

# WOMEN'S TRAVEL WRITING IN THE CYBER-WORLD – ECOFEMINIST AND DIFFERENCE FEMINIST APPROACHES IN TRAVEL BLOGS

## LITERATURA FEMENINA DE VIAJES EN EL MUNDO VIRTUAL – ENFOQUES DEL ECOFEMINISMO Y FEMINISMO DE LA DIFERENCIA EN BLOGS DE VIAJES

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### Abstract

This paper intends to track the development of traditional feminist ideas through the analysis of three contemporary travel blogs. These traditional feminist concepts are to be seen in the construction of a collective female identity that enables transnational and transgenerational solidarity: by receiving and transmitting inspiration, shelter and encouragement among female travellers, the narrators in the blogs create a system of female authority. Within this system, female role models as well as maternal figures become points of reference that help to revalue female attributes. This concept shows allusions to the theory of difference feminism as it is presented in the «symbolic order of the mother» by Luisa Muraro. A similar approach of revaluating femininity happens through the orientation towards 'Mother Nature'. By staging women's ability to give birth, cultural ecofeminists like Susan Griffin intend to affirm a close bond between women and nature. This representation of an emphasised

femininity becomes a central marker in the narratives of the blogs. While this agenda might be designed to counter gendered spaces and the traditional alienation of women within travel discourse, it is problematised by exclusionary and essentialist definitions of femininity that harden engendered binaries like masculinity/femininity or nature/culture.

**Keywords:** Travel blogs; Ecofeminism; Difference feminism; Female travel writing; Digital travel literature.

### Resumen

Este artículo examina el desarrollo de ideas feministas tradicionales en blogs contemporáneos de viajes basándose en tres ejemplos. La estructura narrativa de estos textos expone una identidad colectiva femenina que posibilita la solidaridad transnacional y transgeneracional: recibiendo y transmitiendo inspiración, refugio y estímulo entre viajeras, las narradoras generan un sistema de autoridad femenina. En este sistema, figuras maternas o femeninas funcionan como puntos de referencia que sirven para revalorizar atributos femeninos. Este concepto de género alude a la teoría del feminismo de la diferencia tal y como se presenta en «el orden simbólico de la madre» de Luisa Muraro. Un enfoque similar de revalorizar la feminidad ocurre con la orientación hacia la 'Madre Naturaleza'. Destacando la capacidad femenina de dar a luz, las ecofeministas culturales como Susan Griffin apuntan a establecer un vínculo cercano entre mujeres y la naturaleza. Esta representación de una feminidad enfatizada es una marca central en las narrativas de los blogs. Mientras esta agenda funciona para contrarrestar la marginación tradicional de mujeres en la narrativa de viajes, sus definiciones excluyentes y esencialistas de feminidad resultan problemáticas. Estas comprensiones del género sólo endurecen dualismos como masculinidad/feminidad o naturaleza/cultura.

**Palabras clave:** blogs de viajes; ecofeminismo; feminismo de la diferencia; literatura femenina de viajes; literatura digital de viajes

## 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

This trip was never about some metaphorical dick measuring competition. But if it was, I'd be in a different class. Not because this trip makes me any better or more badass than anyone else.

But because I'm a woman. Duh. (N.N., On Epiphanies par. 9)

This is how the narrator of *Slowly North* ends her blog entry that reflects on the motives for and expectations concerning her solitary bicycle trip along the Pan-American Highway. This mode of female self-empowerment experienced while travelling and expressed through writing is not unusual. Many travel blogs written from a female-identified point of view present feminist statements or gestures of heroic courage felt while being on the road *as a female*<sup>2</sup>.

Often, the emphasis is laid on a specifically female travel experience which leads the narrators to express a feeling of connectedness to other women –regardless of whether they are travellers or locals, known in real life or imagined as a universal female entity. Indeed, the narrators construct a collective identity that demonstrates solidarity among women all over the world. As Jan Fernback states, there «is a 'virtual ideology' in cyberspace which is collectivist in orientation» (46). He observes a collectivity among CMC<sup>3</sup> users that «is driven by the principles of democracy and egalitarianism in its use of CMC, not necessarily in terms of the content of postings in cyberspace» (45). Thus, it can be argued that female collectivity is being established in cyberspace not only at the level of semantics, but also in the formal composition of the medium blog. Features like hypertextual networks or the users' participation through comments create the «blogosphere» (Klemm 37) –a

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1. I would like to thank the Volkswagen Foundation (VolkswagenStiftung) for their funding of my research activities in the Graduate Research Group «New Travel – New Media» at University of Freiburg.

