats of violence.

While the moment described is Hernández's alone, the thoughts and feelings brought up by her solitary walk parallel those of other women in the U.S. writing today. In this essay, I consider four books published during the recent «memoir boom» that approach gender and mobility in provocative ways: Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat Pray Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* (2006), Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us: A*

Memoir (2012), Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012), and Hernández's *A Cup of Water Under My Bed: A Memoir* (2014). These memoirs vary widely in tone, content and political intent. Their authors inhabit distinct social positions, with differing levels of privilege as a result of race, class, citizenship status, sexual orientation and other factors. Yet these four stories are linked by their central plots: women on journeys, moving through space as they reckon with identity, selfhood and cultural expectations in the twenty-first century United States. By putting these diverse memoirs in conversation with one another, I outline a feminist politics of mobility, wherein women enact positive, sometimes radical change, as they move through space –reconfiguring their senses of self, rejecting prescribed gender roles and taking risks in the hopes of reaching better, more just futures.

While women have always found ways around their restricted mobility, recent years have seen an unprecedented rise in solitary women's travel and in women's travel memoirs (Waugh and Nesbitt; Yagoda 11). At the same time, immigration to the U.S. has become increasingly feminised. Over the last century, migration «became relatively more female and relatively less male», with women immigrating for various reasons including economic opportunities and family reunification (Donato and Gabaccia 37). These trends, in which women defy entrenched gender norms by crossing thresholds and borders as travellers, migrants, explorers and wanderers, call into question longstanding cultural associations between men and travel, as well as between men and migration; associations that pervade U.S. literature and media. The four women-authored memoirs discussed here –each reflecting a unique authorial vantage point– disrupt this literary and cultural history.

Putting migration and travel narratives in conversation with one another other risks erasing the substantial material and affective differences between them. I do not take this risk lightly, and I do so with the intent of demonstrating not only resonances between these texts but also their crucial differences. The vastly different identities, embodiments and levels of privilege among these authors are, in fact, what make the conversation between them so powerful. As Chandra Mohanty put it, «In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities» (505). In other words, an intersectional and transnational feminist approach demands that we examine not only the differences between women on the basis of categories

including race, class, citizenship, sexuality, ability and age, but also that we consider links between women –however qualified– in the fulfilment of what Audre Lorde once referred to as «relating across difference» (123). With this in mind, I push back on the tendency to discuss different forms of mobility, such as leisure travel, migration and heritage travel, as though they have no relation to one another. While there are enormous differences between these types of movement, productive conversations can be had by drawing them together, as scholars contributing to the «new mobilities paradigm» have begun to show (Cresswell, «Towards a Politics» 17). In their own ways, both travel and migration can facilitate escapes from difficulty, discontent and daily obligations. These acts of mobility can create liminal moments in which travellers and migrants are no longer defined by their existing relationships to other people, places and institutions; in these moments, women can envision alternate futures. Only by examining a diverse group of texts can we fully understand the feminist potential of both memoir and mobility.

1. INTIMACY, MOBILITY AND GEOPOLITICS

Mobility is movement «imbued with meaning and power» (Cresswell, *On the Move* 3). At its most basic, mobility involves getting from point A to point B. However, it does not occur as an abstract motion in a vacuum but is «a social product» (5). Mobilities gain meaning and significance by being situated in particular cultures, time periods and power structures. In the twentieth- and twenty-first-century U.S., mobility has often been romanticised «as travel, transcendence and transformation» (Ahmed, Castañeda, Fortier, and Sheller 1). Yet, this understanding ignores mobility that is forced and violent. Feminist geographer Jennifer Hyndman, for instance, shows the ways nation-states attempt to restrict movement, especially at their borders, arguing, «mobility is always constrained» (248). Experiences with mobility also vary widely based on a person's appearance, economic circumstances and physical ability; there are limits to who can move where and how they can do so. Acts of mobility are never «simply acts of individual choice» (Hyndman 248). They are grounded in material and social conditions, often state-enacted and enforced, that place limits on bodies in motion.

To keep this paper attuned to hierarchies of mobility and to the link between mobile bodies and geopolitics, I consider the global alongside the intimate. First outlined by transnational feminists in a 2006 *Women's Studies Quarterly* (WSQ) special issue, a global/intimate pairing disrupts prominent metanarratives of globalisation by drawing attention to the body as a crucial site where global processes and politics play out. Tellingly, Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner begin their introduction to the WSQ issue with examples from travel memoirs. Through these examples, Pratt and Rosner demonstrate what one version of a global/intimate connection looks like, with memoirs «knit[ing] together personal history, vexing encounters with the foreign, and meditations on the responsibilities of the traveler» (15). Pratt and Rosner use memoir to show how the global is always linked to the body, to «interiority, idiosyncrasy, and affect» (15). In the same issue, Hyndman and Allison Mountz focus on three sites where this global/intimate connection plays out: the border, the home and the body. These spaces all play a role in the memoirs I examine, where bodies leave homes, cross borders and interact with other bodies.