2. In differentiating between *female* and *feminine* I follow the distinction by Toril Moi. She defines «femaleness» as «a matter of biology» and «femininity» as «a set of culturally defined characteristics» («Men Against Patriarchy» 152). By using the adjective «female» in this article, I adopt the essentialist self-definition of the narrators in the blogs which relates gender identity to the female body.

3. Computer-mediated communication.

space of high interactivity and discursivity between bloggers, which creates a sense of virtual togetherness (Miller 171).

Gender is considered an important category in the self-construction of online identity in the media (Carstensen 1; van Doorn, van Zoonen and Wyatt 144). In her work on gender and media, Andrea Seier combines Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity (*Bodies That Matter*) and the theory of remediation by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (*Remediation*). Butler describes performative speech acts as discursive practices that produce and negotiate gendered bodies in continuous repetition. Therefore, gendering is neither a completed process nor is it pre-discursively given, but perpetuated in daily iteration (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 225). Remediation is to be understood in a similar way: as continuous processes and mutual influences between old and new media. Emerging forms of media borrow from and refashion other more established types; they are embedded in past and future transformations and relate to each other. These performative acts of mediatization reconstitute media in permanent processes (Seier 77).

Combining these principles of performativity for gender and media, Seier highlights their discursive processes of becoming –gendering and mediatization– and their mutual entanglement (139). Consequently, gender and media reconfigure and produce each other mutually: gendered identities are processually produced by medial representations (*gendering through media*); and gender is to be seen as a cultural technique that cannot exist outside media, because it is inscribed in the medial discourse –there is no outside of the discourses producing and transforming gender (*mediality of gender*) (Seier 24).

In the context of travel blogs, remediation can be seen in the stylistic adaptation of older forms of travel literature as in the formal orientation towards letter or diary writing. Following conventional ideas about gender-specific aesthetics in literature, this form of episodic, self-reflective and emotional writing has traditionally been considered a type of writing developed by women. Throughout the history of patriarchally organised Western societies, writing as well as travelling have been male-dominated activities. The grand tour and its literary treatment in eighteenth-century Britain might serve as a prime example of male discovery and self-exaltation through travelling and travel writing. Topoi of virility like heroism, spirit of adventure or the urge to discover have always shaped the literary mode of travel experience.

Furthermore, objective narrations have been taken to be the domain of male writers only.

According to Carstensen, the introduction of digital diary writing as the stylistic form in many travel blogs might open up space for an expansion of «feminine discourse» (3) on the web. The reactivation of female-coded writing patterns can also be seen in the semantics of many travel narratives by female bloggers. Motifs like self-apologising for one's own writing or the highlighting of dangers for female travellers are as much present in past and present texts as the staged self-empowerment experienced by solo travels. Considering the achievements of feminist movements over the last decades and its implications for women's autonomy and mobility, this continuous marking of the exclusiveness of female travelling and travel writing stands out.

This paper investigates the ways in which female identity is narratively constructed and continuously emphasised in three different examples of contemporary digital travel writing. The narrators of the blogs under analysis create a network of female authority by depicting how gifts like inspiration, shelter and encouragement are shared by the female travellers. The narration establishes a circle of female union in which the travellers firstly receive these gifts from older generations of women (like female travel writers of the past) and then transmit them to younger generations (like teen girls with the wish to travel or girls in precarious situations). Within this system, female role models as well as maternal figures become points of reference that help to revalue 'feminine' attributes. A similar approach of reevaluating femininity works through the orientation to 'Mother Nature'.

Developing notions of an imagined sorority between women in the world and an innate closeness of women to nature, these narrations reveal retraditionalising tendencies towards concepts of femininity which have been established and reiterated in the theories of ecofeminism and difference feminism from the 1970s onwards. Although the blog narrations do not refer explicitly to these theories, their constructions of female togetherness can be related to ecofeminist and difference feminist ideas of a universal femininity. Insisting on gender binarity, these theoretical concepts intend to refer affirmatively to feminised values and to create new symbolic orders of female influence within patriarchal structures. Deconstructivist theorists like Judith Butler direct their

notions on gender against this assumption of a universal femininity as *the* subject of feminist politics and expose the exclusionist and essentialist character within this concept of a universal femininity. As Butler claims,

this globalizing gesture has spawned [...] that the category of 'women' is normative and exclusionary and is invoked with the unmarked dimensions of class and racial privilege intact. In other words, the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed. (*Gender Trouble* 19)