The four authors that I focus on are all U.S. citizens, but (to differing extents) they situate their narratives within a global framework. By centring their narratives on movement and fluidity, these authors problematise «binary conceptions of politics and scale as either global or local, central or peripheral, focusing instead on the circulation of power, identity, and subjectivity across space» (Mountz and Hyndman 459). In other words, these authors embody principles of transnational feminism. Beyond affirming that mobility is powerful, political and central to the human experience, these four memoirs suggest the possibility of a feminist politics of mobility, wherein women's movement through space orients the lives of authors and readers away from conventional gender roles and simplistic understandings of national borders, both geographic and cultural. I respond to Mountz and Hyndman's call for a «feminist politics of location» and to Cresswell's outline of a «politics of mobility» by turning to Grande, Hernández, Strayed and Gilbert, whose narratives demonstrate how mobility is always bound up with gender and sexual norms, at the same time as they suggest the political promise of feminism(s) in motion (Mountz and Hyndman 458, Cresswell «Toward a Politics»). To explore the possibilities raised by these narratives, I first

consider the hierarchies of mobility among these journeys. Next, I explore how these authors emphasise routes over roots, as well as the ways women's mobility can threaten social norms. Last, I show the feminist potential of mobility and its role in reworking gender and national identities. Mobility, I argue, can transform individuals, transporting them literally and figuratively. For women, this can provoke a reimagining of what one's life can encompass and suggest ways to reach a more equal future.

2. HIERARCHIES OF MOBILITY

Leisure travel and migration are linked by their heightened mobility, but they have divergent histories, embodied realities and cultural representations (Domosh and Seager 110). In the U.S., memoirs of migration contribute to needed political change and increase social acceptance of immigrant groups. In contrast, travel narratives have a long history of justifying imperialism, expansionism, environmental destruction and violence against the Other. For this reason, scholars have rightly been critical of the genre, with Pratt and Rosner calling it «that most dubious of colonial genres» (13). The inception of the American colonial project, in fact, began with travel narratives penned by explorers such as John Smith. In these racist and exoticizing tales, European sailors relayed supposedly truthful accounts of their «discoveries», which helped spur the desire for further travel and occupation, to disastrous effect for those already living in the so-called New World (Pratt 110, 148-149). Early modern travel writers also fuelled the transatlantic slave trade, using strategic, fictionalised descriptions of Africans to justify the theft, brutalisation and enslavement of millions of people (Morgan 12). Throughout the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries, American travel narratives were often imperialist and downright racist, qualities which did not, unfortunately, prevent such tales from becoming bestsellers (Whitfield 197-203, 280-281).

The genre has come a long way since these racist and ethnocentric beginnings, yet almost all international travel memoirs still perpetrate Other-ing. Gilbert, for instance, reports her fascination with the «strangely beautiful» Indian women she watches labour in the hot sun (160). Later, she compares a Balinese medicine man, Ketut, to «the wise old Chinamen in classic kung fu movies», speaking «a form of English you could call 'Grasshopperese'»

(221). These comments dehumanise those that Gilbert observes. Her word choice, «strangely» exoticizes Indian women, rendering them into foreign objects. Likewise, her comparison of Ketut to «Chinamen», not only references stereotypical, offensive, cinematic representations of Chinese men, but also erases differences between Asian nationalities. In both cases, Gilbert positions the people she observes as irredeemably distant as a result of their class and ethnicity.

At some moments, Gilbert does seem to recognise her essentialising view of the people and places that she encounters, though she remains oblivious to her complicity in perpetuating the colonial legacy of travel writing. For instance, after she visits a local library to research Balinese history, she learns that, contrary to her impressions of the island as peaceful and joyous, «Bali has had exactly as bloody and violent and oppressive a history as anywhere else on earth» (236). Criticising herself for her prior ignorance, she recounts her discovery that the idealised image of Bali as «the world's only true utopia, a place that has known only peace and harmony and balance for all time», in fact stemmed from a successful government-led marketing campaign aimed at international tourists like her (236, 237). By describing this realisation and then relating a more truthful narrative of Balinese history, Gilbert momentarily models a reflexive type of travel writing that serves not to reaffirm Western or white dominance, but that celebrates growth in the traveller and reveals affinities, however disheartening, across cultures.

No matter how much self-awareness white American travel writers express, though, they cannot escape the problematic legacy of the genre, nor can they evade the racial, ethnic and class privilege inherent in travel memoirs. This is why Gilbert and Strayed –U.S.-born white women who choose to travel for the purposes of emotional healing– represent a very different «constellation of mobility» than Hernández and Grande, whose migration journeys were initiated by their parents and born out of global inequalities (Cresswell, «Towards a Politics» 17). Immigrants have been writing narratives throughout the nation's history¹. However, immigration memoirs did not achieve widespread literary recognition until the early 1980s, with the start

1. For a hefty collection of U.S. immigrant writing, see: *Becoming Americans: Four Centuries of Immigrant Writing*, edited by Ilan Stavans (2009).

of the «transnational phase» of American literature (Giles 21). The steady increase in immigrant-authored works since then reflects shifting national demographics as well as heightened media attention around migrant journeys to the United States. Contemporary immigrant-authored memoirs address themes including life as an undocumented immigrant, childhood migration and nuances around achieving the «American dream»². Many of these narratives draw on rich histories of Latinx storytelling. For instance, Grande's and Hernández's memoirs both have elements of the Latin American genre of *testimonio*, first-person narratives written by witnesses to traumatic events (Rohrleitner 40). Grande and Hernández both describe traumas, including childhood abuse and the emotional anguish of feeling distanced from homelands and families. They also write their memoirs as part of the push for immigration reform, where sharing one's migration story has become a key activist tactic (Beltrán 246). Last, both narratives echo earlier Chicana feminist memoirs and autoethnographies that centre an awakening to intersecting structures of oppression (Cantú 319-320).