It remains remarkable to see binary gender images of homogenous and essentialist female (and male) identities in such a recent medium like blogs with high potential for multiple identity and gender construction. Apparently, female travel bloggers intend to position themselves within a field they perceive to be dominated by codices of men. For this self-positioning in a patriarchal organised system, they show reactionary gestures towards traditional feminist claims with notions of an exclusive female union. Butler asks whether these «exclusionary practices that ground feminist theory in a notion of 'women' as subject» (*Gender Trouble* 7) might paradoxically undercut feminist goals to extend its claims to representation: «What sense does it make to extend representation to subjects who are constructed through the exclusion of those who fail to conform to unspoken normative requirements of the subject?» (*Gender Trouble* 8). We may ask whether the insistence on a specifically female travel experience and the (traditional) feminist effort to determine a common ground for the sharing of women's travel experience might not help to strengthen the position of women in the field of travel writing, but might instead reaffirm a masculinization of the genre.

The first example analysed is the blog *She Walks the Earth* by US-American traveller Angela Marie Maxwell. Maxwell, who presents herself as the narrator, walks alone around the world and shows her intimate feelings and experiences through video, pictures and texts. The second blog is called *Slowly North*. Author Katie N.N. neither presents herself in an *About Page* nor does she give details about her biography and life. Nevertheless, she writes from a female-identified perspective and shows herself in selfies that accompany the text. She bikes the Pan-American Highway towards North America. The third example is the blog *Brown Girls Fly* by the two sisters Crystal and

Chelle Roberts from the United States. In the subheading of the homepage they declare to offer «a melanin-infused perspective on travel», and the blog is advertised as «A Travel Site For Women Of Color Who Wanderlust». Thus, the three different headings promote the blog from an ethnically gendered perspective. In the *About Page*, they announce their general mission «to inspire others, particularly women like [them], to travel more frequently» (Roberts, *About Us*).

## 2. 'MOTHER NATURE' AND ECOFEMINISM

Maxwell's blog *She Walks the Earth* shows notions of a femininity that has been developed throughout ecofeminist theory – a notion of women as being biologically in close relation to nature and creation. Describing the idea of her travel project, the narrator uses metaphors of birth and nurture as an expression of her inner development: «My vision for Walk A Mile is still in pregnancy. I am not ready to birth a movement dear to my heart that requires active connection, cultivation and support» (Maxwell, *A Letter to my Girlfriends* par. 7). Attributes of prospective motherhood are used to describe the beginning of a personal project, already alluding in its references to the female body to a gendered travel experience.

During her travels, the narrator feels strongly connected to the landscapes she walks through. Nature leads her to feel completed and discover her female self:

When I think of how the walk has changed me, there are sparse words. It comes at moments when I am tired, hungry and confused and yet still feel whole. It is when I feel like I lost the purpose of my walk as I fall asleep in comfortable loneliness in my tent and by morning the birds and the clay in my toenails remind me of who I am. I am becoming a woman. (Maxwell, *A Letter to my Girlfriends* par. 8)

Travelling on foot functions as an initiation rite for womanhood. In this self-realization of the personal (gendered) identity, the narrator feels her mission to walk: «I could feel the air and all the forest beasts celebrating with me that I had found it. It was the discovery of what I needed to do: Go walking» (Maxwell, *The Invitation* par. 6). This association of femininity and nature –reaching womanhood through perceiving the earth and all its

creatures– is a concept supported by cultural ecofeminists. Emphasising ideals of caring and nourishing, they consider it as potential in patriarchal societies for development towards a female-centred culture (Grewe-Volpp 45). This mode of female sensitivity to the earth is an epistemological claim Susan Griffin supports in her text *Woman and Nature*, a prose-poetic rendering of the dualistic voices of ‘science/masculinity’ and ‘nature/femininity’. Uniting the «great chorus of woman and nature» (Griffin vx) in her narrating voice, she claims: «We know ourselves to be made from this earth. We know this earth is made from our bodies. For we see ourselves. And we are nature. We are nature seeing nature» (Griffin 228). Nature and femininity shape each other mutually and thus become one.

A similar approach to becoming aware of yourself through your body and of the body itself perceiving is expressed by Griffin as an esteem of female corporeality. She stages the female body's strength as a signal of human vividness: «[H]er body [...] how she was proud of her strength [...] her body continuing, her body consuming, her body sweating, her body rising and falling, her body beating, beating, flowing, throbbing, her body endlessly perceiving» (209-10). The narrator in *Slowly North* similarly witnesses her body in a new way while travelling. It is the bodily experience of cycling that allows her to shed society's normative ideals of female beauty:

This is the epiphany where I suddenly accept my body the way it is for ever and ever and I will only ever focus on how wonderful and strong it is like all those other badass women that I admire. I've made it! I've reached body positivity nirvana. I have beaten society and I can now be gloriously smug in how accepting I am. (N.N., *On Bodies* par. 28)

The female body is celebrated for its strength and sporting abilities. This claimed physical self-confidence is supported by the visual aesthetics of the blog, as the pictures present the protagonist in an authentic, unrevised way. For instance, she shows selfies of her tired face after waking up or marked with exhaustion after a long trip, refusing implicitly female practices of self-staging as widely offered in social media.

Likewise, ecofeminist spirituality tends to celebrate corporeality and affinity with the earth. It values the supposedly emotional and empathic, ever-changing physical body that is connected with the nonhuman world (Gottlieb 320). For the narrator in *She Walks the Earth*, this body awareness

means the reshaping of the female rhythm around a personal moon cycle, listening to its natural flow:

Most women are thrust into an unnatural masculine rhythm of steadiness and consistency. The feminine is wild, chaotic and ever changing. When there is no structure to support our rhythm that happens 12 times every year, we must start creating it for ourselves, taking a stand for our bodies natural processes. (Maxwell, *CODE RED* par. 1)

The narrator attributes that same amount of uncontrollability to nature itself: like the natural processes of femininity, 'Mother Nature' cannot be tamed or assimilated into civilised routines. She posts a short story about her stay in Mongolia, entitled «To Cross the River, Woman» (Maxwell, *Mongolia Stories*). The self-addressing vocative in the title already suggests a specific *female* experience in nature. On her way through Mongolia the narrator meets an old nomadic woman who invites her into her tent for a cup of tea. Without speaking each other's language, the two feel connected. Before the narrator leaves, the Mongolian woman instructs her to join her in the milking of her yak. She shows her how to milk the dairy cow and then gives her the bottle of warm milk as a gift for the trip ahead. The narrator feels empowered and delighted by the time spent together. She says:

It felt so magical to have spent the afternoon with a beautiful and strong elderly woman that appeared as if she were waiting for me. I wondered if she was real or if my imagination and longing for feminine interaction had conjured such a dream-like experience. (Maxwell, *Mongolia Stories* par. 10)

When the narrator continues her walk downhill, the woman starts to shake her head vehemently –indicating that something is wrong with this way. The narrator is confused, but nevertheless continues her walk. Later on she realises why the woman meant to signal danger to her: she comes to a point where she has to cross a raging river or walk half of the way back. She decides to try the crossing although it involves a serious risk. In the water she notices the real danger of the current and the coldness of the river. But due to a materialised power in nature she manages to survive: some unidentified energy carries her towards a log pile on which she is able to climb back to the shore. The narrator describes it as «a dark mass that looked as if its arms were reaching out to catch [her]» (Maxwell, *Mongolia Stories* par. 21). She

feels protected by an invisible, personified power that takes motherly care of her, so that she compares her posture after the survival to a «fetus position» and cuddles her bag «like a child» (Maxwell, *Mongolia Stories* par. 21). The narrator infantilises herself by these similes to early childhood and personifies nature in a protecting mother. In her survival, the narrator is reminded of the woman she felt so strongly connected with before:

The day before I crossed the river, a woman embraced me into her home with kindness and generosity. The day I tried to cross the river, it saw me safely but roughly to shore, reminding me that Mother Nature cannot be shaped or conquered. (Maxwell, *Mongolia Stories* par. 24)

Indicated by the gift of warm milk as a symbol for nurturing and motherly care, the woman encapsulates maternal safety for the narrator – a wise power that knows about nature's own laws and that the narrator adopts: «Water has an inherent ferocity and kindness about it. A demand to be respected for although it nourishes life it can also take it away from those who underestimate its power» (Maxwell, *Mongolia Stories* par. 23).

As Griffin describes it, the transition from patriarchal authority to a female-defined vision occurs when humanity is pushed «to the edge of existence, to the source which sounds like a wave inside us, to the path of the water which feeds us all» (162). As in *She Walks the Earth*, water's universal power of nourishing is highlighted and the elemental flows and limits of nature have to be respected: «[T]here are limits, we say, on what can be done and everything moves. We are all part of this motion, we say, and the way of the river is sacred» (Griffin 188). This translates into the belief that one cannot shape or civilise nature but has to dignify its holiness and strength.