Travel and migration have their own literary referents, as well as their own embodied realities. However, these four narratives were all produced well into the «memoir boom», a period of enormous popularity for stories based on true experiences (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* x). Since its start in the 1990s, the memoir boom has led to the inclusion of voices previously neglected by U.S. publishers, or «nobodies», as G. Thomas Couser calls them: ordinary people with stories to tell (5). While Grande, Hernández, Gilbert and Strayed all had writing experience prior to publishing their memoirs, they each downplay that professional experience, framing themselves as amateur storytellers –a tactic that succeeded in captivating audiences.

Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat Pray Love* was released in 2006 and quickly achieved commercial success. It stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over two hundred weeks. The book and its 2010 movie adaptation

2. For recent memoirs about life as an undocumented immigrant see Jose Antonio Vargas, *Dear America* (2018) and Julissa Arce, *My (Underground) American Dream* (2016). For narratives about migrating as a child see Helene Cooper, *The House at Sugar Beach* (2008), as well as Vargas and Arce. For memoirs addressing success and the «American dream» see all of the above, plus Sophia Chang, *The Baddest Bitch in the Room* (2019) and Sonia Sotomayor, *My Beloved World* (2013).

remain a part of the U.S. cultural imaginary, as evidenced by the release of a 2016 essay collection featuring readers' heartfelt accounts of how the book changed their lives (*Eat Pray Love Made Me Do It*). *Eat Pray Love* follows the author as she goes through a difficult divorce followed by another relationship and breakup, all of which leave her facing depression and suicidal thoughts. Seeking inner peace, she decides to travel for a year, getting a book advance from her publisher to fund the trip. She sets out to visit Italy for «pleasure», an ashram in India for «devotion», and Bali, Indonesia for «balancing» (30). The ensuing tale details Gilbert's travels and process of emotional healing, concluding with her having found both a sense of peace and a romantic partner (a man whom she eventually marries and later separates from). The memoir has faced substantial critique, with scholarship focusing on the journey's inaccessibility to all but the wealthiest readers, as well the book's troubling message that one can consume one's way to enlightenment³. Gilbert's narrative, unfortunately, champions exactly the strand of neoliberal feminism that Mohanty cautioned against in *Feminism Without Borders* (2003), severely undermining *Eat Pray Love's* political potential. Yet, as I will argue below, even privileged, problematic, and fleeting experiences of mobility can offer possibilities for queer and feminist futures.

Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* was released in 2012 and follows a similar emotional journey, though it traces a far more rugged physical journey. Following the death of her mother, a divorce and a period of «dabbling dangerously with drugs and sleeping with too many men», Strayed hikes the Pacific Crest Trail, or the PCT (5). This wilderness trail, of which Strayed hikes around 1100 miles, tests her physical and emotional strength. By the end of the hike, she has lost six toenails from her too-small hiking boots but has achieved a new-found sense of resilience. *Wild* was also a commercial success. It hit number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list and was adapted into a 2014 movie. One element that makes both *Eat Pray Love* and *Wild* compelling film adaptations is that both stories conclude with tidy, happy endings –following a tendency in memoir towards «closure» and «resolution» (Couser 67). Although

3. For critiques of *Eat Pray Love* along these lines, see Joshunda Sanders, «Eat, Pray, Spend: Priv-Lit and the New, Enlightened American Dream» (2010) and Ruth Williams, «*Eat Pray Love*: Producing the Female Neoliberal Spiritual Subject» (2011).

Strayed is still alone and unsettled at the end of her hike, the memoir wraps up with a reference to her future happiness and stability. Since she wrote *Wild* twenty years after the events of the book, she is able to conclude by flashing forward to the years following the hike when she gets married and has two children, a boy and a girl (310).

While Reyna Grande's and Daisy Hernández's memoirs also follow spiritual journeys and conclude with some sense of inner happiness, they are decidedly more ambivalent and detail journeys that are far less clear-cut, as is often the case with memoirs of migration and transnational identity (Padilla 10-11). If we think about mobility as a line between A and B, Hernández and Grande travel along lines far more circuitous than Strayed or Gilbert. Point B is different for these authors, too, and neither Grande nor Hernández tell a straightforward tale that begins in global south and ends in global north. Likely owing to these complex narrative structures and to the racial biases of many book publishers, marketers and readers, neither Grande's nor Hernández's memoir ended up on a bestseller list, nor have they reached the pop culture status of *Eat Pray Love* or *Wild*⁴.