The life-giving force of water is a frequent motif throughout ecofeminist writing. In this symbolic repertoire, water is associated with the feminine principle as a primordial wellspring, sometimes interwoven with milk-giving motifs (Eisler 20). In its possibility to create or destroy life, nature is bonded to maternity as an expression for the origin of life. The narrator in *She Walks the Earth* experiences this new beginning on her trip, as she witnesses how «[o]ut of the darkness of disease, comes a new life; a new way of being. In this case, how I walk my walk» (Maxwell, *In Darkness* par. 10). Later on she realises: «[T]his is the beginning of my experience of letting Mother Nature guide me» (Maxwell, *Where I'm At* par. 1).

The orientation towards maternal figures also occurs in other blogs. The narrator in *Slowly North* describes a similar experience of feeling connected and being protected by idol-like women during her travels. The people she meets in Peru make her write about her trip and make her story last. She says:

This story has stayed with me because of the people. [...] the woman who wrote a book and changed my life; the woman on the plane who gripped onto me; the other woman on the plane who looked out for me, a stranger, like I was her daughter. (N.N., *Part 1* par. 5)

The people who inspired her writing and travelling are always female figures, with motherly features of caring behaviour. This centralisation of maternal figures or female role models is a striking aspect in the representation of female travel experience, as we will see throughout the next section.

### 3. RECEPTION FROM FEMALE IDOLS

The orientation towards female role models is present throughout all three meta-narratives in the blogs. Especially, female travel authors become a meaningful source of inspiration and final encouragement. As the narrator in *Slowly North* tells us, after reading and rereading Eva Ibbotson's *Journey to the River Sea*, she feels determined to travel to the Amazon. The book would shape her in every aspect: «Ibbotson's book was the seed, and would be the reason why I majored in Spanish at university, and why I picked South America to cycle. [...] I wish I'd had the chance to write to her and tell her the impact she'd had on my life» (N.N., *Part 1* par. 16).

In *Brown Girls Fly* the narrators refer to twentieth-century travel author Freya Stark by quoting text passages of her works. They say that «many female travelers are still too intimidated to follow in Freya's solo travelista footsteps» (Roberts, *9 Practical Tips* par. 2). They hope to inspire their readers and invite them to embark on the same kind of solo travel: «Armed with a few of these tips and greater confidence, go experience first hand the pleasant sensations of solo travel that Freya Stark esteems» (Roberts, *9 Practical Tips* par. 12). By referring directly to the famous author, the narrators follow their postulated missionary impetus to encourage others.

They also present a particular inspiration for female and black empowerment by compiling a list of «13 Women In Black History With A Passion For

Travel» (Roberts, *13 Women*). Featuring female travellers of colour, past and present, on various social media channels, they invite readers from a similar background to pursue one's passion for travel. Here the declared mission to inspire «women like us» (Roberts, *About Us*) becomes obvious. Travelling as a woman of colour is depicted as something even more courageous, defying «social norms» (Roberts, *13 Women* par. 1) and breaking society's boundaries. They invite to celebrate the female travellers and unite them into a «collective fabness» (Roberts, *13 Women* par. 1), offering the possibility of inclusion. Through this accentuation of their travels as something courageous and special, the narrators sublimate their own experience into an act of female self-assertion. The identification with the «heroines» is intended by staging the categories of gender and race that shape the inherent structure of their blog. At the end of the entry they post the statement: «May we be as fearless as each of you!» (Roberts, *13 Women*), emphasising the wish for continuation.

Considering their travels as an experience from a doubly marginalised standpoint, they want to use cyberspace to share their thoughts with a community of equals:

[A]s American women-of-color who've often wondered why we don't encounter more people like us on the road, we also wanted to create a space where we could talk about practical tips, experiences, and concerns as they relate to cultures of color. (Roberts, *About Us* par. 5)

Ethnicised and gendered identities keep being a coherent and staged characteristic of all different entries within the blog. Beside the textual elements, the pictures also present a collectivity of «brown girls» travelling. The narration suggestively invites the readers to do the same. The received inspiration by female role models (famous authors as well as other travellers) leads the narrators to a further line of transmission.

#### 4. TRANSMISSION TO YOUNGER GENERATIONS

Despite the continuous invitation to travel in the footsteps of famous female idols, the narrators in *Brown Girls Fly* intend to build a «next generation of travelistas» by participating in the «Passport Party Project» (Roberts par. 4). The project provides «underrepresented American girls, ages 11-15» (Roberts, *Passport Party Project* par. 3) with global awareness training, international

exposure and, literally, with their first passports. Participating in the programme, they serve as advisors and mentors for teen girls and want to support the effort of enabling young girls to gain early travel experiences.