The Distance Between Us (2012) traces Grande's immigration journey and life through young adulthood (a story she continues in *A Dream Called Home* (2018)). She begins the memoir with her childhood in Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico, a period marked by her father's departure to *el otro lado*, followed by her mother leaving to join him. After her parents separate, Grande's mother returns to Iguala, but she is indelibly altered by heartbreak and shame, unable to provide the reliable, caring mothering that Grande and her siblings crave. When Grande's father concedes to bring the oldest child, Mago, to the U.S., the other children clamour to join him, and Grande and her brother ultimately persuade him to bring them too. The second half of the book details Grande's adjustment to life in the U.S., concluding with her transfer to the University of California, Santa Cruz, and foreshadowing her career as an author. This plot resolution, though, is undermined by a sense of loss. In the Epilogue, Grande jumps ahead a decade to describe her father's death from liver cancer and her still distant relationship with her mother. Thinking back

4. On racial bias in the literary market, see Alex Espinoza, «Extremely Brown and Incredibly Ignored» (2016).

on her parents' initial migrations, she muses: «I wondered if during their crossing, both my father and mother had lost themselves in that no-man's-land. I wondered if my real parents were still there» (315). This lingering disappointment over never again feeling fully connected to her parents tempers the otherwise happy ending to Grande's tale.

In *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* (2014), Hernández also describes strained relationships with her parents. When Hernández's narrative begins, she is already a U.S. citizen, the daughter of immigrants from Colombia and Cuba. Because of this, the migrant journey is not central to her narrative in the way that it is for Grande. Rather, Hernández reflects broadly on the constant mobility at the heart of her family's immigrant experience, discussing the different paths her first-generation mother and aunts took and relating those to her own experiences. At the same time, she recounts her process of becoming what Grisel Acosta terms a Latina outsider, «challeng[ing] the concept of the stereotypical Latina and the stereotypical...American» (14). Hernández does not fit easily within the shifting norms of Latinidad or U.S. femininity. She reckons with her multilayered identity –Colombian, Cuban, American, bisexual– through a series of vignettes in English, interspersed with Spanish phrases that mimic her mixed-language world. Her tale ends, like Grande's, with the promise of a joyful future marred by a sense of loss. In the last few pages, Hernández describes her move to San Francisco for an exciting job opportunity, but this move creates new distance, both physical and emotional, from her family and her roots.

These memoirs reflect a span of lived experiences. They also reflect four distinct subgenres of memoir. *Eat Pray Love* is a cosmopolitan travel narrative, *Wild* is a solitary wilderness story, *The Distance Between Us* is a first-generation immigration tale, and *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* relates a second-generation coming-of-age immigrant experience. Among these four tales, there is a clear hierarchy of mobilities –some ways of moving are less risky, less damaging and less encumbered by prejudice, poverty or fear. Yet these authors share a genre, memoir, which has historically been a way for «women, excluded from official discourse...to 'talk back,' to embody subjectivity, and to inhabit and inflect a range of subjective 'Is'» (Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography* 16). Hernández, Grand, Strayed and Gilbert write as an act of self-creation and self-definition, to call themselves into being. In doing so,

they use the language of mobility, reflecting on moments of movement and transformation.

3. ROUTES AND ROOTS

These memoirs all deemphasise place, privileging journeys literal and metaphorical. This focus on movement is not unique to contemporary memoir. Some of the earliest U.S. memoirs focused on journeys: nineteenth-century slave narratives centred on an escape from bondage at roughly the same moment nonfiction accounts of international tourism, such as Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), became popular. Unsurprisingly, men authored the majority of these early memoirs, while the few memoirs women published before the twentieth century typically focused on domestic spaces. While scholars have recovered much unpublished travel writing by colonial and antebellum women, the best-known female memoirs written during these periods were captivity narratives—stories defined by women's capture and immobilisation⁵. *Eat Pray Love*, *Wild*, *A Cup of Water Under My Bed* and *The Distance Between Us* diverge from these early women's memoirs, instead following the legacy of male-authored narratives of discovery, escape and movement, complicating standard associations between women and the home.

In *Eat Pray Love* and *Wild*, both authors reject domesticity and married life outright, removing themselves from their houses and divorcing their spouses. This rejection is a temporary one, and their stories conclude with a new romantic partnership or the foreshadowing of one—an echo of the requisite marriage plot of nineteenth-century domestic fiction (Gilbert and Gubar 395). Yet Strayed and Gilbert's fleeting escapes from homes and stable relationships offer up a space for readers to consider the possibility of lives without those ties, a possibility that confounds many supporting characters in these books. In *Wild*, Strayed repeatedly mentions that she does not know where she will go after her months-long hike. She first considers Ashland, Oregon and then Portland. This theme of rootlessness arises at the book's

5. For collected travel narratives authored by women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Susan Clair Imbarrato's *Traveling Women: Narrative Visions of Early America* (2006) and Cheryl J. Fish's *Black and White Women's Travel Narratives: Antebellum Explorations* (2004).

outset, as she stops in a California motel before beginning her hike. Unsure how to fill out the motel paperwork, she tells the woman behind the counter that she is travelling and has no address to list. This is not satisfactory, and the woman tells her to write down the address that she will be returning to after her hike. «See, that's the thing», responds Strayed, «I'm not sure where I'm going to live afterwards» (30). The motel employee then instructs Strayed to write down her «folks'» address, «wherever home is» (30). With her mother dead and both father and stepfather estranged, Strayed has neither «folks» nor «home», but she gives up and scribbles down the address of her stepfather. This passage conveys the illegibility of Strayed's position. The motel employee cannot comprehend that a person—especially a young, white woman—would have nowhere to call home. This illustrates how mobility is always related to immobility. If one is travelling, or even migrating, most people in the U.S. will assume it to be a temporary break from a lifetime of being stationary, of having an address. As these memoirs show, though, one can have roots without being rooted in one place and can have a foundation without being bounded to it.

Grande has roots in Mexico, but she focuses on her journey away from that homeland. Before the text of *The Distance Between Us* even begins, a full-page map of Mexico and the U.S. charts the route Grande takes when immigrating with her father in 1985. The map, bordered by Guatemala on the south and Colorado on the north, is a clear gesture to global connectedness. Grande's narrative, however, takes place largely at the scale of the intimate, «supplement[ing] the visual with a host of other sense experiences: sound, smell, taste; the ways bodies and objects meet and touch; zones of contact and the formations they generate» (Pratt and Rosner 17). *The Distance Between Us* is characterised by such sensory experiences: the «sweet scent of wet earth» in Iguala's rainy season, the «angry welts» on her sister's body after one of their father's beatings, the way the «tears burned [her] eyes» when she first reads Sandra Cisneros (Grande 107, 200, 306). These affective moments are experienced at the level of one woman's body, but they are intertwined with the geopolitics of migration reflected in Grande's route from Mexico to the U.S.—from the dirt and poverty of her youth in Iguala, to the collisions with her father's temper in Los Angeles and, finally, when she encounters Cisneros's words, to the deep connection she makes with other women who have made a journey like hers.

This privileging of routes over roots means that all four memoirists are often, literally, out of the house. Strayed and Gilbert spend much of their trips on foot, one following a designated trail, the other marking out her own path through unknown cities. As she grows up, Grande spends as much time outside of the house as possible, playing with her siblings, lingering after school, and participating in a marching band, where she stomps her way down Pasadena's streets during the Rose Parade. During Grande's teenage years when she is often confined to the home, under her father's critical eye, she likens the situation to a «prison» from which she eventually escapes (293). While Hernández also spends much of her youth inside her family's New Jersey house, her twenties are lived in the public spaces of New York City, including the Manhattan blackout that finds her out on the sidewalks, taking careful steps through the darkness. By focusing on journeys over the space of the home, these authors counter longstanding associations between women and domesticity, supplanting stereotypical feminine values with others such as risk-taking, independence and coming to know one's own soul.

4. THE THREAT OF WOMEN'S MOBILITY

In U.S. culture, women's mobility is often understood to be deviant and threatening. For most of the country's history, women's place was considered to be in the home, and by 2016 27% of women in the U.S. still considered themselves stay-at-home moms, a percentage that has increased since 2000 (Livingston 2018). While modern women do spend much of their time outside the home, there is lingering stigma around women who appear too rootless, too mobile. Partly due to this perceived social transgression, men often direct threats and violence at women travelling alone. In «Geographies of Pain: #SayHerName and the Fear of Black Women's Mobility», Armond Towns demonstrates the added dangers for Black women, with «White supremacy...often connected to the 'threatening' physical movement of Black women» (123). This has resulted, as Towns shows, in numerous cases of Black women harassed and even murdered by white men while driving or otherwise in transit. Though Towns is concerned with Black women in particular, these issues extend to all women of colour. Even if not subject to direct bodily harm, women of colour

experience a range of mistreatment as they move through public space, from invasive surveillance to racist attacks⁶.

These patterns of violence map onto the experiences of many female migrants. For women migrating from Latin America and Mexico to the U.S, as Grande does (and as Hernández's mother and aunts had done), the risk of gender-based violence is high. One study conducted between 2010 and 2011 found that an estimated 35% percent of female migrants travelling through Mexico experience violence during their journey (Servan-Mori *et al.* 56)⁷. There are no reliable statistics for rates of violence against women tourists or wilderness trekkers, but these are doubtlessly much lower than the rates for migrant women. Tourists are often white and middle class, which can deter potential offenders aware that the media and criminal justice system will take a harmed white woman more seriously than a harmed woman of colour, leading to a higher likelihood of the offender being punished. That said, solitary women hikers and travellers of all races do face threats of violence, as recent news stories have addressed⁸. As Susan Roberson puts it, «when women cross spatial, geographic boundaries their movement is seen as a threat to patriarchy and to the social order» (217). To counter that threat, men often enact violence on women's bodies.

In *Wild*, Strayed recounts one such encounter with a bow hunter, whom she lets use her water filter. After he has supposedly left the woods for home, he reappears, and she realises that he has watched her undress and put on new clothes. As he begins to make sexual comments, Strayed reflects on her decision to walk the PCT alone: «No matter how tough or strong or brave I'd been... I'd also been lucky», she reflects (286-287). Her luck holds out, and the man's friend appears to bring him home. Afterwards, Strayed shifts into «primal gear» (288). She throws on her backpack and takes off down

6. On the surveillance and harassment of Black women in public spaces see Simone Browne, *Dark Matters* (2015). On the sexual assault of women migrants at the southern U.S. border, see Sylvanna Falcón, «Rape as a Weapon of War: Militarized Border Rape at the U.S.-Mexico Border» (2007).