Maxwell offers a similar form of social commitment to younger females by partnering up with «Her Future Coalition» (*Who – Why*). As presented in the blog, the foundation helps survivors of gender violence by providing them with long-term care in shelter, education and employment. Maxwell uses her walk across the United States to raise funds for the organisation which will be used to build and expand shelters for girls in so-called «red light areas» (Maxwell, *Who – Why*) in India. As it is explained in the textual narrative: «I walk as a free woman who could choose crazy-expedition over secure-job in a world where many women still can't choose their husband or receive an education. I walk with them in my thoughts» (Maxwell, *Who – Why* par. 7). The narrator presents a transnational gesture of solidarity among women in the world that is experienced on travels.

The creation of virtual networks of hyperlinks shows the narrators' effort to keep the received inspiration, shelter and encouragement being passed on to other women. In *Brown Girls Fly* the narrators compile interviews with expats all over the world –«globetrotting brown girl[s]» (Roberts, *Traveling Brown*)– again expressing the wish to inspire. The users are invited to interact with them and become part of the blogging network by links to various social media platforms in columns on the website. Through this interconnection they create a huge network of virtual togetherness of self-proclaimed «brown girls».

The women represented in the pictures always fit with the constant identity construction of «brown girls» of the blog. These markers of self-definition continue in the users' comments, which mostly identify with the ethnically-gendered perspective of the narrators. For example, reader Kimberly comments on an entry by guest contributor Lemons about diversity in Australia: «My husband, whom [sic] is white, myself (biracial) and our kids, are planning to relocate to Sydney for his job but I'm divided due to what I've heard about racism in Australia, I'm happy I found your blog» (Lemons, *Sydney*). Or user Hamilton, who writes: «I've been thinking about applying for an Australian working holiday visa, and I haven't been able to find stories about

the experiences of black women in Australia. This is helpful. Thanks for sharing!» (Lemons, *Sydney*).

Apparently, the narrators' mission to inspire and motivate other women of colour to travel is well-received by the followers. By compiling meet-up-groups, travel networks, women's travel conferences and girlfriend get-aways, *Brown Girls Fly* opens a space of further links to other websites or social media platforms and creates a comprehensive hypertextual network among female travellers.

## 5. FEMALE UNION AND DIFFERENCE FEMINISM

These gestures of *reception* from female role models (motherly figures or travel authors) and *transmission* to younger generations of women (girls in need, inspired «travelistas») create a transgenerational union of femininity. Perpetuating matrilineal techniques of circulation enables an exclusive union of women.

During one of her journeys the narrator in *She Walks the Earth* posts a letter to her girlfriends. The entry is prefixed with a photo of Maxwell showing her with her carriage coming towards the observer. She is looking down in deep concentration and exertion along the way, but the direction of her body goes straight to the observer. This way, the addressed «dear girlfriends» are implied in the picture as an invisible motivation to keep walking. Without seeing the girlfriends real-lively, Maxwell pretends to walk towards them. The girlfriends symbolise the target of her walk – a target she knows by heart and feels intuitively. The text says:

As I walked through Turkey I had a vision of women walking with me, through video and audio. Women walking for women. To walk for a purpose that extends love and support greater than our selves. [...] A few steps together, from all corners of the world, that offered a spark, a long-distance hug, a *go-get-em* wink or an expression reading *you're not alone*. (Maxwell, *A Letter to my Girlfriends* par. 5 [emphasis in original])

She imagines a transnational («from all corners of the world») community of women that creates safety amongst them. This bond also leads her individual experience to a feeling of transcendence («greater than our selves»). As the

letter continues, this vision of female togetherness is not withheld for women she knows, but also imagines unknown bonds:

But in all transparency, it is a self-satisfying relationship. When I walk up that mountain or through that sandstorm, it is YOU that I need. It is when I feel despair that I tap into your stories of strength. Yours, and the women I have never met, but read about and fell so deeply in love with their courage and boldness. (Maxwell, *A Letter to my Girlfriends* par. 6 [emphasis in original])

This thought implies the understanding of an identity that is shaped and marked by female ethics and leads to a trans-individual experience of togetherness. Griffin envisions a new space for society's transformation, «filled with the presence of mothers [and] filled with the love of women for women» (171). It is the same idea of closest female friendship that Mary Daly compares in her work *Gyn/Ecology* to deep sisterhood, envisioning a bond between women who have never met:

The proximity that [the feminist] feels is not merely geographic/spatial. It is psychic, spiritual, in the realm of inner life-time. She senses gynaesthetically that there is a convergence of personal histories, of wave-lengths. She knows that there is a network of communication present, and that on some level, at least potentially, it exists among women who have never met or heard of each other. (Daly 371)

She continues saying that this «Sister-Self [...] survives because the very meaning of this bonding is Surviving, that is, Super-living. It is biophilic bonding» (Daly 373). Like in the narration of *She Walks the Earth*, female sorority becomes significant as eternal sustainment of life, enabling in its collectivity an experience of trans-individualism and transcendence.

The mode of reevaluating female ethics through transgenerational and transnational bonds between women shows notions of femininity which have been developed in theories of difference feminism. In contrast to equality feminism, difference feminism seeks to recognise significant differences between men and women with the aim to explore the devalued 'feminine' characteristics. By referring affirmatively to female-coded attributes, difference feminists aim to rearrange the symbolic order of patriarchy in which they perceive an underrepresentation of female values.

In the 1980s the Italian philosopher Luisa Muraro formed a movement called *affidamento*, demanding a new symbolic order defined by female points

of reference. In this social theory the figure of the mother becomes significant, as it is seen as the basis for a particular female culture. By reevaluating the connection with the mother as the first relationship of all human beings, this theoretical framework envisions a new societal order of female influence. In this form of gender-based authority, senior women guide younger women. Specifically, *mothers* stand out as symbolic role models in these female relationships. Women's ability to give birth is seen here as the origin of human existence as it is a universal experience of humanity to be born of a mother. The constant power to create life through generations of women confirms the eternity of existence. Muraro calls this «the structure of the maternal continuum that from within, through my mother, her mother, her mother, and so on, refers me back to the beginning of life», enabling the «work of creation of the world» (52). For Muraro, in order to strengthen women's position in society, one needs to revalue the role of the mother and needs to «translate into [the] adult lives the early relationship with the mother in order to experience it again as the principle of symbolic authority» (32).

The strategy of *affidamento* entails women placing themselves under the guidance of senior women who are to serve as maternal figures, enabling mutual entrustment between women. By receiving inspiration and shelter from female (or maternal) figures and by transmitting these 'gifts' to further generations of women (through foundations and linking networks), the narratives in the travel blogs construct a circle defined by female values, or, as in Muraro's words, they «freely give meaning to female grandeur» (20). Alongside these clues within textual narration, the female-identified union becomes evident in the visual elements of the blogs: from so-called 'Girlfriend Getaways' in *Brown Girls Fly*, girlfriends' dinners in *She Walks the Earth* to female travel companionship in *Slowly North* –the pictures reveal a high amount of sorority and visually represent a highly female-defined travel experience. The overall organisations of the blogs remain in their typographical and visual designs rather plain and conventional: there are few experiments with fonts, graphic arrangements or visual and textual interplay. The approach to traditional media styles as one form of remediation seems to correlate with the retraditionalising bias towards notions of an emphasised femininity –that means a femininity that is defined by values related to the female body and that creates an exclusive bond between women.

Difference feminism's ideas of an emphasised femininity are similarly important within ecofeminist theory of female bond to nature. These theoretical concepts have been met with certain reproaches throughout critical feminist history. As Alison Stone claims in the foreword to Muraro's work, by referring to a mother's authority Muraro contests symbolic divisions between nature and culture, private and public life or men and women (xiii). For Muraro it is inevitable to learn language from the mother («language can be given to us only by means of [...] negotiation with the mother» 46). But as Stone clearly points out, this has historically been established by gender divisions of labour that allocated childcare exclusively to women and public work or politics to men. Continuing these hierarchical concepts of patriarchy, Muraro manifests gender dualisms and undermines female's symbolic authority in a patriarchal order. To oppose that order consistently, she would have to oppose the symbolic authority of the mother, too (xii).

On the part of deconstructivist or queerfeminist gender theorists like Judith Butler, the difference and ecofeminist ideas reveal notions of essentialised gender norms by connecting femininity (or masculinity) one-dimensionally to the female (or male) body (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 3). By insisting on gender binarity, difference feminism necessarily creates specific gender ethics related to body politics. Evidence for this may be traced through the gendering processes of attributes like motherly care, and their subsequent linking to the female body. Besides the semantics of an essentialised femininity, the linguistic aesthetics of Daly's statements in phrases like «gynaesthetically» also demonstrate this biologicistic attitude to gender.