7. Neither Grande nor Hernández recounts sexual violence during their migration journeys or during those of their family members.

8. See, for instance: Megan Specia and Tariro Mzezewa, «Adventurous. Alone. Attacked» (2019).

the trail, walking, at first, and then breaking into a run. The encounter is a stark reminder of the dangers women face while travelling. These dangers, I argue, often stem from male discomfort with women being in an empowered position—a position enabled, in this case, by their mobility. Strayed helps this man, a man who has not thought to bring water on an all-day hunting trip, to pump water through a filter that he is barely strong enough to operate, all while she converses with him about her impressive months spent hiking. Making sexualised threats is a way for this man to reassert his dominance, to put the woman in her place.

Men threaten or enact violence against women travellers as a way to slow women down or make them stop in their tracks. However, these threats can have the opposite effect, instigating women to further movement or even increasing their speed. When Strayed senses a threat, she runs. Similar circumstances appear in three of these memoirs, with domestic violence spurring women to move. Earlier in Strayed's book, she reflects on her parents' abusive marriage, describing how her mother «Left and came back. Left and came back» until finally leaving her father for good (13-14). Grande's father is also abusive, and his violence towards Grande's mother is what initially spurs her mother's return to Mexico. Later, after moving with him to *el otro lado*, Grande and her siblings are victims of his abuse. It is this repeated abuse that makes all three siblings «desperate to get out» of the house (286). Ultimately, they do escape, and Grande moves six hours away to attend college (314). Hernández, too, experiences abuse at the hands of her father. When her father first hits her, at age four or five, she realises that «there was someone else inside of me... a girl who cannot be beaten or lied to, a girl who, like a river, cannot be caged» (58). While she does not physically run away from this violence, she enacts mobility through metaphor. She is a rushing river, unstoppable, that cannot be held in one place.

By sharing scenes of domestic violence, these authors follow a legacy of such inclusions in feminist memoir, where recounting male abuses takes on a political edge (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 84-85). Strayed, Hernández and Grande show not only the violence that women are subject to while in public, but also how homes can be spaces of fear, abuse and isolation. Even Gilbert, who does not recount any overtly violent moments, depicts the home she shared with her husband as a place that threatened her emotional

and physical well-being. By describing the hostility of domestic spaces within narratives of expansive personal journeys, these authors reject the notion that the threat of male violence defines them. They also counter assumptions that women in public are the most vulnerable and most likely to be victims. While none of the authors frame their memoirs in explicitly feminist terms, they have each used the word «feminist» to describe themselves in later writing, and they clearly understand the feminist maxim «the personal is political» to be true. Revealing their intimate experiences with violence becomes a tool for global feminist reform.

5. MOBILITY AS RESISTANCE

In their journeys and writing, these memoirists transgress gender norms. Through their trips, Strayed and Gilbert model a temporary release from heteronorms, showing the possibility of attaining happiness and fulfilment outside of a romantic partnership. Hernández and Grande, through their migrations, resist static ideologies of citizenship and nationhood. In addition, by publishing narratives that centre mobility, all of these women resist patriarchal notions about women's place in the world. Their nuanced narratives move beyond a romanticisation of mobility; they draw attention to the distinct challenges and potentialities for women on the move, marking out with their bodies and words a feminist politics of mobility.

For those authors who choose to leave monogamous heterosexual marriages before their travels, this social commentary is not only feminist, but also queer. I understand «queer» to describe any practice or identity that destabilizes heteronorms and challenges the «tacit sense of rightness and normalcy» surrounding heterosexuality, monogamy and the nuclear family (Warner and Berlant 194). Gilbert's book is an example of queering through mobility, with her decided rejection, for a time, of any sexual or romantic relationship. While *Eat Pray Love* can be read as reinscribing heteronorms by virtue of its conclusion, which finds Gilbert planning her future with Felipe, a new male partner, I am interested in the solitary journey that makes up the bulk of the book. From the start, Gilbert is open about her unusual choice to exchange heterosexual monogamy for celibacy and singlehood: The first page of the book includes the line, «I have decided to spend this entire year

in celibacy» (7). With this choice, Gilbert groups herself with others whose social positions and sexual behaviours are considered abnormal, and she enacts a fleeting but forceful resistance to compulsory sexuality, heterosexuality and monogamy. While this «episodic celibacy» is less of an affront to U.S. cultural norms than lifelong solitude or openly claiming an LGBT identity, it does mark Gilbert as deviant, suspicious and a little bit queer (Kahan 27). As Benjamin Kahan shows, celibacy has long been associated with queer or «socially objectionable desires» (6). While Kahan aims to extricate celibacy from these limiting associations, Gilbert's stint with celibacy does reveal non-normative desires. In a short paragraph late in the book, Gilbert hesitantly discusses masturbation. Listing her go-to masturbatory fantasies, she mentions group sex with pirates and firemen, a «pervy» encounter with Bill Clinton and submitting to a «task force of nubile young maids» (317). These fantasies suggest that masturbation not only fulfils Gilbert's «physical hunger» for sex, but that it also allows her to imagine queer modes of sexual fulfilment (316)⁹.

Gilbert's moments of queer imagining are tied to her initial decision to leave home, and they are enabled by her mobility –encountering the world alone and unrestricted until those final months in Bali. Strayed's narrative also concludes by foreshadowing a future marriage, but it begins as she departs her first marriage in search of solitude and adventure, a pursuit which becomes the central story of *Wild*. While this chosen aloneness marks Strayed, too, as a temporarily queer figure, she narrates her uncoupling in a less scandalising way than does Gilbert. As Strayed describes it, her divorce is impelled by grief over her mother's death, a rationale for divorce that many readers would find understandable, if not entirely excusable. For Gilbert, in contrast, there is no concrete impetus for divorce. As she describes it, she simply realises one night, as she sits sobbing on the bathroom floor of her newly purchased suburban home: «I don't want to be married anymore», after which she eventually files for divorce (10). Gilbert chooses, of course, to highlight this scene,

9. I suspect that Gilbert's temporary disentanglement from heterosexual monogamy played a role in her evolving sexual orientation. Masturbatory fantasies aside, Gilbert portrays herself as heterosexual in *Eat Pray Love* but, ten years after the book's release, she separated from her husband and began a committed relationship with a woman (Wong).

proffering the abject image of herself toilet-side, overwrought, as the closest thing to a justification for her divorce. Knowing, perhaps, that they can only push readers so far, Gilbert and Strayed ultimately bring their narratives back into the bounds of heteronorms, concluding with formulaic romances. However, I follow scholars who show that a narrative's meaning is not always found in how it ends, but rather in the subtle themes that run throughout: in this case, themes of solitude, queerness and empowerment that run counter to U.S. norms of gender and sexuality¹⁰.

In Hernández's memoir, resistance to heteronormativity is coupled with resistance to nationhood. Hernández identifies as queer, which causes rifts within her family. Her mother's immediate response upon Hernández coming out is: «This doesn't happen in Colombia» (84). In this scene, the most intimate details of one's life –the scents, sounds, tastes and touches that one takes pleasure in during sex– become linked to global norms. In Colombia, one presumes, there are just as many queer individuals as in the U.S., but they are apparently less visible, at least in the eyes of Hernández's relatives. In Colombia, daughters may avoid telling their mothers, «*Estoy saliendo con mujeres*» (Hernández 84). While Hernández's mother is upset by the revelation, she maintains a relationship with her daughter. Hernández's Tía Dora, on the other hand, refuses to speak to her for seven years until Hernández begins dating a transgender man, whom Tía Dora assumes is cisgender. Dwelling on what it means to be queer, Hernández traces the term's history to a sixteenth-century Scottish poet who writes that queerness is «to be off-center, to traverse or move across, to be anything but straight and normal» (100). I find it telling that this description of queerness is one of movement. To traverse and move in a way that one should not, according to social norms, is to be queer. As Sarah Ahmed puts it, queer moments are moments of disorientation; queer subjects deviate from the well-trodden path, from «the straight and narrow» (544, 554). All four of these memoirists demonstrate how deviations from society's sanctioned routes can, in Ahmed's words, «make... new futures possible» (554).

10. See, for instance: Lisa Moore, *Dangerous Intimacies: Toward a Sapphic History of the British Novel* (1997), especially pages 136-142.

Hernández deviates from social norms through her sexuality and transnationality, as well as through her narrative style. Rather than focusing solely on her own journey, Hernández's book is peppered with parallel stories, many related to her numerous aunts. These Colombian women, all first-generation immigrants, have conflicted relationships with mobility. They take the bold step of migrating to the U.S., yet after migration they remain relatively housebound, leaving home for work or to socialise with other women in private. As Hernández explains, «The women we know never tell us to leave or to make demands. They accept that we are trapped in cages, bound to this man, this country, these factories» (63). This is how Hernández is raised, with the expectation that she will absorb the best of U.S. culture while remaining tied to the home. As the memoir goes on, however, we see that her aunts do make small acts of resistance. Tía Dora has spent a lifetime afraid of plane travel and then, finally, upon her husband's death, decides to go to Spain (114). Near the end of Hernández's tale, Tía Cuchi begins writing *her* memoir (179).

6. RECONFIGURING IDENTITY

As each of these authors show, mobility inevitably shapes identity. Yet mobility does not uniformly bring about positive change. As migration scholars Brenda Yeoh and Kamalini Ramdas argue, «mobility across borders is not necessarily empowering, while immobility is not inherently disempowering» (1198). Experiencing violence or other hardships while travelling can be destructive, altering one's sense of self for the worse. Unfortunately, these are not often the women who share their stories; or if they do, publishers may not want to reproduce such tales. For Grande, Gilbert, Hernández and Strayed, migration and travel had a largely positive impact on identity, creating opportunities for them to question and reconfigure the role that particular places and social values play in their lives.