Also, these concepts of femininity are all based on assumptions of a principally homogenous female identity or homogenous gender norms. A post in *She Walks the Earth* evidences this notion explicitly: on her travels the narrator is looking for collaboration with a project manager. She wishes «to have a relationship with someone who wants to help share women's voices, stories and culture» (Maxwell, *The Walk* par. 2). Imagining a universal bond of «women's voices, stories and culture» directly confirms this homogenising of femininity. Femininity is imagined as a coherent and given concept. There is no distinction offered between being born as a female or identifying as female. In consideration of queerfeminist movements within feminist theory, these notions exclude all those who refuse to identify with binary categories or are

simply not defined as female. Furthermore, it disregards all the possibilities of identifying one's character beyond gender identification. As Butler criticises:

If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered 'person' transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. (*Gender Trouble* 4)

Intersectionality has pointed out that feminist claims were all based on homogenising notions of femininity and that structural categories like *race* and *class* should be considered in feminist movements. Although the narration in *Brown Girls Fly* consistently denounces the marginalisation of women of colour as regards mobility, it never reflects on the causes or effects of social inequalities among women in US-American society. Neither does the narration offer markers of self-distinction from 'white' women. Instead, the homogeneity is textually and visually represented by the continuous self-labelling as «brown girls» –revealing an imagination of ethnically confined femininity without further reflection on its reasons or any differentiation within this group.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Considering Seier's concept of *performativity* of gender and media, the medial conditions of the blog constitute gender and the cultural technique of performing gender constitutes the blog. The coherence of the three dimensions of a gendered subject –sex (body), gender (identity) and desire– is held at disposal and replaced by cultural practices of *doing gender*. Similarly, media is to be seen as a cultural performance that does not end with the limitations of the technical gadget, but is extended to its discursive effects that produce meanings in society (Seier 25). Typical characteristics of digital media –like interactive networks of reciprocal linking and commenting or the chronologically recurring of entries and repetitive visual elements– are used here to create a sense of continuous gender performance. All these features in the three blogs analysed here are constantly related to representations of female identity. Instead of using the potential of the platform for fluid and dynamic

gender performance, the blogs showcase a collective identity of femininity. This fixed concept of gender is established on the homepages of the blogs and manifested in the majority of the websites within the blogs, as they iteratively continue to represent femininity as a homogenous union. The multimodal storytelling (Klemm 55) through text and picture solidifies this concept in its duplication of content.

Butler sees the societal necessity of performing gender consistently in reiterative practices as a proof for the imitative structure of every gender. The regulating norms that produce gender are themselves not definite or determining – otherwise they would not require constant revision (*Bodies That Matter* 126). Paradoxically, the continuous and repetitive instances of gender performance in the blogs assume an original female identity that is bound by 'feminine' attributes; at the same time, they suggest by means of their repetitive production that there is no originality of gender. The diversity of the self-images published in the blogs (travelling as a woman of colour, travelling as a privileged US-American woman, travelling as an athletic woman, travelling as a young person, travelling alone etc.) subverts the notion of a homogenous female union. In fact, the self-images would suggest inclusive gestures of solidarity *beyond* gender identifications: unions between solo travellers or sportily travellers, for instance. Nevertheless, the representation of travel experience in these examples remains gender-specific. These narrative constructions of sorority between travelling women seem to be characteristic of contemporary digital travel writing: by staging an emphasised femininity, the narrators seek to reflectively engage with their position in a formerly male-dominated sphere – both in the practice of travel and its representation through writing. This becomes evident in the choice of diary writing as a female-coded mode of self-reflection and subjectivity.

Butler suggests that instead of taking an unchanging notion of gender as the basis for feminist approaches, the variable construction of identity might be desirable as a methodological precondition. She states: «Perhaps, paradoxically, 'representation' will be shown to make sense for feminism only when the subject of 'women' is nowhere presumed» (*Gender Trouble* 8). In realms like travel and travel blogging that are historically shaped by masculinist ethics, the narrative unification of a female subject might be designed to counter gendered spaces and the traditional alienation of women within travel

discourse. But it must be problematised by its exclusionary, homogenising and essentialist definitions of femininity which can be found in the concepts of traditional theorists like cultural ecofeminist Susan Griffin or difference feminist Luisa Muraro. This way of dealing with masculine symbolic orders by creating feminised ethics merely reinforces engendered binaries like masculinity/femininity or nature/culture.

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