For immigrants especially, mobility can lead to hybrid identities, strategically incorporating elements of multiple places (Bhabha 154-157). Hernández's and Grande's identities can be understood as transnational or «bifocal»: linked to more than one nation and culture (Vertovec 977). Following patterns common in Latinx literature, both code-switch between Spanish and English and both include scenes of return, visiting the countries

of their heritage (Fagan 209). For Grande, this is Iguala, where she grew up. For Hernández, it is Bogotá, where her mother and aunts lived. Hernández expresses her transnational identity most poignantly when explaining Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* to her mother:

Before I can think too much, I am racing, the Spanish words tumbling out of my mouth as I explain Gloria's ideas of the borderland, of living «in between» as feminists, as Colombians, as women who belong to more than one land and one culture. We are neither here nor there, I conclude, almost out of breath. *Ni aqui, ni alla*. (31)

Grande echoes this feeling of in-betweenness. In the memoir's conclusion, she reflects on her time spent in Mexico and the U.S.: «I am from both places», she states (320). Through their mobility, Grande and Hernández reconfigure their sense of citizenship and belonging. Through their writing, they assert the importance of their histories and embrace hyphenated nationalities. They affirm that «the nation, like sex, is a thing contested, interrupted, and always shot through with contradiction» (Briggs, McCormick, and Way 627). «American» is an unstable category, Hernández and Grande show, but one they belong to just as wholly as do white citizens born on U.S. soil, like Strayed and Gilbert.

Strayed and Gilbert also reconfigure their identities through travel. For Strayed, hiking is a way to regain her self-confidence. Setting out on the trek, she resolves, «I'd walk and think about my entire life. I'd find my strength again, far from everything that had made my life ridiculous» (57). As a symbol of this search for identity, she early on consults a compass –«I found north, south, east and west»– orienting herself in the world (66). Strayed does eventually heal through hiking. She comes to terms with her divorce and past heroin use. She finds strength, independence and purpose. Gilbert begins her book with a similar search for identity, what she calls «a voyage of self-discovery» (30). By spending a year abroad, she comes to see her identity as hybrid, rather than American. Though Gilbert comes from a place of racial and class privilege, she sees herself in the margins. Searching for a single word that sums up her identity, she finally settles on the Sanskrit word *antevasin*, meaning «one who lives at the border» (203). She clarifies that she means this figuratively; she is «betwixt and between» countries, but also identity categories (204). «I've spent so much time these last years wondering what

I'm supposed to be», she writes, listing the options: wife, mother, Italian, Yogi (204). This word, *antevasin*, helps her find peace in not being any of those things, but instead dwelling somewhere in between them. This passage also suggests that Gilbert ultimately chooses the identity of a traveller: seeking wisdom from other cultures and languages or, less optimistically, seeking an exotic-sounding word that she can appropriate. While it is easy to find fault with Gilbert's cosmopolitan identity, her experience aligns with each of the authors discussed here for whom mobility can be both a catalyst for identity confusion and loss, as well as the way to cultivate a new, multifaceted identity.

7. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A FEMINIST POLITICS OF MOBILITY

These authors speak from four unique positions, and their stories will resonate differently across audiences. Strayed, and more so Gilbert, have advantages of race, class and citizenship¹¹. Grande grew up undocumented, while the other authors have legal citizenship, and Hernández is bisexual while the others, in these narratives at least, portray themselves as heterosexual. The enormity of the differences between these four authors makes it all the more profound that each memoir points in the same direction: towards the vast political potential of stepping out of the home and through unknown spaces. In their own ways, Grande, Gilbert, Hernández and Strayed each suggest that feminist futures will be reached by setting out in search of the new—or, more accurately, in search of oneself.

In «Towards a Politics of Mobility», Cresswell lays out what he means by the term politics: «social relations that involve the production and distribution of power...the ways in which mobilities are both productive of such social relations and produced by them» (21). A feminist politics of mobility redistributes power to women and renegotiates social relations that have historically supported women's subordination. As shown through these memoirs, women on the move transgress social norms and decentre the domestic. They celebrate journeys and forge hybrid, empowered identities. It is this very threat to established power hierarchies that puts mobile women in danger of

11. Unlike Gilbert, Strayed comes from a working-class background, growing up on welfare. Into adulthood, she struggled financially, and her lack of money is a recurring plot point in *Wild*.

violence. The very intimate actions these women perform –stretching, writing, putting one foot in front of the other on a hiking trail or patch of desert or city street– are linked to global politics. The same can be said for their acts of writing. Considering the future of feminist movements, Sara Ahmed states: «A movement requires us to be moved» (*Living a Feminist Life* 5). She uses «moved», here, as a synonym for «affected». In order to make feminist change, we must first experience some affect that leads us to desire change: rage, grief, love, or something subtler –irritation, envy, anxiety (Ngai 2-3). By sharing their stories through the intimate genre of memoir, these authors move their audience in this first sense. Like other cultural products associated with women, they tell readers: «you are not alone (in your struggles, desires, pleasures)» (Berlant ix). Hernández, Gilbert, Grande and Strayed go beyond this first definition of «movement», though, demonstrating that a transnational and intersectional feminist movement requires women to be moved in a literal sense—to be detached, however briefly, from the relationships that bind us in place, to be disoriented and turned about, to wander, to be «pieces of thread cut from the spool» (Hernández 10).

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